THE COMPLEX LIFE EXPERIENCE OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO ARE WORKING ADULTS IN THE APPALACHIAN REGION OF THE UNITED STATES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Deborah Elizabeth Thurman

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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May 2016

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe and understand the complexity of life experiences for first-generation college students or recent graduates who are working adults in the Central and South-Central Appalachian region of the United States in light of the construct resilience and how purposefully selected students continued study despite difficulties. In this study, information gathered was synthesized regarding three issues: first-generation students, working adult students, and the influences of Central and South-Central Appalachian regional culture. The theory used to guide this study is resilience as it relates to the educational persistence of working, adult, first-generation college students in Appalachia. The complexity of life experiences was generally defined as the many life situations that the participants encounter in the pursuit of a degree. A rich, descriptive portrayal of the target population's complex lives was revealed through interviews with 11 individuals, a journaling exercise completed about their educational experiences, and focus groups. The information gathered, as seen through a cultural profile developed of the region, was explored for commonalities and themes to give voice to the students. One enduring theme was the lack of value placed on education in their families. Another distinct theme was poverty, both in their own families of origin, and in the region. An engaging theme was their unrest with living life without a baccalaureate degree. More specifically, they portrayed a strong determination to rise above their circumstances using the vehicle of further education. Next, overcoming the complexities of their lives through resilience. A final theme that surfaced was how their lives had improved after their graduation.

Keywords: Appalachian region, first-generation college student, working adult students, persistence, and resilience.

Dedication/Acknowledgments Page

For this journey, I owe an immense debt of gratitude to those who supported my efforts along the way and encouraged my success. Two family members have been untiring in their confidence in me as they cheered me on: They are my husband, LT, and my deceased mother, Florence Fisher. Without their devotion and prayers, I could never have completed the task. My mother died prior to my completion, but I am certain that she cheers me on from heaven. Finally, when the going got difficult, there is a friend who sticks closer than anyone and never fails. God, my faithful Father, has given me this rare and unexpected opportunity. I am eternally grateful to Him above all.

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List of Abbreviations

Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC)

Pseudonyms for the counties involved in the study (C1, C2, C3, and C4)

University for Students (U4S) (a pseudonym for the name of the university in the study)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe and understand the complexity of life experience for first-generation college students or recent graduates who are working adults in the Central and South-Central Appalachian region of the United States in light of the construct resilience and how purposefully selected students continue study despite difficulties. The study brought together research on first-generation college students, working adults, and their stressors that create complexity for their lives, and the cultural impact that the Appalachian region has on their education. This study was grounded in the theoretical underpinning of resilience.

The culture of the Appalachian region in the United States provides a unique setting for, and influence on, the part-time college experience for adult university students. For this reason, a research study that focuses on life's complexities for first-generation, adult college students or recent graduates who live, work, and attend school in the Central and South-Central region of the Appalachian chain must start with a description of that area, focusing on its culture, history, and economic realities. Following such a description in this introductory chapter, I explained the reasons for the current study by establishing the gap in the literature and documented details regarding first-generation, working adult students. Finally, I introduced the phenomenological philosophical tradition and research method that provided the exploratory structure for this research study.

Background

The Appalachian Region

The Appalachian region of the United States is a unique area with stunning extremes in natural beauty and regional culture, yet the extremes and culture create hardships for its residents. Rich traditions of music, religion, and storytelling add to the beauty. The unique music of the region is at the heart of the region's worship, entertainment, and culture in general (Abramson & Haskell, 2006). Regional religious perspectives are driven by tradition, some faint influences of folklore, and deep passion. Storytelling is rich with cultural humor and expressiveness that is used to pass down local tradition. The language is characterized by specific sounds and originality. The vocabulary is perceived as archaic and fascinating to outsiders. People in the area value their roots and have often gone to great lengths to preserve the uniqueness of the area.

Because of the remote nature of the region, a lack of emphasis on the value of education, and high unemployment, it is also a region where poverty is high. The economy is depressed, the rugged and isolated topography determines the design of the road systems, and education attainment rates are some of the worst in the nation (Appalachian Regional Commission [ARC], 2012). Central Appalachia had an employment rate of only 60% in 2008-2012 compared to a United States employment rate of 78% in that same time period (ARC, 2012). Overall, the Appalachian region's employment rate was about 5% less than the nation in the same years. The Appalachian region is an area like no other in the United States. Since much of the area is remote without adequate road systems, health care and other services that United States' citizens take for granted, are extremely difficult to deliver. Road building requires moving mountains, thus the funds budgeted often result in inadequate highways (Edwards, Asbury, & Cox, 2006).

One of the principle concerns has been the desperate living conditions of the residents which, as just been noted, are due to a weak economy, deep cultural influences that do not value higher education, and extremes in terrain. Anderson (1964) stated that for one to understand these problems, one must know something of the people. One of the cultural linchpins of the region is for people to accept sacrifice and poverty as a way of life. That fact has often encouraged a depressed view of life's expectations for its citizenry.

Appalachia has long been a source of concern to the nation because of the needs of the citizenry and the difficulties associated with accessibility of public services. For those reasons and more, in 1965 the United States Congress passed the Appalachian Regional Development Act that established the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). Its mission was primarily to promote economic development of the region and its influence continues to the present (Abramson & Haskell, 2006).

The Appalachian Region follows the Appalachian mountain chain and extends from northeastern Mississippi to southern New York State, a distance of 1,000 miles, and covers portions of 13 states, 420 counties and 25 million people (ARC, 2012). It should be noted that the entire 13 state area is not homogenous in its language or culture. ARC (2012) data indicated that 42% of the region's population lived in rural areas in contrast to about 20% in the rest of the United States. Because of the region's enormous size, ARC has designated three general regions of Appalachia, Northern, Central, and Southern, all of which have similarities and differences. In addition, ARC has subdivided the three major regions into Northern, Central, and Southern sub-regions.

From an economic standpoint, the general northern region's data indicate that the population of this segment has higher income on average than the rest of Appalachia. Southern

Appalachia ranks nearly as high. The Central region of Appalachia that covers Kentucky, all of West Virginia, and parts of Tennessee, is by far, the most economically disadvantaged (ARC, 2012). Employment in central Appalachia is lower than in the rest of Appalachia and much lower than in the rest of the nation. Average per capita income in all of Appalachia is much less than the average for the rest of the nation, but in the Central region of Appalachia, it is nearly half of the national average. Any economic progress achieved in the decade of the 1990s when the national economy was strong has been lost in the most recent decade (ARC, 2012).

According to the ARC, life in Appalachia continues to be difficult and more difficult on average than in the rest of the nation. The nature of this rural area differs from many other rural parts of the United States. For instance, many of the Appalachian region's counties still need roads, sewer systems, and water infrastructure. The mere cost of road building and laying water and sewer lines can be exorbitant, as the process requires a great deal of mountainous excavation. Reasons for the substandard public infrastructure are glaringly apparent based on regional statistics after decades of poverty. This maintains and contributes to the uniqueness and the problems of the region as seen through the following descriptions (ARC, 2012). For example, one hundred and sixteen counties in Appalachia had a poverty rate in 2000 that was 150% or more of the national average (ARC, 2012). Further examples described below include the evidence of a lack of retention in education, and also a failure to protect the environment from strip-mining and depletion of resources by irresponsible mining companies that left the region at risk for major flooding.

Low educational attainment compounds the economic difficulties in the Appalachian region. In spite of efforts to increase college graduation rates, Appalachia's percentage of students earning a college degree lags behind that of the United States in general (ARC, 2012).

In central Appalachia, less than 12% of the residents have a college degree, compared to the national average of 30.4% (U. S. Census Bureau, 2012). Shaw, DeYoung, and Rademacher (2005) suggested that educational attainment is an important factor in economic development at the national level and for regions of the country like Appalachia. Research conducted by the ARC (2012) revealed a close link between college degree completion and economic issues for the individuals, their families, communities, the Appalachian region, and the nation. Wang (2009) also indicated that postsecondary education is considered to be a very likely way to overcome the barriers of poverty. The percentage of adults in the entire Appalachian region with a baccalaureate degree in 2008-2012 was four percent higher than in 2000 (ARC, 2012). Data indicates that in this region, increased educational attainment has not resulted in improved economic conditions for residents (ARC, 2012). Because of a deeply entrenched and widely-held perception that pursuing higher education is not what people in the region do, many of the area's high school graduates never consider college. The influences of family history, low socio-economic status, a lack of physical or technological access due to remote highway limitations, and the overall rural setting, all contribute to the lack of college attendance (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). In fact, many of the residents do not finish high school (ARC, 2012). According to the ARC data, Kentucky's percentage of students who do not complete high school was 27% in 2012, the highest percent in the region.

The Appalachian region's economic hardships play a role in the success of the region's citizenry. The area was depleted of resources in order to provide coal, lumber, and other natural materials for areas outside the region. This resulted in serious environmental problems contributing to the poor economy. Once the resources were depleted, there was no more work

for local miners (Edwards et al, 2006). Also, devastation of areas within Appalachia resulted in flooding due to irresponsible strip-mining on mountaintops (Edwards et al., 2006).

In Chapter Two, the economics of the region and historical information were presented in greater detail, but the statistics regarding unemployment and earnings just presented portray the extraordinary problems in Appalachia (ARC, 2012). Unemployment throughout the region ranks higher than much of the rest of the United States.

Adult Learners

Kasworm (2005), a leading researcher of adult learners, found that early in the twenty-first century adult learners comprised approximately 32% of the nation's higher education learners. Researchers have found that these adults have established identities as parents, workers, and leaders (Kasworm, 2010, 2011). Adult learners tend to be a diverse group of an enormous span of ages, backgrounds, work experience, and family dynamics (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006). In fact, one 90-plus-year-old student in Tennessee is in the last stage of completing a doctoral degree, illustrating the extremes in age range of adult learners. In addition, most do not have the luxury of full devotion to their learning. The combination of these factors can create tremendous stress for adult learners (Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert 2009).

Although not without criticism, andragogy has been the leading theoretical framework through which adult education is viewed since Knowles' initial formulations of adult learning theory in the 1950's (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011), culminating in the first edition of his seminal work: *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy vs. Pedagogy* in 1970. Knowles' (1970) conception of adult learning theory focuses on the learner's learning orientation (need to know why, what, and how, as these relate to learning); the self-concept of the learner

(autonomous and self-directing); prior experiences of the learner (influenced by mental models and explanatory styles); the adult student's readiness to learn (usually related to life needs and practical application); orientation to learning (problem-centered and contextual); and motivation to learn (intrinsic value of learning along with personal payoff) (Knowles et al., 2011, p. 4). Although criticized for, among other shortcomings, its lack of empirical support and quantitative measurement tools, Knowles' adult learning theory, and the theory of andragogy, in general, have been the theories in use (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Imel, 1996) among adult educators for well over 60 years in an effort to understand and effectively implement adult education programs. One conspicuous weakness in adult learning theory that this research study sought to address is the link between adult student standing and first-generation college student status, especially when combined with the challenges presented by the Appalachian culture.

First-Generation Students and Degree Completion

A study of this nature can reveal insights about and provide answers concerning students' obstacles to postsecondary educational attainment for working, adult, first-generation college students, given the emphasis on college attainment at the highest levels of national government, with the 2020 College Completion Goal to increase college degree attainment to 60% from the current 40% (American Council on Education, 2013; Kanter, 2011; Mangan, 2013). Further revelation of the benefits of postsecondary educational attainment was demonstrated in research of increased quality of life and higher salaries enjoyed by those who earn a college degree (Cohen & Kisker, 2009). A widely cited study about college student retention by Tinto (1993) provided a model of degree completion citing that students with a closer affiliation to the postsecondary institution were more likely to complete their degrees. In his theory, Tinto emphasized the interrelationship between demographic factors, academic integration, and social

integration. According to this model, students chose to remain in college if they had been appropriately assimilated into the social milieu of the college environment and had taken advantage of the academic opportunities offered by the college, with a special emphasis on the role of faculty members interacting with students as a predictor of college student retention. Although Tinto's research has continued to be granted paradigmatic status within higher education (Seidman, 2012), criticisms of Tinto's original work were numerous. They included it being focused on residential, mainly Caucasian and male students, thus not adequately explaining the retention phenomenon for minorities, first-generation students, and non-residential, working, part-time, or adult students (Braxton, 2002; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnston, 1997; Savage & Smith, 2008). Even recent updates to Tinto's (2012) theory have not adequately addressed first-generation, adult, part-time students, and this appears to be a trend in other works, as well (Seidman, 2012). Adult educators and other practitioners have found that it is common that the needs of adult students are not met by the current policies and practices to improve access and retention (Knowles et al., 2011; Merriam & Bierema, 2013).

Situation to Self

I chose a transcendental approach to phenomenology rather than a hermeneutical one (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology allows researchers to disengage their biases from the research (Moustakas, 1994). This is in contrast to hermeneutical phenomenology that permits researchers to be a part of the research and in which the researcher meets the qualifications of the subjects of the research. I chose to remove myself from the research to limit bias, and remained as a researcher-observer (Creswell, 2007). I preferred to hear the complexities of student lives and have their stories told as a "fresh perspective to the

phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). I assumed that the students are resilient individuals and viewed them through the resilient theoretical lens.

Garmezy (1971, 1991) is recognized as one of the earliest resilience researchers. While studying individuals with schizophrenia, he found that their children did not possess the symptomology of their parents even years later (Garmezy, 1987). Resilience has been identified in areas such as medicine, the economy, and even in plants. Because of the variations on the term and the theory, a consistent definition was not found. However, the construct has commonalities, regardless of the field. Its' generalized meaning has to do with the ability to overcome difficult circumstances (Garmezy, 1987). Educational resilience is a construct identifying the learner's ability to achieve progress in spite of hardship (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993).

A social constructivist philosophy also guided this research. Creswell (2007) stated that this philosophy uses a search for meaning and allows the researchers to "look for the complexity of views" (p. 20). The goal is to rely "as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation" (Creswell, 2007, p. 20). Within this paradigm, one regards the contexts, historical setting and cultural setting of the participants in a subjective manner (Creswell, 2007). This is important when one considers them for persons in the Appalachian region. This exploratory approach enabled me to make sense of the uniqueness of the participants' challenges. The philosophical assumption of this research is ontological, reflecting the nature of the multiple realities of the participants and their differing views of those realities.

Problem Statement

The problem investigated in this study were the obstacles to completion of college degrees experienced by working, first-generation adult college students or recent graduates in the

Central area of Appalachia, and the resilience that is demonstrated as these students attempt to overcome the complexities of college life and complete their four-year college degrees. A review of the research literature regarding adult students in general, revealed some of the obstacles that they faced in continuing their education (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Hand & Payne, 2008). However, in the region of Appalachia as in other parts of the country, the culture frequently devalues that pursuit; moreover, economic challenges are greater and access to education can be prohibitive (Cassen, Feinstein, & Graham, 2008; Goto & Martin, 2009; Kasworm, 2011; Pan & Yi, 2011). Thus, the theoretical base of resilience was clearly demonstrated as students in Appalachia were able to overcome obstacles and complete a baccalaureate degree. Previously, the only research on first-generation college students in the Appalachian region dealt with those who were traditional-age and residential students (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Hand & Payne, 2008). This study allowed the voices of working, adult, first-generation college students in Appalachia to be heard. Research has revealed that the additional obstacles of poverty and the region's culture that distinguishes them from students elsewhere influence students in Appalachia (Hand & Payne, 2008).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe and understand the complexity of life experience in first-generation community college graduates, equivalent, or recent graduates who are working adults in the Central region of the United States, in the light of the construct of resilience and how some students continue despite difficulties. In that pursuit, the complexity of life experience was generally defined as the many life situations that the participants encounter in the pursuit of a degree. Specifically, the struggles and obstacles of the study participants were defined by the "academic, social, and interpersonal

experiences of those students whose parents did not attend college and who were considered to be residents of Central and South-Central Appalachian" (Bradbury & Mather, 2009, p. 258). The theory used to guide this study was resilience as it related to the educational persistence of working, adult, first-generation college students in Appalachia. Providing access to the voices of working, first-generation, adult college students in a learning community in a four-county region of Central Appalachia regarding the complexities of life that they faced in the pursuit of higher education was the central aim of the study.

Significance of the Study

There is a compelling reason for studying the students in Appalachia. The cultural, physical, and sociological barriers that they encounter have a large potential to influence their persistence to completion of a college degree. Their lives and those of future generations can be permanently changed if a pattern of resilience is identified, studied, described in the literature, and widely understood. This will benefit America as the lives of the participants/informants can affect future generations. A study of this nature can be considered to be a unique picture of Appalachian adult college students. In fact, a study of this nature has the potential to impact student success and college attainment throughout the United States since it reveals the complexities of adult students' lives and enlightens higher education leaders regarding how best to meet their needs.

The base of knowledge regarding first-generation college students in Appalachia is minimal since only three such studies have been conducted. The existing literature conveys important details regarding adult learners and has made it plain that they represent at least one-third of learners in college today. In addition, it reveals how the complexity of their lives affects their college participation, and how their work adds to that complexity and affects their

participation. I did not find any studies of working adult college students in Appalachia in the literature searches performed for this study. When combining the various life-complicating factors with first-generation, working, adult college student status in Appalachia, the literature search narrows to such an extent that there is a dearth of studies. The research includes the complexities of life as a first-generation college student, who works, has a family, returns to school after "stopping out" before completing, and combines all of these topics into a unique look into those students who live in a distressed area of the United States. In these studies, "stopping out" refers to interrupted enrollment when life situations cause students to leave higher education (Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey, & Jennings, 2007; DesJardin, Ahlberg, & McCall, 2006; Stratton, O'Toole, & Wetzel, 2008) and can be a permanent exit or a temporary one. The literature becomes scarce in respect to these topics when considering Appalachian region.

As I studied these students qualitatively, my goal was to hear their voices expressing their college life stories in the light of and through the theory of resilience. Herrman et al. (2011) stated that "Qualitative studies of resilience are helpful in generating hypotheses, understanding the meaning of subjects' experiences, illuminating the complex interactions of their social locations . . . and explaining qualitative findings" (p. 61).

This study is one of a kind because no previous research has been conducted with adult students who work and are first-generation students in the Appalachian region. This study allowed for a three-dimensional focus on adult students (working, first-generation, and regional specific), expanding the base of knowledge about adults who work and are first-generation college students in Appalachia. The availability of literature regarding working adult students in general is expanding and the study could be an important new piece of that research by targeting a specific region of the United States. The questions about the complexities of life experience

that this study addresses can further elucidate the issues revealed in other studies of adult learners that are not specific to the Appalachian region.

The students studied are working, adult, first-generation students in Appalachia attending an accelerated, university evening program taught at a satellite location of community colleges. For these students, travel after work to a university campus for the last two years of a baccalaureate would be prohibitive because of their many obligations. This program is designed to allow them to continue in their jobs and family obligations, yet provides these community college graduates or equivalent the opportunity to earn a bachelor's degree at the community college satellite campus. These students are seeking to complete a degree for a variety of reasons, some of which are qualifying as applicants for better employment, seeking the credentials to be eligible for promotion, or achieving a long-term personal goal.

Besides contributing to the body of knowledge about students and, more specifically, working, first-generation adult college students in Appalachia, this study could lead to future financial assistance for working adults. As their story is told, it raises awareness of students desiring a degree who often are marginal earners or are underemployed, given the reality that most of them do not qualify for federal financial aid (Goto & Martin, 2009).

It is possible that the cultural and unique learning environment of the participants can contribute knowledge valuable to their retention to degree completion. Listening to participants' versions of how they coped with life's complexities in Appalachia and maintained their student status might reveal something of the support (or lack thereof) these individuals had. Most importantly, identifying and sharing the behaviors vital for student success from a perspective of "positive deviancy" (Patterson, Grenny, Maxfield, McMillan, & Switzler, 2008, p. 35) might influence future generations of Appalachian and other at-risk students by providing tools and

cognitive frameworks for success (Lopez & Snyder, 2003). A final argument could be made that this problem ultimately affects the United States' opportunities for economic growth and its position in the global economy (Goodlad & McMannon, 1997).

From a Christian perspective, assisting others in need is a manifestation of the Gospel message to love one another (John 13: 34; John 15: 12; I Corinthians 13: 1-13, KJV). This love is a distinctive aspect of the Christian worldview. Qualitative research, with its emphasis on the constructed experience of the individual, is especially equipped to help researchers follow the law-gospel imperatives of scripture, represented best in the prescription of Micah 6:8 as a guideline for responsible Christian and social action: How to act justly while loving and manifesting mercy. Listening to and attending to the needs of others was Jesus' constant concern and is an instructive lesson for researchers and practitioners. He is the ultimate example of one who learned about a need and then met it, just as he did when he healed a leper in Matthew 8:1-4, and when he healed people with all sorts of affliction because of his great compassion (Matthew 4:23-24). He urged his followers to pray that laborers would be sent to the needy (Matthew 9: 37-38). Matthew tells us that he also spent a great deal of time teaching others during his earthy ministry (Matthew 4:23, 9:35). The importance that He placed on educating others should indicate its importance today.

Research Questions

The overarching question that guides this study is as follows: What are the academic, social, and interpersonal obstacles and demonstration of resilience in the life experience of working adults who are first-generation college students in a region of Central and South-Central Appalachia? I explored the following sub-questions with the participants of this study:

1. How do the life complexities of first-generation, working, adult college students from Appalachia influence their ability to persist in college?

According to Bradbury and Mather (2009), those students in Appalachia who enter college have desires to attend college that override the negative influences in their lives. Hand and Payne (2008), in a study of students in Appalachia, indicated that financial concerns, the pull of family, and the need for support can affect their retention in college. Bryan and Simmons (2009) found that college for students in Appalachia created some conflict within the students who felt that they were one person at home and another person at school.

2. What are the students' perceived cultural supports or hindrances in pursuing their educational goals?

Kasworm (2003) stated, ". . . it is suggested that the level of expertise and responsibility of the adult job role does influence collegiate participation" (p. 8). Day, Lovato, Tull, and Ross-Gordon (2011), in a study of faculty perceptions of adult learners, found that the rich experiences that adult learners bring aided them in the classroom. Arce (2006) pointed out the needs of the workforce to have more academically qualified workers which could be a force pushing students ("I need to increase my qualifications for my current job") or pulling them ("I need more preparation to compete for the job I want") into higher education.

3. What perceived internal and attributed external resources (psychological or otherwise) do students possess that have helped them to persist in the face of obstacles (resilience)?

Kasworm (2005) wrote that the multilayered identities of adult students, although not students from Appalachia, demonstrate their multifaceted lives. They have developed meaning-making through their judgments and actions. Kasworm (2010) found that adult learners'

identities have been developed through successful negotiation of academia that does not often recognize their presence. Their identity evolves as they successfully complete each portion of their education through goal-oriented behaviors. She also stated that their adult maturity developed through life experiences aided their academic success (Kasworm, 2010). Kasworm, in 2003, identified the responsibility that adult learners demonstrate in their multiple roles that often compete with one another. This responsibility can aid them in persisting. She stated that their pro-active planning might add to their success. Giancola, Munz, and Trares (2008) found that adult students were more experienced with other cultures and were more likely to be independent. Ronning (2009) identified the task orientation of adult learners when they encounter learning situations that are demanding. Adult learners also seem to have a versatile approach to learning that is an advantage in the classroom. Byrd and MacDonald (2005) considered qualities such as time management, an adequate self-concept, self-advocacy, and a goal focus to be qualities needed to succeed in the college environment.

4. In what way has the fact that their parents did not attend college impact their college experience?

Frye, Curran, Pierce, Young, and Ziegler (2005) found that individuals holding earned doctorates were not able to shed the feelings of being a first-in-family college graduate, or the reality of their working class roots. Neumeister and Rinker (2006) suggested that first-generation college females often lack a role model who is a successful woman. Byrd and MacDonald (2005) stated that many first-generation students lack what they call *tacit* intelligence needed for college.

Research Plan

The plan for this qualitative phenomenological research was primarily one of intentional listening. I listened to the stories of the participants to understand the specific phenomenon of the complexities within their lives with a perspective of resilience theory. I prepared for listening by forming an understanding from the literature about adult students as they work, tend to families, seek to meet fiscal commitments, and carve out time for class and study. I purposefully selected 11 participants who met the criteria of first-generation junior- and senior-level community college graduates or equivalent just beginning their university studies with the major of interdisciplinary studies (the only major offered at the remote sites), and who worked and lived in the region of Central Appalachia. The pseudonym used for this university in the remainder of this document is U4S (university for students).

The definition of working students found in other studies was considered, however, in many cases no specific number of working hours was defined by other researchers. Neumeister and Rinker (2006) merely mentioned part-time work. Other authors were not definitive about the number of hours worked by participants/informants (Kasworm, 2010; Ronning, 2009; and Scanlon, 2008). In contrast to these studies, I chose to define participant employment as working at least 10 hours worked per week.

I chose eleven participants for the study. Dukes (1984), Riemen (1986), and Creswell (2007) indicated that 10 is an appropriate sample. I purposefully chose the 11 participants from the four counties of Appalachia for the research, but they also met the other criteria for the study: adult, working, first-generation students in Appalachia.

I interviewed the participants individually regarding their descriptions of the barriers to education and success that they faced in their lives (Appendix D). In an attempt to identify the

barriers that they faced, there were several opportunities for response throughout the research project. The students were interviewed individually, and then had the opportunity to write about their experiences in journals (Appendix E). Finally, they met in small focus groups (Appendix F) to discuss their lived experiences. I intended for the focus groups to allow for a revelation of a collective voice based on shared experiences (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Once the three sets of data were collected (triangulation), I analyzed the cumulative data for similarities. The participants had an opportunity to review the data for accuracy through member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), while monitoring the entire process. The resulting summary of the data gives voice to the complexity of their college experience through the lens of resilience, the theoretical framework used to inform this study. This theory allowed the identification of the complications of their lives that would prevent many from completing. The working, adult students, who are first-generation students in Appalachia, allowed for a narrow focus on influences that may have permitted them from completing a degree in spite of circumstances. I provided a more in-depth description of the theoretical framework in the literature review section.

I prepared a combination of the textural and the structural descriptions (the field notes and observations) of the essence and meaning of the experience for each student in addition to the journaling and transcripts (Moustakas, 1994). The participants chose the pseudonyms that were used to allow the students anonymity in order to focus on the rich detail of their experiences without betraying their identity. I examined the audio transcriptions of the interviews and focus groups, combined with field notes and the journaling exercise, for similarities. Information units were isolated from the text and organized into categories. I identified clusters of core ideas from all of the students and determined the frequency

(enumeration) of clusters among the students' responses. I grouped the complexities of their academic, social, and interpersonal experience based on the categories. Those complexities, once categorized tended to demonstrate areas of similarity with others in the group, for example, participants having a parent that worked in coal mining. This revealed themes that represented commonality with others by type of lived experience. Those themes meshed with the "individual textural description" for each experience (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). I examined the themes to ensure that they were appropriate and representative. Then, I identified, extracted, and labeled subcategories to see if each contained a portion of the experience that aided in understanding the extent of the lived experience. Thus, they were clustered and themed. A few themes surfaced as primary complexities. These could be viewed in light of resilience. This composite identified the complexities of life for the students in the study. Quotations were selected, as appropriate, in order to reflect the essence of their experience.

I developed a composite description of the essence of the experience of the students. Moustakas (1994) used the term, "horizonalization" (p. 95), which refers to the use of significant statements to help in describing the experience of the phenomenon. I integrated this approach into the study, while using the research questions as a guide. These questions address lived experience, perceived supports or hindrances in life, internal and external qualities of the students that caused them to persist in higher education (resilience), and perception of how work and education coexists and complements one another. Verisimilitude (a term that indicates that the writing appears to be true and is a quality of a good literary study) was the goal of the writing (Richardson, 1994). I did not use data analysis software.

Delimitations

The major delimitations for this study were as follows: I only selected first-generation

community college graduates or equivalent beginning their third or fourth year of study or recent graduates of the program with U4S within the interdisciplinary studies major learning communities in the four identified counties of the Central and South-Central Appalachian region of the United States. I used "Learning community" generally here in order to describe students taking their classes together at the four locations. They were adult learners aged 25 and older (Compton et al., 2006). In addition, the participants were working adults who worked at least 10 or more hours per week. The rationale for this selection was to garner a purposeful sample of students who met the study criteria (working adults, first-generation college students, and residing in Appalachia). The goal was to glean the complexity of life experience for this unique population and how they persist to complete the program. As noted above, this makes the current research one of a kind, as only three studies were found in the literature and they investigated the traditional-aged first-generation student during their first year of college, but none were found for non-traditional-aged students in Appalachia (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Hand & Payne, 2008). I used discriminate sampling in order to select the 11 participants for this study (Creswell, 2007; Dukes, 1984; Riemen, 1986) in an effort to arrive at the desired purposeful sample.

Definitions

1. *Resilience* -- The basic construct of resilience is understood, yet no uniformity in terminology or measurement exists among researchers. Multiple definitions of resilience all involve a risk or adversity and a resulting positive adaptation in at least one area of behavior (Herrman et al, 2011). Thus, the definition developed for this study reflects individuals facing adversity in at least one area of their lives and overcoming the adversity by demonstrating a positive adaptation in behavior.

2. *Androgogy* -- Knowles described this adult learning process as "andragogy" and defined it as "a core set of adult learning principles" (Knowles et al., 2011, p. 3). Those six principles are (a) the need of adults to know, (b) the learner's self-concept, (c) the learner's prior experiences, (d) the learner's readiness to learn, (e) the orientation that the learner has to learning, and (f) their motivation to learn (Knowles, et al.,2011, p. 3).
3. *First-generation college student* was used as a selection definition. For the current study, a first-generation college student is defined as a college student whose parents did not attend college. Some studies use the term first-generation college *student* as meaning the first in one's family to attend college, which is the definition used in my research study (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005).
4. *Adult* – Adults in this study were persons 25 years of age or older.
5. *Working* – For the purpose of this study, working described a participant who worked 10 hours or more per week.

Summary

Chapter one gives an overview of the beauty and hardships in the area of the United States called Appalachia, named after the mountain chain that provides the backdrop for the region. The chapter further portrays the participants who were the basis of the study. I utilized a qualitative, transcendental, phenomenological perspective that will contribute to the body of research on the working, adult, first-generation college students of the region in the light of the resilience that they demonstrated due to the complexities of their lives. The research questions listed are the basis for the interviews that took place with the participants. There is justification for the investigation since no such research exists.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter provides a research synthesis related to the life complexities of working, adult, first-generation, college students in Central and South-Central Appalachia. Three major studies were found that address the issue of Appalachian college students and their struggles, even though each study primarily described the experiences of first-generation college students in Appalachia from the perspective of the traditional, residential student. These studies reflected the nature of a break with their Appalachian culture in varying degrees. The first, Bradbury and Mather (2009), reflected traditional, residential students in the Northern Appalachia area. The other two dealt with first-generation students in the Central area: "First-Generation College Students: A Study of Appalachian Student Success" (Hand & Payne, 2008) and "Family Involvement: Impacts on Post-secondary Educational Success for First-Generation Appalachian College Students" (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). However, I could not find studies that addressed the experiences of first-generation college students who were working adults in Appalachia. This highlighted gap in the research informs the current study in the following literature review that synthesized three areas: (a) theoretical framework; (b) uniqueness of the Appalachian region, sub-regions, and students; and (c) first-generation students.

Theoretical Framework

Many theories exist that explain human behavior, including those theories within the recent field of positive psychology that emphasize human flourishing or positive development and adaptation, instead of the focus on pathology that has traditionally defined psychology's approach to human behavior (Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2010). The reason I chose resiliency as the theoretical framework for the current study is due to its focus on "good function or outcome

in the context of risk or adversity" (Masten, 2014, p. 6). Resilience has been shown to arise "from ordinary resources and processes" (Masten, 2014, p. 3) that produce flourishing behavior, especially in the face of obstacles and setbacks. Because the term *resilience* can be used in finance, in medicine, in descriptions of objects, and many other areas, the issue of finding a consistent conceptual and operational definition of *resilience* is important. The basic construct of resilience is understood, yet no uniformity of terminology or measurement exists among researchers. Multiple definitions of resilience involve a risk or adversity and a resulting positive adaptation at least in one area of behavior (Herrman et al, 2011). In psychology, child development, and other areas where risk situations have been studied, agreement can be found that individuals go through risk situations and that some of them are able to maintain a positive reaction to that event or long-term stressor or adversity. Traumatic events can produce a great deal of damage to any individual and those effects can be long-lasting as they tend to change individuals' perception of themselves and their environments (Condly, 2006).

Adversity does not affect individuals in the same manner. What is determined adverse and devastating to one individual might have little effect on another. Masten (2014) indicated that resilience is ordinary because of a protective-type system possessed by all individuals; therefore, resilience is the ordinary magic of life. However, not all people respond positively to adversity. Thus, Masten determined that threats to the protective system *can* cause resilience to be replaced by developmental problems. Although Masten declared *resilience* to be "ordinary magic," other research reveals different perspectives.

The historical study of resilience usually begins with the work of Garmezy (1971, 1991), whose early longitudinal research into schizophrenia revealed that some children of schizophrenics were not impacted negatively by their environment (Garmezy, 1987). In fact,

years later those children were still seen as adapting fairly well to life without psychopathology. Other early research included Werner's (1989) study of children on the island of Kauai, Hawaii. Her research covered the lives of 698 children from the prenatal stage until they reached age 32. Similar to the results found by Garmezy (1991), Werner discovered that some individuals living in adverse situations were able to adapt successfully to life. Both Garmezy and Werner found two common facets of resilience rooted in the qualities of the individual. Those facets were the amount of support that the individuals experience in their close environment and the support that they found in their extended environments.

A shift in resilience research occurred, moving from a focus on the environmental risks that the person experiences (for example, Garmezy's focus on the environment that the resilient individual experienced) to a more positive study of the internal reasons for the resilience in individuals (Kumpfer, 1999). According to Kumpfer (1999), this shift took the focus from frustration or despair to one of optimism. An implication of this more optimistic focus is a need to find out what causes one individual to be resilient in hopes that efforts can be made to develop those qualities in others. A question that can be raised is whether training for resilience can be effective. According to Kumpfer, this training for protection through resilience could be done intuitively with persons at risk. However, Kumpfer stated that few prevention programs were based on resilience theory. She noted the difficulty of defining process and outcome constructs but wrote that the "confluence between the environment and the individual and the individual and choice of outcomes" describe the difficulty of developing specific training programs to teach resilience (Kumpfer, 1999, p. 183). Condly (2006) produced one further description of a resilient individual, noting it is similar to velvet-covered steel; this metaphor implied that an individual can be soft to the touch with the strength of steel as reinforcement.

Kirmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall, Phillips, and Williamson (2011) also confirm the difficulties faced by researchers and practitioners in trying to develop resiliency training that focuses on malleable aspects or characteristics of resilience. The authors wrote that in recent years resilience required some systematic rethinking in order that resilience training might aid individuals during major life transitions. They implied that indigenous people who have had major disruptions, such as making radical changes in location, could benefit from resilience training. Nonetheless, Kirmayer et al.'s research involved the Roots of Resilience project, in which they found positive responses to training. Regarding the trauma of moving from one location to another, Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortes (2009) noted that migration from one culture to another could be one of the most radical changes that an individual can endure.

Kumpfer (1999) listed six major predictors of resilience. They were (a) stressors, (b) external context or environment (including the balance between risk and protective factors), (c) person-environmental interactions, (d) internal characteristics (spiritual, cognitive, social/behavioral, physical and emotional/affective competencies), (e) resilience processes (resilient reintegration), and (f) positive outcomes (successful life adaptation) which can be predictive of future resilience. Her fourth predictor includes the spiritual dimension (used here interchangeably with religion), the least studied of the internal characteristics. Individuals who have demonstrated resilience often mention the importance of a spiritual dimension in their coping with and flourishing in the presence of risk. In fact, in serious risk situations, such as drug dependence or violence, many religious organizations have played a critical role in building resilience with documented success (Condly, 2006). Religion has been seen as a way out of difficulty, connecting a person with others, protecting from harmful behaviors, and giving

meaning to life. In fact, the forgiveness aspect of religion has been seen as a strong positive quality for individuals. Condly (2006) found that service, which many religions emphasize and practice, influenced social justice and the search to find meaning beyond oneself (Condly, 2006). Adolescents observed religion to be a powerful protector from harmful environments. In addition, Condly found religious adolescents to have better academic outcomes when compared to nonreligious adolescents (Condly, 2006). Kim and Esquivel (2011) stated, "The development of spirituality and religious faith may be viewed as lifelong and following a trajectory of increasing complexity and integration" (p.760).

An article in the *Harvard Mental Health Letter* entitled "Resilience" (Harvard Medical School, 2006) described various recent findings of resilience research from the perspectives of biology, psychopharmacology, and brain imaging. These new findings contrast with previous thinking that some people were innately able to handle stress. The writer also mentioned a longitudinal study of New York City residents' responses after the events of September 11, 2001. Responses to that research indicated that residents with specific thinking patterns were able to deal with the tragedy and would not likely require any type of counseling. The authors speculated that this could have been due to the short duration of the trauma. The article summarized that findings from each type of research still involved the presence of an adverse situation and a resulting positive outcome on the part of some individuals.

The recent decade has brought about an expansion in the types of resilience research (Shahar, 2012). Previously, the majority of research on resilience applied to young populations (Kappa, 2002). As the expansion in types of resilience research has occurred, more adult subjects have been used, and the biological perspectives described discuss genetic differences due to the possession of specific neurochemical variations that may contribute to the ability to

react positively or negatively to stressors (Vine & Aldao, 2014). New research also maintains that brain functioning can contribute to either positive or negative responses (Wang, 2010). Curtis and Cicchetti (2003) encouraged a multidisciplinary theoretical perspective. They made the point that biological factors influence psychological processes in the individual. They discussed the biology of resilience using possible "contributions of genetics, neuroendocrinology, immunology, emotion cognition, and neural plasticity" (Curtis & Cicchetti, 2003, p. 775). All of the above illustrations of resilience are important as possible roots of resilience. For the purposes of this research, I will now discuss educational resilience.

Educational resilience focuses on the ability of an individual to overcome obstacles and succeed in an educational environment. Research in this area, however, has mainly focused on children and youth. Educational resilience was described by Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1993) as "the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences" (p. 46). In a study of students, Alva (1991) claimed that students who achieve resilient success were those "who sustain high levels of achievement motivation and performance despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly in school and ultimately dropping out of school" (p. 19). However, most of the current research on educational resilience has focused on extreme underachievers or on ethnic-minority students. In Great Britain, Sacker and Schoon (2007) explored the likelihood of disadvantaged school leavers' (equivalent age to United States' high school) in a specific birth cohort returning to school at a later time. They observed that the students may have had to "build a reserve capacity of resources and assets before resilient reintegration into education" (Sacker & Schoon, 2007, p. 873) became possible.

Kumpfer (1999) used the term resilient reintegration as meaning a successful adaptation after the individual has had a time of disruption or stress. Primarily, social science research has demonstrated that something had to take place in each individual to cause that resilient reintegration. That resilience could have been a work credentialing issue, a personal goal, a need to be an example to children, the hope of future earnings, or an observation that the individual was just as capable as those who were work superiors. As individuals aged, perhaps a confidence factor could have been at the heart of their motivation. Successes throughout life could have built new confidence in their abilities to achieve. Sacker and Schoon (2007) implied that resources had to be built from within the individual. They adopted a life course approach to studying resilience as they observed students' successful reintegration into education. Other research into this long-term observation of successful reintegration is relatively non-existent.

As a result of more research into educational resilience of Australian high school students, Martin and Marsh (2006) developed a theoretical 5-C model consisting of the following ingredients: (a) confidence, (b) coordination (perceived as planning), (c) control, (d) composure, and (e) commitment resulting in persistence. An important component of this study was the impact the intent to establish motivation and engagement, had on student's academic resilience. Questions such as those related to enjoyment of school, general self-esteem, and the amount of class participation were used to try to identify motivation and engagement in the education process. Even though the participants were high school students rather than adults, since information on adult educational resilience is close to non-existent, this high school research is important. Martin and Marsh used the 5-C model to measure academic resilience by identifying motivators, engagement, and other student descriptions. The 5-Cs were validated as descriptors

of educationally resilient youth. The outcomes of enjoyment, participation, and self-esteem were seen as practical implications of the data.

In their study of high-achieving African American youth from single-parent, low-income families, Williams and Bryan (2012) observed 10 themes in the youth and the role of their environment. Low-income youth often leave education; however, this 2012 qualitative study gave the opportunity to focus on qualities of students and their families present that ensured the educational resilience of these youth. The 10 themes noted in the study are listed below:

1. The practice of the parents to be involved in their children's education, such as reinforcing good grades, applying discipline for poor grades or behavior, monitoring school progress, and setting realistic expectations.
2. Stories of personal hardship.
3. Warm, responsive, supportive, and close relationships with mothers.
4. Strength of extended family relationships.
5. Positive school extended activities.
6. Supportive adult relationships at school.
7. A peer culture that revolved around scholastic achievements.
8. Positive involvement in extracurricular activities.
9. Social networks of support for the youth.
10. Positive community influences that provided encouragement or advice, including healthy activities outside the structure of school, such as church or community organizations.

All of these influencers seemed to protect the vulnerable youth from succumbing to negative environmental influence. This study reinforced the idea of building resources to

insulate youth (Williams & Bryan, 2012). In a related study, Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortes (2009) found that academic success in Latino youth in college was related to the presence of both personal and environmental protective factors that insulated the students from risk situations.

Only one study of educational resilience in adult students was found. Campa's (2010) qualitative study of Mexican Americans who were successful in a community college setting revealed the barriers that they encountered with race, linguistics, culture, and even understanding their classroom expectations. For them, resilience was coping with changing cultural norms, seeing life the way it was, and seeking new and different adaptations. One of the students focused on observing the people who had the power in any given situation. He pointed out to his classmates that their ambivalence in the classroom reemphasized the power of the faculty member. He coached them about proper classroom behavior and the importance of befriending the faculty. Another student was troubled by the machismo of his gender. His commitment to his education reflected an intentional decision to go against the machismo of his culture. He chose to use his life for a greater purpose—that of being a good father and husband. He had observed the hardships of his mother and grandmother, who had been abandoned by the fathers of their children and were left to struggle. His intentions were to complete his education in order to transform the culture of his child. A third student, who had learned to read in her 30s and was a college student in her 40s, became an activist within her scope of influence as she discovered wrongs. She challenged her fellow students to try to overcome inequities in their lives. In addition, she and her husband volunteered to help others by forming a tutor program for reading and math when they saw the need in fellow students. None of the parents of the participants in this study had graduated from college (Champa, 2010).

Regardless of the lack of a concise theory interchangeable in a variety of areas and settings, the term resilient can be used to describe individuals who press on in a positive way with life in spite of difficulty or adversity. Wu et al. (2013) offered a uniform definition of resilience: "Resilience is the ability to adapt successfully in the face of stress and adversity" (p.1). Resilience does not need measurement for one to know it exists. Condly (2006) determined that it was important to find how risk affected individuals. He observed that resilience must be chosen constantly throughout life for it to be enduring. He identified elasticity as a characteristic individuals use to adapt to the risk factors in the environment and become resilient. As individuals succeed when faced with cultural, generational, or traumatic obstacles, then they can be described as resilient.

Indicators of resilience vary from one domain to another. Based on measures of resilience, a resilient individual may be competent in one or more settings but not competent in others. Resilience varies in intensity—very strong in resilience or less so. A test of resilience was administered to a group of Finnish youth in a longitudinal study of parent perceptions of their child's educational resilience (Räty, Kasanen, & Rautiainen, 2014). Results included that the perceived resilience of the children had roots in the parent's beliefs in their children's potential and educability. Educated parents were found to have higher expectations of their children's resilience and persistence than vocationally trained parents (Räty et al., 2014).

Another perspective on resilience, especially educational resilience, is that of building resilience in vulnerable individuals. Based on a lengthy review of educational resilience, Downey (2008) recommended a combination of building teacher-student rapport, developing a caring classroom community, the use of realistic academic expectations, and the use of student strengths that could add to the self-esteem of the learners. Children and youth experienced

cohort-based environments as they attended elementary and secondary education. Upon entering college, that was not often the case, although statistics have reported the successes of cohort-based support environments (Downey, 2008).

A new movement in educational resilience training with children and youth can be found in a shift from a focus on the deficits that children have to a focus on the positive and optimistic strengths in children (Brownlee et al., 2013). In a development related to the recent work of positive psychology (Snyder et al., 2010) using a statistical process known as factor analysis (Grimm & Yarnold, 1995), certain strengths were identified and then are considered the strengths-based model for work with all children. Brownlee et al. (2013) stated that positive strengths can be found in all children and, when identified, help to empower a resilient response. According to Doll (2013), at-risk children can become resilient children when they begin to see themselves as competent, to focus on learning goals, to behave in a positive manner, and to maintain healthy friendships, and when their families strengthen what happens in the classroom.

In conclusion, resilience occurs when one overcomes hardship with a positive perspective. The presence of a uniform theory of resilience is not necessary for a person to understand that resilience is a functioning characteristic of people. I expected that adult students in this study would cite, implicitly or explicitly, the role of resilience in their pursuit of education as indicated in the two quotes that follow. Educational resilience as described by Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1993) is "the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences" (p. 19). Alva's (1991) finding that those who achieve this success of resilience are students who are able to continue with high levels of performance and motivation in spite of stressful life events or situations that could put them at risk of dropping out of school.

The students in the current study are adults who work full-time, have families and other obligations, and for whatever reason stopped out of their education previously. For some of them, it is likely that a healthy environment is not always present, but that they excel in spite of their current environment. They have decided that the time is right to continue their college educations. The students being heard through this study are resilient during their education in spite of obstacles that they face in their daily lives. These study participants are not traditional-aged students. They also do not have the benefit of parents to guide them through the challenges of college. In fact, they have additional cultural obstacles to overcome in Appalachia where education is not always valued. All of these factors combine to make the college experience difficult. Any small thing added to what they normally have to face could cause them to discontinue their education. Research into adult students in Appalachia who work and are first-generation college students, and who succeed in spite of major obstacles to their education is an important endeavor in order to allow adult students to find their voice about the pursuit of their baccalaureate degree.

Related Literature

The topics relevant to an understanding of the study follow. These are (a) to focus on the uniqueness of the Appalachian region and the sub-regions, (b) to reveal how other studies examine first-generation learners, (c) to describe adult learners and their stressors that contribute to the complexities of their lives, and (d) a look at andragogy (theory of adult learning). These concepts relevant to the participants in the study supported the development of a unique view into their lives.

Uniqueness of the Appalachian Region, Sub-regions, and Students

The Appalachian region is a 420 county area of the United States that extends into portions of 13 states in the eastern third of the United States (ARC, 2012). Just over 25 million people reside in over 204,000 square miles in the Appalachian mountain range that "follows the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi" (ARC, 2014b). Approximately 20% of the United States' population resides in rural areas compared to 42% of Appalachia (ARC, 2014b). One can be in a city and then within a short while be "up a holler" (called that by locals) on a curvy, even one-lane road or one-lane bridge. The mountains create barriers for travel, education, economy, medical care, employment, and many other important facets of life. The residents in some remote areas have accepted hardship as their destiny (Eller, 2008).

General attachments form to locations. Eller (2008) stated that everyone searches for a connection to place. This is especially likely to happen regarding where one lives (Cooper, Knotts, & Livingston, 2010). People in Appalachia may have received a "double dose" of that effect because many of them have never been elsewhere and do not desire to go elsewhere. They have spent their entire lives in the same place with the same people doing many of the same things. Part of their restricted travel is due to the extreme topography. Road-building requires a huge economic outlay in many parts of Appalachia and often is not feasible (Abrahamson & Haskell, 2006). In fact, some of the region's roads are toll roads because they are expensive to maintain (Abrahamson & Haskell, 2006). I have heard it said that you could not go to see a remote location within a section of the Appalachian region while on the way to somewhere else because the location in question is not on the way to anywhere. For those with family or

obligations elsewhere, they can leave Appalachia and come back, but for many others, that option is closed due to economic limitations.

Another reason that many residents of Appalachia are landlocked is that they live in poverty and hardship and lack money or transportation to navigate the area. These residents have difficulty providing a living for their families, and this same pattern has existed for decades. It was true of their parents, and grandparents, and likely their great-grandparents (Eller, 2008).

The fortitude and resilience of the people is one of the things that make this region remarkable. The constant poverty and entrapment has given many an attitude of fatalism because they feel powerless to change things, yet they have made the most of life with colorful culture that adds meaning, vitality, joy, and value to their lives (DeYoung, 1995; Tang & Russ, 2007). In fact, it is hard to separate the general culture of the region from the culture of poverty. The people throughout generations were able to keep carving out a meager living and finding a reason to live. They constantly had to overcome hardship. Family was everything. They created celebrations, such as family reunions, to add a positive dimension to their lives (Abrahamson & Haskell, 2006). Strong religious faith passed down from generations of Christian legacy gave them hope.

It is worthy of mention again that all areas of the Appalachian region are not alike in hardship or educational attainment. The central area that includes Kentucky, West Virginia, and some of Tennessee seems to be characterized by the greatest degree of hardship. Statistics from that area indicate that the percentage of the population holding a college degree is nearly half of the national average (Ali & Saunders, 2006). According to DeYoung (1991) in the summer of 1991, one county in upper-eastern Tennessee had fewer than 6% of its residents who were college graduates. He chose to use a pseudonym for that county because of the deplorable

statistics that he was quoting at the time. According to DeYoung's article, he had "attempted to show . . . that educational practice/leadership in traditionally oriented and economically depressed American rural school systems bears little resemblance to modern experience" (p. 314). At present, one part of Appalachia in an unnamed state has 12.8% of its citizens with a baccalaureate degree compared to 28.5% nation-wide (ARC, 2014b).

The Appalachian region, as mentioned in the Introduction, has a vast array of beautiful, yet often treacherous scenery. One can go from a mountaintop to a "holler" very quickly. This can create obstacles in maintaining a healthy economy since many things cost more to offer in topography such as this region's (Eller, 2008). In the midst of the region's majestic scenery and natural beauty one finds an economy weaker than the national average. Coal mining was a hope for the mountain people of the past and a violation of the mountain ranges (Eller, 2008). Outside corporations entered the area, discovered rich deposits of coal when coal was a key heat source, and promised great jobs for the citizenry. They showed little regard for the mountains and began strip mining that cut huge gashes in the mountains. Sometimes the entire top of the mountain was removed. Deep coal mines were dug underground, and the residents were given good-paying jobs to go deep into the earth to dig out the coal and bring it to the surface. The corporations had little regard for safety. Thus, mines frequently caved in, trapping and killing miners who were buried alive. Working under the earth with coal dust caused miners eventually to develop black lung disease that shortened their lives. The jobs were appealing because the miners were paid a better than average wage for the region. People who have traveled in remote areas of the Central Appalachian region reported passing tiny shacks with a Cadillac outside and a television antenna mounted on the shack. The miner's families enjoyed some of the luxuries of

the "outside" because of the miners' incomes. They welcomed jobs that would allow them those luxuries in spite of the dangers (Eller, 2008).

The lifestyle of the miners also resulted in a "rise in tobacco, alcohol, and drug abuse" (Eller, 2008, p. 242). Those items were affordable in the case of some prescribed drugs needed in order to deal with the extreme work environments. In fact, at one point in the history of the coal mining era, it was stated that a section of the Appalachian mining region "received more prescription painkillers than did any other area of the country" (Eller, 2008, p. 242). Coal mining is still common, and "between 1996 and 2005, 320 workers were killed in American coal mines" (Eller, 2008, p. 242).

Another sad development from the strip mining in the region was the disregard for the mountains that resulted in serious flooding, wiping out entire communities and remaining a continual threat for others (Abrahamson & Haskell, 2006; Eller, 2008). Strip mining involved taking the top off the mountain in order to reach the coal. It was much less costly for the mining companies, and the strip mines were often left with just a covering of dirt after the coal removal. Often serious flooding occurred, causing destruction and death in communities when rains washed down the mountains. My family experienced the devastation of a community flood due to the strip mining. Much of the family's possessions and memorabilia were destroyed when my father served as a minister in a remote coal mining area.

The response of the residents to the sacrificing of the mountains for strip mining was expressed by Larry Gibson:

> We have a conversation with the land here. The land will talk to us. It will tell us things. Nothing comes easy for people in the mountains. This is a symbol of what the history of the mountains is about. We are a little worn. We are a little bent. We are a little broken.

> But we are real, and we are here. And we are tired of being collateral damage, a sacrificial zone for rich people. (as cited in Eller, 2008, p. 259)

Some of the Appalachian region's inhabitants still live in dire poverty with no reasonable way out of it since the poverty rate is higher than the rest of the nation (ARC, 2014d). Much of the mining has ceased and manufacturing jobs have gone overseas. During the most recent recession, job loss was more severe in Appalachia than in the rest of the nation, and the unemployment rate exceeded the nation's rate in recent years (ARC, 2014c). This means that unemployment remains a deep concern, and one of the counties for this study (C3) has the highest unemployment in the state of Tennessee at 16.1% (ARC, 2014c). Some of the region's human successes leave the area for a better life with the result that the area is left with less than it had to start with. For those who can obtain it, education can often be the key to a better job.

Appalachia has been drawn closer to mainstream America in appearance through the emergence of retail establishments such as Wal-Mart that brings inexpensive products which cause the citizenry to look more like the people in most parts of America. However, the impact this establishment has on local economies is controversial. Eller (2008) stated that "The fundamental problems of the region remained: issues of land use and ownership, taxation and public responsibility, environmental quality, economic security, civic leadership, human rights, and respect for cultural diversity" (p. 223). The region still suffers from problems unique to the remote mountain communities, the difficulty of providing adequate services to the residents, and the lack of a means for many of its residents to make a living. These continue to plague a region that has already suffered a great deal. For example, "rural Appalachians suffered higher mortality rates" from conditions such as heart disease, "diabetes, cervical, breast, and lung cancers" (Eller, 2008, p. 241) as a result of the hazards of mountain employment and lifestyle

than urban Appalachians. Eller also stated, ". . . there is little doubt that poverty contributed to the persistence of these health disparities in Appalachia" (Eller, 2008, p. 241).

In the past, some of the region's rural inhabitants valued a separation from mainstream America. They deliberately chose to separate themselves and their families from the influx of new cultural influences. This fierce independent spirit demonstrated itself in many ways that shielded them from the outside and "fueled a cooperative community spirit that allowed families to survive during hard times" (Eller, 2008, p. 244). Their resistance to change has pervaded resulting generations and has demonstrated itself also in a distrust of education for their children. Thus in current Appalachian society, some youth are not encouraged to pursue higher education.

The entry of mainstream America's influence resulted in some communities' strong and intentional grip on their heritage. This is expressed through yearly heritage days, folk music revivals, folklore and storytelling days, and cultural events (Abrahamson & Haskell, 2006). A portion of the population reads nature's signs to predict the weather, or an almanac to know when to plant their crops. Natural health remedies are studied and passed down from generation to generation. The festivals and culture maintain a connection to the past for the residents, but they also bring an influx of tourists desiring an exposure to the culture. Tourism brings revenue into the region but also produces traffic issues. Tourism brings in persons who love the land, but also those who disregard nature. Tourism brings commercialization, yet that commercialization is not always welcomed. Residents resent the influx of the outside. In many cases, the strong pull of mainstream America's influence on the youth via media has removed any visible expression of their roots. However, one thing that does not seem to weaken is the strong dialects of some areas of Appalachia, especially Central and Southern Appalachia (Abrahamson & Haskell, 2006). This speech has been both romanticized and ridiculed.

Growth came to the mountains of Appalachia in spite of the desperate attempts of the residents to cling to the past and to the land. Over the decades, family members left the region to find decent wages. Sprawling shopping centers were built on land that was formerly extraordinary farmland. Mountain areas became dotted with cabins to house weekenders or tourists-turned-residents. Land became theme parks that attract thousands of tourists each year. In spite of this influence, many rural areas remain nearly untouched with little access to the outside world (Eller, 2008).

Another strong influence has been the tourists' desire to get back to nature by buying up farmland or mountain areas in order to make them their home. I have seen areas with a large population of tourists-turned-residents with an end result of creating resentment and change. The new residents try to bring influence from their previous state to re-make the Appalachian area, although moving to the area because of its natural beauty. They come admiring the beauty, yet then project on the local culture the influences of the areas that they left.

To maintain the uniqueness of Appalachia, the citizenry needs to become the best that they can be in order to make the region the best it can be (ARC, 2012). Education may help entrepreneurship and employment that can aid the economic plight of its residents. In 2010 in Tennessee, the six-year graduation rate from community college was 30% and from universities, 52% (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2011). Earning a college degree for Appalachian residents is an intentional climb since many of the youth never finish high school, thus making their pursuit of higher education difficult. Tennessee's high school graduation rate in 2013 was 80.4% (U. S. Department of Education, 2013). From 2008-2012, the high school graduation rate for the region of Appalachia was 74.8% (ARC, 2014a). Reasons for low graduation rates may be attributed to a lack of emphasis on or even a suspicion of education by

the region's populous; thus, Appalachian regional residents are sometimes satisfied with low expectations (Eller, 2008).

First-Generation College Students

First-generation college students are defined as students whose parents did not attend college (Mamiseishvili, 2010). Some studies called them first-in-family students (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007). Merritt (2008) pointed out the demographic changes in first-generation college students. She reflected that several decades ago, white, working class, baby-boomers were the predominant first-generation students because they were represented most frequently as college students, in general. A shift in new college students due to race, ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic level has resulted in a new description of the first-generation student of today. Cho, Hudley, Lee, Barry, & Kelly (2008), who found information typical for the new definition, discovered that first-generation students are now underrepresented in high income brackets and overrepresented at the low income categories, chronicling the shift toward low socio-economic status for the preponderance of today's first-generation college students. However, it is important to remember that regardless of race, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic level, or any other characteristic, a first-generation college student is one who is the first in their family to attend college. The obstacles to college completion faced by first-generation learners may include familial, social, educational, financial, and personal ones. Descriptions of some of the difficulties encountered by first-in-family students follow.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2005) reported that first-generation students were consistently at a disadvantage throughout their college experiences. They found that nearly one-half of first-generation students left without completing a degree. The report also stated that:

> [T]hey completed fewer credits, took fewer academic courses, earned lower grades, needed more remedial assistance, and were more likely to withdraw from or repeat courses they attempted. As a result, the likelihood of attaining a bachelor's degree was lower for first-generation students compared to their peers whose parents attended college . . . Even for students who attended a 4-year institution with the intention of earning a bachelor's degree, first-generation students were less likely to earn a bachelor's degree than were their counterparts whose parents held a bachelor's or higher degree. (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2005, p. 4)

In an anecdotal account, Macias (2013) recounted that, as a first-generation college student, he needed a mentor. His description of a mentor was an individual who did not expect deficiency from first-generation students. Rather, he needed someone that believed first-generation students were capable of excelling. In contrast, he urged that "a deficit-oriented mind-set with respect to first-generation students will yield deficit-oriented solutions" (Macias, 2013, p.18). Macias wrote that instilling a sense of competence in first-generation students is a lofty goal that can be accomplished through cultivating their strengths.

Some first-generation students actually dropout of school during their senior year of college. A survey was administered to the institution used in the Hunt, Boyd, Gast, Mitchell, and Wilson (2012) study, and the withdrawing senior-level students in an attempt to determine the rationale of the students' decision to leave when they were so close to graduation. Based on their overall findings, most respondent, first-generation students said that their family obligations were interfering with their degree pursuit (Hunt, Boyd, Gast, Mitchell, & Wilson, 2012). Therefore, their degree pursuit had to be put aside for the sake of the family. The students were much more likely to say that they didn't have family support. Of the seniors questioned, 60% of

the first-generation students were paying for more than 75% of their education with personal funds, loans, or income and they were significantly more likely to have financial concerns. They were much more likely to report that stress or anxiety was a barrier to their persistence. Obligations to family and work were significant factors in their leaving school during their senior year of college even when graduation was in view. Family and work trumped the completion of college when crisis situations arose. The surveyed students in the Hunt et al. (2012) study were willing to sacrifice their own accomplishment or success in order to assist in family situations or in the need to put work over personal educational goals.

Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols' (2007) research found results similar to those of Hunt, et al. (2012). They describe first-generation college students as being poorly prepared and worried about financial concerns. Frequently, these students withdrew from higher education, even when nearing completion. One important finding of their research was that non-first-generation college students perform better academically than first-generation students did regardless of the amount of confidence in their own ability. The non-first-generation college students also had a significantly higher level of self-efficacy than their first-generation peers. This revelation highlights another important obstacle for first-generation students.

Educational obstacles are the key focus of this study. Another applicable one is Byrd and MacDonald's (2005) report that first-generation students in Appalachia are academically unprepared. Academic preparation is an obvious concern for many students, especially first-generation students, and this usually results in lower test scores on college entrance exams for first-generation students. Adam (2003, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009) has published several articles that highlight the reality of low income, first-generation students being academically unprepared. The study of ACT test-takers found that first-in-family college students scored much lower on

the ACT than students who had a parent who had gone to college (Adam, 2003). Fifty-two percent of first-generation students failed to meet any of the ACT benchmarks compared with 31% of overall scorers (Adam, 2006, 2009).

For first-generation college students, the college experience takes a certain measure of humility. When entering the unfamiliar environment including college admissions and student paperwork, an extended campus, uncertainty regarding how to understand schedules, calendars, online registration, syllabi, and online research—to mention only a few—a great deal of humiliation can be felt. During the processes, the first-generation student without a mentor makes one mistake after another and has to ask for help. In the words of a doctoral student, Brandy, "I had to study twice as hard to learn how to maneuver in and out of the system, how to work the system, how to learn" (as cited in Gardner & Holly, 2011, p. 84). She added, "There was no one telling me what a FAFSA was, for example . . . I had to learn this. No one taught me anything" (as cited in Gardner & Holly, 2011, p. 84). Miles, also a doctoral student, shared, "I can't be on top of it if I don't know what to expect. No one had really told me. I'm not dumb" (as cited in Gardner & Holly, 2011, p. 84). Another student, Margaret, stated, "[My peers] knew things that I didn't. I always felt like I was slowly behind everyone else" (as cited in Gardner & Holly, 2011, p. 84). Kelly explained,

> Their parents are educated and have degrees so they kind of know what the system is and how to work it . . . . For me, I kind of have to feel my way around and learn as I go. (as cited in Gardner & Holly, 2011, p. 84)

Kathryn expressed her inner conflict, "In a way, I'm kind of caught in between these two groups: the working class group and the world of academia. I don't fully belong to either group anymore. I kind of have one foot straddling the line" (as cited in Gardner & Holly, 2011, p. 84).

The students in the doctoral programs in the two schools studied by Gardner and Holly (2011) found language an obstacle when they returned home. One student stated that she couldn't really act educated when she got home because people felt she was uppity. Her cousins stated that she didn't talk the same as she used to. Miles claimed that, "I have literally cut off all connections to those people back home because those people are still doing those things that I cannot be associated with . . . and it hurts" (as cited in Gardner & Holly, 2011, p. 85). From another perspective, Gardner and Holly quoted Kathryn, "Part of academia doesn't really fit with me. I find some of the people [at the university] to be very elitist" (p. 85).

A lack of educational preparedness is not the only issue influencing first-generation college student degree attainment. Seemingly minor issues that others might not consider also cause problems for students. Some first-generation students expressed that they were geographically place-bound in higher education options. They felt that they needed to attend college close to home and at night because they needed to keep jobs (Inman & Mayes, 1999). These students felt that they also needed to continue to be able to be involved parents while attending college (Inman & Mayes, 1999).

Financial aid is another challenge because attaining aid is often found to be "an elusive and mysterious process, where the university-controlled application requirements and award amounts, and the real needs of the students were not considered" (Eitel & Martin, 2009, p. 625). Eitel and Martin (2009) found students "overwhelmed by the financial aid process," (p. 625) as well as helpless and frustrated. The students of their study perceived money to be a constant worry. That worry also impacted their educational choices, such as the compromise some made to become nurses since finances prohibited them from becoming doctors. To quote one student experience with a financial aid counselor, "They're just nonchalant about your funding. . . .

because it's like 'It's not me getting the money, and I don't really care'" (Dolan, 2005, p. 1). A further concern is that first-generation graduates are often saddled with debt when they leave college (Adam, 2005). Then, a guilt factor also exists from the student's spending so much of the family income or being responsible for a large debt for their education. In a case study, Hartig and Steigerwald (2007) quoted David as saying, "My father has had the same jacket for 20 years, and I spent $500 on books this semester" (p. 159). In a recent presentation at the 2014 Conference for the Association for Non-traditional Students in Higher Education, Dr. Belle Wheelan, President of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, portrayed first-generation college students as having very little home support and limited college survival skills (Wheelan, 2014). She stated that many drop out of college because of financial problems and debt.

Only four studies in the Appalachian region have been conducted regarding the region's first-generation students with three focusing on traditional students, but abundant literature is available about first-generation students in the general population outside of the Appalachian region. In research on first-generation college students, Appalachian first-generation students experienced a culture shock, as do first-generation students in general, when they brave the challenges of learning the language of syllabi and financial aid without the advantage of parental guidance. Because their parents never attended college, the foreign environment of college has no interpreter. Many of these students fall by the wayside (Hunt et al., 2012). Byrd and MacDonald (2005) stated that many first-generation students lack what they call *tacit* intelligence needed for college. This label refers to possessing the awareness that the student should attend college, be ready for class, use course materials, such as a syllabus, and feel the need to collaborate with classmates. They also referred to tacit intelligence as the ability to

navigate college (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005). Parents who graduated college (and perhaps attended college with great success) can interpret this foreign language and culture of college for the entering student. Neumeister and Rinker (2006) suggested that first-generation college females often lack a role model who is a successful woman, either in college or in the world of work. Furthermore, Bradbury and Mather (2009) and Bryan and Simmons (2009) found that first-generation college students in Appalachia often do not have confidence in their ability to succeed in the academic arena of higher education. Part of that can likely be attributed to poor preparation in earlier schooling.

Bryan and Simmons (2009) studied 10 first-generation students in an early intervention program in Appalachia. Their study revealed some of the value in having an orientation to the college campus while still attending high school. Students can be overwhelmed with the size of colleges and universities. The orientation to campus gave those who were participating a familiarity with the school. The researchers compared the oriented students' experience to that of students who had not had the orientation and were intimidated by the size of the university and a transition to a large city. The students who received the intervention were also given academic preparation, including test preparation for the ACT. Test preparation and college orientation gave the students more confidence in their ability to adjust to the college world. These same first-generation students found serious deficiencies in their parent's knowledge of college. The students also discovered their parents' lack of interest in knowing more about the college environment. One student in the Bryan and Simmons' (2009) study stated, "It's [college is] like being in a foreign country, and I was acclimated to that foreign country very well by the [program]" (p. 395). For first-generation students, this study reveals additional merit to having a mentor to navigate the challenges of higher education. It also portrays more of the educational

challenge, not merely academic, but environmentally, for first-generation students. DiMaria (2014) told of a young, first-generation high school graduate who wanted to attend and was accepted to law school. She graduated college but the bus ride late at night in the city to law school was daunting, so her parents objected to her going. She compromised and attended a graduate school closer to home, but hoped to go back to law school later. Her journey through higher education was a frustrating one as she tried to navigate the system without a guide. Rosario described it herself in these words, "You know how [the cake] should look and how it should taste when it's done, but without a recipe or someone to tell you how to bake it, you are baking it from scratch" (DiMaria, 2014, p. 10). In the classroom, she was intimidated. She realized that the students in the classes had "book smarts," but she had "common sense."

Non-English speaking first-generation students have an additional obstacle of communication (Diravidamani & Selvan, 2014). They struggle with understanding faculty, students, formal and informal speech, and other nuances of the English language. Sending and receiving communication complicates their education as they do not understand the cultural norms for this in their new context. Non-verbal communication can also prove confusing, as the cues they have intuited are no longer the normative practice. Torres, a Mexican-American, discovered quickly that everyone is not treated alike on a university campus (DiMaria, 2014). He stated, "I saw students overlooked because of their social skills" (DiMaria, 2014, p. 11). His experience caused him to develop a university campus welcome event for the incoming Latino freshmen. Some of the attrition to second year may be due to the communication and cultural challenges of Hispanic students, many of whom are first-generation students. According to Hewing (2012), 35% of Hispanic students were less likely than first-generation students who were White to continue until the second year.

Adult students, first-generation college students, and minority students frequently begin their studies at a two-year school or community college (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Research has established that many attend there, in part, because it is close to home. Therefore, offering a seamless transfer to a university program in the same building or location makes another degree available to students. In addition, having a baccalaureate option offered by a university at a community college enables the student to earn a four-year degree instead of dropping out or stopping out (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). It is hoped that this can translate into obtaining a job, a better job, or a chance for promotion.

Sidle and McReynolds (1999) stated that "Colleges and universities have ethical responsibilities to the students they admit and enroll every semester" (p. 291). That leads to a discussion about whether schools want, or should help to interpret the college system for a first-generation student. Some offer guidance early in the first year with orientation classes or "freshman experience" programs (Sidle & McReynolds, 1999). In today's competitive higher education market, this single intervention may mean the difference in continuous enrollment to graduation. It may also be interpreted from an ethical standpoint as the right thing to do. By helping one first-generation student to succeed, future generations could be impacted. As Adam (2004) noted, once the first-in-family graduates, it is much easier for other siblings to attend successfully.

Schools, many of which are outside of the Appalachian region, who are sensitive to the challenges are increasing in numbers, many times from a merely economic perspective. For example, Rutgers University offered an intervention program that begins with a select group of seventh graders based on need, who will be the first in their family to attend college (Abdul-Alim, 2013). These students are offered pre-college activities throughout their high school years

that include preparation for the ACT and attending a college class with a mentor. Students who complete the pre-college preparation and meet admissions criteria are then given free tuition at Rutgers University for the four years of college. University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) leads the nation with 87% of their freshman enrollment described as first-generation students (Horwedel, 2008). UCLA takes institutional accountability seriously. They are modeling extraordinary efforts to aid the first-generation learner, regardless of income, by creating a sense of community and connectedness in ethnic groupings in housing directed at study themes with a higher than normal ratio of residence advisors, and matching the students with mentors in graduate school.

Forbus, Mehta, and Newbold (2011) determined that first-generation students are more likely to have lower GPAs than their peers. Results of a research project to determine motivation, success, and satisfaction with higher education revealed that first-generation students tended to be more serious about their education than continuing generation students (Forbus, Mehta, & Newbold, 2011). This and the finding regarding GPAs appear to contradict one another, but more likely indicate that, although the first-generation students are serious about their education, they may not be acclimated or may not be prepared to succeed in the coursework. In addition, since first-generation students are likely to take pride in their colleges or universities, it may behoove schools to cultivate long-term connection with their graduates. These findings are in harmony with a conclusion drawn by Gardner (2013), encouraging schools to foster a sense of belonging with the first-generation students.

As I begin a discussion of the students who will be the target of this research, I will first identify the location and environment. The ARC (2014a) identifies specific counties of Tennessee that are included in the greater area called the Appalachian region. Four of those

counties are served by a public university that I will identify with the pseudonym University for Students with the following identifier in this study, U4S. For 11 years, that university has partnered with local public community colleges in order to offer the second two years of degrees at specific community college satellite campuses. The students taking the university classes at the community college location are actually university students who happen to be housed at a location other than the main campus. The faculty teaching classes are vetted by the various departments at the university and can be full-time or adjunct faculty. This is an effort to serve students who may be unable, either financially or because of employment, to drive to the university's main campus to finish a Bachelor's degree.

Community colleges are often the location of choice for first-generation students because of the small classes close to home where staff can assist students more in navigating the new environment (Roszkowski & Reilly, 2005). Thus, community colleges can give a student extra help as they learn to navigate the college experience. Then, when they enter university courses on the same campus, they feel somewhat less intimidated by the terminology, processes, and a larger campus or environment.

The applicable research addressing first-generation college students can be summarized with the perspective of a study conducted by Frye, Curran, Pierce, Young, and Ziegler (2005). The authors studied seven individuals from working class backgrounds and first-generation roots who earned doctorates. The participants revealed, among other things, that one rarely sheds the feelings of being a first-in-family graduate with working class roots. One individual stated that she carries her working class foundation with her.

> I feel like the real me is a working class person even though I make a good salary and I have this Ph.D. I feel like the real me is, you know, the girl that was raised in the

> country, very working class, with parents who didn't go to college. That feels like the real me. (Frye, Curran, Pierce, Young, & Ziegler, 2005, p. 3)

Another individual in the study stated, "I would always tell myself, 'I'm not really supposed to be here.' 'An [*sic*] I'm crashing the party kind of thing'" (Frye et al., 2005, p. 3). These individuals revealed a conflict between where they had begun and what they had become.

Adult Learners

The following material describes the experiences of adult learners in higher education, the difficulty they experience in funding their education, the stressors of their lives as they pursue their education, and how adults learn (androgogy) in comparison to pedagogy.

Many operational definitions exist for "adult student"; however, a commonly accepted one identifies those students as being 25 years of age or older (Kasworm, 2003). Considering students in this age group, adult learners now outnumber their traditional-aged counterparts (Ross-Gordon, 2011). For example, baby boomers represented 56% of adult learners in the decade of the 1990s, and in the early part of the first decade of this century they represented about 20% of the entire student population in higher education (Palazesi & Bower, 2006). Palazesi and Bower (2006) stated that baby boomers are returning to school in record numbers in order to reinvent themselves with a "positive modified self-identity" (p. 44). Adult, non-traditional students return to college for a variety of reasons. Many of them work to support families and need to earn a degree to find a better job or get promoted (Palazesi & Bowers, 2006). Other adults return because of personal goals instead of work-related pressures.

Adult students, overall, tend to be serious students because they have more world experience and often see the need to return to an educational environment (Campbell, 2005). They are in school primarily because they want to be. Colleges and universities that may focus

on educating only traditional undergraduate students may miss the opportunity to serve a large population of adults who may work during the day and need programs at alternate times or in a variety of formats, such as online classes. According to Complete College America (2011), only 25% of college students in 2011 were traditional students. Based on the same study, 75% of today's college students are commuter students, many of whom struggle to prioritize many competing tasks and appointments. Most of the adult population in the United States has not earned a degree (28.5%) (ARC, 2014a), yet in the knowledge-based society of the United States a degree is becoming increasingly important in order to obtain a job and also to keep one (Helterbran, 2007).

Adult learners usually get classified under the larger category of non-traditional learners. The Association for Non-traditional Students in Higher Education (ANTSHE, 2014) describes non-traditional students as not being of traditional student age, minorities, or those who have dependents at home. Moreover, according to ANTSHE, higher education students in 2013 were mostly female (57.4%), adult, minority (30.9%), and part-time (Wheelan, 2014). Most important for the current study, the student profile as described by ANTSHE includes students who are academically unprepared and often first-generation students with little home support and limited college survival skills.

Compton et al. (2006), Hardin (2008), and O'Toole and Essex (2012) all indicated that adults were seeking learning that was relevant for them in the moment or at their present job. Research emphasizing the role of identity formation in higher education indicated that adult students first saw themselves as employed, and secondly, saw themselves as students (Ross-Gordon, 2011). According to Ishitani (2006), adult students perceived their first obligation was to their employer, and classes must fit around their work schedule. Thus, their education often

had stops and starts and many never completed a degree. Compton et al. (2006) pointed out that these adult learners could be "more capable of learning than their younger counterparts because of their ability to use their prior learning experience" (p. 75) upon which to build current learning. In fact, Ross-Gordon (2011) indicated that adults' "rich life experiences" (p. 26) might help their younger classmates as they both interact in the classroom. Many adult college students are frequently looking for a program that will enhance their work skills (Kasworm, 2003).

In a broad study of 487 undergraduate students, Nelson and Padilla-Walker (2013) collected multi-measure data from five-colleges that emphasized values, identity achievement, depression, and relationships to compare these students' data to criteria that adults deemed important for adulthood. A majority of the students indicated that they were adequately prepared for college. The emerging adult student data revealed that 64.2 %were well-adjusted and flourishing (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2013).

Adult students constantly juggle their work, family, and social obligations in order to maintain their school schedule. One writer called it a "web of perception, constraint, and role demands" (Fairchild, 2003, p. 12). They likely perceive that they should be doing one task while working on another. They may feel guilty about all of their roles because they cannot be their best at any of them. Often they become preoccupied with one role's stressor while they are actively involved with another commitment that also causes stress. An example can be guilt over going to class when they feel that they should be caring for a sick child. In 2003, 29% of adult students were single parents (Kasworm, 2003). That number has increased in recent years as women caregivers continue to be in the majority (61.7 %) of first-generation, working adult students who are also classified as low-income earners (Mamiseishivili, 2010). The number of first-generation, low-income students is increasing.

One student residing in a remote county in Appalachia (designated as C3 in this study), which had a 16.1% unemployment rate (the highest rate in the State of Tennessee), commented in a recent speech to an audience in Appalachia about her educational experience in the U4S off-campus program (U. S. Census Bureau, 2015). According to Culverhouse, "A degree gives not only marketable job skills, but also confidence, dreams, and hopes. These are qualities much needed in our rural communities and that's exactly what this campus gives to [C3] County" (as cited in ARC, 2014a). She also mentioned bonds that form with the students in adult cohort settings, and the strong support that they have for one another. In her speech, Culverhouse reflected on observations of the adult learners in her first class of the accelerated degree program:

> The real need was apparent when I walked into my classroom. Half of my classmates were parents. Some had job requirements that had changed and they needed a degree to keep them. There were some moms whose current jobs had no growth and whose husbands had been recently laid off. One was a single father who had also been recently laid off. These were families in need of change. (as cited in ARC, 2014a)

I have demonstrated the characteristics of adult learners and presented a foundation for why services to them are important. However, as with all learners, adult learners have both positive and negative experiences in higher education. Some of the negative experiences come from lack of financial aid and other funding characteristic of higher education in the past few years (Scanlon et al. 2007). As a result, admissions, financial aid, and office staff at universities can be frequently overworked and have little time to interact with students, especially adult students who may be first-generation learners and might not know the processes and need more help. I continue to contend that first-generation and adult students often struggle to learn the

vocabulary and processes of college and university studies. Another obstacle for working adults who seek admission and have a variety of questions for various campus offices, such as financial aid, is the practice of traditional daytime hours of operation for university offices when adult students likely work during those same hours. They may have to take off work to get help with processes or people. The outdated practice of sending notices of deadlines to a student's mailbox on campus when the off-campus student has never accessed that mailbox is another example of poor service provision. The student has not really been told of the deadline when their unused campus mailbox has the only notice that they get. It is difficult for some to believe that these things still take place but they do. Also, college classes can be large and intimidating for all students, but especially for the returning student who feels much older than many of the students in the classes. If the adults are part of the large number of commuter students, they have less interaction with fellow students and they find themselves having to "self-problem-solve" (Kasworm, 2010, p. 150). This detachment from peers often leaves them feeling disconnected from the institution and from needed information about the learning environment. The disconnectedness eventually could result in the student dropping out of school, a causal path proposed by Tinto (1993, 2012) and others.

Tinto (1993, 2012) theorized that connectedness to the campus kept students from dropping out (Braxton, 2002 Seidman, 2012; Tinto, 1993, 2012). Although Tinto formulated his original theory based primarily on traditional-aged students, his research is still presumed relevant because it has been modified in recent years based on research with diverse populations, to include adult, commuter, and part-time students (Braxton, 2013; Savage & Smith, 2008). His interactionalist theory explains student success and degree completion in terms of academic integration with the school and social networks. These two constructs, academic and social

integration, influence students' commitment to the college or university. "The greater the student's level of social integration, the greater the level of subsequent commitment to the local college or university" (Tinto, 1975, p. 110). Tinto (1975) acknowledged that other influences such as student demographic characteristics, skills and abilities, prior schooling, financial aid, and supply and demand also could affect decisions to stay or to leave college. His theory about adult students, especially those who commute to school and have limited social contact outside of class, led him to theorize that the adult student must find the sane connection in the classroom that is essential for traditional undergraduate students. Also, he determined that, if students are in the minority on a college campus, this can add to their sense of alienation. Tinto was the first to research and identify the types of departure made from college by students. Results of his research continue to influence school administrators' decisions about retention strategies.

Studies such as Woosley and Shepler's (2011) continue to support Tinto's (1975, 1993, 2012) findings that students who are engaged in social contact with the campus community are more likely to stay. An aspect of Tinto's work that has been criticized by others is his lack of attention to the internal, psychological processes that influence student success and retention (Bean & Eaton, 2001, 2002). Although Tinto emphasized intentions and goal commitments as mediating influences in retention decisions, other researchers found goal commitments to predict student retention, holding constant for other, more sociological factors (Savage & Smith, 2008). Savage and Smith (2008) used hope theory to study college student retention among adult, commuter, part-time military students. They found that "specific, measurable, and challenging goals" (p. 481) that are realistic can aid retention with adult students. They found support for Snyder, Lopez, and Pedrotti's contention that hope (comprised of goals and positive mental processes known as agency—willpower— and pathways—specific mental routes to accomplish

goals) predicted those students who would graduate and those who would not. The current study's focus on resiliency theory to explain first-generation adult student success in college is supported by studies such as Savage and Smith's that underscore the role played by adaptive cognitive and emotional strategies. In short, implementing the soft and hard skills of success into the college curriculum could represent the best of academic, intellectual integration by having faculty members, and others, spend time with students teaching them about more than just subject matter discipline. Ability and outside environmental influences certainly shape student behaviors as they relate to successful strategies in college. This highlights the need for sociological perspectives on development and retention, but many students, especially adult students, need help with the basic cognitive and psychological skills to be successful as college students. "Theories emphasizing the internal, psychological processes affecting goal orientation should be considered as possible tools to help build these skills by giving students both motivation and strategy to bend their reality around otherwise limiting factors" (Savage & Smith, 2008, p. 481).

Adult students who need to work frequently find that college academic schedules are prepared more for residential students. That translates into scheduling issues when courses may only be taught in the daytime. Sissel, Hansman, and Kasworm (2001) posited that adult students do not always have a voice and value in higher education; in fact, they tend to be marginalized. One study indicated that the public (non-profit) colleges and universities were not giving attention to the growing adult student market (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). This study also documented the lack of attention given to adult students in journals of higher education.

In a study of 159 adult students who were asked to rank their stressors, it was work that gave the students the most stress (Giancola et al., 2009). A recommendation of the Giancola,

Grawitch, and Borchert (2009) study was to garner support from family and friends, since this support was shown to alleviate the negative reactions from role strain and aided in retention for the student. In Appalachia, it has been mentioned that the family may feel challenged by or even envious of the education of the adult student and may be reticent or unable to give needed support (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Unverferth, Talbert-Johnson, & Bogard, 2012). This can mean that family support is non-existent, thus adding family stress to the work, social, academic, and life stressors for adult students in Appalachia.

Furthermore, research by Scanlon, Rowling, and Weber (2007) indicated that adult learners have to develop a new identity and that this new identity can conflict with their existing roles of spouse, parent, employee, etc. This is further complicated as the identity formation is important in order to also develop the connection to other students, faculty, and the institution. This is true of all learners in higher education. However, when this higher education identity formation takes place, stress can be a result and add to the list of stressors for working adult students (Scanlon et al., 2007).

Adults may also lag behind traditional students in technology skills required for higher education coursework. This digital divide can add to the pressure and intimidation of higher education for adults (Rao, 2009). Access to technology for low-income students can also be a significant barrier to success. The cost of purchasing technology can be prohibitive when one is a sole wage earner for his or her family while attending college as a non-traditional student. If the low-income student has to use open labs at school to access course material, then additional time at school keeps them from family even more.

In spite of the challenges and barriers, Goto and Martin (2009) found that adult students who were the most committed to their education had "(a) robust motivation to build a better life,

(b) strong efficacy beliefs, and (c) a clear understanding of an institutional pathway" (p. 17). They want to be "accepted as part of the academic community and to be acceptable as successful undergraduate learners" (Kasworm, 2010, p. 153).

Most adult learners pay for their own education, in contrast to many traditional students who may have parental support or financial aid from several sources (Kasworm, 2003). For many adult students, the only financial aid available is through loans. Only a minority of adult learners have employer benefits that may pay their fees. Neumeister and Rinker (2006) stated that many first-generation college students, regardless of age, work jobs to help to finance their education. Their research indicated that working while attending college can lead to difficulties in juggling responsibilities and also keep adult students from participating in the social life of main campus (Neumeister & Rinker, 2006).

Debt load for students is an issue at all levels, for undergraduate students with families to doctoral students. A doctoral student in Gardner and Holly's 2011 investigation reflected, "For me to survive—and that is really what it is about, survival—I have to have this second job" (p. 86). She also indicated that she would graduate with "a ton of debt" (as cited in Gardner & Holly, 2011, p. 86). Debt load is frequent among first-generation students as well as working adult students. Students go into their education without assurance that the cost and the debt will be justified by future earnings.

Working Students

Work can be seen to be an asset or a hindrance to students. Berea College in Berea, Kentucky, requires students to work 10 hours per week to off-set the free tuition offered to them (Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2003). Results of Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner's (2003) study of traditional-aged students found that during their first semester, working seemed to have

a negative effect on student grades. It was noted in their study that working as a student, however, seemed to increase potential future earnings. Arano and Parker (2008) also found similar data. They mentioned the impact of a delayed completion date for the degree as a further negative result from working as a student. Their study determined that working an inordinate number of hours resulted in lower grades for upperclassmen. The university's programs at the off-campus sites of Appalachia, in contrast, are arranged to allow adult students to work full-time while attending full-time hours as a university junior or senior.

Research on working students has dealt primarily with working traditional-aged students. Darolia (2014) reviewed an assessment of traditional-aged students based on representative data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth from 1997. Comparisons across genders, college types, and part-time as well as full-time students were made. Part-time students represented about 40% of the students in the study. Although the percentage of traditional-aged students versus non-traditional adult learners who are employed in this study is not known, results indicated that little evidence existed that working affected the grade point average of part-time workers. In contrast, other studies found that employment impacted persistence and graduation rates (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; University of Texas, 2006).

Research on faculty perceptions of adult students indicated that they were tenacious and determined (Day, Lovato, Tull, & Ross-Gordon, 2011). The faculty found the working adult students to have rich work and life experience upon which to build their academic knowledge. However, these students were found to sometimes be ill prepared academically for their coursework. In online courses, interaction with faculty was found to be essential, since the online student often had no other line of communication with the class or regarding questions about the content (Deggs, Grover, & Kacirek, 2010). Communication with online faculty in that

study was found to be the key to satisfaction with the course. Learning communities, a support system based in communication, strengthen the ability of adult students to be resilient in their education (Maher, 2005).

Androgogy

Adult learners, learning scholars, and practitioners have claimed that adult students do not learn in the same way that children and traditional undergraduates do (Knowles et al., 2011). Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, (2011) described this adult learning process as "andragogy" and defined it as "a core set of adult learning principles" (Knowles et al., 2011, p. 3). Those six principles are (a) the need of adults to know, (b) the learner's self-concept, (c) the learner's prior experiences, (d) the learner's readiness to learn, (e) the orientation that the learner has to learning, and (f) their motivation to learn. This is in contrast to pedagogical learning when the child learns lots of things that they do not need to know, they have little prior experience, and they learn at all times, not just when they are ready or motivated to learn. It is also in contrast to a behavioristic model that one learns when reinforced for that learning. Adult learners tend to learn because they want to do so and have motivation to do so. They are oriented to learning, perhaps, because of the relevance of the curriculum. They build their learning on their previous life experience. The dimensions of andragogy, according to Knowles et al., deal with the adult's goals for learning, the individual differences in their situations, and the previously listed core principles of andragogy.

Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2011) point out that learning involves change. Adult learners can be making social and personal adjustments as their base of learning expands. These changes in behavior can complicate the life of first-generation, working adult students in Appalachia because a conflict can arise between their upbringing and their new learning. Their

world expands as they learn, develop competencies and find fulfillment in their potential. All of this requires adjustments within their lives. The authors described learning as "the process of gaining knowledge and expertise" (Knowles et al., 2011, p. 17). The adult learner becomes empowered by the process model of androgogy. They become involved in the learning process.

Summary

In summary, literature on adult college students and the complexities of their lives has demonstrated that adults face severe challenges in their educational pursuit. Those who must work face additional challenges. The literature revealed that these challenges can be compounded in the region of Appalachia. In addition, it has been found that first-generation college students face unique obstacles because they often have few people to aid them in navigating a new culture. A major gap has been demonstrated in a combination of all of those criteria.

Although the segment of the Appalachian population considered in this study is adult college students, in the review of the literature regarding students in the Appalachian region, there was no research found that dealt entirely with adults. Three studies were found of first-time college students in this unique region, yet these studies dealt with primarily traditional-aged students (younger than 25) and some were residential college students who were first-generation students (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Hand & Payne, 2008).

The Hand and Payne (2008) study of first-time students who were primarily traditional-age in the Central area of Appalachia, portrayed themes found in the students' lives that affected their persistence in college. Those factors included financial concerns, the influence of family, and the need for support. Hand and Payne's study introduced areas of student lives that were examined in closer detail in this dissertation project, such as the financial concerns of students

and their need for support. In fact, according to Hand and Payne, the theme of family influence can also appear strong enough to draw them back or to keep them close to their families rather than to persist in college.

Bryan and Simmons (2009), who studied a student group of 10 traditional-aged, first-generation college students in the Central Appalachian area sought to find patterns of experience. Their findings indicated that these students had experienced very closely-knit families. They also found that this closeness created some conflict within the students who felt that they had to maintain two personas: one at home and the other at school. They were not entirely comfortable sharing what they had learned and experienced at college with their families because it seemed to go against their home culture. This was partly due to the parents' lack of familiarity with the college experience and partly because education can be considered as teaching things contrary to what the parents think is true. This characteristic can be true in general across the nation, but one premise could be that the cultural influences of this region made this process more acutely felt. Social pressure that the students felt in returning to their original culture after graduation was an additional finding in the Bryan and Simmons' study. The world of the student had expanded while that of their families had not changed.

Another research study of Northern Appalachian first-generation college students indicated that those who do enter college had a desire for additional schooling that took precedence over the negative influences in their life (Bradbury & Mather, 2009). The studies above introduced the life of traditional-aged students in Appalachia but I could not find studies of working adults who are first-generation college students in a region of Central and South-Central Appalachia.

Even though the three studies just summarized are applicable to the proposed project, there is no relevant literature that exactly matches to the current study of working, adult, first-generation college students in Appalachia. However, the three studies based in Appalachia demonstrate obstacles to success in higher education exist as a result of the regional influences.

Only students who possess a characteristic persistence, described in this study as resilience, can persist and succeed. This study demonstrates a new perspective on Appalachian learners because it is unique and because of the complexities of the students. The construct of resilience describes individuals who are able to press on in spite of obstacles in order to reach a goal.

Ryman, Hardham, Richardson, and Ross (2010) attributed the sense of community developed through learning communities which allowed student to dialogue with each other improved persistence. They also theorized that a learning community could be a supportive agent for students through "social presence, authentic learning, interdependency, critical discourse, and leadership" (Ryman, Hardham, Richardson, & Ross, 2010, p. 34). Although more relevant for graduate students, Kabes, Lamb, and Engstrom (2010) a Master's Learning Community Program in the Midwest indicated that the use of inquiry, collaborated problem solving, and the use of peer review and feedback, aided in the success of the intervention in the lives of adult students.

Finally, the chapter closes with a section about andragogy. This term describes a theory of adult learning in contrast to pedagogy. Andragogy is important to this study due to the need of adult students to learn content that is relevant to their lives

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

In this chapter, I present the rationale and qualitative methodological plan that I used to study the complexity of life experience for first-generation college students who are working adults in the Appalachian region of the United States. The literature reviewed described the obstacles to success in college that adult, working, first-generation students, and students in Appalachia all have. I investigated each of the four descriptors of the students (working, adult, first-generation, and resident of Appalachia) as a separate strand of the research process. The theoretical perspective of resilience informs and helps frame the college experience of these students. Through this framework of resilience and descriptors of the students, a unique portrait of students with a determination to succeed as they persist in spite of obstacles begins to emerge. Because qualitative research digs deep to get a complete understanding of the phenomenon under question, I was motivated to explore more closely the "positive deviancy" of these first-generation Appalachian students (Patterson et al., 2008) who succeed despite the obstacles in their way. Throughout the data collection and analysis, I sought to hear and then describe life complexities that revealed the resilience (or lack of) in the first-generation, working, adult college students who comprised the study because these students have found a way to persist in college while juggling the responsibilities of family, work, and school without college role models.

Included in this chapter is a description of the research design and questions, the role of the researcher, a description of the participants, the triangulated data collection procedures, data analysis, a plan to address trustworthiness of the results, and finally, ethical considerations to protect the students who were participants in the study.

Design

This inductive analysis is a qualitative, transcendental phenomenological study. I chose a qualitative design because qualitative research allows the intentional, ethical inspection of the lives of the students by hearing their voices (Moustakas, 1994). It gave the research much more detail than a mere quantitative analysis of data could have. The kind of information that this study was expected to reveal is not quantifiable. I expected every participant to bring to the research his or her own unique descriptors of the obstacles in their life. Creswell (2007) noted, "The hallmark of qualitative research today is the deep involvement in issues of gender, culture, and marginalized groups" (p. 43). The adult students chosen for this study are most likely marginalized due to their culture, status as "working", and possibly standing as parents of young children. If one were to study these participants using a quantitative method, certain facts could be obtained and deduced, such as economic data, the numbers that are being marginalized, or what parts of the country have more marginalized individuals. In contrast, the qualitative method allows researchers to probe deeply into the thinking and experiences of participants to reveal in great detail possible reasons for the marginalization and difficulties. The qualitative method chosen for this study allowed the participants to speak about the phenomenon of college—and was best accomplished through a qualitative design with a focus on the lived experiences of the study participants (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Moustakas (1994) stated, "The aim is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience" (p. 13). This is the description of a "phenomenon." He also described phenomenological design as "The transformation of an individual or empirical experience into essential insights" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). Moustakas further declared that "Epoche requires a new way of looking at things, a way that requires that we learn *to see* what stands before our eyes, what we can distinguish and

describe" (p. 33). To achieve this goal requires the researcher to remove (deliberately) his or her bias so that participants' voices rather than that of the researcher, is heard and described. This is the essence of transcendental rather than hermeneutical phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994).

Moustakas' (1994) research philosophy indicated that the researcher should intentionally use his intuition and diligently strive to remove bias when conducting research with a transcendental phenomenological design. Researchers must be absorbed in hearing voices of participants without allowing bias from their own experience to enter into the research. This description reflects the difference in hermeneutical phenomenology (the researcher becomes part of the research) and transcendental phenomenology - the researcher, using epoche, removes her bias and chooses merely to listen to the participants (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Regardless of the related literature, I sought to remove my biased expectations and just listen to the participants, and interpreted the results based on common themes and comments made. I was determined to hear, in rich detail, the students' complex life experiences. As a reminder from Moustakas (1994), I sought to "see what is, just as it is, and to explicate what is in its own terms" (p. 41). I also chose a phenomenological approach of hearing participant voices in order that this experience allows them to be affirmed and encouraged to persist in the face of difficulties. After listening to the participants, I analyzed the details in a non-biased manner by categorizing them based on the reported data rather than my own pre-conceived notions.

I asked (a) participants to self-report demographic data, (b) participate in individual interviews with the researcher, and (c) write in a journal about their complex life experiences. I then (d) conducted focus groups with the participants. After data collection was completed, I used a complex process of identifying themes, information units, and core ideas in order to be able to communicate properly the responses of the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Questions

The objective of this study was to convey the complexities that participants experience as first-generation, working adult college students in Appalachia. In order to accomplish this purpose, one overarching question guided this study: What are the academic, social, and interpersonal obstacles and demonstration of resilience in the life experience of working adults who are first-generation college students in a region of Central and South-Central Appalachia? I explored the following sub-questions with the participants of this study:

1. How do the life complexities of first-generation, working, adult college students from Appalachia influence their ability to persist in college?
2. What are the students' perceived cultural supports or hindrances in pursuing their educational goals?
3. What perceived internal and attributed external resources (psychological or otherwise) do students possess that have helped them to persist in the face of obstacles (resilience)?
4. In what way has the fact that their parents did not attend college impact students' college experiences?

The art of asking questions in any kind of therapy or research is a critical part of the framework. James, Morse, and Howarth (2010) provided an overview of types of questions and the characteristics of the interviewee and the interviewer. They are not merely a vehicle to elicit information. There can be power in the art of asking. The interviewer can approach issues from a variety of angles, can create dissonance, or facilitate expression of beliefs when one considers the learning styles of the interviewee. Questions can be used to reveal discrepancies in thinking processes or can lead to discovery in the one being asked the questions. They can be used to just

gain facts or can also be used to reveal the meaning behind statements (James, Morse, & Howarth, 2010).

When preparing questions, the interviewer, first needs to be aware of assumptions made when asking the questions (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Once an assumption is perceived by the one answering, then it is difficult to ever go back and re-address the assumption that is made. It becomes accepted and both move on. Second, the interviewer needs to ask open questions unless she wants a simple response. Open questioning gives the impression that a more lengthy opinion should be provided as a response, in part, due to open questions requiring deeper thinking on the part of the one interviewed (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013).

James, Morse, and Howarth (2010) mention two methods—the Socratic method and "vertical arrow restructuring" (p. 85). Socratic questioning describes a method that clarifies meaning, elicits an emotional response and consequences, and creates insight. Vertical arrow restructuring is used to explore underlying meanings or beliefs. The meaning of a thought is questioned repeatedly to search for the bottom line. The client characteristics also need be considered when framing questions. They should adapt to the deficits, mental health, and even memory issues of the person being asked the questions (James et al., 2010).

Some methods require the use of short sequences, others, from concrete questions to more specific ones and then the reversal of the process (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Bad questions are ones that lead a person's answer whereas good questions allow for answers that give freedom to the one answering. Skillful questioning requires recall, integration of previous answers, planning, and a good understanding of when and how the questions should be expressed. One of the most important facets of good questioning is listening. This allows the interviewer to integrate the previous answers and then to plan the next questions.

Poor questions can result in poor answers (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). The ability to "read" the interviewee can determine whether questions are being understood, given thought, and allow for the state of the interviewee to be given adequate respect. The interviewer can ask appropriate follow up questions or can go off on a tangent that does not reach the proposed goal. One aspect of this is that interviewers must be careful not to lead the interviewee into negative thought framework (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013).

Maximizing the effectiveness of asking questions can become a skill. This can be done by building a framework of sequences, which will delve into the thinking of the interviewee and lead him or her to deeper thought (Patton, 2002). The purpose of the research questions mentioned at the beginning of this section was to bring out depth of thinking. The interview questions existed to probe into the students' responses and allowed those students to reveal what they perceived to be obstacles to success, the influencers in their lives, their attributions of resilience in spite of difficulties and work, and the impact on their college experience caused by having parents familiar with college. By investigating students' thinking about their adult, working, first-generation college experience within Appalachia and its culture, revelations relevant to the students themselves (they can understand their own fortitude better), and other college students similarly situated can be made.

Setting

I chose participants from four specific locations in a university degree program in counties located in Central and South-Central Appalachia where a state university offers an off-campus evening program. Previous studies have addressed first-generation students who are traditional-aged, residential students in the Northern and Central regions. The states included in those studies were Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Bryan &

Simmons, 2009; Hand & Payne, 2008). I conducted my research in counties that were not used in the studies cited previously. Approximately the eastern half of Tennessee is designated by the ARC (2012) as belonging to the Appalachian chain and region. Several of those East Tennessee counties are part of the most rural areas of the Appalachian chain and should reveal additional descriptions of residents in the region. The state university providing the education program from which participants were drawn is in the middle and eastern area of Tennessee. It serves a 42 county area, and 36 of the counties that it serves are in the Appalachian region. The university has online undergraduate programming available in the same major (the only one offered off-campus for them) from which the informants were purposely selected, but online programming does not always appeal to the older adult student who did not grow up with easy access to a computer. Consequently, their access to the Internet was often limited or non-existent (Deggs, 2011; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). According to Connected Tennessee (2010), a state organization that surveys residents statewide regarding the accessibility to broadband service, many Appalachian counties lack high speed Internet. The university identified four pockets of students at community college locations (near to where the students live and work), where U4S offers onsite undergraduate coursework to community college graduates or the equivalent. Sometimes students come to the program with credits so old that the university has to translate those from academic patterns that are no longer used into current course offerings. These working adults could not reasonably travel to the university and keep their jobs because of schedule, distance, and terrain, but more than that, they are somewhat comfortable in the small satellite campuses of community college where parking is easier and where there are fewer but friendly personnel making the environment far less threatening. I have

mentioned the vulnerability of adult students previously and it will be revisited as the interview, focus group, and journaling data is considered.

The ARC (2012) also has economic level designations for the counties in the entire region. The definitions of the designations found on their website are as follows:

County Economic Levels: Each Appalachian county is classified into one of five economic status designations, based on its position in the national ranking.

(a) ***Distressed.*** Distressed counties are the most economically depressed counties. They rank in the worst 10% of the nation's counties.

(b) ***At-Risk***. At-Risk counties are those at risk of becoming economically distressed. They rank between the worst 10% and 25% of the nation's counties.

(c) ***Transitional***. Transitional counties are those transitioning between strong and weak economies. They make up the largest economic status designation. Transitional counties rank between the worst 25% and the best 25% of the nation's counties.

(d) ***Competitive***. Competitive counties are those that are able to compete in the national economy but are not in the highest 10% of the nation's counties. Counties ranking between the best 10% and 25% of the nation's counties are classified competitive.

(e) ***Attainment.*** Attainment counties are the economically strongest counties. Counties ranking in the best 10% of the nation's counties are classified attainment. (ARC, 2012).

The four counties where programming is offered are: C1, designated by the ARC as a "transitional" county in Central Appalachia; C2, designated "at-risk" (in the 2011 report was "transitional" but dropped in 2012 to "at-risk") in South-Central Appalachia; C3, which is designated "distressed" and is in Central Appalachia; and C4, which is designated "at-risk" and is located in South-Central Appalachia (ARC, 2012). All four of those counties according to the

ARC are ranked lower than the national average in percentage of students who have completed college. These economic data about counties where the programs are located support offering students in Appalachia more than one option to pursue their baccalaureate degree. I solicited volunteers to participate in this research from the pool of students or recent graduates at these four locations.

Two community colleges serve these students at locations near to their homes in the designated four counties. These locations are off-campus, or branch locations, operated by the community college. The community college is able to offer the first two years of a degree in most cases without students having to leave the satellite campus. This makes the option of an associate's degree (and a baccalaureate degree) much more accessible than traveling to main campus locations. In these four counties, the students may also take the junior- and senior- years of a baccalaureate degree at the community college satellite campus from the U4S without traveling the nearly 100 miles over sometimes rural, curvy, and mountainous roads to the university. According to Rand McNally (2012), a one-way trip of 78 miles that students would have to travel would require about two hours and ten minutes in transit. Time to locate parking and walk to class would be added to this. This distance would be prohibitive for these working, adult students without the onsite programs in the four counties.

Participants

I purposely selected the study participants based on their experience of being a working, adult, first-generation college student in the third or fourth year (junior and senior years) of study in an area of Central and South-Central Appalachia. I considered recent graduates for the participant pool. Students were not deselected based on gender, age, race, or any other criteria. Moustakas (1994) provides the following rationale for selecting participants:

> The essential criteria include the research participant has experienced the phenomenon, is intensely interested in understanding its nature and meanings, is willing to participate in a lengthy interview, and (perhaps a follow-up interview), grants the investigator the right to tape-record, possibly videotape the interview, and publish the data in a dissertation and other publications. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 107)

A carefully chosen sample, according to Creswell (2007), is important to "forge a common understanding" (p. 62). Thus, descriptions of the criteria used will follow. First, only adult students (25 years of age or older) were considered (Compton et al., 2006). In addition, I selected participants based on being working students in one of the four programs in the counties indicated earlier. In trying to provide a rigorous definition of working students, I read several studies and discovered multiple definitions. Some studies merely used working adults. Neumeister and Rinker (2006) mentioned part-time work. Others, such as Kasworm (2010), Ronning (2009), and Scanlon (2008), approached their research on the basis of whether the participant was working or not working. Compton et al. (2006) stated that working adult students primarily consider themselves workers first. I used the descriptor of "working" for this research to describe any adult learner who is employed at least 10 hours per week and no distinction was made between part-time or full-time employment.

Furthermore, I used *first-generation college student* as a selection definition. In regards to this study, I defined a first-generation college student as a college student whose parents did not attend college at all. Some studies use the term first-generation college student as meaning the first in one's family to attend college, which is the definition used in my research study (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005). Others consider first-generation college students to be those whose parents have not earned a degree (Neumeister & Rinker, 2006). However, Byrd and

MacDonald's description is considered authoritative when one means what I do in this study: lacking a parent with college experience who can act as a mentor.

For the present study, I selected a purposeful sample of 11 adult, first-generation, working college students in their third or fourth year of a designated off-campus program at a regional university. I based the sample size of at least 10 participants on Dukes's (1984), Creswell's (2007) and Riemen's (1986) recommendations. I used a self-report procedure in which students provided information about their background to choose the participants. All of the students completed a demographic survey to supply descriptors of their parent's educational attainment, their work status, where they attend classes, and to indicate if they would like to be a part of a research study. I selected a sample of 11 participants from the responses to the survey. The purposeful selection ensured that the participants represented all four county campuses in the Appalachian region where a regional university offers an interdisciplinary studies program and that all participants were adult, first-generation, working college students with an evening baccalaureate program. Once this process was completed, I conducted a pilot interview with one of the possible participants who was not selected as a subject (but met the criteria) to ensure that there were no awkward or misguided questions.

Procedures

The first step in this inquiry was to gain approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) from both universities, Liberty University and the research site, U4S. Evidence of the approval of this request is found in the Appendix A, and is based on requirements found on the IRB website of Liberty University. After completing this step with both universities, I conducted a pilot study with one or two individuals not selected for the study in order to refine the processes. After a successful pilot study, the actual work with the participants began.

I began the search for study participants by delivering a recruitment letter (Appendix G) and a questionnaire (Appendix C) to the four groups of students or recent graduates who met the criteria in the four designated Central and South-Central Appalachian counties. The recruitment letter followed a guide on the Liberty University School of Education website and explained the study. The questionnaire included questions regarding the description of the criteria for the study by Liberty University—working adults who are first-generation college students—and demographic and family data. I collected a pool of potential participants from all four locations to determine those qualified for the study. Once I accomplished this, I confirmed which students would be participating and then had the selected participants sign a consent form (Appendix B).

The Researcher's Role

Moustakas (1994) stated, "The first challenge of the researcher, in preparing to conduct a phenomenological investigation, is to arrive at a topic and question that have both social meaning and personal significance" (p. 104). The social meaning of this study is to reveal the life complexities these working adult first-generation college students experience. The personal significance is that I have been in that same situation. I have lived this experience. Because of my own experiences with the research problem that informed the present study, I have chosen a transcendental perspective in which I removed, to the degree possible, my own bias from experiencing the phenomenon myself. I intentionally sought to hear the participants' voices with a fresh perspective. My only manifest assumption was that the participants possessed some degree of resiliency based on their persistence in education in spite of obstacles.

The researcher often plays a critical role, but in this region, the role is more complex. This region has the reputation of a closed society where they view outsiders with suspicion. I was born in the Central Appalachian region and have been a resident of South-Central

Appalachia for more than 30 years. I have a unique paradigm from which to create an environment of trust on the part of the participants. I graduated from high school in Appalachia, graduated from college in Appalachia, and spent most of my adult years interacting with residents in this region. This background aided me in making an empathetic alliance with the subjects. In addition, my background in educational psychology has prepared me with interviewing skills that put them at ease as we discussed the topic. I hold a baccalaureate degree in psychology, a master's degree in educational psychology, and an education specialist degree in instructional leadership. My educational journey has been a long one, as I have worked while attending school as a non-traditional, first-generation college student for all three of my degrees over multiple decades. I have spent a portion of my career working with welfare clients in this region, assisting them with a return to school and to college. For nearly 20 years I have worked in higher education, assisting students with college admission and coordinating off-campus programming logistics.

The participants were the focus of the research, and I was a participant-observer in the interviews. As the researcher, I made a definitive effort to interpret participants' comments without bias (removal of my own bias as a first-generation, working, adult student from Appalachia through "epoche") (Moustakas, 1994). My only intention was to have their stories told as a "fresh perspective to the phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). To do this, I interpreted the narrative data through a social constructivist paradigm. Creswell (2007) stated that this paradigm uses a search for meaning and allows the researchers to "look for the complexity of views" (p. 20). The goal will be to rely "as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation" (p. 20). With this paradigm, one regards the contexts, historical setting and cultural setting of the participants in a subjective manner (Creswell, 2007). This is important when one

views the students through the lens of the Appalachian region. This paradigm was expected to enable the participants and me to make sense of their unique challenges to their education. The philosophical assumption of this paradigm is ontological, reflecting the nature of the students' multiple realities and their differing views those realities.

Data Collection

Prior to interviews in the field, I administered a brief pilot test to a person who was not selected for the study proper, in order to check the validity of the processes. After that, I did not make any adjustments before beginning the study.

Then, soon after those steps were completed, the interviews began. This is based on the intention of following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) guidelines regarding adequate time in the field. I conducted interviews using the questions in Appendix D. After the interview, the participants were given their journaling exercise (Appendix E) to take with them and complete within a week. They were encouraged to return the results whether briefly described or narrated in rich detail. I asked the participants to return these exercises to my email address or mail them. Creswell (2007) indicated, "In recent years, new forms of data have emerged, such as journaling in narrative story writing" (p. 129). Instructions for journaling included the method of returning journals to the researcher by electronic communication or through the mail in a postage-paid envelope that I gave them at the time of the interview. I provided phone reminders or email reminders in order to encourage the return of the journaling. Finally, I arranged one or more focus group(s) to allow for open discussions. I held two focus groups in order to prevent students from having to travel a great distance from their home campus.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested triangulation of data to ensure validity of qualitative data analysis, a recommendation supported by all authoritative texts in the field of qualitative

research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002; Stake, 2010). For this research study, triangulation was comprised of the following: one-on-one interviews lasting approximately one hour per individual (recorded and transcribed verbatim, including field notes), a journaling exercise that included writing about the complexities of students' lives and their educational experience, and a focus group in which participants were encouraged to share in a group the factors related to the complexities of their lives and how they are overcoming them. The focus group interaction was informal to create a relaxed atmosphere and was recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Interviews

It was critical to establish rapport in each interview to aid the participant in being comfortable with sharing his or her story. Complete attention to the participant was essential. I took careful notes but sought to ensure that note taking did not distract anyone from the interview itself. Questions used in the interview can be found in Appendix D. The auditory tape of the interview was transcribed verbatim. Member checking was used to allow participants an opportunity to review the transcription of the interview and the focus group for accuracy (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002; Stake, 2010). In his work, Moustakas (1994) described the participants as "co-researchers".

I conducted a pilot interview prior to the start of any participant interviews that contributed to the research. The pilot study would reveal sections that needed revision or deletion so that the research interviews could be better aligned the task of hearing the participant voices and ensuring validity of their responses. There were no revisions to the process needed. I then conducted semi-structured, one hour, in-depth interviews with the actual research participants using open-ended questions. I audiotaped interviews and then transcribed with the

addition of field notes from the interviewer. Interviews were held at the off-campus location where the participant attends(ed) classes. Questions (Appendix D) started in a general way to build rapport and then moved to more specific questions. Those questions and the information given to the students are included in Appendices D and E. The interviews allowed for a "thick description" of the essence of the complex lives of the subjects (the phenomenon). Moustakas (1994) recommended that interview questions be "defined, discussed, and clarified" in order to end up with a "manageable and specific question" (p. 104-105). He posited that this process could glean the essence of the experience of the participant while maintaining a neutral position as the researcher. Moustakas determined that the essential point of reference for the selection of participants was their experience of the phenomenon.

I carefully grounded the interview questions in the literature, following the Moustakas (1994) guidelines to be free of bias and to closely connect to the four research questions for the entire research study. I worded the prompts in a manner that would make the most sense to the participants, including use of the local vernacular. Besides seeking to hear the complexities of students' lived experience, I asked questions regarding perceived supports or hindrances in pursuing their education goals, a description of the complexities of their lives, and the internal and attributed external resources they possess that have helped them to persist in the face of obstacles. Throughout the process, I kept in mind the intention of revealing the complexities of their lives related to their work, their age, or the nature of the first-generation college student experience in Appalachia. Interview questions for the study are:

- How long until you graduate (or did you graduate)?
- Please describe the complexities that you experience(d) in your life while you attend college (a, b, c, and d were used to prompt them if they had difficulty answering).

  - Financial concerns?
  - Family pressures?
  - Childcare issues?
  - Work pressures?
- Please tell me the internal and external qualities that you have which help you cope with these pressures (a, b, c, and d were used to prompt them if they had difficulty answering).
  - How did you learn to cope like this?
  - Who is a good example to you in coping with this experience?
  - How important is the support of your classmates?
  - Tell me about times that your classmates have helped you to cope.
- Please tell me about your family and close friends.
- Please describe about how each of them feels about you attending college.
- Who is your most supportive family member or friend? Why do you think this is so?
- Who is your least supportive family member or friend? Why do you think this is so?
- Please describe how your employer and co-workers feel about your education.
  - How are they encouraging?
  - How are they discouraging?
- How do you feel about your classes this semester and in general about your education?
- How has your work and your coursework blended together and helped each other?
- How important has having this program closer to home been to you?
- Do you have other things that you wish to share before we close the interview?
- I would like to thank you very much for sharing these important feelings about your life as a student and I assure you that this will be held in confidence until a false name is

assigned to your information and you will have the opportunity to review these details before they are shared.

I held interviews in a quiet office environment on each campus that will keep the conversation confidential. I conducted recordings in that setting without a lot of outside noise. During this interview, I asked participants to choose a pseudonym and used it for the remainder of the research. I provided instructions for the journaling exercise given to them at that time and they gave them one week to complete and return that document. After the transcription was completed, I sent the participant the transcription for review and approval. I conducted email or phone follow-up in order to ensure that I received a reply from every participant.

Journaling Exercise

After the interview, the participant had one week to complete a journaling exercise (Creswell, 2007). The prompts below, and those in the interviews, were worded in a manner that would make the most sense to the participants, including use of the local vernacular. The journaling questions were:

- Please describe in more detail about your family, work, and friends.
- Please tell how they feel about your education.
- Please tell how your education interferes with issues regarding your family.
- Please tell how your education interferes with issues regarding your friends.
- Please tell how your education interferes with issues regarding your work.
- Please tell anything about your education that frustrates you.
- Please tell me in detail about the learning community of friends that has formed in your classes and whether that helps or hinders with any complexities of your life.
- How has your education complicated your life?

- Tell me about the qualities about you that have helped you to deal with the complexity of attending classes.
- How has your work helped you with knowledge that you needed in your classes?
- How has your coursework helped you with knowledge that you needed in your work?
- How important has having this program closer to home been to you?
- Please share any other information that you feel could be helpful to this research, especially with the complexities of your life or the qualities about you that have helped you to be persistent about your education.

I provided further details of this exercise in Appendix E. By writing their stories, the participants were able to think of further details to add to the transcribed interview information. In addition, they were able to share things that they were reticent to share aloud. I asked the participants to return the journal exercises to the researcher's email address or mail them within one week of the interview. I conducted email or phone follow-up in order to receive responses from every participant.

The journaling exercise described in Appendix E requested that the participants write a summary of what it is like to be a working adult, first-generation college student in Appalachia with a focus on the complexities of their lives. The form explained why this was necessary and how anonymity was the goal. The exercise length was undefined in order to encourage as much information as possible.

Focus Group

The third facet of the data gathering, which would support data triangulation as advocated by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and other authorities regarding validity of qualitative data analysis,

was a focus group interview (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002; Stake, 2010). To accomplish this, I assembled two small focus groups to allow all of the participants to gather without traveling a large distance to be together. The focus groups were an opportunity for participants to share "complexities-in-common" with one another. This added to the texture of the descriptions as this step was also audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

Because of the distance involved between and among the four counties, a location was arranged to allow the participants to come together in group(s) and allow a relaxed, informal discussion regarding the experience of their educational tenure and the complexities of their lives. The intent of this exercise was to get the group talking and to reveal other obstacles that did not come out in the interviews. I held the focus group session in a centralized classroom location that minimized interruptions and noise. I reconfigured the furniture in the classroom in a circle so that the environment was relaxed and open and maximized the opportunity for the students to express their experiences to one another. I worded the prompts below in a manner that would make the most sense to the participants, including use of the local vernacular. The prompts used in the focus group are:

- Please share the complexities of life as an adult college student.
- Please share the complexities of your life as an adult college student with parents who did not attend college, such as their understanding of what college is like, and any other perspectives regarding this.
- Please share the complexities of your life as a working adult college student.
- Please share how living in this area of Appalachia might have impacted your life as an adult college student.

- How has attending as a part of a group of adult students impacted your ability to complete your studies?
- What has this success taught you about yourself and your abilities?
- How has this success complimented and influenced your work life?
- Have you updated your life goals because of your current success in college?
- If not addressed in any of the questions up to this point, describe, in detail, what are now or what have been your most significant concerns or worries as you attempt or have attempted to complete school? What bothers you, what pre-occupies you, or what worries or irritates you the most as you attempt to complete your college degree?
- How might the school or the program improve so as to help you complete your degree? What's missing for you? What might the system, the school, or the program do, that is not being done now, to help you complete your degree?

The prompts above revolve around the theory of resilience, and also the complexities that the participant overcame during their educational experience in the specific program described. They also sought to reveal the unique vantage point of the participants as working, adult, first-generation students in the region of Central Appalachia.

I designed the purpose of the prompts and the conversation to extract more detail of the complexities of the participants' lives. I guided the discussion as carefully and informally as possible in order to bring together shared experiences and life complexities. By uncovering the shared complexities, I expected that themes would emerge. Other than the questions, conversation was able to flow in an unobstructed manner.

Patton (2002) described focus groups as including up to eight people who discuss "targeted or focused issues" (p. 236). According to his description, it brings together

homogenous individuals with similar backgrounds to participate in a group interview. The issues discussed are ones that include similar experiences for everyone in the group. It encourages the interview situation to be flexible with open-ended questions that might "flow from the immediate context" (Patton, 2002, p. 342). It is designed to be a discussion and an interview with a group involving a discussion that should be comfortable and even enjoyable. A setting of this type should enhance data quality. It is not necessary for the group to have consensus on a specific topic; however, the interviewer should hear from everyone, and effective facilitation skills are required from the one leading the discussion. This will make the discussion focused and active for all participants. It is important for the facilitator of the focus group interviews, according to Patton (2002), to remember that confidentiality can be breached when participants share something heard in the interview and to make preparations to prevent this happening.

According to Bloomberg & Volpe (2012), focus groups have elements of individual interviews, observation of the group, and group discussion. It is desired that a candid conversation will result from the combination of people with similar situations. They stated that an "assumption of focus groups is that, within a permissive atmosphere that fosters a range of opinions, a more complete and revealing understanding of the issues will be obtained" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 123). I planned for the information gathered from the focus group to serve as an augment of the information previously obtained in individual interviews. Further instructions regarding the focus group questions are in Appendix F.

Because of the financial hardship that some of the participants were likely experiencing, I gave a $50 gift card to a national chain store at the end of the focus group session. I chose a store that is represented in each of the four counties of the research and which has both groceries and gasoline.

Data Analysis

Once I assembled all of the written data into a portrait of each participant, I carefully analyzed the information by looking for themes, commonality, and uniqueness (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Moustakas (1994) gave very specific guidelines about how to group, categorize, and emphasize the participant responses. I used all of these processes to ensure I properly shared the experiences that each participant has faced in the pursuit of his or her education to date.

I combined the transcripts of the individual interviews with each participant (using a pseudonym) with the written journal of what it is like to be a first-generation, working, adult college student in Appalachia, along with transcriptions of the focus group discussions to examine them carefully for themes. Creswell (2007) explained the process this way:

> The researcher develops a textural description of the experiences of the persons (what participants experienced), a structural description of their experiences (how they experienced it in terms of the conditions, situations, or context), and a combination of the textural and structural description to convey an overall essence of the experience. (Creswell, 2007, p. 60)

I was careful to adherene to Moustakas' (1994) modification of a method by van Kaam to analyze the data. According to this modification, the steps are (a) list and preliminarily group, (b) reduce and eliminate, (c) cluster and thematize, (d) validate, (e) use the validated and constituent themes, (f) construct a structural description, and (g) construct a textural description (Moustakas, 1994). The first step was to group the triangulated data into an overarching description of the responses by each participant to the four research questions. I eliminated items that were mainly conversational. Next, I identified the emerging themes by type of lived

experience. I validated the themes by returning to the overarching description to ensure that they were properly labeled or categorized. I formed the structural description as a kind of outline of the overarching description. Finally, a textural description containing only the rich detail emerged with the essence and meaning of the complexities for each participant. I followed the analysis procedures from Moustakas (1994) for examination of each transcript for the description of the results. I selected quotations to use verbatim to reflect the essence of their complex experiences. Graphics were not necessary to better understand the clusters of data.

I developed and described a composite description of the essence of the experience of the participants. Moustakas (1994) used the term "horizonalization" (p. 95) when he referred to the use of significant statements for the purpose of describing the experience of this phenomenon. I did this carefully using the research questions as a guide. These prompts were intended to elicit sharing of the participants' lived experience, perceived supports or hindrances in their lives, internal and external qualities of the participants that cause them to persist, and how the fact that their parents did not attend college impacted their college experience. Credibility was the ultimate writing goal in framing student comments about their experiences. I designed each question to elicit a rich description of the experiences.

During this entire process, a non-biased auditor, who is not affiliated with the university, reviewed the details to ensure that strict guidelines were followed to protect the confidentiality of the participant responses. This person's credentials include a master's degree in school counseling and a Ph.D. in Community College Leadership. Part of her training included proper interviewing and confidentiality processes. After the study was completed, I gave each of the participants the choice to receive a copy of the entire completed dissertation.

Trustworthiness

To ensure validity, the questions asked in the interviews, the journaling exercise, and in the focus group(s) were grounded in the literature and pilot-tested to determine that they were appropriate and that they did not create confusion or truncated responses from the students (Fassinger, 2005). To address the trustworthiness of results, I interviewed students in the field rather than to bring them to an unfamiliar location. Triangulation of the data methods (interviews, self-reported article regarding the challenges in their lives, and focus groups) was a further attempt to ensure trustworthiness of the data and maintaining the credibility and dependability of results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used "epoche", (Moustakas, 1994) to reveal and to remove any bias as much as possible, by seeing only what was visible, without bias. This removes any "self-direction" by the researcher.

I desired to glean thick descriptive data from interview transcriptions, journaling, and focus groups to ensure that the study was credible and valid. Participants examined transcripts and my analysis of those transcripts as a member checking approach to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness. I carefully maintained an audit trail regarding the study. I stored the data, the pseudonyms, and other details of the research and in locked locations and with password protection for anything on an electronic device. This protection also extended to oversight by the person who served as an external auditor.

Ethical Considerations

Because of the vulnerability of these participants who have not felt entirely comfortable in their college experience, I made every attempt to encourage active discussion without controlling it. It was essential that I treated them with respect. My desire was for students to

sense that their responses were important and that their life situations were valued. I had no authority over these students through my work. I coordinated programming, not students.

I gave the students a consent form to sign initially that established their agreement to participate in the study, along with a copy that they kept for their records. None of the students in their junior year of college work were under 18 years of age; therefore, an assent form was not needed.

I took great care to ensure the confidentiality of participant responses including the use of pseudonyms, coding, and double coding where needed. I will keep their coded responses for three years in a locked area and in a password-protected computer. A person who served as an external auditor was in place to evaluate the processes and to maintain confidentiality.

My personal ethics required that I take extra precautions to follow required procedures. My personal faith requires that I first answer to God regarding the treatment of the participants and the data. I consider God to be much higher and require more of me than a mere list of guidelines. He requires, not just external adherence, but accountability from the heart. Psalm 15:2 states, "He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart" (King James Version). Psalm 19:14 is a prayer of mine, "Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer" (King James Version). Because of my desire to be acceptable to God, I did not engage in deception of the students nor take their need for confidentiality and respect lightly. I based the procedures on the work of Creswell (2007), Miles & Huberman (1994), Patton (2002), and Moustakas (1994) and conducted as described above.

Summary

The methods chapter is the heart of the procedural methodology that guided the

study. It describes in detail the steps of the process, including the selection of participants, and the questions used to glean rich detail from them regarding the complexity of their journey toward a college degree. The questions selected revealed this complexity through the lens of resilience.

This study is the first of its kind in Appalachia to identify the complexity of working, adult, first-generation college students. I used the transcripts to carefully group the collective themes that were identified from the shared experiences of the participants. I was a human instrument used to lend voice to these adults regarding their educational pursuit. I took great care to provide anonymity for those voices, yet to portray them in such a way to allow readers to view the participants' educational life.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe, analyze, and understand the complex life experiences of first-generation college students, or recent graduates, who were working adults in the Central Appalachian region of the United States. The interviews and journaling provided rich detail of the complexities that the participants encountered in the pursuit of their education. I designed the questions asked of them to reveal those complexities based on the four descriptors of their lives as working adults who were first-generation students in Central and South Central Appalachia. In this chapter, I will elaborate on their life complexities using, not the mere capture of facts, but a discovery of the emotion, contexts, and even the web of relationships that culminates in the rich detail of the research. To accomplish this purpose, I used resilience as a theoretical framework to inform the research.

Participants

I used four criteria to select the 11 participants for this study. Each individual had to be (a) a working, adult; (b) first-generation college student; (c) in the third or fourth year (junior and senior years) of college, or had to be recent graduates; and (d) live in Central or South-Central Appalachia. Each individual selected for the current study met all four of the criteria. Of the 11 participants in the research, two were male, nine were female, one was African American, one was an elected official, five were married, five were non-parents, three were single parents, three were “empty-nesters”, and nine had earned a baccalaureate degree. The pool of potential participants was not necessarily representative of the general population. The purposeful sample chosen merely required the participants to meet all of the criteria for the study in spite of the lack of representation of gender and race that limit the results. Eleven participants worked full-time,

all were 25 years old or older, none of their parents attended college, and all attended programs in Appalachia. Two participants are currently working on an advanced degree, and one is beginning the admission process to begin an advanced degree. One participant had a unique perspective because she was born in Appalachia. She then had lived out of state for a number of years, and had returned before entering community college. Her participation in the study was relevant for several reasons, including her roots in the Appalachian region and her education based in that same area. I protected participant identities by using pseudonyms of their own choosing.

Billy Bob

Billy Bob and a co-worker were instructors in a trade school at the time of their enrollment in the off-campus program. Already comfortable with their banter as friends, they helped to create a strong sense of community in their cohort group. His wife of 23 years, and his greatest supporter, had battled an illness for nine and a half years, which meant that his work and schoolwork sometimes had to be in the background while he served as caregiver. His parents had never attended high school. His disabled father and mentor died when Billy Bob, youngest of seven children was 16. Billy Bob admitted that high school for him was not a high point since he was often in trouble and failed multiple classes. Education was never really a high priority in his family, or in their part of Appalachia where times were hard and people's primary concern was putting food on the table. His stint in the military and his work as a trade school instructor had taught him a different mindset and set the stage for his confidence in continuing his education. Billy Bob's educational track began at the trade school. Success there gave him the impetus to go to the community college. After graduation he became a trade school instructor at

the same school where he had attended. Years later the state school began to encourage the instructors to earn a baccalaureate degree.

Although college was never expected of him, it was something that he desired. Every success gave him the confidence to try the next. Once he earned his bachelor's degree, his family was very proud of him. Billy Bob stated that every level of education that he completed made him want to strive for the next one. The accomplishments raised his level of confidence in himself.

When asked about the biggest complexity regarding his higher education, he readily said, "time." Work deadlines sometimes conflicted with deadlines at school. His friendships suffered because he did not have time to give to socializing. He also found class research to be difficult because of a lack of time to access it. Although he could access library resources online, he did not often do that. His work required him to travel infrequently but when he did, instead of going out to eat after meetings, he would need to return to his hotel room because of assignments that were due. Work had to be his first priority, so school obligations had to be lower on the list. That caused stress for him when he had to rush to complete assignments at the last minute.

However, Billy Bob's greatest concern was his wife's health. He commented that it was hard to be working on homework when his wife was sick in the next room and he wanted to spend time with her. Her long battle with cancer at the time of the interviews meant that she was bedfast. He frequently had to leave work to take her to medical appointments, and he had recently been pursuing (unsuccessfully) a clinical trial for her.

Money was took second place as a complexity of life for this adult student. By attending full-time, he was only eligible for educational benefits for one class per semester. However, being a full-time student in order to move quickly through the program was more desirable to

him than stretching it out longer. Therefore, he covered much of the cost of his education. At times, Billy Bob stated that it seemed he was "spinning his wheels" by trying to do everything all at once.

Billy Bob stated that having the support of his IS classmates was extremely important. There was a strong bond among them and they would help each other a great deal. That bond kept him wanting to go back and looking ahead to the next class. He felt that they kept one another engaged in the process. An example that he gave was an informative speech that they had to present. He was more focused on whether he was doing better than his classmates than he was about how he was giving the speech. He said that it meant that they had some terrific presentations because everyone talked about their area of expertise. All of those things kept "the class lively".

When asked about how his course work and his work blended together and helped one another, he stated that it helped very much. Because of an opportunity at work to open a new program at the trade school, he was able to build a new curriculum by looking at it from a "logistics" perspective and from a student's perspective instead of just putting it together. His course work as well as this new curriculum required him to dig deeper than he would have without the coursework experience. He enjoyed it immensely. As a follow-up, I gave Billy Bob the opportunity to be the instructor of the new program at the trade school—the first program of its kind in the state. He now had the chance to demonstrate the relevance of his degree and his research. Since he is piloting the program, he found that he did not have people to go to for answers to his questions. He determined that he had to continue to use his research and critical thinking skills. Also after graduation, Billy Bob began a graduate degree. However, at the time of the focus group, his wife's declining health was determining how quickly he could proceed.

John

John graduated recently from the off-campus accelerated program. However, his first experience at the university was on the main campus of that same school many years prior, and at that time, he had encountered a number of obstacles in trying to do that. At the time, he thought about giving up on his goal of a degree because he just could not handle the difficulties of accessibility as a working adult, returning to school in the main campus environment. John seemed to want to tell about that difficult situation. He stated that the university on its main campus was not made for older people. He described his first attempt as a nightmare from day one. Once he was admitted and tried repeatedly to choose his classes, they would disappear from his schedule. After several attempts he drove to the county where the university was located and told someone the problem. They helped him and then said everything would be okay. He drove all the way back home, only to find that the schedule had disappeared again. He returned to campus only to be told that it was too late to get him in that semester. The next semester, the same thing happened again. By this time, a year was up and he was told the same thing again. He ended up having to get intervention from a state representative after he was told everything would be fine this time. He returned to campus and the person with whom he had to work on the schedule was angry that he had contacted the state representative. They tried to make him look foolish and said that his schedule was in the system again. He refused to accept their statement without proof. The university staff was stunned to discover that the schedule truly was gone again. John had made his point, but had lost the support of the staff who resented him instead of apologizing for the yearlong difficulties.

To make matters worse, after his persistence those years prior in getting enrolled, this first-generation college student then had further issues due to his lack of knowledge of a

syllabus. He stated in the focus group that he did not understand some of the terminology of college, nor did he grasp the importance of a syllabus. For example, he kept hearing the campus instructor state that "we discussed this and that". He even asked others if the class was just Tuesday and Thursday to be sure that he was attending all the classes because he had not heard the discussions that were mentioned. He described it as a "Twilight Zone" experience. Furthermore, he walked into the class one day and no one was there. So he asked some students in the hall about it. They explained to him that it was finals week and there was a different schedule that week. He then went to his advisor who told him that it was on email. He asked "what email?" He had not known all semester that he was supposed to be answering emails with the class. He was told to go to a specific place to set up his email. He walked in, sat down, and no one offered to help him for five minutes. One of the three people behind the desk responded when he rang the bell. They told him to type in his password but he did not know what it was. Once he was able to log on, he went to his home county, logged on to his email and discovered the entire semester of work. He had not missed the final but it was scheduled for the next day and he had not completed the semester of assignments. His frustration level those years ago was very great by that point. His comment spoke volumes, "nobody ever showed me how things worked. It was very frustrating--the whole deal with them over there [on main campus]".

John's experience in the off-campus program for adult learners was a distinct contrast. In the focus group, he added that the mindset of adults was far different to that of traditional-aged students. The adults talked about job and children instead of "the party of at the fraternity". His opinion was that adults were there because they wanted to be there, which made a big difference in the atmosphere of the classes. He even had assistance every semester with registering and knew to check his email! His major recommendation for aiding adult students in returning to

college was to orchestrate a non-traditional student orientation for them before they began the program to explain many of the details that would be required of them to know. John praised his success in the off-campus program.

John shared a story about the lengthy illness and hospital stay of a seven-month-old granddaughter that resulted in her death while he was in the program. He found a way to continue his studies even at the hospital with her. That chapter in his life left an indelible imprint. John changed career paths after graduation. He has since been elected to public office in his home county.

Jamie

Jamie had given a lot of her adult life to educate her husband of 34 years and two sons. She had started her education in the past, but the pursuit of her husband's doctorate took them to various locations and her education ended up on the back burner for 25 years. She raised her two sons, one with serious emotional difficulties, and had helped them as they completed their baccalaureate degrees. They are now certified public accountants. However, she always regretted not completing her degree. At the time that she started the off-campus program, her sons were involved in master's degree programs and she was working for a community college. The son with a disability continued to require her constant monitoring to ensure that he was eating and taking his medications.

Jamie described her parents as having lost their mothers at young ages. Her mother's mother died when her mother was two years of age. Her mother was shifted from one household to another and back again because no one was able to keep her permanently. Her mother managed to finish high school in spite of all of the turmoil in her young life. Her father also experienced environmental constraints to his education. His mother died when he was 14 so he

started working at that young age driving a coal truck. He managed to complete high school while working transporting coal.

Jamie's dad did not support Jamie's interest in going to college. However, a math teacher in her high school planted an idea in her mind about majoring in computer programming. She entered college later, but was not able to complete her dream major. At that time, she felt very intimidated to be around other students and academically inept.

After supporting her husband's education and raising a family, 25 years later, she was determined to enter the Interdisciplinary Studies (IS) program that was held in the building where she worked. The off-campus location allowed her to work, and then attend the university classes just upstairs from her workplace. Jamie found the networking and bonding of the off-campus program students to be socially satisfying.

When asked about the things that made her life complex during her university studies, she mentioned first the responsibilities of being caretakers for her in-laws and her aging mother. She found herself juggling work, medical appointments, responsibilities of wife and mother, and then the challenges of being a student again. Her own widowed mother lived 45 minutes away and needed her, as well. During that time, Jamie also broke bones in her foot and was in a boot, affecting her mobility. She mentioned that the stress also caused her to gain a great deal of weight. Her son's disability required her attention when issues arose. He lived elsewhere, so she made repeated trips to check that he was eating properly and had all that he needed. At times during her coursework, the family had three members in college at the same time.

Another major stress was the constant peak times of her job. Jamie is the kind of person who gives over and above the requirements of her job. She cares for the students that she serves and treats each as she would want others to treat her children. She works long hours throughout

the peak seasons of her work. That meant that her homework often took up the rest of her waking hours.

There were also the stresses of academics. She had not been a student for a long time and had not received a good educational background in English classes. However, the coursework and work duties seemed to interweave beautifully. She learned presentation skills, management skills, technology, and a variety of other specialized skills. Above all, she had learned confidence in her abilities. Because of the program's varied curriculum, she reflected that it was often difficult to understand what a person was qualified to do with that degree. However, for a working adult, she found that it gave her excellent workplace skills that she used regularly. All of this was a major growth experience for one who had described herself as "backward."

I asked her about the internal and external qualities that she had that helped her cope with all of the complexities of work, school, family, and extended family. Her first reply was an internal faith in Christ. She depended on her faith to get her through everything. She had developed a strong drive to complete what she started. She also mentioned an external quality that is her network of friends at church who helped encourage her.

The degree that she achieved meant that she was eligible for a new job. Because the community college administration knew that her degree was nearly complete, they had her start learning the new job while she was trying to complete her bachelor's degree. Her description of that experience of being in school while learning the new job was a "big stressor." She also stated that having a degree had given her more respect in her workplace. In the end it helped her to feel better about herself. Now, she had completed what she started. She commented, "Having finished, it just closed a chapter in my life and I can be proud of myself" (Jamie, personal communication, 2015).

Clara

Clara had a present-day perspective about the complexities of life in the program since she had two more semesters to go in order to complete. She had loved her courses and instructors. Clara observed that returning as an adult student was a positive experience for her since, in her own words, she "bombed out" when she was younger. Competing with younger students in college was difficult. She also had to overcome some social anxiety she experienced as a result of being robbed a few years prior. Fear of entering a college class at the beginning of the program had been extremely difficult. However, she was able to face that fear to get out of her comfort zone in order to stretch her abilities.

Clara works in a hospital pharmacy, and received a promotion at work while a student in the IS program that also put her in the position of supervising some of her former coworkers. She had worked in the same pharmaceutical environment with the same supervisors for 15 years, and had worked her way from a pharmacy tech to a supervisory role as the pharmacy buyer. Her co-workers seemed to be intimidated by her promotion from being one of their peers to now being their supervisor. The additional responsibility became a stressor for her. The workload was especially heavy on days when she also attended school in the evenings. In addition, during the past two semesters, she found that some major work events—regulatory review, operations audit, and inventory—occurred during her coursework and finals. With her responsible nature, the combination of these things that were very critical to her success in the workplace, were compounded by her commitment to school. Before the end of her most recent semester, the hospital began a remodel of their pharmacy and she was assigned to oversee it. She stated that she had not been sleeping well because of all of the stress.

Her mother had been deceased for several years and her two older sisters were her only family support system. She expressed that she had a lot of close friends, one, her biggest cheerleader, had been a part of the first graduating class of the off-campus IS program in that county. As she reflected on who was her most supportive person, her mother came to mind, although education was not something her mother had experienced. Clara's mother only completed second grade and worked in sewing and cabinet-making manufacturing jobs. She remembered her mother talking about being one of the older children in her large Appalachian family and had to stay at home to work the garden and care for the younger children.

Clara's father grew up in a mountain community that was typical of the Appalachia of the past, and worked as a coal miner in that small community. Life was hard and he had difficulty supporting the family financially. Thus, they lived in poverty. Clara stated that her family was not the kind that said to the children when they came in from school, "Let's sit down and do homework" because they were only concerned with putting food on the table and keeping the lights on. Everyone had to work when they came home each day.

Clara described qualities that helped her to cope with the complexities of attending school as a working adult, first-generation college student. First, she mentioned her willingness to sacrifice during the present for the payoff at the end. It was upsetting to someone who came from poverty to need to take out a student loan, although it was necessary. Another quality that she mentioned was the ability to compartmentalize facets of her life that allowed her to focus on one thing at a time. This was especially an asset when she became overwhelmed. Another quality was her strong desire to continue lifelong learning. She described herself as having a passion to succeed.

Clara also counted her faith as a reason that she could overcome her early years. Her church became an important part of her life at 14 as a "bus ministry kid." She said that the church picked her up and poured love into her. She found herself around successful people who were not bound by poverty or drugs and alcohol. Those friends and church mentors had encouraged her to have positive skills, such as financial management and appropriate social relationships, aiding her to overcome the things that were lacking in her early years. As she described it, they took her raw skills and invested themselves in her. She began to believe that she could have their kind of life. She expressed her gratitude that the Lord changed her life and allowed her to get an education. Clara also described herself as mentored by teachers who took an interest in her abilities, made her feel special, and treated her as if she could achieve. She was grateful for the positive influences that God had put in her life.

Clara had learned to have really great relationships with people. Thus, working in the midst of a cohort group gave her support from the relationships built there. As a single adult, she stated that all of her Thanksgivings and birthdays are "taken" by friends and families, times that are often stressful for those without family connections. She is able to capably communicate with professionals, physicians, pharmacists, drug reps, and people who are at a professional level. One physician suggested to her that she should go to "med school", a comment that made her realize that he felt that she had what it took to succeed in higher education.

When asked about how her coursework and work blended together, she first described an activity in class when she was to interview her "boss." She sat down with one of the directors at work and gleaned some important insight. Through her coursework, she had observed important content from her class in the styles of her supervisors. She had a positive work environment to put into practice the content that she learned.

Her campus was just five minutes from her work, therefore, she could finish her workday and head for the campus in time to decompress before class, something that could never have been possible if she had to drive to another city. She had visited the main campus more than an hour and a half away, but her "life is way past" the ability to attend there. The culmination of her life's experience and participation in the coursework was her statement, "I guess what I learned about myself through this program is that I can do it" (Clara, personal communication, 2015). She observed, "Education is a very, very powerful thing" (Clara, personal communication, 2015).

Sue

Sue lived in a remote area of the state where access was difficult due to long, curvy roads. Many people there stay in that location their entire life and never experience anything different. Sue, on the other hand, had made her way gradually out of that area and now resides in a metropolitan area of the state. Sue found the IS program to be convenient and manageable in that mountainous area where she worked for a national chain store. Since there were few jobs in the area, she determined to stay with the company and use it as a way out of the region and away from difficult memories. She now described her life as being the opposite as it was than when she was in school.

We first began the interview with her family. In the journaling exercise, she made the statement that "most of her family has passed away." Her parents divorced when she was four and she lived with her mother and stepfather until she could support herself. Both of her parents were alcoholics. In fact, most of her family are alcoholics. She mentioned that she did not know that it was bad for individuals to drive around with a mixed drink in their hand until she was in middle school and participated in a school program to educate students about the dangers of

alcohol. Her mother was her closest friend until she died while Sue was in the program. It was obvious throughout the interview that she still feels the impact of that loss in her life. Her stepbrother was her closest family member after her mother's death. Sue was fortunate to have discovered the influence of "Upward Bound" in her early years, a program that gave her positive examples, rather than her family, to shape her goals and to provide healthy mentoring and friendships.

Sue had only a handful of real friends and one very close friend, but working 50-plus hours per week allowed for very little contact with them. She expressed concern for some of her friends who had not continued their education. In fact, she described them as not "exactly go-getters, education-wise" (Sue, personal communication, 2015). This is often the case with place-bound youth. Sue was the only one in her group of friends with a baccalaureate degree. Life in her county of origin was not easy since it had the highest unemployment rate in the state for several years. Jobs were hard to come by, and some of her friends became content to go to work rather than to continue their schooling. She described others as willing to get on government benefits in order to eke out a living.

For Sue, an education was expected. Although she only knew a dysfunctional relationship with her father, he was insistent that she go and that she make good grades. She made one C in high school and her father grounded her for six weeks. He was not supportive or involved during her college work, either financially or otherwise. He never offered to help her at all in spite of the financial burden that every semester in the program brought. She found every interaction with him to be frustrating and negative, since he made every conversation an argumentative one. His alcoholism made any personal contact with him difficult. Her brother

had sailed through school with superb grades and without much effort. They were competitive, although education took more work for her.

She found her coworkers and workplace to be supportive as long as her education did not interfere with their workload or schedules. Her supervisors saw potential in her ability to work with people. They allowed her the rare opportunity to do a co-op in other sections of the business where she learned a much broader knowledge base than many ever do in that company. Every new thing she learned made her a more versatile employee. Even during her education, the company promoted her to be a manager over about 50 employees, including a large segment of the workspace in a building. When asked about her ability to impress her supervisors and to earn promotions, Sue described herself as quite relentless. She lightheartedly described that she would "excessively follow-up" (Sue, personal communication, 2015). She did not shy from the responsibility of managing that many people. She seemed to flourish in that environment.

Sue then addressed the complexities of her life while attending college as a working adult first-generation student. A monumental complexity was financing her education. She had attended the flagship university in the state after high school, following her brother, but was not successful, and lost her federal grant. She could no longer get financial aid. She found herself dependent on student loans in order to continue.

During the off-campus program, Sue's mother died, and then followed a series of deaths of close relatives. She described that time in her life as "just awful." Her father then divorced her long-time stepmother with whom she was close. Yet, despite the crushing obstacles, Sue did not give up. She kept pressing forward with work and school without succumbing to the addictions of her parents and extended family.

She chose the IS evening, accelerated program for the last two years of her baccalaureate degree because of its proximity and flexible schedule. However, one of her biggest hardships was the need for an Internet connection at home, as she could not afford the fees for that service. Thus, as an extremely busy employee and student, she had to manage time to do her research at the satellite campus or other locations with wireless Internet service even though there were few in her rural surroundings. She described herself as a "multi-tasker" who could take her schoolwork to do on breaks at work. Nearing the end of her program, Sue reflected on a time when her culminating project for her degree was due. She was awake for 36 hours to accomplish it just before an important job interview. She left the interview convinced that she did not get the job, in spite of the fact that she really needed the job to begin paying back her student loans. As it happened, she did get the job (promotion) and moved to another location with the company. Moving away from the hurtful memories of her hometown helped her to get a new start. The move also provided a better income that made life easier.

Sue never allowed herself the luxury of giving up. She made statements such as, "You have to do the work, you have to put in the time and effort," "You just have to do it," "You just have to miss out on a few things," and "You just have to make sacrifices" (Sue, personal communication, 2015). An important quality that she mentioned was, "I am okay with being by myself and can motivate my own self" (Sue, personal communication, 2015). She mentioned that the pursuit of her education made life exhausting. She described herself as a hard worker who gave 100% all of the time, but the success at work and in the classroom made it all difficult to accomplish.

Sue mentioned a Psychology of Personality class that was her favorite. One of the best parts of it was a lengthy exam that resulted in an elaborate description of her. She said that she

did not like what it said about her, although she perceived it to be an accurate view. She had labored over the answers to the degree that it was an honest representation. Her comment was that

> before that moment, I don't think I had the awareness of those kinds of things because who tells you that you are kind of a jerk, or that you are really judgmental, or maybe even selfish. I felt like my father at that moment. (Sue, personal communication, 2015)

She decided to change what she did not like about herself. At the time of the interview, she was making preparations to start her master's degree. Because she could not afford the Graduate Record Exam, she was working on a portfolio that, hopefully, would exempt her from the exam, and gain her acceptance into the program. She stated, "The company I am working for is not my long-term goal" (Sue, personal communication, 2015).

Dorothy

Dorothy was a recent graduate and single. She had started her education in her words, "Gosh, a long, long time ago" and had found a solid career in a medical office (Dorothy, personal communication, 2015). Dorothy had received promotions, so pursuing more education was not necessary to her career. Her work was demanding as she found herself managing one facet of a medical practice in several counties. However, there were lingering feelings of wanting to finish her bachelor's degree. She simply wanted to complete what she had started. Years had passed since high school, so re-entering college was a challenge academically. In the cohort setting of the university's evening classes, she was able to build a strong support system with her classmates. The group bonded and strengthened one another's resolve to complete. Dorothy pointed out that working in the learning community made the courses much more fun than they would have been in a classroom of strangers. She formed friendships that have lasted

and even enhanced her professional life. An added incentive of the cohort experience was the accountability that the students required of one another. That one thing made her reach farther than she normally would have done.

In describing her family and friends, she mentioned a close-knit family that missed her involvement much of the time during her tenure with the university. Her friends also felt the time restraint that studying and school caused. Her mother was her greatest cheerleader with strong confidence in Dorothy's ability to succeed in the university. She felt a lack of support from her brother and one friend, primarily because they did not understand her reasons for returning to school and the value of the education to her. They seemed to question why one would return to school when they already had a job. When asked these questions, she described the feelings of her family and friends as sometimes being "kicked to the curb" by them (Dorothy, personal communication, 2015). She experienced a feeling of loss since she had little time for "fun activities" (Dorothy, personal communication, 2015). At times, her family or friends would ask her, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" Her coworkers seemed a bit anxious about whether she might leave the workplace once she achieved her educational goal. Just as some of her family, they also questioned why she would invest so much time and money on her goal.

Dorothy's employer was mostly ambivalent. However, a salaried position allowed her hours to be flexible as long as she got the work finished. Her coursework actually seemed to inspire her creatively about things that could be done on the job to be organized, focused, and successful as a manager of people. She pointed out that it is easy to get stale at your work, but the coursework fed her new approaches that enhanced her work productivity. Gleaning up-to-date knowledge about "human resources, management, law, psychology—especially in business,

and computer knowledge" had been "a lifesaver on the job" (Dorothy, personal communication, 2015). Thus, her employer gained her enhanced abilities and knowledge.

When asked specifically about the complexities of her life as a result of her education, she immediately responded that the most pressing concern was constantly juggling work and school responsibilities and keeping up with both. Financial concerns were very much a part of the picture, and she would question whether the education she was receiving would ever benefit her in a manner that matched the cost. She justified it because she was enjoying the program—almost like a recreational cost. One other complexity that she discussed at that time was that of the language of college without the guidance of family. At first, she did not even know what "Interdisciplinary" was, but she was completing a degree in that field anyway. Being a part of the cohort helped as they learned things together about the university requirements. She learned more self-confidence by enduring the challenges of education one step at a time.

Dorothy described qualities that enabled her to cope with all of the stresses. She described three immediately. She was able to stay calm in the midst of chaos, was a "multi-tasker", and was able to prioritize the lists of duties in order to meet deadlines (Dorothy, personal communication, 2015). She also mentioned her ability to stay focused on the big picture, yet at the same time being able to take things one at a time. She described events in her life that had prepared her to cope. She stated that it was a result of overcoming a lot of problems and conflict in the past. She had found herself years before at 27 "without a job, divorced, no education, and kind of starting all over" (Dorothy, personal communication, 2015). She said that starting over and rebuilding had taught her many coping skills. That experience had given her the confidence that comes with an attitude that "the sky is the limit" (Dorothy, personal communication, 2015).

Dorothy acknowledged that having the program close to home was so important that otherwise she was not likely to have completed her bachelor's degree. A bad experience on the university's main campus many years prior had demonstrated to her that a degree earned by driving that far was not a possibility for her. Most days she would leave work and drive directly to class. That made the program "do-able" and much more convenient.

In closing, she said that earning her degree had opened up a "world of possibilities" (Dorothy, personal communication, 2015). Her final comment was "I am grateful the 2+2 program [two years at the community college followed by two years with the university at the community college site] made it possible to earn a degree while continuing to earn a living" (Dorothy, personal communication, 2015). Although the program did not increase her income, and her employer may not have seen a change, again, it gave her ideas in order to succeed on the job. She saw this step as an end to her formal education but not to her learning.

Isabella

Isabella experienced the loss of her mother at age 13. She had felt that loss every day since and it often came up in our conversation. She commented that her mother had always talked about her getting an education. Her father had remarried and was somewhat detached. From time to time, he would ask about school in a general sort of way, but she described him as her least supportive family member simply because of a lack of understanding of her desire for education. His substance abuse also distanced him from her. His siblings in this Appalachian family were resentful of her pursuit. She described their reactions to her education as trying to be "better than them" (Isabella, personal communication, 2015). The need for higher education was not something that they understood.

Isabella stated that she started at the community college as a traditional student. During that time, she had a short, unsuccessful first marriage. Isabella said that she started the accelerated program "after growing up, I guess you could say" (Isabella, personal communication, 2015). She shared that she was now nearing the end of a Master's in Business Administration and that she is "pretty pumped about it" (Isabella, personal communication, 2015). As she shared that news, she sadly reflected on her high school peers in the small, rural area where she grew up. She had previously assumed that her generation knew the importance of a college education but so few took advantage of the opportunity.

Isabella described her mother's sister as being her most supportive family member, and was, in fact, vicariously living out her own desire for education through Isabella. After Isabella completed her education, that aunt began her own. Isabella then reversed roles and become the encourager. They continued to encourage one another's educational pursuits. She and her aunt had wagers with one another about who would finish first and she found that interaction very motivating.

When asked about how her employer and coworkers felt about her education, she first mentioned her inability to get a job without a degree that would support her financially. In the pursuit of her education, she found herself working for a community college part-time, without insurance and other benefits, and hardly able to provide sufficient income to live. However, the educational environment was an encouraging one.

In addition to having an inadequate job, another hardship while attending the program was an inability to afford an Internet connection at home, resulting in extra hours at her workplace to access things necessary for her coursework. She even described herself working near her home sometimes at a truck stop that had wireless Internet access in order to do work that

was due. Another obstacle was that the workload at the college where she worked was very busy at the same times when her education program was most involved. That made the entire process much more stressful. She described her weekends as revolving around writing and research. The intense university five-week schedule was difficult for her. In fact, she stated that the five-week classes meant that you had "a heart attack every five weeks" (Isabella, personal communication, 2015). She felt that it was overwhelming every time she saw a new syllabus. She lightheartedly stated that there were many missed holidays and birthdays in the "name of education" (Isabella, personal communication, 2015).

Financial stress included the need to take out student loans. She received no tuition reimbursement in her part-time job and was already financially challenged to support herself. Loans became the only method of paying for courses. She noted that if her courses had been a greater distance from her workplace, she would have had to re-consider whether she could have completed. She was willing to make the sacrifices necessary in order to complete her degree because she needed job opportunities that completing her education could offer.

When asked about the internal and external qualities that helped her to cope, she described her ability to sit back and think before acting because she had made it a practice to have a calm demeanor within. Isabella is a hyper, happy, extroverted person outwardly, but inwardly she described herself as calm. To others, she portrayed a positive attitude regardless of how she felt internally. She also mentioned her drive to complete her degree. She felt that it was mainly motivated by the need for a secure job. Losing her mother at an early age seemed to mature her quickly. In addition, she said she lived in "the middle of nowhere" in Appalachia so she had to learn to be resourceful (Isabella, personal communication, 2015). Unless one looked

deeply into the pain of her life, Isabella impressed everyone with her humor and laughter. She was always very affirming to people around her and engaged with them in conversation.

The support of Isabella's classmates was not critical to her success. She described herself as there to get things done and to move on. By the time she entered the program she "had been going solo for a long time" (personal communication, 2015). The one thing that the cohort members seemed to do for her was to provide accountability to keep her on track every semester. She noted that only one comment from a classmate about not taking a class the next semester and then the camaraderie would kick in to influence them all to stay together each semester.

Isabella's reply when asked about how her coursework and her work blended together pointed out an exposure to a variety of things of which she had no previous knowledge. Those things had prepared her well for a full-time job. After her grade was posted following commencement, she was eligible to begin her new job the following week at the community college where she had worked part-time. That new job allowed her health benefits, retirement, and educational assistance. After completion of the degree, she also spent time writing goals for future. The degree gave her the background necessary to pursue a Master's in Business Administration that she started shortly after completing. She mentioned that she expected to complete that degree within the upcoming semester. While involved in that program, Isabella married again. At the time of the focus group interview, Isabella was looking ahead to a doctoral program.

Isabella did not mind driving to main campus for that one big event—commencement. As a highlight, her aunt and her best friend attended. Her father attended but he was drunk and made the day uncomfortable. Her stepmother gave her a card that day and was happy for her, yet that did not make up for the discomfort of having her father nearly ruin the event for her.

Isabella now spent her days at work talking with prospective students about the importance of a college education. She observed that many of them have parents who do not support the student's educational goals. She also observed that they live in an area where there is very little influence from higher education in spite of the presence of a community college. She found that the adult prospective students that came into her office were far different from the traditional-aged ones. The adults were emotional and passionate about their desire to go to school.

As she reflected on the program, she mentioned, "It was something good you were working for when there was bad all around you. You knew it was something that was going to benefit you and a goal that you had for yourself" (Isabella, personal communication, 2015). She had made what she called a "stupid mistake" [referring to her short-lived first marriage], but this was her step to go in a better direction (Isabella, personal communication, 2015). She described herself now as accomplished and confident in what she had completed.

Mary

Mary chuckled when she said that she was older than all of her instructors in the program. She began her college career just after high school in 1969 but married and had babies before she could graduate. Then, a move away from the university stalled her education entirely. She was currently the mother of five adult children, four granddaughters, and a grandson on the way. In a ladies' Bible study, she had remarked to a member that she was going back to school and received a negative reply about the transfer of her credits. However, undaunted, she continued prayerful about the subject for two years. She felt the Lord saying that she should attend. All of her children were there to see her graduate 45 years after she began her bachelor's degree studies.

In 1969 when she and a girlfriend first began as students on the main campus of that same university, they attended the freshman orientation and were astounded by what they heard and saw. They wondered at the time what they had gotten themselves into as African Americans on a largely Caucasian campus and in a predominantly Caucasian region of the state. Mary began college at that time with a huge "afro" hairstyle during the days of racial tension throughout the country. Because of her hair and skin color, she was associated inaccurately with the racial problems elsewhere. Most of the people of color in the city of the main campus lived in an area called Bush Town. The roads there were not paved and many of the residents lived in poor conditions. She and her friend endured bias, but Mary and her friend went to Bush Town to see how they could help the people there. She and her friend became affiliated with the Wesley student organization, and through that organization they helped many people in that African American community. In recent years, Mary recognized a broadcaster on a local television station as being one of the individuals that they had helped in those days. That person is now working in politics and government in her city of residence. Seeing that person on the screen gave Mary a sense of relevance that she could assist another in furthering their education and career. During her short tenure at the university as a residential student, Mary also helped to organize a "Black" student organization. Mary acknowledged that the residents in the area where the main campus of the university was located were very racially closed-minded and made inaccurate judgments of others. Many had never traveled out of that area and knew very little of the world as a whole. One prospective roommate for her and her friend walked into the dorm room, stated that she was not going to be in that room, and never came back. The young lady admitted later that she was afraid of them. Mary called the fear "ignorance" (Mary, personal communication, 2015).

When asked about the internal and external qualities that she had which helped her to cope with the racial bias and complexities that education added to her life, she quickly stated that Jesus Christ is her Lord and she keeps Him number one in her life. She said that she could not do anything without His help. Her quiet time with Him came first every morning even when pressed with school matters. Mary's father had completed only the sixth grade and her mother was a high school graduate. Those parents stressed education and personal development to their three children. They made sure that their children learned a love for God, confidence in prayer, and a love for music. Mary's early training had taught her to be able to see past the bias of others about her skin color. Her parents instilled in them an awareness of their individual talents and the importance of using them for God. Mary shared that "My mother always said use the gifts that you have, so I spent a lot of time singing" (Mary, personal communication, 2015).

When Mary returned to college after her children were grown and the accelerated program began, she found challenges. She bought a computer, but had no experience with one. She soon found her classmates ready and willing to help her. Eventually, classmates helped her through learning PowerPoint and preparing a presentation for her culminating project before graduation. Another challenge was paying for college. She accepted a student loan with regrets. Also, time management, a challenge that many of her classmates had was not a problem for Mary.

Mary did not need the degree for her job because she was an independent contractor. A person in the company that she represented found out that she was a student only when she was applying for Credit for Life Experience and needed documentation for a portfolio. He revealed his sincere support when he texted her at commencement with the news that he was in the audience.

I observed Mary to be an extraordinary individual with superb people skills. She was able to relate to everyone in the focus group with a great deal of sensitivity and humor. She met new people very well and established rapport with them quickly. She was a successful businesswoman before starting the degree, yet she stated that she chose to re-enter school in order to finish what she had started long ago. When people asked her what the Interdisciplinary Studies degree meant, she referred to it as something that used to be called "Liberal Arts" which to her meant getting a "pretty good base on a lot of things" (Mary, personal communication, 2015). Mary appeared to still be celebrating her success in the program during the conversations held for this study.

Amy

Amy had a unique background that qualified her for the study in spite of living for a time in another state. She was born in the Appalachian region, then moved with her family to a northern state in order for her mother to find work, then returned to Tennessee and started and completed the accelerated program. Her family's connection to Appalachia and her return to the same region gave a unique perspective on the study. Her mother's parents had both been from Appalachia and had also moved to a northern state to find work. Amy stated that her father had not been involved "in her life" at all (Amy, personal communication, 2015).

Amy's mother had worked second shift, so Amy spent a lot of time alone as a teen. She frankly stated that she had behaviors as a teen that caused her to spend time in jail and in trouble. It was during that time that she was diagnosed as bipolar and dealt with the effects of a mental health diagnosis. As a result of these issues she had $5000 in tickets and fines to pay to another state once she moved, in order to be able to get her Tennessee driver's license. Returning to Tennessee allowed her to leave the negative influences of friends and to get a new start. She

reflected that getting a new start by going to college taught her to live more for the future and not for the "heat of the moment" (Amy, personal communication, 2015). She pointed out that, had she not moved away from her friends who were bad influences, she might have had to choose between them and her education. Amy maturely said that they were in a different chapter of her life and they no longer have anything in common.

Family complexities seemed to be her greatest concern during the IS program. She regretted having less time for her children. At the time, she chose to focus on school in order to "secure a future" (Amy, personal communication, 2015). In addition, the pursuit of her education actually put some strain in her relationship with her son's father. At times, they seemed to have an "on again, off again" relationship (Amy, personal communication, 2015).

When asked about the qualities that enabled her to cope with education as a working adult, first-generation college student in Appalachia, she stated that she had learned to focus on her future and not merely on the present. As she accomplished each new step or class, her confidence grew. Each new success gave her the momentum to keep going. She grew convinced that she had to break the cycle of the past. In addition, she began to realize the influence that her attitudes had on her children. She stated, "If you don't change and put forth a good example, they are just going to follow in your footsteps" (Amy, personal communication, 2015). She observed that she had to separate herself from everything that she always knew—the people and the bad influences. She needed to write a new chapter in her life.

The importance of having the program close to home was, as she stated, "the biggest help. If this program had not been offered the way it was with satellite campuses, I would have never been able to make the hour drive multiple times a week. It would have never happened"

(Amy, personal communication, 2015). Even with its closeness to home, she acknowledged that having a working automobile was a difficult expense.

She expressed a love for her coursework and instructors in the IS program. The evening schedule made it possible for her to attend because her "significant other" was sometimes available after work to keep her two children (Amy, personal communication, 2015). She mentioned that she was on the Dean's list nearly every semester and that she dedicated herself to studying. As a part of her coursework, she participated in a paid internship at a local organization. This was a superb example of the intent of an internship because that organization began preparing her to go to work for them after it was completed. Immediately after her graduation they hired her as a private contractor. Later, after success as a private contractor, she stated that the organization was then going to put her on the payroll with health and other benefits. She commented more than once about how pleased they were with her.

The response of her family and some of her friends was described as "ecstatic." She was the first in her family to go to college and everyone seemed to cheer her on. When she graduated, they made a road trip to Tennessee to celebrate with her. Amy had her daughter at 19 years of age and she was described as her greatest supporter. They appeared to have a close, respectful bond. Amy also had a younger son. His father is the man with whom she currently lived.

The support and friendship of her classmates was essential to her. She observed that she had made some wonderful friends through the classes together. The friends that she made worked hard to schedule the same classes together in order to maintain the friendships and support. Amy had an ability to unite the group with her matter-of-fact rapport with everyone. I observed her to possess an amazing intuition regarding her inner feelings. That comfort with

herself made everyone in the focus group comfortable around her. Her ability to express herself drew out feelings from the group that might not have surfaced. She felt that the cohort group would stay friends forever and she stated that they had more faith in her than she did.

In reply to the question about how her work and coursework blended together, she pointed out that her work and her coursework were very separate from one another, but her degree helped her to become more "well-rounded" (Amy, personal communication, 2015). It helped her understand better ways of communicating with people with whom she worked. She learned to separate herself from previous biases. She said that her coursework taught her to "kind of step back and look at people differently and talk to them differently without judging" (Amy, personal communication, 2015). She now worked with a very large group of people from around the world. The religion's class had helped her to learn respect for various religious beliefs and cultures. She also had learned to be much more "professional" (Amy, personal communication, 2015). She stated that there were times at work when she reflected back to the time management that she developed during the program and it helped her on the job.

In closing she stated that a lot a people feel that they cannot complete a degree because of all of the complexities of their lives, but by taking it "one tiny step at a time, it is doable" (Amy, personal communication, 2015). Also, doing the courses in five-week segments meant that you just concentrated on one "chunk" at a time. She acknowledged that her instructors had also had similar hurdles to completing their education. She had found through opening up to her instructors about what she was going through at the time, that they were "understanding" (Amy, personal communication, 2015). She also found the intensity of the coursework to be a good diversion from sadness about living so far away from her mother. It kept her busy.

Lilly

Lilly was an example of someone who had overcome learning disabilities during her life and was persisting in a university setting. Lilly was still a student in the evening program at the time of the interview, and because of her full-time job, family, and other issues, she only managed to take a class or two each semester. Lilly described her family as a mother and father who are still living, and three teenage daughters, including also their father who lives with her. Her father was a coal miner who had a very rough life. Her father had graduated high school but her mother had quit school when she was in ninth grade. Her mother had lived with reading challenges all her life and Lilly commented that what her mother can read today is because she and her brother worked with their mother to help her. Lilly was in special education in elementary school for several years because of several learning disabilities, and lacked the help at home with overcoming that hardship because her parents did not feel capable of helping. She mentioned that learning comes hard to her. She also had speech therapy through her school years. She faced limitations on her ability to pursue learning at an early age as she and her brother were only allowed to do homework for one hour when they got home from school because they had to "feed the hogs and milk the cows" (Lilly, personal communication, 2015). They also tended the goats and chickens and helped with many chores. The philosophy of her family was, if the homework did not get finished, then "so what" (Lilly, personal communication, 2015). Her mother worked the garden and did all of the farming. Her father often did not arrive home from the coalmines until 7:30 or 8 p.m. In the summer, they also had to work in the garden.

Lilly described her daughters as very supportive. She expressed determination that she did not want to be an example of a "quitter" because of them (Lilly, personal communication,

2015). She wanted to be an example of a college graduate. She also has a child with similar learning disabilities to her own. That child was in special education classes in middle school and required a lot of assistance at home with homework. That task had to be Lilly's since that daughter was unwilling to receive help from the other daughters.

After entering the university portion of the degree, she was able to handle only one or two classes at a time, partly because of her learning difficulties. This complicated her life because she needed courses when they were not being offered in her home county. Thus, she had to travel to a nearby county in order to get the classes that she needed. The drive one-way was about an hour, but it could be longer if she found herself behind log trucks. She had to drive with care because the mountainous drive might include elk or deer in the road, especially after dark. She could only leave after work at 4:30 p.m. so, if the one-hour drive extended past an hour, then she would be late for class. Taking classes elsewhere distanced her from the support of the cohort members, since she was not following the same cycle of classes. Lilly also felt the stress of taking out loans for school. She was concerned about the responsibility of paying them back after she completed.

Academic challenges presented themselves, especially when she tried to take an online class. She found right away that she needed an instructor to talk with and classmates who supported her. She enjoyed the group experience and taking classes that were at a local site. Learning in classes with interaction with others was a critical part of her learning experience. In addition, she did not have a good writing background. That presented a lot of challenges as she began all of the writing and research of the program. As a current student she was already dreading the writing required in the culminating project just a few semesters away. She did find

the instructors willing to make comments on her papers and allowing her to make corrections. Lilly's many difficulties with learning continued throughout her college work.

When asked about the qualities that enabled her to cope during the stresses of her education, she mentioned that she was very organized and was not a procrastinator. The stress of doing it early was less than the stress of waiting until the last minute. She was also very persistent. She kept her goal in sight.

She mentioned that her coworkers were phenomenal in their support of her education. They had actually done research for her and would sometimes go to the library for her on their lunch hour to get books that she needed. They even listened to her rehearse her speeches after work hours. Lilly's supervisor was her only detractor and appeared to be intimidated by her educational pursuit. She opposed Lilly even talking about her education at work. This opposition caused Lilly workplace stress. During this time, a different job in the same office became vacant and she was chosen to fill that position. She then found herself having to learn a new job while trying to keep up with her coursework.

The importance of having the program close to home was "the most amazing thing ever" (Lilly, personal communication, 2015). Being able to leave work and get to the campus in five minutes allowed her to do things on her lunch hour and to get to classes on time. She mentioned that, had she needed to travel to take her courses, it would have made a huge difference in her ability to go.

In closing, she wanted to mention that she had already had three major job offers for when she completes the program. She has had 16 years at her current workplace where she has health benefits and retirement. Thus, she already felt a bit of anxiety about the decisions that she

might need to make once she completed the program. She mentioned the ego-boost that those offers had given her.

Lucy

Lucy had been an acquaintance of mine in a previous job but since she lived in another county, we had lost touch. Lucy contacted a university representative in another county when she heard of the accelerated evening program. She was so determined to complete her baccalaureate degree that she left a career of more than 25 years, since that workload would not have allowed her to attend evening classes in a nearby county. In addition to leaving a job that "she could do in her sleep," she took a major cut in pay in order to take the other job (Lucy, personal communication, 2015). Lucy had attended the university's main campus a number of years earlier when life was simpler for her. After having a family, she was "landlocked" somewhat restricting her ability to complete her degree until this opportunity presented itself.

Actually, Lucy did not have to attend the entire two years of coursework because she was able to use the hours that she had already completed. She had married during her senior year as a traditional student 30 years prior. At the time, she expected to complete college but she did not. She found a career that she loved in news reporting, but after years in a career of newspaper management and reporting that was fading in relevance, Lucy found herself under continual pressure to do more with less. The bottom dollar of profit became more important in the newspaper industry than maintaining the quality that had been important to Lucy. She felt that her ethics were being violated because of the change in emphasis. She found herself in her late 40's needing to get into another career, yet without the "piece of paper" (diploma) she was unable to qualify for jobs that would have opened those doors of opportunity (Lucy, personal communication, 2015). She then went to a radio station as a news reporter with an additional

responsibility of the accounts receivable. She took a large cut in pay, but this employer did not mind her college pursuit. This job required that she learn to use radio boards and a different accounting method than one she had previously used. The compounded changes created a great deal of stress for her.

When asked to describe her family, she first mentioned her parents. Her father had come from a coalmining, lumber-milling family and had died early in life when Lucy was in high school. According to her, he had a fifth grade education. In describing her father's life, she noted that children went to work as soon as they were old enough and it was expected that they would contribute to the family's income. Her father grew up a "bit harshly" because his father was a hard taskmaster, but that was an acceptable way of life where they lived (Lucy, personal communication, 2015). Her grandfather did not consider education to be important. When her parents married, Lucy's mother was 14 and eventually had five children. Early in their marriage, they lived in the mountainous area of two nearby counties without many educational opportunities. Her parents then determined to move to the county where Lucy currently resides because schools were better there and they wanted their children to have a good education. That area was also mountainous and travel difficult but since the schools were better, there was no question about moving. Her mother was 42 years of age when her husband died (from working in the mines) with children at home and no workplace experience. She did not ask others for help but went to work in a sewing factory. Lucy stated, "I grew up thinking my mom was the strongest, smartest person in the world" (Lucy, personal communication, 2015). Her mother eventually earned her General Equivalency Diploma (GED) while working in a sewing factory as a sole provider for the family. Lucy wonders how much her mother could have accomplished if she had not been born in the small coal-mining town in Appalachia. She described her family

as a good hardworking family with a lot of value placed on family. Lucy and her siblings continued to be very close after leaving home to have their own families. Each had gone to some kind of training or education after high school, but Lucy was the only one who had earned a baccalaureate degree. Lucy stated that the value that her parents put on education by moving to the other county in the 1950's for better education for their children had paid off many times in the children and grandchildren's lives.

Lucy's financial concerns were great because of her education. She had taken a $26,000 a year pay cut in order to get a job that would allow her to go to school. She lived simply and made sacrifices in order to persevere. She cancelled her contract for satellite television and many other things down to the "bare basics" (Lucy, personal communication, 2015). As much as she and her sons could give up, they did. One other concern during Lucy's education was the supervision of her youngest son who, at the time, was just 17 and she had concerns about supervising his dating choices.

Paying for the classes themselves was much of the hardship that she experienced. She was eligible for some financial aid but not nearly enough to cover the cost. When she took online classes, the cost was a great deal more than the onsite classes. She finished her baccalaureate degree with $15,000 in student loans. To many that may sound acceptable, but to an adult in her 50's in Appalachia that is a substantial investment. She stated that she hopes to have her loan paid off by the time that she is eligible for retirement.

Another major stressor was her exhausting schedule. She had to be at work by 6 a.m. so had to be up and going around 4:30 a.m. She was on the air at 6:30 a.m. and had to stay until the final newscast of the afternoon at 5 p.m. She could barely make it to another county for classes that started at 5:30 p.m. She finished class at 9:30 p.m. and had at least a 30-minute commute

back home. In addition, the rapid pace of the program meant that there were constant deadlines to meet for her classes, and work was always demanding. However, she stated that she never missed an hour of work. Juggling time was a constant pressure.

A further issue that resulted from the rural area of Appalachia where she lived was the "little country road" that she had to drive to class in a neighboring county (Lucy, personal communication, 2015). The roads in her area are curvy, somewhat narrow, with frequent slow-moving farm vehicles or large tractor-trailers to complicate the travel. She had a small span of time to get to class and she sometimes found herself held up in her commute and late to class. She stated that sometimes she was the last person to arrive.

Lucy's mother, still living, was experiencing many health issues while Lucy was trying to finish the university program. She was hospitalized in another county three times during Lucy's participation in the program. Lucy found herself often leaving work, caring for her mother, and then attending class. She and her sisters would share taking her to dialysis three times each week and to other medical appointments.

Because of her mother's deteriorating health she said that she walked in the line at commencement just for her mother. Her mother's weakened condition meant that she probably should not have traveled the many miles to the main campus to see Lucy graduate. They traveled there a day early in order to stay in a hotel for her to rest before attending the commencement. Her mother attended in a wheelchair, but when Lucy went across the stage to receive her diploma, she looked up in the large arena to see her mother standing and waving her arms to get Lucy's attention so she would know that her mother was sharing in that moment. Her mother continues to be proud of Lucy for that accomplishment. Lucy also reflected on her deceased father. She stated, "I think that [my graduation] would have been a stellar moment for

me in his eyes" (Lucy, personal communication, 2015). Lucy gave evidence that she was not a quitter in any sense of the word.

Lucy was now the Chief Economic Officer of a medical facility in her county. The director had observed her strong work ethic and work experience over the years but could not get an exemption to hire her until she graduated. She was an eager learner in order to know what was necessary to fill that role. However, the one thing that concerned her most was getting successfully through her first federal audit. At the time of the focus group interview, she had received word that day that she had made it through successfully. She was exhausted, but happy. As a result, she was uncommonly quiet during that interview after the grueling weeks of the audit.

Lucy closed the one-on-one interview by saying that her participation in the IS coursework was a great experience. She stated, "I think it is a great program that [U4S] has for adult learners in particular" (Lucy, personal communication, 2015). Personally, she has looked at her graduation as a very important accomplishment in her life. She reflected that, if she had continued her studies when she had originally started, she would have graduated 30 years earlier. Because of her new job, her income had allowed her to begin building a home for herself and her two grown sons who live at home.

Results

Research Question Results

This overarching question guided the study: What are the academic, social, and interpersonal obstacles and demonstration of resilience in the life experience of working adults who are first-generation college students in a region of Central and South-Central Appalachia? The following sub-questions were explored with the participants of this study:

1. How do the life complexities of first-generation, working, adult college students from Appalachia influence their ability to persist in college?
2. What are the students' perceived cultural supports or hindrances in pursuing their educational goals?
3. What perceived internal and attributed external resources (psychological or otherwise) do students possess that have helped them to persist in the face of obstacles (resilience)?
4. In what way has the fact that their parents did not attend college impact students' college experiences?

I have answered these questions using the individual interviews, information provided by participants in the journaling exercise, and the data gathered in the focus groups. The research questions were asked in a variety of ways with each source of information to uncover as much of the deeper feelings, impressions, and the external environment of the participants' lives. The questions also needed to confirm that the participants met the four criteria of the study: (a) working ten or more hours per week, (b) adults 25-years-of-age or older, (c) first-generation students whose parents did not attend college, and (d) lived in the region of Appalachia. The narrow focus of the study made it difficult to find participants who met all of the criteria. However, eleven participants completed the entire study. I removed my biases from the study. For example, I would have supposed that the participants would have had childcare issues. None of them did. Therefore, the results of this study are at least a near approximation of the true feelings and perceptions from the frame of reference of the participants.

Sub-question one. The first sub-question was "How do the life complexities of first-generation, working, adult college students from Appalachia influence their ability to persist in

college?" As mentioned in Chapters One and Two, the Appalachian region is mountainous with poor roads and has residents who did not always value education. Poverty is typical and often used when describing the residents of the area. Coal mining gave the residents increased earnings but has also been documented to result in many health issues. Large families often were needed to raise food in order to live. Older children were sometimes asked to care for the younger children so that parents could work—either in the fields or in jobs. Subsistence living is often the status of Appalachian families.

The research revealed the following things about how the complexities of life in Appalachia affected the college persistence of the participants. Six of the eleven participants discussed the poverty and even deep poverty that they endured in their lives. Two of these told stories of having to come from school and have little or no time for homework because of the chores of feeding hogs, milking cows, working the garden, and caring for goats and chickens. In one of the families, they had only one hour for homework and any remaining homework just did not get finished. Several mentioned that their families were mostly occupied with putting food on the table, not learning. Five described the influence of familial Appalachian backgrounds on their lives as representing strong roots. Clara told about the death of her young father leaving her 40-plus-year-old mother with a second grade education and no work experience outside the home as the remaining family breadwinner. She supported the family by working in sewing factories and cabinet-making shops. One participant acknowledged that she had benefitted from government assistance due to her poverty while enrolled in the program. Isabella described her inability to find work, especially one that did not require a baccalaureate degree. She told about the constant struggle and the need to get student loans in order to stay afloat.

A question about the educational level of the parents was very revealing. The mention of parents who had dropped out of school to raise family members or to go to work seemed consistent with the history of this area of Appalachia. Five stated that they had one parent who graduated high school. Only two stated that both parents had graduated high school, and two had one parent who earned a GED. Two were not aware of the educational level of their fathers because of the lack of his involvement with the family. Three had fathers who only reached fifth or sixth grade. Two had mothers who only reached the seventh or eighth grade. Two had mothers who never completed elementary school, and one of those had attended school only through the second grade because she had to drop out to take care of the younger children. A few of the participants stated that their parents were not able to help them with school homework because of their own lack of education. Clara pointed out the hurt she felt as a young student because her mother was not willing to go to parent-teacher conferences, but she later realized that her mother had attended school only until the second grade and was not comfortable in educational settings. Her follow-up comment was that her mother did the best that she could. Some of the participants mentioned family members who could not understand their college interest. Dorothy's family had no insistence on higher education, and, in fact, was ambivalent toward it. Billy Bob discussed the influence of Appalachia and its lack of emphasis on education. His family felt it was far more important to work to put food on the table than to attend school. The importance of education was not valued or passed on by family. Isabella mentioned living in a remote area where most of her classmates were not concerned with higher education. They were content to get whatever jobs they could and start families. Although her father had insisted on her going to college, he offered no help. Mary was the only one of the

group members who indicated any experience with the arts. She was a vocalist. The others seemed to have no background at all with the music or art of the culture.

Most of the participants in this group discussed travel difficulty in attending classes due to the topography. Roads in some of these remote areas of the state were two-lanes, curvy, mountainous, narrow, and sometimes hazardous. The distance from class also contributed to arriving late for class after work. In addition, the roads were often shared with tractor-trailer trucks as well as other heavy equipment. As for the effect that the mountainous terrain and poor roads had on their education, four pointed out that travel from their location to main campus would have taken an hour and a half or more one way on poor roads. They felt landlocked and in need of a program close to home. Two of the participants had to leave their home county to travel to the off-campus location on a "little country road" where they might encounter trucks or delays. Lucy had a narrow window of 30 minutes to get to class and would often be the last to class. Another mentioned that she had to travel two lane roads for an hour to get to class. She got off work at 4:30 p.m. and class began at 5:30 p.m. She was sometimes delayed by log trucks or elk or deer in the road and was grateful for understanding instructors.

Coal mining was also an issue in four of the participant's families. Jamie's father began driving a coal truck at age 14. Lilly pointed out that her father often did not return from the mines until 7:30 or 8 p.m. so her mother and the children had to do the chores to raise food and care for farm animals. Two of the participant's fathers who worked in coal mining died at young ages.

Academic stress and unpreparedness could be partially attributed to the lack of educational emphasis of the Appalachian region. Schools in this region of Appalachia struggle to maintain quality. In my years of working with teachers to assist them with graduate degrees, I

have observed that many of the region's teachers frequently use poor grammar. University requirements for research, writing, and citing references created stress on several of the participants. Eight of the participants mentioned experiencing academic stress. Three did not.

Whether the lack of emphasis on education had an impact on the participants, all of them did experience academic stress. However, some of that stress was due to bad experiences in the past. In order to reinforce the meaning of his bad experience, John told a long saga of feeling that he was out of touch with some of the "happenings" in a class, in spite of the fact that he had attended every class. In the end, this was a result of not knowing the terminology of the university. He was not aware of the importance of a syllabus and had missed out on a full semester of assignments. He was also not aware that he had a university email address where important news was shared. He also had no clue that the university published a different schedule for finals week so he went to class for his final and no one was there. He found out from some students in the hall that day that the final for his class would be the next day. This experience nearly turned him off totally on university coursework. He had also experienced a lot of frustration for several semesters in trying to get admitted to the university. He did not find the campus staff helpful. In fact, they blamed his inability, but after three attempts at registering for three different semesters, he finally pointed out to them that there was a technology glitch causing his problem with registering online.

Dorothy also had a bad experience trying to take a class on the main campus of this same university. She was five minutes late for class one evening after driving nearly an hour to get there and found that the instructor had locked her out of the classroom. She waited until the class took a break later in the evening and joined the class. This experience caused her to feel that she might never go back.

Interestingly enough, a few participants spoke about their strong faith in God,and how He had helped them through the difficulties of their lives, including the Interdisciplinary Studies accelerated program. The Southeastern area of the United States has often been called the "Bible Belt," and that faith-based influence may still be felt in comments made by participants of their dependence on a personal Savior, Jesus Christ. The African American female described how her faith had allowed her to tolerate the racial injustices of the past in the region. She was not content to be merely an observer, but even in her younger years at the university, she had spent her free time in assisting African Americans who had experienced more prejudice than she had. One other example of the religious life of the participants was Clara who admitted to being a "bus ministry kid," strongly influenced by the culture and example of the families in her church rather than her own family.

Sub-question two. Next, the sub-question "What are the students' perceived cultural supports or hindrances in pursuing their educational goals?" revealed a number of important issues for them. I will address the hindrances first.

Perceived hindrances. Eight of the eleven participants mentioned financial difficulties as a result of their education. Nearly all of them talked about the cost of the courses. One maxed out available student loans. Seven of the group mentioned getting student loans and their concern about paying them back. Three had minimal educational benefits that paid for a portion of their classes. Two had lost earlier scholarships because of failing college on their first attempt. Dorothy said that she considered the cost of her classes as a recreational expense like shopping because she loved her classes.

Group members described a variety of maladaptive behaviors or mindset in either their lives or those of parents. One participant admitted to addictions and incarceration. Two

mentioned the serious addictions of their parents. At least three members mentioned the lack of parental value of education. Two of them had lost their mothers early in life due to illness, thus they missed guidance from that parent and felt a deep sense of loss.

Lucy had to leave a 25-year career because her boss expected her to be available to follow news stories whenever they happened. If she were in school and a news story occurred she would not be available. This opposition to her education resulted in her resignation. She took a job in news reporting at a radio station with a $26,000 pay reduction. In the new job, she had the stress of learning very different processes. Lucy had to learn radio boards in order to make the regular news broadcasts throughout the day and a new accounts-receivable system in order to handle the accounts for the station. All of this happened at the same time that she was starting her schooling. In order for Lucy and her two sons to live on her new salary, they had to make steep sacrifices. Two of the 11 did not have Internet service because of the cost. That made the online component of the five-week hybrid courses very difficult. They found themselves trying to find places to study that had wireless internet access. Isabella found herself having to go to a nearby truck stop to access the internet. Amy also had financial strain because of keeping her car running. She mentioned the cost of repairs, maintenance, and fuel several times in our interviews.

Family illnesses created difficulties for several of the participants. Billy Bob told about his wife's nine and a half-year battle with cancer. His first obligation was as caretaker for her. He mentioned the internal conflict that he felt when his wife was sick in the next room and he had to be on the computer doing coursework. Her health continued to deteriorate and, at the time of the interviews, he had to ensure that someone could stay with her so that that he could participate. She could no longer care for herself. Lucy told about her mother's three

hospitalizations in the short time that she was attending the program. Family members frequently had to be with her when she was at home, so Lucy would study while she stayed with her mother. Her mother would often ask her what she was reading and studying. Lucy jokingly said that it was like homework in elementary school when her mother would ask. Because her mother's house did not have access to the Internet, Lucy had to go home to take her tests. Later in her program when Lucy would stay with her, her mother would ask about when she was going to finish. She was becoming impatient with Lucy's divided attention.

Jamie had responsibility for the care of her husband's parents who lived next to them. She often had to shuttle them to medical appointments and provide care for them. Her own mother lived about 30 minutes away and she had to check on her from time-to-time. In addition, one of Jamie's sons had an emotional disability and she frequently had to travel to another location to ensure that he was eating correctly or caring for himself properly. During the time in the accelerated program, Jamie also broke her foot and was in a boot. That compounded the stress and made every task more difficult.

Clara experienced social anxiety due to a robbery several years before. She was often unsure in new situations and felt that anxiety to a great degree when she attended class the first time. Amy shared about her own diagnosis as bi-polar. She talked about the changes that she experienced in the program by learning to sacrifice for her education rather than living "in the heat of the moment" (Amy, personal communication, 2015). After she shared about being in jail and some fines that ensued before she moved to Tennessee, she stated that she had closed that chapter in her life.

Sue's mother experienced a short illness while Sue was taking classes. Soon afterward, she died while Sue was still in the program. Sue shared some of the impact that loss had on her life because her mother was her best friend.

The most heartbreaking story about family illnesses was John's. His seven-month-old granddaughter was in the hospital for several months while John was in the program. He was often conflicted about caring for his daughter and her family and his need to study. He stated that he took a number of tests using the hospital Internet. He stayed at the hospital as much as possible. In the end, his young granddaughter died and the family had to grieve together.

Lilly experienced cultural obstacles because of her own learning disabilities. She had speech therapy for several years in elementary school, spent time in special education classes, and said that she had to do only one class in the program at a time. Lilly was also dealing with a daughter who was in special education classes due to a learning disability. She felt frequent guilt because she could not always be there to help her daughter. Lilly also mentioned that her mother had great difficulty with reading but was never diagnosed with a learning disability.

Two of the participants had families who exhibited addictions. Sue mentioned that she was not aware until late elementary school that it was against the law to drive with a mixed drink in hand, because both of her parents were alcoholics. Isabella's father was drunk when he attended her commencement. Clara mentioned the change in her life when she came under the influence of church people who mentored her and were not addicted to alcohol. Amy talked of her previous experiences of addictions and being friends with people who were also addicted. She mentioned several experiences of being in jail. Those bad influences were left behind when she returned to Tennessee, but some of that trouble followed her. Before she could get a Tennessee driver's license, she had to pay back $5,000 in fines to the state that she left.

Isabella experienced family opposition to attending college. None of her family had attended college and she still lived in the community where they lived. When she began college, several of the group began to resent her and talked of her trying to be better than them. Family gatherings were often filled with tension toward her.

Fathers were obstacles to some of the participants. Amy stated that her father was not in her life. Two had fathers who were very negative toward them. Sue's father was constantly angry and she chose to be around him as little as possible. Isabella's father was not supportive. Sue and Isabella both stated that their fathers were a hindrance and did not encourage or help them in any way. When Jamie had finished high school, her father did not want her to further her education or get a job. He wanted to keep her sister and her at home protected by him. She mentioned that she was very "backward" at the time (causing her discomfort in many situations). One high school teacher had influenced Jamie to have an interest in computer programming. She wanted to study that but her father would not allow it. She also mentioned not feeling smart enough to go to college.

Bosses contributed to hindrances. Lucy could not remain in her longstanding career in order to attend school because her boss wanted her available to follow the news stories whenever they happened. Lilly spoke of having a very negative boss who was threatened by her education. She made it difficult for Lilly to take classes during her associate's degree when they were only offered during the day. She did not want Lilly to talk of her academic successes while at work. She made it difficult for her to even go to the local campus to do research. Lilly speculated that her boss was threatened by her degree because she might fear that Lilly could eventually be more qualified for the boss' job.

Work issues create additional educational hindrances for the participants. Three began training on new jobs during their education. That added a great deal of stress to their already stressful situation. Lucy stated that she would never recommend that a student go through what she did in juggling family health issues, coursework, full-time employment, and learning a new job. Also, Lucy's new job at the time required her to be at work by 6 a.m., on the air giving the news at 6:30 a.m., and staying available to give the evening news at 5 p.m. before she left for the day. As mentioned in a previous paragraph, that allowed her only 30 minutes to make the 30-minute journey to class, hoping all the while that she would not encounter delays. The five-week classes required everyone to be there for all of the classes because of the need to maintain "seat time" for accreditation. The hybrid format meant that the online portion provided the rest of the accreditation requirements. Lilly also traveled one hour to another county for some of her classes because the local cohort was taking three or four classes at a time versus her one class at a time. That often put her out of sync with the schedule that was being offered locally and she would have to travel to another location to get a class that she needed. That one-hour trip could barely get her to the other location in time after she left work at 4:30 p.m. Amy felt overwhelmed time-wise frequently during the program. Once she started her paid internship, she became a full-time worker. Adapting to work seemed to create a strain in her life. Amy felt that her job required one set of learning and her coursework another. She said that the learning of one did not mesh with the learning in the other. This caused her some stress as she learned both. Billy Bob mentioned time constraint due to his schedule and difficulty meeting deadlines. Workplace stress, time constraints, and family obligations made participation in an evening program difficult, especially for single parents. Six of the seven members of this focus group discussed the stress of their workplace and the difficulty balancing that with the workload of the

program. Two worked for a community college where the ebb and flow of workload often duplicated the same ebb and flow of their course load. For most of them, the format of the evening program made it doable.

In contrast, Clara was promoted to a supervisory position while she was in the program. This meant that she now supervised some of the people that she once had as co-workers. A few of them began to resent her supervisory role. She felt that this strained relationships that she once considered as friendships. Also, as she was promoted she gained new responsibilities as the pharmacy buyer for a hospital. Her workload was more difficult on Tuesdays and Thursdays and those were evenings when she had classes. She sometimes left work, went to class, and then returned to her workplace. During her tenure in the program, she experienced the work stresses of a regulatory review, operations audit, and inventory. These events took place during the time of class finals so she was juggling work and study a great deal. She was also given the responsibility of overseeing the remodel of the pharmacy. She admitted not sleeping well during her most recent semester because of all of the stress.

Dorothy already had a responsible job in a medical office. She had things that were in her area of expertise that no one else did and her work took her to multiple locations in several counties. That meant that she had to keep up her work and travel while taking 12-credit-hours per semester in college for two years.

Near the end of her university program, the community college where Jamie worked allowed her to move into a position that required a baccalaureate degree. She found herself learning the new job while trying to keep her coursework schedule of 12-credit-hours per semester with constant deadlines. It put a great deal of strain on her because of the additional

family responsibilities that she experienced during the same time period. However, she successfully completed the program.

Sue was promoted to frontline supervisor and given supervisory responsibility over 50 employees. She experienced constant stress from juggling school and work schedules. She was gifted at supervision but the company where she worked required many work hours from her. She carved out small chunks of time during her breaks for study.

To close out this section about work-related issues, I will summarize the work hours that each experienced. Mary worked 12-18 hours per week because she was a private contractor who set her own work hours. Five worked 40 hours per week, two worked 37.5 hours per week, and three worked 40 or more hours per week.

Family commitments also created conflict in the lives of most of the participants in the study. Lilly felt guilt for not being at home to help her learning-disabled child and guilt for taking Saturday classes in her associate's degree that took time away from family. Lucy felt a great deal of angst about needing to spend more time with her ill mother. She felt guilt about not being present to cook meals for her sons. Amy felt very bad that she was not able to help her children with homework because of doing her own homework. Billy Bob felt guilt for not being with his ill wife because of his own work. Dorothy knew that her family felt some resentment that she was not available to be with them because of taking classes. She seemed hurt about her brother not understanding her desire for education. Jamie was plagued with guilt about needing to be more available for family needs. John stated that it hurt him that his children did not understand why he was not always available to watch them play sports or to spend time with them. He also mentioned guilt that his wife had to pick up the slack in many ways.

Several mentioned that their friendships suffered because of their coursework. They felt the need to study much of their free time and had to let activities with friends go. One positive example of friendship issues surfaced when Amy moved to Tennessee. She left her friends behind. It was good in that she no longer had their negative influence, but it was difficult in that she wanted them to understand her desire for education and even to pursue it themselves. She lost several friends during her university experience.

When asked about their least-supportive family member or friend, some of the participants could not name anyone except to say that some of their closest family or friends did not understand their desire for more education. Billy Bob stated that he had one friend that did not understand his desire for education. He graciously described it as one bad quality in an otherwise good person. Clara admitted that her mother would have been described as her least supportive, not because she did not want the best for Clara but that she just did not understand the educational system or its value since she only completed the second grade. Clara's mother came from the school of thought that education was for rich people and that people like Clara's family simply had to get a job. To her that was the sum total of Clara's life and future. Isabella and Sue stated that their father was their least-supportive family member or friend, although neither of them had close friend support. Sue's also noted her father was the least supportive in her personal circle. Jamie mentioned her sister was her least supportive, simply because she did not understand the value of education. John said that his children were least-supportive for the same reason. They only knew that their dad was not available all of the time that they wanted him to be. Lilly's least-supportive person was her boss. Lucy had one friend whose relationship suffered the most because of her education. According to Lucy, that friend probably felt the loss

the most. Mary's least supportive person was a lady in her Bible study that was negative when Mary initially mentioned the idea to her.

Finally, the university raised many obstacles in the students' paths. The transition for the students from community college to university was complicated. Processes were not similar and the language used at the university was complicated for students with no "interpreter" of higher education jargon. In addition, the Interdisciplinary Studies nomenclature and advising were vague. The students had to take the offer of a degree to open doors for them by faith since the degree had a broad definition. Lastly, John and Dorothy both had previously had traumatic prior experiences with the same university while trying to attend at the main campus. Dorothy had shared about getting locked out of a main campus class after a one-hour drive to campus from work. She was five minutes late and could not enter the class because the instructor locked her out. John mentioned his lack of experience with a syllabus during his first class on campus. He expressed deep frustration with not doing much of the coursework because of not knowing of the email assignments until a day before the final exam. He had gone to campus for the exam a day earlier and found that the university calendar designated different days for the final exams, a process that seemed a departure from schedule with which he was unfamiliar.

Perceived supports. The prominent theme of the participants was their strong determination to complete the program. They mentioned frequently the support that they gave to one another as a cohort. Lucy commented about her cohort group, "Having four [classes] at one time just about made me quit, just about. But I kept being told by other people in my cohort, we are all feeling this and it is okay" (Lucy, personal communication, 2015). Dorothy commented, "But you know that during my classes my classmates were very instrumental because they did

have families and they were facing the same pressures that I was, so, 'if they can, I can' sort of attitude" (Dorothy, personal communication, 2015). Dorothy also noted,

> In one of the classes, I was overwhelmed, couldn't do it, didn't think I could pass, you know the very negative mind set, and a classmate said something to me, kind of like, 'get over yourself, yes, you can'. (personal communication, 2015)

Isabella said about the cohort, "It was something good when there was bad all around" (personal communication, 2015), and Billy Bob loved the competitiveness in his cohort. Clara noted,

> We take care of one another, so we are in it together, so that is a positive thing about the program . . . just a really good group of people and we are all tied together with the fact that we all want to better our lives, and we see this program as an opportunity to up our skills and to open up some doors for us . . . .In all the things we are going through in our life, work and school balance, we watch out for one another whether it be, we text, call, and we email . . . . (personal communication, 2015)

Motivation to demonstrate persistence for family members was also present. Lilly stated about her daughters, "I don't want them to see that I am quitting school, and I want them to know that no matter what kind of obstacles get in your way, you can do it no matter what" (Lilly, personal communication, 2015). Regarding her sons, Lucy said, "I also think them seeing me working so hard, hopefully, will be something that they value at some point in their life" (personal communication, 2015).

Personal tenacity was also a pattern exhibited by participants. Sue told me, "I am quite relentless" (personal communication, 2015). John stated,

> It does take discipline and you have to make sure you set time aside to make sure you get it done, whatever reading you have to do. You know, you are sitting there and the phone

> is ringing or someone needs something and you say 'I can't because this is my day to do school work'. (personal communication, 2015)

Jamie pointed out, "I guess about me internally, I have my drive. I have a strong drive to finish things" (personal communication, 2015). About her commitment, Isabella said, "I think the drive that I had to complete the degree . . . of course that is what pushed me through . . . that motivation" (personal communication, 2015). "It is more like I am broke and I need a better job. So that was kind of a big motivator more me" (Isabella, personal communication, 2015). "I learned to self soothe. It was kind of like dealing with myself because I lived in Appalachia. I lived out in the middle of nowhere" (Isabella, personal communication, 2015). Dorothy reflected,

> I found myself at 27 without a job, divorced, no education, and kind of starting all over. So I think starting there and rebuilding a little bit at a time gave me the confidence that comes with 'the sky is the limit.' (Dorothy, personal communication, 2015)

Clara made some remarkable comments. "Well, my mom passed away several years ago" (personal communication, 2015). "I want to progress and have some bigger skills so that when I am in my fifties or sixties, those last fifteen or twenty years that I am working, I am not having to do the hard manual labor" (Clara, personal communication, 2015). "I understand that things do not last forever. It is only fifteen weeks and I know the payoff of exerting the effort so I am willing to sacrifice now and endure because I know there will be a pay-off" (Clara, personal communication, 2015). Billy Bob mentioned being "bull-headed." He said,

> I don't like starting something I cannot complete. I am a little bull-headed when it comes to that. That probably helped me because I know there were a lot of times I would sit down to start doing some kind of research, homework, or paper, and just think, 'why am I

doing this?' It seemed like it was almost like I could handle it or I guess that quality of wanting to finish what I started kept me going. (personal communication, 2015)

Amy discussed the state of being motivated by incremental success. She said, "The more that I accomplished, I was able to look back on my accomplishments" (personal communication, 2015). "I realized how good it felt to succeed" (Amy, personal communication, 2015). "I know that I have much more future, and so many more chapters to accomplish" (Amy, personal communication, 2015). "I had to distance myself, and then I would have to think really of how good I felt say each semester, each test, or each assignment" (Amy, personal communication, 2015). "Really knowing that I had changed from what I was, and then seeing what I was going through, and then thinking; wow, I can really do something with my future and influence other people" (Amy, personal communication, 2015).

Each of the participants mentioned some external supporters that were important in the process. Amy's 11-year-old daughter was mentioned as her strongest support. I met her daughter and they seemed to have a strong bond of respect for one another. Billy Bob stated that his wife of 23 years was his best supporter. Clara mentioned that a friend who had graduated the program in a previous cohort was her cheerleader. Dorothy's mother was her best supporter. Isabella told about her deceased mother's sister who encouraged her. They even wagered with one another about who would graduate their programs first. Jamie's husband, whom she had helped support to get his doctorate, was her best supporter. John's wife was his encourager and picked up the slack for him so he could finish. Lilly said that her three daughters inspired her. Lucy emphatically stated that her mother was the smartest person that she knew and was her best supporter. Sue's mother was her best cheerleader, but she died just a few months before Sue's

graduation. Sue's work did not allow her time to socialize so she did not have a close friend to support her other than her deceased mother.

Mary was in a unique situation. She had prayed earnestly about the opportunity to finish her degree. One day she knew that the Lord was telling her to go and inquire about it. However, she sensed that He was telling her to keep it to herself. She let it slip to a lady in Bible study who was negative about it. Mary realized that indicated that she was not to have mentioned it to anyone. She inquired about it, started the process, and was admitted. One day her daughter asked her why she was going to the campus so much. Mary told her about it and the daughter, her husband, and her daughter's husband were the only ones to know until her last semester in the program. It was at that time that a family outing was planned and she told them that she had to do some writing. Her other four children and their families found out her secret. Everyone was extremely excited and couldn't wait for commencement.

At the time of the interview, Clara was still a student. She was able to apply something she had learned in class about feeling the part as a leader. A supervisor commented that he had seen a positive change in her leadership. One of her supervisors was grooming her to take over his job when he retires in a few years.

The adults in the study were in varying stages of marriage, partnerships, and singleness but were in relatively stable situations. Two of this focus group lived with heterosexual partners and had children by them. One participant had experienced a separation but then was reunited before the time of the study. Two were currently married at the time of their participation in the educational program. Two were never married. Three described having experienced divorce. Five were parents, mostly of children who were, at the time of the study, adults.

As a whole, the participants were pleased with the accelerated format, content, and faculty of the IS off-campus program. As expected, the pressures of condensed five-week courses added much more stress than the 15-week courses. Recommendations included a few topics that could be added. However, one complaint surfaced about the online and on-site courses and that was what the students labeled as "busy work." They expected and were happy to do things that were relevant. However, they resented spending time completing assignments that did not appear to have a purpose other than to have them satisfy a time or activity requirement. As one student explained, "It wasn't making me a better person and it wasn't making me a smarter person. It wasn't going to impact how successful I was in my future" (Lucy, personal communication, 2015). Mary agreed with Lucy that they were businesswomen who were already extremely busy, thus, the busy work "got on my nerves" (personal communication, 2015).

Sub-question three. In order to answer sub-question three "What perceived internal and attributed external resources (psychological or otherwise) do students possess that helped them to persist in the face of obstacles (resilience)?" I revisited the theoretical framework of resilience that was used for this research. As explained in the literature review for this study, there is no unified definition of the theory itself. The basic construct of resilience is understood, yet no uniformity of terminology or measurement exists among researchers. Multiple definitions of resilience all involve a risk or adversity and a resulting positive adaptation at least in one area of behavior (Herrman et al., 2011). The reason I chose resilience as the theoretical framework for the current study is due to its focus on "good function or outcome in the context of risk or adversity" (Masten, 2014, p. 6). That resilience has been shown "to arise from ordinary resources and processes" that produces flourishing behavior, especially in the face of obstacles

and set-backs (Masten, 2014, p. 3). Masten's (2014) mention of "flourishing behavior" (p. 3) is seen in the resulting semester long persistence of each person, but also in the commencement for nine of the 11 participants. The working, adult, first-generation college students in this region of Appalachia are persisting to their goal of graduating the program.

Internal attributed resources. Resilience demonstrated on the part of the participants through their internal resources described in this chapter included (a) time management, (b) personal integrity, (c) internal strength or resolve, (d) ability to enjoy humor, (e) determination to overcome negative examples, (f) realization that education was a ticket out of their current circumstances, (g) awareness that they must do it now or the opportunity might never present itself again, (h) desire to be a good example to their children, (i) tolerance for stressful situations, (j) outgoing personality, (k) willingness to attempt something never tried before, (l) relentless in pursuit of a goal, (m) ability to manage multiple tasks at one time, (n) being adaptable, (o) strong faith in God's ability to give strength, guidance, and help, and (p) willingness to sacrifice present comfort for future gain.

External attributed resources. Resilience demonstrated on the part of the participants through their external examples and resources included (a) military that experience taught discipline and persistence; (b) a parent who mentored behaviors such as overcoming obstacles, persistence in the face of difficulty, and a can-do attitude; (c) work accomplishments that gave them confidence to attempt an educational goal; (d) encouragement of a teacher who saw potential in their life; (e) a strong network of support from family and friends; (f) a church family who took them in and taught them when family did not; and (g) learning community support and accountability.

Sub-question four. A response to sub-question four "In what way has the fact that their parents did not attend college impact students' college experiences?" can be answered in a variety of ways. None of the parents of the 11 participants attended college. Furthermore, the goals of each of these 11 took them far beyond the educational background of their parents. Clara's embarrassment that her mother was not willing to go to elementary school for activities reflected the impact that her mother's poor educational level had on a young life. The mother who completed only second grade was not willing to enter into dialogue in a school environment.

Parental lack of education also resulted in participants needing to seek mentors and role models from outside the home. Sue chose to align herself with a community-based organization called "Upward Bound" in order to find positive mentors since her parents were alcoholics and her relationship with her father was negative, maladaptive, and dysfunctional. She continued to follow that external example as a guide for her life and chose to refrain from addictions. She became very distressed in one of her classes after taking a personality test because it pictured in herself what she labeled a picture of her dad. She did not want to be like him and began instantly to develop other mentors and influences that would bring out a better result. Lilly chose to align herself with capable co-workers. Jamie began a slow learning process that ended with earning her baccalaureate at 55-years of age even though she did not feel smart enough for college earlier in life. The mentors that the participants chose lifted them above low educational aspirations. Isabella lost her positive mentor at 14 when her mother died. Her father had addictive behaviors and was distant with her. Therefore, she resolved to use education to "dig her way out of a life" that could have reverted to her father's behaviors (Isabella, personal communication, 2015). Billy Bob slowly used education to get him out of being locked into repeating history. He decided that he did not want to continue to clean floors for the rest of his life. He used small

successes to do that. He took a trade course, completed it, took another and completed it, went to the military where he learned discipline and integrity, then earned his associate and baccalaureate degrees. Amy left the bad influences of her friends and chose new mentors in educational environments.

Lucy's father was a coal miner and had a fifth grade education but she stated that her mother was the smartest person that she knew even though she did not finish school, but later earned her GED. Dorothy's mother was her positive mentor. Mary had a solid, happy home life where the children were encouraged to find and use their talents. They were taught the power of prayer and faith in God. Mary chose to start every day meeting with her Lord in a quiet time that was then used to guide her day. She mentioned that, "if the Lord is first in your life, then everything will work out as it should" (Mary, personal communication, 2015). Mary had great mentors in her parents even though her father only completed the sixth grade. They taught her to live for someone greater than herself.

Themes

The process of identifying the themes carefully followed the description in the methods section. Due to the magnitude of the data, I needed a sense-making analysis to "identify core consistency" (Patton, 2002, p. 453). During the process of analysis, I used various headings to separate the information gleaned. I listed those heading in the section above about themes. I used all pseudonyms of the participants to attribute various situations using the headings. I was careful to follow Moustakas' (1994) modification of a method used by van Kaam to analyze the data. According to this modification, the steps are (a) list and preliminarily group, (b) reduce and eliminate, (c) cluster and thematize, (d) validate, (e) use the validated and constituent themes, (f) construct a structural description, and (g) construct a textural description (Moustakas,

1994). The first step was to group the triangulated data into an overarching description of the responses by each participant to the four research questions. I eliminated items that were mainly conversational. Next, I identified the emerging themes by type of lived experience. I validated themes by returning to the overarching description to ensure that they were properly labeled or categorized. I formed the structural description as a kind of outline of the overarching description. Finally, a textural description containing only the rich detail emerged with the essence and meaning of the complexities for each participant. I followed the analysis procedures from Moustakas (1994) for examination of each transcript for the description of the results. I selected quotations to use verbatim to reflect the essence of their complex experiences. Graphics were not necessary to better understand the clusters of data.

Moustakas (1994) used the term "horizonalization" (p. 95) when he referred to using significant statements for the purpose of describing the experience of this phenomenon. I enacted this pattern using the research questions as a guide. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) describe the process in this manner: "Having immersed yourself in your data and lived with them for an extended period of time, you have most likely reflected on emergent patterns and themes" (p. 175). I described the emergent themes in this chapter and summarized them above.

The themes were evident once the summary descriptions (overarching descriptions) were developed. As I reviewed and grouped each of the descriptions, themes began to surface immediately. I made groupings based on "resilience," "general issues," "how school and work blended," "internal and external qualities that they possess," "pivotal situations," and finally, the "successes that were due to earning their baccalaureate degree." I found a few "outliers" that could have fallen into one theme or another but are worth mentioning: "writing goals for oneself," "grateful," and "opened a world of possibilities."

Several of the participants mentioned in the interviews that their families did not or could not emphasize education due to the desire for all family members to contribute to the urgent need for food. They stated that they were limited in the amount of time allowed for homework. Another said that he had specific chores to maintain livestock in order to feed the family. Another said that her mother (with a second grade education) would not even go to parent/teacher conferences. One father did not want his adult daughters to go to college or to work; he wanted to keep them at home. Others clearly stated that their family did not value education. Furthermore, another participant stated that she and her daughter have a learning disability and thought that her mother, who cannot read well, shared that same barrier to learning. Many of the participants' parents had not completed high school, and some did not emphasize the importance of education at all. The emerging theme was the "lack of value that the family put on education." It is worth repeating here that none of the parents had attended college; in fact, several had not even entered high school. One stated that her "boss" was antagonistic toward the educational pursuit of her employee. In contrast, one participant mentioned that her family moved in order to provide a better education for her and her siblings. Neither parent had attended college, but they wanted "better" for their children.

Another distinct theme was poverty, both in their own families of origin, and in the region. Once again, the issue of having to do chores in lieu of homework revealed the need for all family members to participate in caring for livestock or crops. A few did not have a father involved in the family at all. A student loan to these participants seemed monumental because students knew the value of every penny for the family. Six of the participants stated that they had a mature mindset because of their background and family responsibility. A reoccurring

situation was that the family could not help with college expenses. One stated that she did not want to clean floors for the rest of her life.

An engaging theme was their unrest with living life without a baccalaureate degree. More specifically, participants portrayed a strong determination to rise above their circumstances using the vehicle of further education. All participant comments emphasized a great deal of sacrifice--in money, family time, social contacts, or in the consequences that came as a result of their going against the norm--in order to achieve this goal of a baccalaureate degree. Some went in debt with student loans; others risked favor with their siblings or family. Some were even concerned for their physical well-being as they traveled difficult roads in order to attend class. One participant actually left her successful career in order to study for and attain her degree. Ten of the 11 participants mentioned that they had an almost obsessive determination to finish their degree. One had to detach herself from long-term friends in order to complete. They were willing to sacrifice, were self-motivated, not dependent on classmates, exercised patience, and handled a multitude of tasks at once in order to complete the program, all things that pointed toward resilience.

The theme of overcoming the complexities of their lives through resilience was strong and persistent throughout the interviews with participants. The complexities were due to health issues, financial stress, guilt and shame over the lack of time for family, conflict over obligations at work versus time needed for study, and class travel difficulties due to the mountainous terrain and distance to class. Some were single parents and had to spend time and energy ensuring that their families were cared for. One had a death of a parent, another a death of a grandchild. One participant had a spouse who had declining health due to a battle with cancer. Others had to remove themselves from important social supports in order to participate in all the activities and

behaviors necessary to attend classes and pursue their degrees. Others were much older than the other participants and experienced a true detachment from the "lazy" comfort of "just earning a living" they had grown accustomed to. Two people had to overcome major obstacles related to attending classes on the main campus and another participant had a mental health diagnosis. All 11 participants communicated a mindset that they would never give up. They were self-motivated. Several acknowledged a strong dependence on God for strength. One stated that he had good time management skills. Others admitted that they were patient while others mentioned that they had a mindset of always expanding themselves. Other participants admitted having a sense of humor that helped deal with obstacles, and a few recounted how being organized helped them to have a bigger picture perspective about obstacles, setbacks, and negative life experiences. A consistent and persistent theme from the participants was delayed gratification, having a long-term, as opposed to a short-term, perspective about life and the pursuit of their college degrees.

The theme of delayed gratification was further extended into participants' stories about how their lives had improved as a result of their college studies or upon graduating. One ran for public office and was elected; another participant had a job waiting for her after her grades were posted and immediately received a $15,000 raise with health and retirement benefits. The same participant was nearing graduation from an MBA program when I was gathering the data for this study. Another participant was appointed to plan and implement the first state-wide technology program at the vocational school where he worked. One beamed with pride regarding her accomplishment, the first in her family to get a degree. Each of the participants voluntarily shared things that were a result of their education, such as promotions, changes in employment, and more free time to enjoy family. The students and recent graduates demonstrated great

versatility in going over, around, and through the complexities that they faced. They had learned a new confidence in their abilities. Only two participants had pursued a graduate degree, but others were considering that option. The graduates continued to celebrate their graduation and expressed a new appreciation for their ability to succeed. The two remaining current students in the program expected to be just a couple of semesters from graduation. Overall, all participants felt more accomplished and confident.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe and understand the complexity of life experiences of first-generation college students, or recent graduates, who were working adults in the Central and South-Central Appalachian region of the United States in the light of the theoretical framework of resilience and how these students persisted with their academic goals despite difficulties. In order to accomplish this purpose, one overarching question guided this study: What are the academic, social, and interpersonal obstacles and demonstration of resilience in the life experience of working adults, who are first-generation college students in the region of Central and South-Central Appalachia?

In answering this research questions, chapter four began with an overall description of the participants. I then presented the rich, detailed portraits of the individuals with an emphasis on their life complexities. I organized the results section by responses to the four sub-questions of the study. Finally, the data analysis revealed that each person had multiple complexities in pursuit of their baccalaureate degree, including tragedy, financial stress, a lack of family support, and many others. Their stories began to weave an overall picture of resilience, the theoretical basis for the current research project. This picture revealed the themes listed.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe and understand the complexity of life experience of first-generation college students, or recent graduates, who were working adults in the Central and South Central Appalachian region of the United States. I conducted the study in the light of the construct resilience and sought to understand how some of these adult students flourished despite various difficulties. I dedicated Chapter Five to understanding implications of the data collected. This chapter includes a summary of the research findings of the investigation, a discussion of those findings, and portrayal of some implications of the study results. However, it cannot provide implications for a greater population due to the restrictive nature of the criteria for the study which are "adult, working, first-generation, and "in central and south central Appalachia. Finally, Chapter Five will focus on some limitations and then recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

At the completion of the data collection from the interviews, journaling, and focus groups, I identified salient themes. One enduring theme was the lack of value placed on education by participants' families. Another distinct theme was poverty, both in their own families of origin and in the region of Appalachia in general as described in the section about poverty. Another emergent theme was the participants' unrest with living life without a baccalaureate degree. More specifically, they portrayed a strong determination to rise above their circumstances using the vehicle of further education. Finally, the theme of overcoming the complexities of their lives through resilience emerged. The general definition of resilience used in this study is that of reaching a positive outcome in spite of negative environmental

complexities. All of the participants had a list of complexities in their lives. However, they had demonstrated the ability to persist in spite of them to degree completion or near completion. The long list of complexities included health issues, financial stress, guilt over the lack of time for family, conflict over obligations at work versus time needed for study, and class travel difficulties due to the mountainous terrain and distance to class. The students and recent graduates demonstrated great versatility in going over, around, and through the complexities, or challenges, they faced. Nine of the 11 had completed the Interdisciplinary Studies accelerated, off-campus, evening program at the time of the research interviews.

One overarching question guided this study: What are the academic, social, and interpersonal obstacles and demonstration of resilience in the life experience of working adults who are first-generation college students in a region of Central and South-Central Appalachia? I delineated salient findings under each of the following sub-questions:

1. How do the life complexities of first-generation, working, adult college students from Appalachia influence their ability to persist in college? The influence of the Appalachian region permeated every facet of the participant's lives. The poverty of the region was evident in nearly every participant's home. Each had grown up in homes with parents who were undereducated and underemployed. At least two of the participants, during their elementary and high school years, could not spend enough time on homework because they had to care for livestock and gardens. Putting food on the table was a concern for many of the parents. Coal mining was the occupation of four of the fathers. Alcoholism and its resulting implications for the families were present in at least three of the homes where these participants were raised.

Next, the lack of value placed on education in this region of Appalachia was prominent in their family history. The terminal level of education of parents extended from high school down

to second grade. The influence of the region's common beliefs ran deeply in the families. Education was not as important as getting a job and raising money for the family. Employment was mainly in blue-collar, manual labor jobs, not those requiring education. Therefore, the need for education was not emphasized or articulated as a way to help the family become more successful. Several of the participants revealed that their families did not even understand their own desire for a college degree. They could not understand the time or money invested in that pursuit. However, these 11 participants, mostly from small counties and towns, felt an internal unrest until they continued their education, a significant finding that I mentioned in the theoretical implications section.

2. What are the students' perceived cultural supports or hindrances in pursuing their educational goals? The hindrances came in the form of family health issues, road systems, family disability, previous educational experiences that clouded their impression of higher education, the need to take out student loans with the resulting concern about paying them back, a lack of familiarity with university terminology, and even the loss of previous scholarships. In addition, some were victims of poverty and were limited in their ability to change their current condition.

The adaptive supports were much fewer in number and often were just one individual, teacher, or family member who gave them encouragement. Some of the support they received came from parents, other cohort members, and some were external organizations such as a church family. One significant adaptive support system was intrinsic motivation. Every student mentioned the importance of earning a college degree, the unrest of not having earned one, and a driving determination to be, and do better than his or her families or their parents. I further explain this with the next question.

The participants in the research pool were extremely resilient. They overcame the hindrances listed above and found reserves in themselves to press forward. As adults, they encountered difficulty and knew that overcoming difficulty was necessary. Although the term "resilient" as represented in these pages, is never used, the students consistently described themselves as experiencing adversity but possessing the ability to adapt in positive ways. When asked about the internal and external qualities that they had that aided them in coping with the complexities of their lives These qualities also belong in the results section instead of merely in the summary of the findings. I repeat them in that section.

The participants described themselves in the following ways: (a) multi-tasker, (b) never give up, (c) willing to sacrifice, (d) self-motivated, (e) not dependent on classmates, (f) faith in God for strength, (g) good time management, (h) patient, (i) always expanding self, (j) always looking for the humor, (k) outgoing, (l) organized, (m) mature mind-set, (n) disciplined, and (o) task-oriented.

3. What perceived internal and attributed external resources (psychological or otherwise) do students possess that helped them to persist in the face of obstacles (resilience)? The participants in the research pool were conspicuously resilient. They overcame the aforementioned hindrances and found inner reserves necessary to persist with their educational goals. As adults, they had encountered many difficult circumstances and experiences and had internalized the resiliency necessary to be successful in the various ways each defined success. Although the term "resilient" as represented in these pages was actually never used by the participants, they nonetheless consistently described themselves as experiencing adversity but possessing the ability to adapt in positive ways, i.e. they were resilient. When asked about the internal and external qualities that they had that aided them in coping with the complexities of

their lives, participants described themselves in the following ways: (a) multi-tasker, (b) never give up, (c) willing to sacrifice, (d) self-motivated, (e) not dependent on classmates, (f) faith in God for strength, (g) good time management, (h) patient, (i) always expanding self, (j) always looking for the humor, (k) outgoing, (l) organized, (m) mature mind-set, (n) disciplined, and (o) task-oriented.

4. In what way has the fact that their parents did not attend college impact students' college experiences? Students whose parents did not attend college were seriously disadvantaged as evidenced in the example of John's experience on campus. He had been professionally successful in work at a car dealership prior to attending school. When he enrolled in classes at the university, he thought he was keeping up with everything; however, he had a shock the day before the final exam when he found out that he had missed out on assignments all through the semester. He nearly missed his final. Another example about the negative influence of parental inexperience with education can be seen in Clara's painful testimony about her mother (dropped out in second grade), who admitted to being embarrassed and hurt because of her mother's unwillingness to go to the school for any activity. Lilly's story emphasized her mother's inability to help with homework.

The demonstration of resilience culminated in the completion of a college degree by overcoming multiple and multi-faceted risk factors and obstacles. The strength of their resilience could have been, and was enhanced, by external, social factors, but it was mostly evident in the strong resolution of the participants to succeed no matter what life put in their way, a finding to be highlighted as a theoretical implication.

Discussion

I used resilience as a framework to inform the persistence of this study's participants through very difficult circumstances. Other students might have given up, and some of this group thought of it at times. However, these participants demonstrated tremendous resilience even in the face of significant risk factors or obstacles. This section will discuss the relationship of this reliance to its titular theory and relate the findings from this study to the germane empirical research literature.

Theoretical

Masten (2001) emphasized the importance of protective factors in resilient students, resilience defined as "good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development" (p. 228). Many methodological and operational definition issues remain to be worked out in the research and literature; however, the literature clearly points to the important role assets or protective factors play in successful adaptation of resilient people. The construct of success is sometimes controversial within the literature on resilience (Luther, 2000; Masten, 2001), highlighting the issue of defining success: What is success and who gets to decide what it is? Typically, in psychological research, especially resilience research, success is defined either by a lack of maladaptive, dysfunctional behavior or by the presence of achievement—or, perhaps, by both (Masten, 2001, 2014). Based on the research reviewed in chapters one and two, one can conclude that students who earn a college degree are also more likely to earn higher salaries over their lifetimes, and are also more likely to achieve other positive life outcomes and be better adjusted psychologically (Astin, 1997; Dunn & Hammer, 2012; Masten, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1995; Weiten). Moreover, for the participants in this study, earning a college degree, becoming educated, and "doing better" than their parents, were important goals, making the

attainment of a college degree a valid definition of success for this sample. I should also note that the parents modeled successful resilience to the participants in their ability to survive dire poverty. Those parents were able to keep the family going during difficult times with hardly a thread of hope.

The most noteworthy aspect of resilience theory is just how common resiliency is. The conception of resilient students as *invulnerable* or *invincible* has been common in the research literature, in the media, and even in clinical psychology (Masten, 2014). As Masten (2014) explains, though, as long as students have assets or protective factors that mediate the relationship between risk factors and life outcomes, those life outcomes tend to, more often than not, be more positive, adaptive, and achievement-oriented. Now, what kind of protective factors, in what combinations or amounts, and to what degree are all issues remaining to be worked out in the research on resilience, but according to Masten (2001), it is clear that

> the great surprise of resilience research is the ordinariness of the phenomenon. Resilience appears to be a common phenomenon that results in most cases from the operation of basic human adaptational styles. If those systems are protected and in good working order, development is robust even in the fact of severe adversity. (p. 227)

Empirical

There are four strands of content in the literature review for this research. They are: (a) residing in Appalachia, (b) being a first-generation college student, (c) standing as an adult learner, and (d) working students. These threads enhance the empirical content of the research by setting this apart from any other research project available. I developed each strand separately in order to ensure the pure identification of each.

Individuals with Appalachian influence have unique qualities that are rooted in the poverty, low educational achievement, cultural limitations, and topographical restrictions that are part of the region (ARC, 2012). In other words, many of the regions' citizenry may have more than the normal level of obstacles to overcome. The area has double the nation's average for the amount of rural terrain present. Many highway systems of the region include narrow, curvy, and hazardous routes. Even the region's toll roads are not straight. The residents often spend their entire lives without venturing out of the region. Thus, providing local programming to these individuals can make the difference in accessibility to higher education. The economic standing and outlook for the region are both below the national averages due to underemployment, high unemployment, and a poor track record for the establishment of new businesses. Thus, providing financial assistance in order to increase the brain trust of the region can be an essential facet of economic growth. A mentality of fatalism can describe many of its residents. The constant poverty and entrapment has given many an attitude of fatalism because they feel powerless to change things, yet they have made the most of their situation with colorful culture that adds meaning, vitality, joy, value to their lives (DeYoung, 1995; Tang & Russ, 2007). Education is devalued, as reflected in the educational statistics regarding achievement and graduation. Outside corporations have depleted the region's natural resources and left it in worse condition than when they arrived. Some areas have their own dialect that is ridiculed by other areas of the nation.

First-generation college students in this study can be described as individuals without a parent who attended college. However, in the case of the participants in this study, several had parents who did not complete high school. Residents without a parent who attended college are at a cultural disadvantage in comparison to students with at least one parent who knows the

language of college. The obstacles to college completion faced by first-generation learners may include familial, social, educational, financial, and personal ones. The National Center for Education Statistics (2005) reported that first-generation students are consistently at a disadvantage throughout their college experiences. They frequently do not have a mentor to guide them, and learn after the fact things that they should have done in order to be successful. Statistically, they tend to be dropouts from higher education rather than graduates. Poor academic systems in the region do an inadequate job of preparing students for the rigor of college. Even scores on college entrance exams tend to be lower on average for first-generation college students. Applications for federal financial aid can be daunting without a parent or mentor. In the words of a doctoral student, Brandy who was not in this study, "I had to study twice as hard to learn how to maneuver in and out of the system, how to work the system, how to learn" (as cited in Gardner & Holly, 2011, p. 84).

Another descriptor of some college students is adult learners. Persons in higher education who fit in this category either left college unsuccessfully years prior or never entered to start with. They are entering years after having completed high school and have lost some of their recall of high school academics. General definitions of this age group indicate that they are 25 years of age or older. On the positive side, these learners have experienced life without a degree and seem to be doubly intent on getting one. They are in school because they want to be. However, they come with baggage that frequently includes children and a family. They must earn a living first and education must fit into their busy lives. They are adept at juggling home, work, and school. Their exceptionally strong determination to finish a degree makes them capable of overcoming difficulties. These students care little for loyalty to an institution unless it creates an environment where they can thrive. Adults are going to attend in the culture that

allows them to succeed. They tend to pay for their own education or borrow the money to attend, thus they are not interested in learning things that are not relevant to their lives. Palazesi and Bower (2006) stated that baby boomers are returning to school in record numbers in order to reinvent themselves with a "positive modified self-identity" (p. 44). Adult, non-traditional students return to college for a variety of reasons. Many of them work to support families and need to earn a degree to find a better job or get promoted (Palazesi & Bowers, 2006). Other adults return because of personal goals instead of work-related pressures.

Working adult students tend to work full-time while supporting a family. They are often the breadwinners for the family. Some are single parents, some have blended families, but all seem to need an income to survive (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). The group as a whole does not have the luxury of leaving a job in order to complete a degree (Campbell, 2005). The degree becomes just another priority on the list of things to do each day.

Wang (2009) indicated that postsecondary education is considered to be a very likely way to overcome the barriers of poverty. Early indicators of success in the lives of the recent graduates of the students in the study lend weight to his findings. These students have been given promotions, raises, and have entered graduate programs. For individuals who were previously stuck in their situations, this is a remarkable outcome.

This is the first study of its kind to weave four strands of student descriptors into a thorough study of current and recent students in the region of Central and South-Central Appalachia by gathering data about the complexities of their lives in the light of resilience from three sources. In doing so, the current research extended applications of resiliency theory into higher education and highlighted in an important way that poverty's insidious reach goes beyond the identity of race and gender and has implications for theory, research, and practice.

Implications

Theoretical and Empirical

What, then, are the implications of resiliency theory in the current study for first generation working, adults who are pursuing a college degree as first-generation college students? The first is the focus on an adult population. The research on resilience has focused almost exclusively on children in K-12 education (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2015). Some research is beginning to emerge with respect to resilience and war, terrorism, and natural disasters, but the corpus of resiliency research has been conducted on samples of school-age children, teenagers, and adolescents (Masten, 2014). This study sought to extend the resiliency research by focusing on adult students and their resiliency in the face of adverse factors—poverty, divorce, financial difficulties, sickness, and a culture that often de-emphasize education. Second, commensurate with findings from other studies emphasizing positive psychological traits, students in this study were successful to the degree that they could develop goals, chart their path to these goals, retool goals in the face of difficulties or setbacks, and persist in the face of difficulties or setbacks. Strongly desiring a college degree seemed to matter as much to these adults students as did any other factor. Their setbacks and challenges were real and often palpable, but their ability to persist toward the completion of a goal motivated them beyond the complexities, the challenges, and the difficulties. This finding corroborates the discoveries of Masten (2001, 2014) and others (Garmezy, 1991; Luther, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Prince-Embury, 2015) who emphasized the ordinariness or resilience, as long as basic adaptive systems are present in people's lives. Regardless of the possible similarities among many positive psychological theories (resiliency, flourishing, hope, self-efficacy, optimisms, self-determination), the importance of having access to and then applying adaptive, supportive,, goal-oriented strategies cannot be overemphasized.

Third, resilience, an ability to endure serious difficulty without succumbing to hopelessness and helplessness, is a remarkable quality of the human spirit and has its focus on "good function or outcome in the context of risk or adversity" (Masten, 2014, p. 6). Some individuals are not able to rise above the circumstances of life. However, for others, a tenacity of spirit provides the impetus for dissatisfaction with the status quo (Masten, 2014). Those individuals want something more for themselves and their families. This characteristic is not based on vanity of spirit, but upon a burning desire to achieve. They do not want "something for nothing," but are willing to pay the necessary price for achievement. They have experienced life in the status quo and it is not sufficient for them.

Practical

Shortsighted governance related to higher education's accessibility for adult students has great cost when considered in terms of a lost knowledge base, tax base, and the integrity of its citizenry (Sowell, 2014). For example, one of the subjects of this study was on government benefits, in the justice system, and a negative influence on others. Her future was changed. She reached a love for learning, became a productive citizen, and provided a healthy example to her children. This has implications for the greater good of the nation. It was not by giving something to an individual, that her life was changed. It was by allowing her the opportunity to grow and to earn educational achievement. Re-tooling for another one of the subjects, someone whose career was fading in relevance, gave her an opportunity to increase her earning power rather than to return to poverty.

For most adult students, work is not an optional activity. Work is an essential part of their lives. Thus, it behooves schools who wish to attract adult students to focus on ways to create a successful learning environment. Work must come before education for the adult, yet

education represents their hope for a better life for their families. Making the two mesh is not a simple task, but it is possible. For successful education of adult students, higher education institutions should focus on accessibility opportunities by considering how their specific policies and procedures either help or hinder adult student success and degree completion. A quite simple practical implication is to assess institutional student service practices to see what can be done to help students, many of whom would be considered at-risk. Establishing former students as mentors for current students, making sure to offer students tutoring opportunities, being explicit in teaching success skills through introductory courses, and having people on-hand to answer basic questions or facilitate school-related issues are all simply practice-related implication that would not cost much in terms of a school's budget.

For many working, adult students, online education is acceptable. However, for others who need the emotional or motivational support of a learning community, local, flexible programming is the only answer. Decision-makers should take into account the various learning styles of the adults. Auditory learners require a different format than visual learners. Social individuals thrive in a social environment. Not all isolated students have the internal stamina to persist when questions outnumber the answers. A learning community holds the members accountable to continue in spite of obstacles. They support, encourage, and interpret for one another. For an adult learner in the study who had a learning disability, the group was the only way for her to survive and excel. One conclusion of these examples might be for decision-makers to realize that there is a need for both the online and the off-campus opportunities if they wish to draw working, adult learners to their institutions.

Another important consideration is that first-generation, working, adult learners could thrive if given the necessary knowledge to navigate the college jungle. College enrollment with

all of its trappings, such as applying for federal financial aid, needs an interpreter. Instead of having the background to understand the process, first-generation students must seek out all of the various facets of enrollment. Even registration for the first-generation student can be a nightmare, such as the subject in this study who kept persisting years prior with attempts at enrollment and was made to feel foolish by college personnel. After three semesters the problem was discovered to be a technology glitch, not at all the fault of the entering student. A lesson to be learned here for administrators is that placing one admissions obstacle after another in the process for prospective students can be disastrous. Providing the necessary admission and enrollment information for success in the off-campus IS program proved to be the environment necessary for this individual's successful entry which ultimately led to his graduation. He even persisted when his infant granddaughter spent months in the hospital and later died—something that some individuals might not have done, but he proved his resilience by finding ways to continue in order to complete his assignments. He supported his family, but also found a way to keep his goal in sight and his equilibrium throughout a devastating trauma. ,

Considering education's role as a positive externality in society that confers positive benefits on third parties who are not part of the original economic transaction (Sowell, 2014), the Federal government should consider tax preferences and subsidy policies that could benefit adult learners. The normal deadweight loss associated with taxes is diminished or eliminated altogether, in some instances, with transactions where there are either positive or negative externalities, such as with the public good of education (Mankiw, 2015) Education is an investment in human capital, and human capital, more than any other factor, influences innovation, technological progress, and human flourishing .

Limitations

One major limitation of the study was the nature of the participants. I conducted this study in only one sub-region of Appalachia. I utilized only junior and senior students (in an accelerated, adult-focused degree program) and recent graduates all from only one university major. The sites were community college locations that were extension campuses for the university. I used only one university for the study. I did not study any other areas of the country. Only one person of color was involved with the research. This was a purposeful sample and many ethnic groups are poorly represented in this area of Appalachia.

The nature of qualitative research, while it allows person-focused research in which to hear participant voices, lacks the objective generalizability of quantitative research studies. Due to the limitations listed above and based on the nature of qualitative inquiry, others should exercise caution in interpreting and generalizing this study's findings to other populations.

Recommendations for Future Research

A recommendation for future research is to locate younger adult learners for participation in a study of 25-35 year-olds. As the research on working adult students, in general, is scant, more studies that include adult students and especially targeted groups with this population should be conducted.

A second recommendation is to study similar groups of adult learners in other parts of Appalachia, along with adult learners of various ethnicities, locations, and stages of life. This type of thorough study would allow researchers to make definitive generalizations about the impact of expanded educational opportunities for working adult students. One possible change of the research sub-questions deals only with re-wording the question for clarification. The

possible change for the fourth sub-question might read: In what way has parents lacking college experience impacted students' college experiences?

Finally, the construct and theory of resilience needs further treatment in the research literature. Masten (2001) describes the research on resiliency as either person-focused (qualitative) or variable-focused (quantitative). More of both types of research are needed to better understand the etiology of resilience, its predictive factors, its co-variates, what causal factors contribute to resilience, and what resilience, itself, might cause. However, there is a need for more person-focused studies to capture the rich complexity of this multi-faceted, human phenomenon. A particularly strong need exists for longitudinal research that would identify, for comparison, four types of people: those who are successful in life and who have no or few adverse risk factors; those who are successful but who have many risk factors; unsuccessful people with many risk factors; and unsuccessful people who have little to no risk factors. Only by comparing people across a matrix of characteristics will a definitive and causal picture of resilience emerge.

Summary

As acknowledged by Patton (2002), it is important to "get a sense of the whole" (p. 440). The overall purpose of this study was to describe the life complexities of first generation, adult college students from Appalachia who were trying to work and pursue what was often a life-long dream: earning a college degree. My desire was to uncover, hear, record, and then share with others the perceptions, attitudes, motivations, and resilience—the lived experience—that these participants had demonstrated as they endured difficult life circumstances in pursuit of something very important to them. Every participant in this study represented the message behind the powerful words attributed to Benjamin Disraeli: "'I have brought myself, by long

meditation, to the conviction that a human being with a settled purpose must accomplish it, and that nothing can resist a will which will stake even existence upon its fulfillment'" (as cited in Nightingale, 2005). Every participant faced some kind of difficulty, obstacle, challenge, setback or classic risk factor as defined in the research literature. Yet, each one, due to personal, internal resources, or the help from some other person or the social system, was able to persist in the face of difficulties in order to achieve something important to each one. In pursuit of their goals, however, something else happened: each person developed human capital none had expected. Yes, one person bought a house, and one was building a new house; six had received promotions or new jobs; three were able to move from the remote areas where they lived to an urban dwelling; and most experienced family pride in their accomplishments. Beyond that, though, each participant learned new confidence in his own abilities and potential. Each person gained more respect in her workplace. In short, each student transformed into something he or she never thought would happen—each became a purveyor of hope for others on their difficult journeys through the complexities of life.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Liberty University IRB Approval for the Study

From: "IRB, IRB"
Subject: IRB Approval 2048.011315: The Complex Life Experience of First-Generation College Students Who Are Working Adults in the Appalachian Region of the United States: A Phenomenological Study
Date: January 13, 2015 at 3:28:15 PM CST
To: "'Debbie Thurman

Dear Debbie,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases are attached to your approval email.

Your IRB-approved, stamped consent form is also attached. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please retain this letter for your records. Also, if you are conducting research as part of the requirements for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, this approval letter should be included as an appendix to your completed thesis or dissertation.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
Professor, IRB Chair
Counseling

(434) 592-4054

Appendix B: Consent Form

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
1/13/15 to 1/12/16
Protocol # 2048.011315

CONSENT FORM

THE COMPLEX LIFE EXPERIENCE OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO ARE WORKING ADULTS IN THE APPALACHIAN REGION OF THE UNITED STATES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Deborah Thurman
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to participate in a research study of working adult university students who will be the first in their family to graduate with a baccalaureate degree and who have participated in the off-campus 2+2 in Interdisciplinary Studies in [redacted] counties. You were selected as a possible participant because you are involved in the off-campus program and have volunteered to participate in this research study. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. This study is being conducted by Deborah Thurman with the School of Education at?

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to determine the obstacles that you are overcoming in your life in order to succeed in earning your baccalaureate degree and what you feel has helped you in overcoming them.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. You will be asked to fill out some brief information about your background, such as states and counties where you have lived. This step should take about 10 minutes.
2. You will be interviewed by Debbie Thurman about the complexities of your life that you must overcome in order to attend school and graduate. This one hour interview will be recorded and you will have the opportunity to review the transcript of the interview to verify its accuracy.
3. You will be asked to write about the obstacles in case you have remembered some others after the interview. This step should take 10-30 minutes depending on how many additional comments you wish to make. This document will be mailed directly to Debbie or handed to her.
4. You will join in a small group of other students in the program to talk about the complexities of your life (those that you feel comfortable talking about) in order to see what common details that you have with one another. This one hour group (focus

group) will be recorded and once again, you will have the opportunity to review it for accuracy.
Once all the information has been gathered and a summary of it has been prepared, you will have an opportunity to ensure that your part of it is correct. All information about the complexities of the lives of the students will be coded in order that no names are given out. Recordings and data from the study will be kept in a locked cabinet or on a password protected computer.
5. If you choose to withdraw from the study, you may send that in writing to dethurman@liberty.edu. At this point, Debbie Thurman will delete your part of the study from any of the research materials.
Risks and Benefits of being in the Study
Risks to participation are:
The risks are very minimal and likely nothing more than you might share in normal conversation. This study can be very important to the people who read it by telling them how important it is to meet the needs of working adult students. Therefore, it is very worthwhile. One risk is that remembering some things might be a bit upsetting and if so, it will be my responsibility to let you know where someone is located who can talk with you about that.

The benefits to participation are:
A $50 gift card will be provided after successful completion of the focus group activity to offset any travel cost incurred by the participants.

Compensation:
As a thank-you for your participation, you will receive a $50 gift card to [redacted] at the completion of the Focus group activity.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report that I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records.

Deborah Thurman will have an unbiased individual (external auditor) who will ensure that all data is handled according to the details here. When the research study is written, there will be no reference at all to any names of the participants. Names will be made up to represent the names of those students in the study. The person who will be transcribing the recordings will also agree to confidentiality.
Each of you participating in the interview and the focus group will be able to refuse to answer if you choose to do so. Because information that you share in a focus group might be shared by another member, please use discretion in what you share with the group.
The data will be stored in locked locations and disposed of carefully after 3 years or stored longer if more research may follow. Recordings will only be used for the purpose of this research and will be erased after 3 years.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or [redacted] If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:
The researcher conducting this study is Deborah Thurman. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at [redacted] or 931-484-7413. Because she is a student of Liberty University, you will be allowed to contact Dr. Steve Frye at [redacted] or 931-372-3904.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Check here to indicate that you know that an audiotape recording will be made of your one hour interview and the one hour focus group.

I understand that my name, social security number and address may be provided to the business office of Liberty University for the purpose of facilitating payment to me for participating in this study

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of
Researcher:_____Date:_____

IRB Code Numbers: 2048

IRB Expiration Date: 12/31/15

Appendix C: Student Questionnaire

I am looking for willing students to participate in a research project about the complexity of life for students in parts of Appalachia. I have a list of questions below that will indicate if you meet the criteria for the study.

Name: _____

County where classes are located: _____

Best way to reach you:

Phone _____

Email address that you check often _____

Please answer each question carefully about yourself and your family. Thank you sincerely for your participation.

1. In which county do you live? _____
2. In which county and state were you born? _____
3. How long have you lived in this region?_____
4. How much schooling did your mother complete?
____High School
____Enter College
____Complete associate's degree
____Complete baccalaureate degree
____Other
5. How much schooling did your father complete?
____High School
____Enter College
____Complete associate's degree
____Complete baccalaureate degree
____Other
6. Did you have siblings attend college? If so, before or after you? _____
7. Do you work one or more jobs? _____
8. If you work, how many hours per week do you work? _____
9. Which are you currently, a junior or a senior? _____
10. Are you interested in having your voice heard about your life while in this program? [I will be asking about the complications of your life, your supporters and those who are not, and how this program may have influenced your work life. If you are interested, you will do an interview with me in a confidential setting for one hour, do a writing exercise to explain further that may take from 10-30 minutes, and then do a group meeting in a confidential setting for one hour with other students who are participating. For your participation in the three things, you will receive a $50 [redacted] as an appreciation and you will have your voice heard in a research project.] (Circle one)
Yes No

Appendix D: Participant Interview Questions

Questions should start in a general way to build rapport.]

1. How long until you graduate?
2. How do you feel about your classes this semester?
3. Please tell me about your family and close friends.
4. Please describe about how each of them feels about you attending college.
5. Who is your most supportive family member or friend? Why do you think this is so?
6. Who is your least supportive family member or friend? Why do you think this is so?
7. Please describe how your employer and co-workers feel about your education.
a. How are they encouraging?
b. How are they discouraging?
8. Please describe the complexities that you experience in your life while you attend college. [a, b, c, and d can be used to prompt them if they have difficulty answering.]
a. Financial concerns?
b. Family pressures?
c. Childcare issues?
d. Work pressures?
9. Please tell me the internal and external qualities that you have which help you cope with these pressures. [a, b, c, and d can be used to prompt them if they have difficulty answering.]
a. How did you learn to cope like this?
b. Who is a good example to you in coping with this experience?
c. How important is the support of your classmates?
d. Tell me about times that your classmates have helped you to cope.
10. How has your work and your coursework blended together and helped each other?
11. How important has having this program closer to home been to you?
12. Do you have other things that you wish to share before we close the interview?
13. I would like to thank you very much for sharing these important feelings about your life as a student and I assure you that this will be held in confidence until a false name is assigned to your information and you will have the opportunity to review these details before they are shared.
[They should then be given the information on how to reach a counselor should they need to do so.]

[Once the pilot interview(s) has been done, I will be able to determine if more or less questions will be needed in order to hear the rich experiences and complexities of their lives.]

Appendix E: Student Journaling Exercise

Name: _____

County where classes are located: _____

Best way to reach you:

Phone _____

Email address that you check often _____

Please read this first:
This is a writing exercise to provide more detail about the complexity of your life as a student, personally, professionally (work), and in your education. It is a chance for you to tell about frustrations that you have had or any personal crisis in your life that has made taking college classes more difficult. You may also add details about anything else that you might have decided to share after the interview. You may use more paper to answer any question that requires more space.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO ANSWER EACH QUESTION TO THE BEST OF YOUR ABILITY. ALL QUESTIONS ARE IMPORTANT TO THE RESEARCH.

1. Please describe in more detail about your family, work, and friends.
2. Please tell how they feel about your education.
3. Please tell how your education interferes with issues regarding your family.
4. Please tell how your education interferes with issues regarding your friends.
5. Please tell how your education interferes with issues regarding your work.
6. Please tell anything about your education that frustrates you.

7. Please tell me in detail about the learning community of friends that has formed in your classes and whether that helps or hinders with any complexities of your life.
8. How has your education complicated your life?
9. Tell me about the qualities about you that have helped you to deal with the complexity of attending classes.
10. How has your work helped you with knowledge that you needed in your classes?
11. How has your coursework helped you with knowledge that you needed in your work?
12. How important has having this program closer to home been to you?
13. Please share any other information that you feel could be helpful to this research, especially with the complexities of your life or the qualities about you that have helped you to be persistent about your education.

PLEASE return this document to [redacted] within one week of your interview or you may mail it to: Debbie Thurman, [redacted]

Thank you for taking time to share in detail about your life! This can help other students in the future.

Appendix F: Focus Group Questions

Participants should first be told: (a) that the focus group is going to be recorded, (b) that their name will never be shared in the report because I will use the pseudonym that they have chosen in place of their name (c) they will have the opportunity to read and approve the transcript of the recording, (d) all information will be kept long-term in a locked area and in a password protected computer, (e) that they will have the opportunity to review the entire study if they wish before it is turned in, (f) that they will only use the names on the name tags during this interview, (g) they will be given a $50 gift card to [redacted]how my appreciation once we finish the Focus Group today. They will also be asked to keep in confidence anything that is shared by others, but to be aware that this confidence cannot be guaranteed by the researcher. Most of all they should know that their voice will be heard in this study. They should be encouraged to discuss as a group each of the following items.

1. Please share the complexities of life as an adult college student.
2. Please share the complexities of your life as an adult college student with parents who did not attend college, such as their understanding of what college is like, and any other perspectives regarding this.
3. Please share the complexities of your life as a working adult college student.
4. Please share how living in this area of Appalachia might have impacted your life as an adult college student.
5. How has attending as a part of a group of adult students impacted your ability to complete your studies?
6. What has this success taught you about yourself and your abilities?
7. How has this success complimented and influenced your work life?
8. Have you updated your life goals because of your current success in college?
9. If not addressed in any of the questions up to this point, describe, in detail, what are now or what have been your most significant concerns or worries as you attempt or have attempted to complete school? What bothers you, what pre-occupies you, or what worries or irritates you the most as you attempt to complete your college degree?
10. How might the school or the program improve so as to help you complete your degree? What's missing for you? What might the system, the school, or the program do, that is not being done now, to help you complete your degree?

I wish to thank you again for your influence on this research project. I want your voices to be heard about your life as a student. Your stories are important and can help students and administrators. I will be contacting you to ask about your interest in viewing the research project before it is turned in.
[Give out the $50 gift cards and a thank you note to each student present.]

Appendix G: Recruitment Letter

Date: January 18, 2014

Dear Interdisciplinary Studies Student:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to understand the complexities of your life as a student in the off-campus Ten[redacted]versity Interdisciplinary Studies program, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study. I will be asking questions about family, childcare, work, and other pressures that you deal with while pursuing your degree and the benefit of having the program close to home.

If you are over 25, work at least 10 hours per week, and neither of your parents have attended college, and are willing to participate in a one hour individual interview and a group interview, you will be asked to tell me about the complexities of your life as a student. It should take approximately one hour for the individual interview and one hour for the group interview. You will choose a false name to describe the information that you share in the one hour interview. All who participate in the group interview will be asked to keep in confidence everything that was shared, but everyone will have the right to decline to answer specific questions given to the group. As a follow-up to the first interview, you will be given a short journaling form on which you can add additional information. You will submit that to me within a week.

If you would like to participate, please answer the questions at this time on the attached questionnaire. A form expressing your consent to participate is attached. If you are willing to participate, then please sign and return the form to me. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent document at the time of the interview in order to give your permission to use your comments for my research.

If you choose to participate, you will receive a $50 [redacted]t card to compensate you for your travel expenses. That gift will be given to the persons who complete the individual

interview, sign the consent form, write any additional comments for the study, and participate in the focus group. It will be given at the time of the focus group. I will be making an effort to have the group discussion in a location that is near to you. However, it is possible that you might have to travel to a nearby county. That is the reason for the gift card to be used to compensate you for the travel to that location.

Sincerely,

Debbie Thurman
Associate Director of Extended Programs, [redacted] University
dethurman@t[redacted]lu