

AN EXPLORATION OF SELF-DETERMINATION IN FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE
STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Chelsa Rash

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the self-determination experiences of first-generation college students. For this study, first-generation college students were defined as students with parents who do not have any college education. The study examined students taken from a population of first-generation college students who are at least 18 years old, classified as a sophomore or higher at a university or college in pursuit of a bachelor's degree, and enrolled as either full-time or part-time students. The theory guiding this research study was Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory. The research questions expounded upon the individual, self-determined experiences of these students considering the formidable challenges of the college experience. Purposeful, criterion, and snowball sampling were used to select 12 research participants for the study. Data were collected from the participants using one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and participants' letters. Data were analyzed using transcendental phenomenological methods to ascertain a combination of the textural and structural themes that identify the essence of this phenomenal experience. The modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of data analysis, as described by Moustakas, was used. The findings indicated that beginning in high school, first-generation college students need support and guidance. Support and guidance are critical during the first year of college for first-generation college students, but they will require support throughout their college journey. Finally, effective resources are needed to help first-generation college students overcome challenges and obstacles to achieve degree completion.

Keywords: first-generation college students, college and career ready, self-determination, competence, autonomy, relatedness

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Dedication

My dissertation is dedicated in thankfulness to my Heavenly Father, my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, who indwells in me. Father, I believe Your Word as it is written in Isaiah 43:2, “When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee” (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017).

Father, thank you for positioning my guardian angels as Your divine servants to keep “charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways” (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Psalms 91:11).

To my mom, Mama, you have held this position the longest. I have lived my life without you for the past 38 years. It has been unbearable at times, but God’s grace is sufficient. I had a 12-year example of an awesome woman of God, faithful wife, blessed mother, dutiful daughter, precious sister, and beloved friend. I reflect upon different aspects of your life, and I understand your faithful strength more each day. You are forever my example. Until we meet again . . . love always.

To my brother, Bobby, thank you for being my big brother. Some do not have the experience of a strong, courageous, and proud Black male who paved the way for GREAT things. *Semper Fi*, *Always Faithful*, the U.S. Marine Corp’s motto, was truly your identity banner. You were preeminent, special, and significant to God in your role as our big brother, and we are forever grateful. You set the standard. Until we meet again . . . love always.

To my sister, Jacqueline, thank you for the sisterly/motherly role that you played for 37 years in our mom's absence. You left here so suddenly during the height of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. We made so many plans . . . I had talked to you two days prior, and you encouraged me to stay the course with my dissertation. Although you are not physically here, I know that

you are celebrating with me. I can hear you, “See, Chelsea, I told you that you could do it!” As your little sister, I wanted to do everything as Jackie did it. I wished to be more bold, courageous, and dynamic. I am getting there. Until we meet again . . . love always.

Father, I know that You have ordered my steps, and this is just the overture. I believe the saying that “every God-given dream must die a human death,” which means that the dream is at a point where God must intervene for that dream to be realized.

Acknowledgments

After 17 years of being an educator, I began my graduate studies in August 2013 to achieve a Master of Education degree in Elementary Education (MEd). One week later, my brother died. His death impacted my life on every level, but by God's grace and mercy, I continued my educational journey to degree completion. With increased momentum, I embarked upon an Educational Specialist degree in Educational Administration and Supervision (EdS), an advanced degree for administrative leadership. With its completion, my sights were set on earning a terminal degree, Doctor of Education (EdD) in Curriculum and Instruction. Over these years, several people have inspired me personally, professionally, and academically, climaxing my eight-year educational journey. This dissertation is a testament to their loyalty, commitment, and perseverance, as well as my spiritual intestinal fortitude to achieve academic success. With an abundance of gratitude, I want to thank you for your role of distinction in my life.

To my husband, Albert, "My love's design . . . the one He kept for me . . . until it was time." There are no words for the support you have given me over these years as I pursued my dreams. I am grateful for your patience and sacrifice during the countless hours I have spent on my journey to higher education. The Father will restore the time that was lost due to my studies. I could not have done it without you, and I know how blessed I am. We have been through so much together, even COVID, but Jesus saw fit to continue to see us as ONE. Soulmate, you had faith in me, and you prayed for me. *"I put my hand in yours . . . Now and forevermore . . . Just put your faith in me . . . I will be all that you need."* I love you.

To my son, Aldric, my boy, and my one and only. When I look into your eyes, I see myself and smile. Since you were in fifth grade, I have been in school, so I know that it seems like forever to you. You and your dad have made sacrifices for my dreams to come true, and I

am grateful. When you graduated from sixth grade, I graduated. When you graduated from eighth grade, I graduated again. I planned to finish this degree in 2020, but God had other plans. You will graduate this year from high school, and I will finish my EdD this year also. It is only right that we finish together. I pray that I have inspired you to seek your dreams, “walk after God, fear God, keep God’s commandments, obey God’s voice, and serve and hold on to God” (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Deuteronomy 13:4). I love you.

To my dad, Daddy, you have been my prayer warrior since before I was born. You have stood in the gap for the past 38 years since Mama has been gone. I would never have made it without you. Thank you for loving and honoring our mother until her dying day and even now. We did not know how much this would mean to us, but it means the world. During this journey, I could always count on the Holy Spirit to notify you when my countenance was weak, or the attack was greater than my flesh could bear. You would pray for me night and day. You still do, and I am forever grateful. I thank the Father daily for the blessing of an EARTHLY father ordained specifically for me. “Whoever fears the LORD has a secure fortress, and for his children, it will be a refuge” (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Proverbs 14:26). I love you.

To my brother, Julius, thank you for being my brother who is determined, strong, and courageous. In 2016, you coded twice, and God saw fit to save you both times. You were on life support for days, and you endured physical therapy and rehabilitation. God restored your life and rewarded you with double. The banner for your life is Ezekiel 36:11, “. . . will make you prosper more than before. Then you will know that I am the Lord.” I was blessed with two brothers, strong and mighty. It is just you and me now; our circle has been broken. My prayer is that you and I live many long and prosperous years in memory of Mama, Earl, and Jackie; I am your keeper. I love you.

To my nephews, nieces, extended family, friends, loved ones, peers, and colleagues, keep dreaming and believing in God's promises for your life.

I want to express my gratitude and appreciation to the 12 first-generation college students that participated in this study. For sacrificing your valuable time to impart wisdom and understanding of your experiences, goals, dreams, and even fears with me for the sake of research, I am honored. Hopefully, your experiences are a part of the effective change needed for future first-generation college students. Finally, I would like to acknowledge other first-generation college students as I know you may be experiencing various challenges in your educational journeys. Hold fast to your self-determination, which is the reason you began this journey.

Thank you, Dr. Collins, for your scholarly guidance, words of wisdom, and prayers of faith along my dissertation journey. Likewise, Dr. Gable, your suggestions and recommendations were important contributions to the finished product. I consider myself extremely blessed to have had the opportunity to work with you both and to have you on my committee.

“Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof: and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit” (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Ecclesiastes 7:8). Because of my parents, Rev. Willison and Maxine Reed Voss, I am a true believer and follower of Christ.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Imagine a college student making a phone call home to the most important people in life. The purpose of the call is to share the first-semester experience, which was thrilling, scary, and filled with trepidation. Will the loved one understand the joys, frustrations, and highs and lows of this experience? For first-generation college students, that understanding may not happen as the loved one may simply have no idea of the intricacies of this experience. This distinct group of individuals characterized by many definitions will need a support system that may be difficult to find in their interdependent familial situations.

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the self-determination factors of first-generation college students. This chapter will provide the background of the study that includes the historical, social, and theoretical contexts that lead to the problem and purpose statements. Included in this chapter are also sections for situation to self, which explains my convictions for conducting the research, the significance of the research study, and the proposed research questions essential to direct the study. Concluding the chapter are definitions that are important to understanding the study and a summary of the chapter.

Background

Persistence and college retention are likely issues for first-generation college students (Ishitani, 2016; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Clear identification of first-generation college students is one key to their college success. A student whose parents do not have any college experience has been the defining factor for identifying first-generation college students (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). To ground the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study, it is essential to present the historical, social, and theoretical background to understand first-generation college

students' self-determination. The following sections provide the contexts that guided the study. The historical context offers unique insights into the persistent motivations of first-generation college students. The social context examines the perceptions of first-generation college students' experiences as they directly influence their persistence to degree completion. In addition to this study's historical and social contexts, the self-determination theory provides foundational support to the research literature and its previous findings.

Historical Context

In 1979, Fuji Adachi, a director at the University of Wyoming, introduced the term "first-generation college students" in an unpublished study to identify Upward Bound students' generational and socioeconomic status (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). First-generation college students make history in their families as they are the first to attend college (Gibbons et al., 2019; Ishitani, 2016; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). The definition of first-generation college students differs in the literature, but the common consensus is that these students embark upon a new and unknown experience. The definitions include parents who attended college but may not have received their 4-year college degree and students with one parent who received a degree (Gibbons et al., 2019; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Adachi (1979) described first-generation college students as students whose parents do not have any college education. Adachi's (1979) definition, which is still used by the U. S. Department of Education, is used when identifying first-generation college students in this research study.

After identifying these students, colleges must decide whom to include in their statistical data. These students represent a large part of the student body at most colleges. Pratt et al. (2019) reported that first-generation college students make up 20% of college students. These students are often from low-income households and are people of color (Adachi, 1979; Gibbons

et al., 2019). Toutkoushian et al. (2018) found that parents' educational levels are directly linked to first-generation college students' decisions about college. The research on first-generation college students does not directly address their self-determination but the outward factors that are ultimately challenges for these students (Ishitani, 2016; Redford & Hoyer, 2017).

Social Context

When considering college students, first-generation college students' classification compared to their peers may be non-traditional (Gibbons et al., 2019). This is due to their intrinsic desire to pursue a college degree (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). To meet first-generation college students' needs, some colleges have created advisory committees that offer support to students, scholarship programs, and talent search programs (Hébert, 2018). These aims will offer the support that these students need to attempt and complete their educational goals.

Tate et al. (2015) summarized that first-generation college students are often from low-income households and diverse racial and ethnic groups. First-generation college students account for 24% of undergraduate students on college campuses, and their retention rates are significantly lower than in other groups (Schademan & Thompson, 2016). First-generation college students often feel financially burdened, socially awkward, and academically unprepared (Ishitani, 2016; Pratt et al., 2019; Schademan & Thompson, 2016). These students' needs are the focus of attention for colleges as the first-generation college student population continues to increase (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Consequently, the college experience is different for these students, and their mental health and well-being are understandably impacted (Covarrubias et al., 2015).

Theoretical Context

Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory guided this study. Prior research has used various theoretical frameworks when considering first-generation college students, such as the cultural mismatch theory (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015) and social cognitive career theory (Gibbons et al., 2019). Cultural mismatch theory asserts that first-generation college students experience disparities when the culture from their family or home life is in direct contrast to the culture of the college or university (Phillips et al., 2020). Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016) sought to understand and project first-generation college students' career development, goal achievement, and persistence in the work environment using the social cognitive career theory as a theoretical base in their study. Social cognitive career theory posits that an individual evaluates the quality of life by how well career aspirations are developed, career decisions are made, and the level of success (Garriott et al., 2015). These theories have contributed substantially to the literature on first-generation college students. However, Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory most appropriately frames identifying the participants' self-determination experiences in the present study.

According to the self-determination theory, humans are driven by three intrinsic motivators: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Self-determination exists when these basic psychological needs are met (Greene et al., 2019). The absence of one of these needs will affect one's ability to be self-determined (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Although the needs are distinctly different, motivation is the targeted outcome when the needs are satisfied (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). The research questions that guide the study examined these self-determination factors. Prior literature has not incorporated this theory as related to first-generation college students. Research has focused on cultural differences and the need for early

career development measures, but the research has not addressed the first-generation college students' self-determination experiences through the college journey. Gaining more knowledge of first-generation college students who have persevered through the challenges they encountered while attending college will add to the current literature.

Situation to Self

When I reflect on my senior year in high school, I do not remember my preparedness for my impending college experience. My mother had succumbed to cancer five years earlier, and my father did his best in her absence to continue to raise four children. I am the youngest of my siblings, but I was not the first college student as my eldest brother and sister attended community college. My eldest brother joined the Marines after one year of community college, and my sister earned her associate's and bachelor's degrees. My parents did not attend college, but they instilled in us the importance of education. I did not realize then that we were first-generation college students. My inspiration to conduct this research study originates from my desire to understand first-generation college students' self-determination to persist in college, even when faced with challenges.

Philosophical Assumptions

Axiological Assumptions

According to Kivunja and Kuyini (2017), axiology is "research that benefits people" (p. 35). My axiological philosophical assumption is based on my understanding of first-generation college students' preparedness for the college experience. In qualitative research, axiological assumptions are essential as they are the values, knowledge, and biases that should be identified for their impending role in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My values centered on my perceptions of self-determination during my college experience as a first-generation college

student (Davidson & Beck, 2019; Goldman et al., 2017; Greene et al., 2019; Vansteenkiste et al., 2018). The significance of first-generation college students' value is that procedures are enacted to support this diverse group at their level of individual needs (Toutkoushian et al., 2018). I kept a reflexive journal (Appendix K) to record my values and biases present before my research and any occurrences during my research related to being a first-generation college student, while also embracing the data gathered from the research participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I performed the *epoché* process of phenomenology, which helped me identify any perceptions or biases that may affect my understanding of the first-generation college students' experience (Patton, 2015). These perceptions or biases were recorded in a reflexive journal (Appendix K). The perceptions of the students' college experiences in their first year varied, but the values that shape their narrative provided rich interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ontological Assumptions

Throughout the study, my objective was to gain a clear perspective of the first-generation college students' experiences in their first year of college. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasized that the ontological assumption refers to differences in how individuals understand their realities and subsequently convey their individual experiences. The different perspectives that each participant provided were intended to establish the essence of the first-generation college students' experiences. While these students have persisted through at least one year of college, the realities of each of their experiences were different. These realities were essential to this research study to create shared experiences of first-generation college students with multiple perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Paradigm

The constructivist paradigm guided the research study as it was my desire for the research

participants to create subjective meaning to their experiences as they moved through the college experience. In constructivism, knowledge is constructed rather than communicated, and it is more concerned about the learning process and not necessarily the product (Gangwar & Savita, 2017). Jean Piaget is a well-known advocate of constructivism, as he believed in active learning (Liu & Chen, 2010). Piaget (1970) explained that active learning is meaningful learning in which learners are involved in constructing their knowledge and understanding through their own experiences. As different perspectives emerged from each first-generation college student, the perspectives were identified and recorded. Liu and Chen (2010) contended that instead of truth, constructivists view knowledge as a hypothesis. A constructivist will take what is already known, compare it to the new information, and subsequently decide to change thoughts and beliefs or look at the new information as something that is not needed (Gangwar & Savita, 2017). My goal for this study was to provide rich, descriptive interpretations of the first-generation college students' experience. This was undertaken through the mutual dialogue between research participants and me during their individual interviews and the focus group session. A greater understanding of the transition and persistence through college for first-generation college students offers a different perspective that is missing from the current literature. Through this research, firsthand knowledge can be heard directly from students who are actual first-generation college students.

Problem Statement

The problem is that first-generation college students are often less prepared for college than their peers (Greene, Jewell, Fuentes, & Smith, 2019). Social and familial connectedness and academic inexperience of first-generation college students are related to the preparedness for the college experience of these individuals (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Gibbons et al., 2019;

Goldman et al., 2017; Irlbeck et al., 2014; Pratt et al., 2019; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). Gibbons et al. (2019) found that one-fourth of college students are first-generation college students, and that college adjustment is a struggle for these students. Because of their unique needs, they often feel disconnected from the college experience and struggle academically (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015).

Colleges and universities have implemented programs to support these students, as the retention for first-generation college students is low (Hébert, 2018; Irlbeck et al., 2014; Malin et al., 2017; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017; Tate et al., 2015). A sense of belonging in the college setting is needed to help the students combat the necessary barriers for their academic success (Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019). Irlbeck et al. (2014) found that mentor and family support are essential to first-generation college students. Other research has focused on student support programs that are an effective means to assist students in meeting educational and career goals (Tate et al., 2015). However, the research lacks a qualitative representation of first-generation college students who were self-determined in their quest for a college degree. Therefore, this study sought to fill the gap in qualitative literature for the voices of first-generation college students who have persisted through the first year of college. These students provide valuable data on their self-determined experiences and the associated impact, perceptions, and outcomes.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the self-determination experiences of first-generation college students. This qualitative study thoroughly explored first-generation college students' lived experiences and the necessary self-determination factors needed to persist through the first year of college and complete their college education. For this study's purpose, first-generation college students were defined as students whose parents

do not have any college education (Adachi, 1979; Pratt et al., 2019). The theory guiding this study was Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory. Ryan and Deci (2000) contended that humans are encouraged to persevere through their lives when psychological needs are met. This theory may also explain the cultural interactions experienced in the college setting. This study adds to the literature regarding the self-determination factors necessary for first-generation college students to transition from high school to college.

Significance of the Study

Colleges and universities realized that the number of first-generation college students was low, and these students did not find any value in continuing higher education (Wildhagen, 2015). Subsequently, college and university programs have been designed to encourage first-generation college students' achievement and retention (Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). Support needed for first-generation college students may be more formidable than other undergraduate students (Gibbons et al., 2019; Ishitani, 2016). Understanding first-generation college students' psychological needs may help to increase their intrinsic motivation, which adds support and meaning to the pursuit of degree completion (Goldman et al., 2017). This research study's significance is the need for a deeper understanding of this phenomenon related to first-generation college students and their college journey that can positively change future first-generation college students' intrinsic motivation and conscious experiences. Gaining a better understanding of first-generation college students' lived experiences and their self-determination to begin and complete their college education may offer new perspectives for this diverse group. Therefore, this study examines its empirical, theoretical, and practical significance.

Empirical Significance

Empirically, this transcendental phenomenological research study aimed to explore an understanding of first-generation college students' lived experiences as they persisted through their first year. Researchers have examined several areas that pertain to first-generation college students: family achievement guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015), student retention (Ishitani, 2016; Pratt et al., 2019), career outcomes (Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019), socioeconomic status (Hébert, 2018; Schademan & Thompson, 2016), and college and career readiness (Martinez et al., 2017; Royster et al., 2015). Each topic is discussed further in Chapter Two. However, prior research does not exist regarding first-generation college students' self-determination to even attempt post-secondary education.

Theoretical Significance

Theoretically, this study's impact is grounded in Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory. Ryan and Deci (2000) defined the self-determination theory as a human motivation theory that involves an individual's development, personality, and psychological needs. Researchers examined self-determination theory in several scholarly studies (Davidson & Beck, 2019; Goldman et al., 2017; Greene et al., 2019; Vansteenkiste et al., 2018). Using the self-determination theory, Greene et al. (2019) studied the effects of college students' psychological needs being satisfied as they transition into college. In the Goldman et al. (2017) research, three studies were conducted using the self-determination theory to directly correlate students' intrinsic motivation with their basic needs being satisfied. Vansteenkiste et al. (2018) found that intrinsically motivated students received greater learning outcomes from their college experience. Davidson and Beck (2019) conducted a study on the three basic needs of the self-determination theory (competence, autonomy, and relatedness) and how these needs

strengthened the students' ties with the university and their commitment to degree completion. The importance of these studies is significant to researchers and all educational stakeholders, but no research details the lived self-determined experiences of first-generation college students as they enter and persist through their college journey. The significance of this research study is worthy of discussion in its attempt to fill this gap.

Practical Significance

The practical significance of this transcendental phenomenological study is important to all secondary and post-secondary stakeholders. Those individuals include secondary and college administrators, principals, teachers, parents, and students. Schademan and Thompson (2016) found that college and university faculty can affect first-generation college students' college experience. These students enter college with feelings of trepidation, determination, and isolation, which have garnered the need for a more supportive network on the college campus (Ishitani, 2016). Before college enrollment, secondary administrators, principals, and teachers should be mindful of the curriculum needs and support services that will meet first-generation college students' needs (Gibbons et al., 2019). This study's findings provided more understanding of the challenges faced by this diverse group of students as they persist to degree completion. Findings from this study of first-generation college students' lived experiences also inform parents and students with valuable information as they embark upon the college journey.

Research Questions

To research first-generation college students' lived experiences and self-determination, the research question and sub-questions were designed to introspectively reflect the students' perspectives. The research questions are indicative of the literature on the challenges and stressful experiences of these diverse students (Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). The need for a

supportive network was also examined through the research questions (Irlbeck et al., 2014). Four research questions were important to help describe the lived experiences of first-generation college students. The Central Question was open-ended and reiterated the purpose of the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Moustakas, 1994). The qualitative researcher's task is to create clarifying and significant questions in a phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The central research question was as follows:

How do first-generation college students use self-determination to persist through their college experience?

The central research question was used to understand the lived experiences of first-generation college students. Covarrubias et al. (2018) maintained that the college experience for first-generation college students is filled with more challenges than their peers, which increases the likeliness of higher attrition rates and lower degree completion. The research participants provided their perspectives on the research topic. This study is important to first-generation college students as it allows their voices to be heard and may help educational stakeholders understand supportive measures that will benefit future first-generation college students. Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory guided the research study.

The research sub-questions delved specifically into the research participants' perspectives. The focus of these questions allowed the participants to expound upon their individual experiences as first-generation college students, their motivations to begin college, and the support needed for first-generation college students. The research sub-questions were as follows:

SQ1: How do first-generation college students apply self-autonomy to pursue their higher education goals?

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), open-ended questions will offer a detailed understanding of the phenomenon. Understanding the psychological needs of first-generation college students may help to increase their intrinsic motivation, which adds support and meaning to the pursuit of degree completion (Goldman et al., 2017). During their pivotal adolescent stage, first-generation college students may desire more autonomy, but they still need familial support as they make decisions about their academic endeavors (Wang & Nuru, 2017). Ryan and Deci (2017) explained that autonomy is self-regulation, which is an individual's need to control their actions, feelings, and thoughts. The data from this sub-question described the firsthand motivational and autonomous experiences of first-generation college students. Their explanation of their lived experiences gave a needed voice that the current literature is lacking.

SQ2: What are first-generation college students' perceptions of support systems that foster the development of one's relatedness to their new educational experiences?

The data received from this sub-question may be beneficial to future first-generation college students as they plan to embark on the college journey. Relatedness focuses on an individual's feelings of belonging, significance, and social connection (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Holt et al. (2019) found that relatedness affects first-generation college students' well-being and their feelings of competence and autonomy. Colleges and universities may also use this participant data to create and organize programs and measures to support first-generation college students' feelings of relatedness. These programs have been found to minimize first-generation college students' academic inadequacies and limitations and enhance social interactions on the

college campus (Hébert, 2018; Irlbeck et al., 2014; Malin et al., 2017; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017; Tate et al., 2015).

SQ3: What are the unforeseen obstacles that challenge first-generation college students' competence during their first year of college?

Ishitani (2016) found that first-generation college students encounter challenges upon entering the college experience. Considering this, this sub-question explored first-generation college students' self-efficacy or competence even to desire a college education and beliefs that degree completion is an obtainable goal. Competence refers to an individual's need to effectively overcome challenges and ultimately receive recognition for doing so (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Competence is important to first-generation college students as there must be skills provided in the learning environment that will allow the student to recognize their progress (Meijers, 1998). The data is supported by Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory.

Definitions

The following terms used within this study are important to understanding this transcendental phenomenological research study.

1. *Autonomy* – The students' need to participate in activities that align with their self-concept beliefs (Ryan & Deci, 2000).
2. *Competence* – The students' need to believe that they can effectively achieve learning outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000).
3. *First-generation college students* – Students whose parents do not have any college education (Adachi, 1979).
4. *Relatedness* – The students' need to be involved in activities that satisfy their feelings of importance and provides a relationship with others (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

5. *Retention rate* – The number of students to continue to degree completion at a university (Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019).
6. *Transition* – Passage or shift in an event over a time period (Gibbons et al., 2019).

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the self-determination experiences of first-generation college students. First-generation college students are entering the college experience unprepared to meet the insurmountable challenges of college (Gibbons et al., 2019). Further, these students face more barriers than peers in achieving their educational and career goals (Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019). There is a gap in the existing literature on the self-determination of these students as they persevere through these challenges during their first year of college and beyond. Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory provides the theoretical framework for this research study, which examined how competence, autonomy, and relatedness are helpful as first-generation college students persist towards degree completion.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The availability for all students to receive a college education has improved over recent years (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Goodwin et al., 2016; Tierney & Venegas, 2016). However, first-generation college students still face barriers in this educational achievement as degree completion rates are lower for them than for their peers (Schademan & Thompson, 2016). First-generation college students are students whose parents do not have any college education (Adachi, 1979). For first-generation college students to achieve academic success, the level of competence or self-efficacy is important (Garriott et al., 2015; Kyndt et al., 2018). These students' individual actions should be consistent with their confidence in achieving their goals (Sergis et al., 2018). More can be done on the college level to develop and maintain vital relationships with first-generation college students to meet the satiable needs of this diverse group (Gibbons et al., 2019; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018).

This chapter provides a theoretical framework for this research study and reviews related literature on first-generation college students' self-determination experiences. The theory guiding this research study was self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theory highlights fundamental requirements that encourage intrinsic motivation and well-being, which are necessary for college student academic achievement (Greene et al., 2019). Through empirical research, Ryan and Deci (2000) found that three basic needs, "competence, relatedness, and autonomy" (p. 68), are significant to the growth and development of humans. Self-determination in first-generation college students is studied to gain better insight into the possible connection to these students' support and perseverance. Further, themes emerged from the inquiry of the research questions that are important to this research study's structure. The

literature review in this chapter explores this group of college students' experiences as they require more support than other college students.

Theoretical Framework

In qualitative research, the theoretical framework is the basis for researchers to establish the theory and its relationship to the studied phenomenon (Gall et al., 2006). The self-determination of first-generation college students is the focus of this literature review and the phenomenon experienced by these students. Competence, autonomy, and relatedness are three basic needs that are necessary to stimulate inner motivation for better learning outcomes. The relevance of the theoretical framework in qualitative research is important as understanding these needs developed and directed my research. The three basic needs outlined in the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) guided this research study.

Self-Determination Theory

The theory used as the framework for this research study is Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory. This theory focuses on inner psychological needs and their connection to human motivation and personality (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory, humans are motivated to succeed through basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Using empirical methods, Ryan and Deci (2000) found that humans are well-meaning, motivated to learn, and ready to use their skills and talents. However, these individuals may also experience periods of diminished productivity and obligations. According to Howard et al. (2016), individuals are motivated differently, and because of this, outcomes are different.

Vansteenkiste et al. (2018) clarified that learning is more meaningful when students are internally motivated to learn. The guiding framework of Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory is that if an individual's satiable needs are met, the individual will

positively experience the learning process. Enriched learning, persistence, and better grades are indicators of a self-determined individual (Vansteenkiste et al., 2018). The three basic needs that are identified by Ryan and Deci (2000) center the self-determination theory. Meaningful learning for first-generation college students may require considerable adjustment to acclimate to this new experience (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). The literature is lacking research on the self-determination that is necessary for college persistence and retention.

The abilities, knowledge, and actions of an individual are important determinants of self-determination directly affecting the quality of life (Howard et al., 2016). Sergis et al. (2018) agreed that it is considered highly in the educational field because of the extensive empirical studies of the self-determination theory. The authors also found that the skills and abilities that are evident in self-determined individuals are linked to their success (Sergis et al., 2018). Skills, such as problem-solving, creating and setting goals, making sound decisions, and responsibility, are essential to this success (Howard et al., 2016).

Self-determined individuals show the necessary initiative to have sustaining and productive lives (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci (2000) emphasized the importance of intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, and achievement of psychological needs on health and well-being. Howard et al. (2016) contended that self-determined individuals have personal convictions and leadership skills that allow positive and substantial contributions to their school and community. These individuals' self-esteem and self-concept will result in assured learning abilities and improved critical thinking skills (Ryan et al., 1997). In the educational field, self-determination theory centers on the students' learning interests and the enhancements of those interests that will increase the learning potential (Ryan et al., 1997).

Students must be assured that they can achieve their learning goals in the classroom. Ryan and Deci (2000) maintained that intrinsic motivation is important to academic success, but more importantly, it is the issue of the non-intrinsic motivation that is necessary to encourage perseverance and persistence. For self-determined individuals, these motivations must be intrinsically accepted into their behaviors and well-being (Ryan et al., 1997). In direct contrast with intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation relates to completing an activity for external rewards.

Intrinsic motivation is the driving force in the three basic psychological needs (competence, autonomy, and relatedness) of self-determination theory (Orsini et al., 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan et al., 1997). Competence is the acceptance and trust in one's skills and abilities to endure through challenges (Ommering et al., 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan et al., 1997; Stone et al., 2016). As the individual level of competence increases, value-added motivation is increased for the action or behavior (Kalkbrenner & Sink, 2018). Autonomy is the sense of empowerment and conscience control over learning opportunities and the learning environment (Demetriou et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan et al., 1997). This need may be considered the most important and indicative of a sense of belonging and connectedness (Greene et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan et al., 1997). Relatedness describes the need for an intimate relationship with a group (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan et al., 1997; Van den Broeck et al., 2016). A nurturing relationship will satisfy social and emotional needs and connect the other basic needs, competence and autonomy (Holt et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan et al., 1997). For self-determined individuals, the three basic psychological needs are met (Orsini et al., 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan et al., 1997). A high level of competence in first-generation college students will help them to consider themselves qualified and confident in a higher

academic achievement (Demetriou et al., 2017; Greene et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan et al., 1997). As the challenges surmount during the experience (Gibbons et al., 2019; Ishitani, 2016; Redford & Hoyer, 2017; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017), the self-determined student will persevere (Holt et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan et al., 1997). Colleges and universities have realized the need to offer support in meeting these basic needs to this diverse group of students (Greene et al., 2019; Irlbeck et al., 2014; Tate et al., 2015; Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019). The self-determined student will desire to learn and be intrinsically motivated to exhibit the intestinal fortitude needed for this experience (Orsini et al., 2016).

Related Literature

This section of the chapter will synthesize what has been studied about the experiences of first-generation college students. The first section of the literature review is an overview that provides background on first-generation college students. After reviewing the existing literature of the research study, themes were revealed that indicate a need for supportive efforts for first-generation college students. The themes include the classification of first-generation college students, the period of identity crisis of first-generation college students, college/university independence versus interdependence of first-generation college students, low comparisons of first-generation students' college attrition and college completion, and the need for a supportive network for first-generation college students before and after their college experience.

First-Generation College Students

Irlbeck et al. (2014) defined first-generation college students as students with parents who are high school graduates or less. A key aspect of first-generation college students is that they are not keeping with the norms of their family traditions (Irlbeck et al., 2014). These students are the first in their families to attempt this major goal in life. This attempt may be one

that did not have much collaboration and feedback from immediate family and friends. It may be a desire to achieve more and create a better life for themselves. A sense of obligation for their current situations and future circumstances is likely the driving force for these students. This type of pressure can often add a level of stress to an already stressful situation. Swanbrow Becker et al. (2017) maintained that the transition from high school to college is a significant developmental stage for first-generation college students. The college experience for first-generation college students is a new cultural experience (Irlbeck et al., 2014). Winnie Ma and Shea (2019) explained that barriers for first-generation college students are more evident in comparison to their peers. Academic pressures are an obvious experience for all students, but there is another stress level for first-generation college students to experience.

Pratt et al. (2019) offered college statistics that state 20% of college students are first-generation college students. One of the main challenges of first-generation college students, as Wildhagen (2015) explained, is the lack of parental support, which directly coincides with their common identity. Since these students are the first in their families to undertake this endeavor, it takes time to understand the customs, rituals and routines, and the college vernacular. Irlbeck et al. (2014) explained that fundamental rules and college standards are new to first-generation college students. This new language can be hard to navigate and make sense of, which heightens the experience. This trepidation is met with anxiety and feelings of no relief as this experience is like no other. Swanbrow Becker et al. (2017) found that the college experience is stressful for all students, but first-generation college students experience stressors on a different level. These students may not enter the college experience as prepared as their traditional counterparts. The levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-regulation may be limited because of their first-generation status. When financial and familial support are factored in, these students are doing

all they can to maintain this new status (Ishitani, 2016; Pratt et al., 2019; Schademan & Thompson, 2016). This may leave the student attempting to navigate the college experience alone.

Irlbeck et al. (2014) emphasized the importance of first-generation college students building relationships with faculty and staff. Communicating with these individuals will help students understand pertinent college information, viewpoints, and social behaviors (Irlbeck et al., 2014). This college experience component will help increase the sense of connection to the college campus (Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019). The communication roles have changed for this student on the college campus as professors may not seek out the student to communicate. It is the responsibility of the student to open the lines of communication and seek assistance as needed. These students may lack this skill.

In adjusting to the college experience, the lack of preparedness for first-generation college students may lead to detachment from their home environment. Wildhagen (2015) concluded that these students are not academically prepared to meet the challenges of their college experience. A college and career ready student is a high school student ready for college and/or career and is prepared for a successful transition from secondary to post-secondary education and/or career. When defining college and career ready, Royster et al. (2015) affirmed that the process of college readiness should begin before the senior year of high school. The earlier these efforts are undertaken increases the likelihood of these students being college and career ready. According to Kanno (2019), all options for students' successful completion of high school, such as career and technical education, should be used to nurture students' vocational skills and talents. Martinez et al. (2017) extended the definition of college and career readiness

to include attitudes as this was found to affect the students' level of confidence in their college success.

Kanno (2019) stressed that with so much emphasis being placed on everyone attending college, some students are subsequently leaving high school less prepared for either college or career than in the past. This may cause even more division as these students will not have support from family and friends. These students often lack the core education that is needed, which will consequently require specialized instruction to fill the learning gaps (Swanson et al., 2017). Lower grade point averages and fewer challenging curriculums are attributed to their academic deficiency (Evans, 2016). The students' college experiences may be hard to explain, which may be frustrating. Their suggestions and advice may not offer any valuable solutions to the issue. This may lead the student to feel frustrated and unsupported by the most important people in their lives. Inner questioning by first-generation college students about the decision to attend college is now at the forefront of already mixed emotions (Wildhagen, 2015).

Royster et al. (2015) identified the likelihood of less-prepared students enrolling into college and completing their degrees. The students began the process with hopes of changing their lives and achieving a feat that has not been done in their immediate family. For first-generation college students, just attending college is an achievement and often admirable in the eyes of their families (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). Manzoni and Streib (2018) contended that first-generation college students' struggles play an active role in their college success rates. These students were found not to have familial connections throughout the college experience and have more financial challenges than their peers. College-educated parents have more financial stability than non-attenders (Irlbeck et al., 2014). These challenges are often the reasons that first-generation college students do not persist to degree completion.

Malin et al. (2017) emphasized that first-generation college students will benefit from the implementation of college and career ready programs that include daily instruction and strategies to meet their learning needs. Irlbeck et al. (2014) maintained the importance of support groups on and off the college campus to assist them in this new cultural experience. Outreach programs on college campuses attempt to lessen the negative impact of academic deficiencies and strengthen relationships with first-generation college students (Goodwin et al., 2016). This may be one way that colleges can meet the psychological needs of first-generation college students. These students need more support as they encounter and understand the college experience. Feelings of alienation and guilt are evident as the student attempts to make sense of the new culture that is now their present experience (O'Shea, 2015). A supportive network is necessary to help navigate the experience, as it may be difficult for parents to identify with this unfamiliar experience. A supportive network will consist of individuals that first-generation college students can emulate and build a relationship. Relationships with college faculty or staff through internships and mentoring programs were found to offer the needed support in their experiences (Law et al., 2019). Advice, support, and companionship are several of the benefits of a supportive network.

Classify or Not

Within their unique characteristics, first-generation college students face specific challenges in their journey to achieving academic success (Gibbons et al., 2019; Ishitani, 2016; Redford & Hoyer, 2017; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). College is often where students gain new interests, broaden their experiences with other cultures, and build a career path (Toutkoushian et al., 2018). First-generation college students are students whose parents do not have any college education (Adachi, 1979). For these students, the college experience may not

provide the promises of gaining new interests, increasing cultural experiences, or extending career development (O'Shea, 2015). First-generation college students experience greater inequalities in their attempt to achieve the benefits of a college education (Manzoni & Streib, 2018).

Students with low socioeconomic status and those from ethnic/racial minority backgrounds are often the students with limited opportunities for a college education (Covarrubias et al., 2019). Initiatives have been created to expose these students to dual enrollment (Freeman, 2017), service learning (Wang & Nuru, 2017), outreach programs (Le et al., 2016), and government assistance incentives (Everett, 2015). Still, low-income and minority students struggle with their transition to college (Carlton, 2015) in the areas of familial support (Guassi Moreira & Telzer, 2015), financial independence (A. Kim et al., 2020; Wang & Nuru, 2017), and college and career readiness (Malin et al., 2017; Martinez et al., 2017; Royster et al., 2015; Tate et al., 2015; Yavuz et al., 2019). As first-generation college students continue to explore the possibilities of achieving a college education, initiatives, such as faculty and staff mentoring (Ghazzawi & Jagannathan, 2011; Y. Kim & Choi, 2019; Law et al., 2019), remedial courses (Aelenei et al., 2017), and tutoring programs (Azmitia et al., 2018; Everett, 2015; Felicetti et al., 2019) have been implemented.

College attendance (Bauman et al., 2019; Page et al., 2019) and degree completion rates (Giani et al., 2020; Toutkoushian et al., 2019) have increased, but there are still limitations for first-generation college students (Jury et al., 2017; Phillips et al., 2020). Personality characteristics, identity crisis, and social and cultural influences are some of those limitations (Luzecy et al., 2017). With the addition of the lack of familial support (Guassi Moreira & Telzer, 2015), financial independence (A. Kim et al., 2020; Wang & Nuru, 2017), and college

and career readiness (Malin et al., 2017; Martinez et al., 2017; Royster et al., 2015; Tate et al., 2015; Yavuz et al., 2019), the limitations increase. First-generation college students face even more considerations for their academic success, including acclimating to the college experience, self-efficacy, and ethnic identity (Y. Kim & Choi, 2019). Degree completion rates are affected for these students compared to their peers who have college-educated parents (Schwartz et al., 2018).

The insurmountable barriers for first-generation college students may benefit this diverse group to be identified while in high school. These students can achieve success, and their higher education engagement can increase (Luzecy et al., 2017). Using student information systems, Royster et al. (2015) found that students as early as eighth grade can be college ready “if equipped with college aspirations and college preparatory coursework” (p. 221). It requires educators to make a concerted effort to set benchmarks and goals to prepare students for college and/or careers. Students who are actively involved in their high school learning experience, participate in college and career readiness efforts, and create problem-solving and acclimation skills necessary for degree completion should achieve academic success (Le et al., 2016; Martinez et al., 2017). Parental support is the best determinant of first-generation college students achieving academic success (Irlbeck et al., 2014; Kanno, 2018; Nichols & Islas, 2016; Wildhagen, 2015). With the correct combination of variables, these students can improve their education (Vega, 2016).

Engagement in high school activities and quality curriculums have been directly linked to first-generation college students’ college academic achievement (Nichols & Islas, 2016). The intention is to change their understanding of college education by their participation in initiatives for college and career readiness (Payne et al., 2017). High school is where important

relationships will be established with teachers, counselors, and peers as the students' needs are identified (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). Social interactions with peers reinforce and support students' needs to even dream and believe that academic achievement is possible (Wadhwa, 2018). Connecting with other first-generation college students on the high school level will help them remain focused on productive behaviors that will lead to goal attainment (Petee et al., 2015; Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016). Learning how to foster these types of relationships in high school will prove beneficial for first-generation college students when a similar need arises in the college setting (Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016). This level of interdependence is a much-needed skill that the student will continue to develop in the college experience to seek help with the challenges that will arise (Brenning et al., 2017; Schwartz et al., 2018; Theobald et al., 2017).

Colleges and universities attempt to identify first-generation college students by asking the parents' education history on the college application (Stephens et al., 2012). The focus has centered on colleges and universities' responsibility for retention and degree completion (Sublett, 2019). When considering factors that affect student retention and degree completion rates, the students are just one factor (Goldman et al., 2017; Schademan & Thompson, 2016; Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019). Creating a learning environment that will benefit this diverse group will create the pathway for student academic success (Page et al., 2019). Being mindful of the impact on the students, the initiatives created for a conducive learning environment will influence student perceptions. Classifying students as first-generation college students has benefited the colleges that construct the classifications (Wildhagen, 2015). "Inequality" is synonymous with "classifying people into groups" (Wildhagen, 2015), and these classifications continue even after college graduation (Manzoni & Streib, 2018). With this classification, students are encouraged to create feelings of loyalty to the college (O'Shea, 2015). The classification, according to

O'Shea (2015), also detracts awareness of their individual social class. First-generation college students benefit from various programs created for their acclimation process, special admission consideration, and faculty and staff who are encouraged to be mindful of their status (Luzecyj et al., 2017). Colleges or universities may benefit from the classification as students will feel a strong sense of institutional belonging and more individualistic versus embracing their social class.

Identity Crisis

First-generation college students' attendance has increased in U.S. colleges and universities (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Even though the enrollment has increased for this student population, the retention rates for these students have decreased (Ishitani, 2016; Pratt et al., 2019; Redford & Hoyer, 2017; Schademan & Thompson, 2016; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). College administrators have considered these declines and are exploring possibilities for retention (Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017; Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019). Therefore, first-generation college students' identity is important to examine as their transition to college is a life-adjusting event that may affect the well-being of the student (Lilgendahl & McLean, 2020). Identity is described as an individual's distinctive traits or personality (Brzeski, 2017). First-generation college students have a distinctive identity as students whose parents do not have any college education (Adachi, 1979). Their first-year experiences involve many new activities, such as transitioning away from parents and home life (Covarrubias et al., 2019), acclimating to their new environment (Swanson et al., 2017), and participating in social and extracurricular activities (Walsh et al., 2015).

As these students embrace their new identity, other facets of their personality will emerge (Guassi Moreira & Telzer, 2015). With this emergence, their new and prior experiences will

collide, and a new growth awareness will occur in thinking, learning, and discovering things (Erikson, 1968). Erikson (1968) concluded that an individual's environment would make impactful changes to their personality as they mature. One of the main purposes of late adolescence is the formation of one's personality (Klimstra et al., 2018). For first-generation college students, late adolescence occurs at the same time as they enter the college experience (Peifer & Yangchen, 2017). The emergence is imperative to individuals' improvement of mental, physical, and social capacities that must be developed free of parental involvement (Lewis et al., 2015; Lowe & Dotterer, 2018). Parental involvement was found to influence high students' career interests (Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016). Clancy and Dollinger (1993) asserted that personality might impact identity development. The biggest changes to identity development will also occur during this time (G. R. Adams et al., 1987). The college setting offers diverse opportunities and experiences (Covarrubias et al., 2015; Gibbons et al., 2019; Goldman et al., 2017; Irlbeck et al., 2014; Ishitani, 2016; Pratt et al., 2019; Schademan & Thompson, 2016) that may encourage students to reexamine their past and present beliefs about their identity and seek new identities (Gummadam et al., 2016; Klimstra & Denissen, 2017). First-generation college students have positioned themselves to experience their new identity and developmental growth and discover many other identities (Gfellner & Bartoszuk, 2015). Whitehead and Wright (2017) explored the phenomenological analysis of the identity crisis that may be undertaken by first-generation college students. This study suggested two changes, student advising and classroom instruction, to help first-generation college students have more confidence in their experiences. According to Whitehead and Wright, first-generation college students feel undeserving of their college experience. This phenomenon leads first-generation college students to equate this identity crisis with an unworthy experience, leading to a more

difficult college experience. The following examples are important identities to this research study related to personality and academic achievement experienced during adolescence.

Ethnic Identity

Researchers have sought to gain a better understanding of ethnic identity (Kantamneni et al., 2018; Langenkamp & Shifrer, 2018; Lilgendahl & McLean, 2020; Peifer & Yangchen, 2017) and measure it in different ways (Worrell et al., 2019; Yuan & Li, 2019). Ethnic identity is described as the extent that an individual feels a sense of belonging, commitment, and connectedness to one's ethnic group (Kantamneni et al., 2018). As first-generation college students begin experiencing the college journey, interactions with different cultures will increase (Galliher et al., 2017). These interactions may cause these students to compromise their culture to assimilate into the college's cultural climate (Hooper et al., 2015). Students feel disconnected from their new learning environment and do their best to fit in (Tibbetts et al., 2016). Because of their close familial connections, there is an adjustment to their changing identity (Means & Pyne, 2017).

Sexual and Gender Identity

An individual's sexual identity is described as who an individual thinks romantically or sexually (Shively & De Cecco, 1977). Gender identity refers to an individual's personal sense of being either male or female (Roselli, 2018). As the life cycle stages unfold and individuals move to adolescence, sexual identity may encompass a major part of their identity (Miller, 2018). An individual will assign a specific gender or sexual identity to oneself during late adolescence or early adulthood (Theobald et al., 2017). This is the same time that first-generation college students enter college life (Peifer & Yangchen, 2017). It is a critical time in their lives as these students have been a part of a marginalized group from high school to college (Squire & Mobley,

2015). These individuals may begin to feel more comfortable in their identity and share these experiences with others (Galliher et al., 2017). The confidence that individuals feel in their gender identity will directly influence their self-efficacy and acclimation to the college experience (Theobald et al., 2017).

Career Identity

Career identity is a calculated decision about one's respective career choice, reflective of their abilities, personality, interests, and motivations (Meijers, 1998). Praskova et al. (2015) asserted that career identity is an important link to a person's well-being as one progresses through life. There is a correlation between academic work and career-level work (Y. Kim & Choi, 2019). Once the career identity is established, feelings of life satisfaction can affect academic success (Garriott et al., 2015). Garriott et al. (2015) studied the psychological effects of college adjustment on first-generation college students. The researchers sought to understand the correlation between the academic and life satisfaction of first-generation college students. Personality traits and other cognitive processes are a good indicator of overall life satisfaction. Academic self-concept is related to a student's academic achievements (Lilgendahl & McLean, 2020). Peteet et al. (2015) described academic self-concept as one's feelings about their abilities to learn. With the combination of these factors, first-generation college students will explore and define their career identity and make appropriate decisions about their career development and well-being (Praskova et al., 2015).

Independence vs. Interdependence

The transition to college for first-generation college students is important as it now provides a new level of independence (Covarrubias et al., 2019). As these students emerge to adulthood and leave their families to attend college, the significance of this life event is

paramount (Guassi Moreira & Telzer, 2015). Likely, for the first time in their lives, first-generation college students begin to create their independence and significantly increase their individual responsibility (O'Shea, 2015). Adjusting to the challenges of their new status as first-generation college students, balancing college and social life, and completing schoolwork can be a daunting task for the newcomers (Schwartz et al., 2018). These students move to college, acclimate to a new learning environment, manage their social, personal, and financial life, and experience newfound freedom from parents (Covarrubias et al., 2019). These changes may cause uncertainty for first-generation college students (Gibbons et al., 2019). The separation from their parents as they embark upon this new journey into new and exciting experiences will develop new identities (Lane, 2017).

As first-generation college students accept more responsibility and become more independent, their reliance on their parents will lessen (Nichols & Islas, 2016). Students will build a new relationship with parents to change their conflicting roles as they continue developing their independence (Majorano et al., 2017). As their maturity level increases, their independence will develop into more mature relationships (Majorano et al., 2017). Tibbetts et al. (2016) maintained that as first-generation college students attempt to gain more independence by depending less on their parents, they will gain more self-efficacy. Their parents' perceptions will change, and these students will feel more capable, independent, and responsible (Polenova et al., 2018). First-generation college students need the opportunity to personally deal with challenges without interference from parents so that they can develop their mental, physical, and interpersonal skills (Lewis et al., 2015).

The first-generation college students' struggle to make the college transition has been attributed to the rise in degree completion rates (Gibbons et al., 2019; Greene et al., 2019; Malin

et al., 2017; O'Shea et al., 2017; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017; Tello & Lon, 2017). Students should feel a sense of belonging to the college community through positive connections with academic and social environments (Freeman, 2017). The college experience has different roles and meanings depending on the individual first-generation college student (Redding, 2017). This experience may be a means to satisfy the lack of belonging and fulfill the need for independence by now being able to socialize with others outside of the immediate familial circle (Jury et al., 2017; Lane, 2017).

Students come to college with individual plans and goals, and these ideals should merge with the school environment as this will affect the learning outcomes (Wong & Chiu, 2019). Colleges understand the importance of first-generation college students developing their problem-solving skills, which will allow them to manage and overcome the demands of the college environment (Tibbetts et al., 2018). First-generation college students are being revealed as driven achievers who exhibit newfound independence and maturity in accomplishing their educational goals (O'Shea, 2015; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017).

Interdependence describes changes in one's life that directly affect changes in others' lives (Lowe & Dotterer, 2018). The traditional support system of first-generation college students will change during the transition to college, and these students are now reliant on the resources and services offered at the college (Gibbons et al., 2019; Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019). Greater academic achievement has been linked to students being more responsible for their actions and decreased parental influence (Brenning et al., 2017). Being competent in their abilities and personally selecting future goals is important as students move from independence to interdependence (Theobald et al., 2017). Cutting the emotional ties from family and developing emotional strength will help students to feel like the views of others affect them less

(Freeman, 2017). To move through independence to interdependence, first-generation college students should make goals for their future and trust in their abilities to maneuver through this new experience (Nichols & Islas, 2016).

As individuals emerge to adulthood and continue to transition to interdependence, they relinquish their roles with their parents, education stakeholders from high school, the interim college experience, and come to terms with their new experiences (Brenning et al., 2017). This will likely happen as the acclimation process to the college experience continues (Scager et al., 2016). Although first-generation college students may not be college and career ready (Kanno, 2018; Royster et al., 2015), interdependence will take place as these students learn the rituals and routines of the college experience (Schwartz et al., 2018) and receive support to navigate the challenges of the experience (Gibbons et al., 2019; Ishitani, 2016; Ommering et al., 2018; Redford & Hoyer, 2017; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). As first-generation college students encounter challenges in their college transition, they will become more open to different interpretations of their reality (S. Kim et al., 2018). The transition will have more ease as the students' experiences increase (Lowe & Dotterer, 2018). College and career readiness is a preparedness skill that is found to be beneficial to the transition to college for first-generation college students (Martinez et al., 2017; Royster et al., 2015) as students must discover how to mesh newfound activities with their lives (Kyndt et al., 2018).

Critical thinking and organizational skills are important to individual growth as parent involvement will be limited (Van Rooij et al., 2017). The relationship between the parents will reach an equal status as they begin to appreciate each other's views (Majorano et al., 2017). Parents can undermine student development by being controlling, overprotective, and overbearing (Nichols & Islas, 2016). Nichols and Islas (2016) identified "helicopter" (p. 60)

parents that were overly involved in the lives of their emerging adult. This parenting style is a barrier to the students' independence and defeats their impending interdependence (Lewis et al., 2015). At this point of emergence, students live on campus, in charge of their meals, and create new relationships (Garza & Fullerton, 2018). The transition to college is a rite of passage for students as they exert their independence while becoming less dependent upon their parents (Lewis et al., 2015; Redding, 2017). As their interdependence increases, the attachments between parent and child slowly and reluctantly diminish (Polenova et al., 2018).

The interdependent roles will continue to change during the transition, and separation from behaviors, activities, and family will take place (Scager et al., 2016). Even through the transition from the first year of college to the second year, first-generation college students do not completely disconnect from the experiences of the first year (S. Kim et al., 2018). The skills that were learned through college and career readiness efforts will be evidenced throughout the college experience (Tibbetts et al., 2016). For first-generation college students, college retention is a barrier that can be mastered at any level, high school or upon college entry (Cholewa & Ramaswami, 2015; Swanson et al., 2017). Academic achievements through the first year of college are linked to college retention rates, and rightfully, the transition is successful (Means & Pyne, 2017). These interdependent factors that affect first-generation college students are formidable, but they are achievable and manageable (Hébert, 2018; Le et al., 2016; Page et al., 2019; Payne et al., 2017; Swanson et al., 2017).

College Attrition Compared with Degree Completion

As first-generation college students maneuver through the challenges faced in college, their attrition rates are four times higher than their peers (Petty, 2014). College attrition refers to a student dropping out of college before completing a college degree (Schwartz et al., 2018).

Adding the factor that first-generation college students' parents do not have any college education (Adachi, 1979) to the possibility that they may come from single-parent homes, have low socioeconomic status, or are a member of an ethnically diverse group (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015), college attrition may be inescapable (Glaessgen et al., 2018). The encompassing college experience occurs differently for first-generation college students (Gibbons et al., 2019; Ishitani, 2016; Redford & Hoyer, 2017; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). These students attempt to navigate through and adjust to college without the guidance and support of their families (Gibbons et al., 2019).

There is no solitary reason for the college attrition of first-generation college students (Bailey & Phillips, 2016). Students lack the social capital to skillfully maneuver through the college experience (Schwartz et al., 2018). Social capital is described as the networks or relationships of the student (Nichols & Islas, 2016). For first-generation college students, not having a college-educated parent is detrimental to their success (Glaessgen et al., 2018). The social capital of first-generation college students must be established even more than their peers to ensure that their needs are supported (D. R. Adams et al., 2016). Positive achievements, such as lower college attrition rates, higher grade point averages, and an increased sense of belonging to the college community, are linked to social capital (Evans, 2016; Mason et al., 2018).

Parents who do not have any college education (Adachi, 1979) do not adequately prepare first-generation college students for the college experience (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Goodwin et al., 2016; O'Shea, 2015; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Consequently, this may lead first-generation college students to drop out of college at a higher rate than their peers (D. R. Adams et al., 2016). Since they may not have their parents to seek advice and assistance (Seidel & Kutieleh, 2017), they are also likely not to use the college support services, such as tutoring and

student counseling services (Lancaster & Xu, 2017). Parents' educational level is the best determinant of students persisting through college (Nichols & Islas, 2016; Toutkoushian et al., 2018).

The academic performance of first-generation college students is lower when compared to the performance of their peers (Morison & Cowley 2017). This may be attributed to the lack of first-generation college students not having parents share college experiences, goals, and achievements (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). These students have limited knowledge of career planning (Tate et al., 2015), financial aid (Ishitani, 2016; Pratt et al., 2019; Schademan & Thompson, 2016), college attrition and degree completion (Nichols & Islas, 2016), and maneuvering through the college experience (Covarrubias et al., 2015, 2019; Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019). The research identified by Tate et al. (2015) sought to understand the unique external influences and internal beliefs of the career development process for first-generation college students. The researchers tested the first-generation college students' familial influence factors and compared them with low graduation rates. The expectations of non-college-educated parents are directly attributed to higher attrition rates of first-generation college students (Schwartz et al., 2018). Winnie Ma and Shea (2019) found evidence of the sense of coherence from the first-generation college students' support system. When these students have a support system, they are more likely to have positive career outcome expectations. The research also indicated that if the students are more connected to the college campus, the perceived barriers and career outcome expectations are lessened.

In direct contrast to college attrition is degree completion (Morison & Cowley 2017). First-generation college students from a low socioeconomic status are nearly four times more likely to drop out of college after their first year than their peers (Payne et al., 2017). It has been

shown by Royster et al. (2015) that school districts should ensure that curriculums are preparing students for college and career readiness. The early intervention efforts would support academic success. Challenges in degree completion for first-generation college students are insurmountable, but some elements have led to increased successes (Le et al., 2016). College and career readiness in high school (Malin et al., 2017; Tate et al., 2015), student support services in college (Bailey & Phillips, 2016; Cholewa & Ramaswami, 2015), and academic engagement during the college experience (Iammartino et al., 2016) are elements of degree completion. Degree completion of first-generation college students is dependent on personal qualities and familial support (Haarala-Muhonen et al., 2017). These qualities successfully contribute to these students applying for and enrolling in college, actively participating in the college experience, and completing their college education (Giani et al., 2020).

First-generation college students' level of involvement in high school is associated with their success in college (Wadhwa, 2018). When these students are active participants in college and career readiness programs in high school, their understanding of a college education is affected (Page et al., 2019). Tate et al. (2015) contended that first-generation college students do not feel the entitlement typically found among the millennial generation, but these students seem to appreciate the career opportunities and outlook for their career development. Connecting these students to valuable support networks, such as career professionals, college contacts, and even peers, can assist them in identifying their potential qualities that will lead to degree completion (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Pratt et al., 2019; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). The research provided by Winnie Ma and Shea (2019) sought to understand the unique characteristics of the barriers and expected career outcomes of first-generation college students. The researchers tested the first-generation college students' connectivity and familial, friends,

and significant other support. Winnie Ma and Shea (2019) conducted a traditional cross-sectional method approach to study the perceptions of the educational and career barriers faced by this diverse group.

Considerations for academic success and degree completion for first-generation college students must be factored into their educational experience (Vega, 2016). Pratt et al. (2019) affirmed the percentage that 71% of first-generation college students drop out of college over their peers during their first year. These students are not completing their college education even though they were initially filled with dreams and ambitious goals (Ghazzawi & Jagannathan, 2011). Engle and Tinto (2008) reported that first-generation college students often do not return to their second year of college. Researchers also found that graduation rates for first-generation college students within six years are just 21%, while their peers have a degree completion rate of 33% (Freeman, 2017).

Colleges and universities have provided support programs to alleviate the challenges faced by first-generation college students (Hébert, 2018; Page et al., 2019; Payne et al., 2017; Swanson et al., 2017). The services offered in these programs bring diverse groups together for psychological and academic support (D. R. Adams et al., 2016). First-generation college students need interventional motivation to increase feelings of value for degree completion and to overcome the challenges that face this diverse group (Bailey & Phillips, 2016).

Supportive Network

Lack of social support of first-generation college students, according to Harlow and Bowman (2016), had the greatest impact on academic success and degree completion. Acclimating to the college campus and its experiences may weaken coping skills and contribute to high stress levels (Swanson et al., 2017). These students have entered a cultural experience

that is filled with norms, innuendos, and rules for social etiquette (Irlbeck et al., 2014). Self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-adjustment skills are important to navigating this new experience (Bailey & Phillips, 2016). Since first-generation college students do not have parents that can help ease or instill these beliefs, this can lead to feelings of hopelessness (Goodwin et al., 2016). The benefits of a supportive network for this diverse group can help them transition into their college experience (Irlbeck et al., 2014). Positive role models who are also college graduates have a significant role through their valuable advice and assistance about their experiences (Luedke, 2017). First-generation college students will need these types of social and professional networks as they maneuver through the college experience and begin to build their lives (Mason et al., 2018). A supportive network filled with mentors, role models, and peers willing to share their college experiences will contribute to a sense of belonging for first-generation college students (Gummadam et al., 2016). As students work to overcome the challenge of building these networks, initiatives on the high school and college level continue (Hébert, 2018; Irlbeck et al., 2014; Malin et al., 2017; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017; Tate et al., 2015).

Tello and Lon (2017) maintained that high school counselors are in a good position to support first-generation college students as they transition to college. They are familiar with the students personally and for a longer period before the transition (Ndiaye & Wolfe, 2016). Since the college experience will be brand new, this type of intervention can prevent trials or tests and offer problem-solving skills (Bauman et al., 2019). As the realization that college is very different from high school, first-generation college students soon understand that more time must be dedicated to their studies (Demetriou et al., 2017). High school counselors can fill the gaps when first-generation college students realize that familial support is not there (Tello & Lon,

2017). Identifying first-generation college students (Tello & Lon, 2017), providing college information (Ndiaye & Wolfe, 2016), and creating and implementing interventions (Covarrubias et al., 2019) for first-generation college students are important roles for high school counselors. I. Jackson and Knight-Manuel (2019) found through past research that high school educators of color had an important role in helping students through social, cultural, and political processes. These educators used critical thinking skills in their teaching methods that allowed students to make sense of their realities. The cultural consciousness of these educators, according to Jackson and Knight-Manuel (2019), made a significant impact on the consciousness of all students.

Yavuz et al. (2019) found that creating a comprehensive college and career readiness program that is implemented at the high school level will make a significant difference in first-generation college students. Students who are college and career ready are proficient in the basic skills and knowledge for success in college and/or career studies (Martinez et al., 2017). Dual-enrollment and dual-credit programs are now a part of most high school course offerings, and research has found them to improve the high school to college transition (Malin et al., 2017). Ortega (2018) found that incorporating real-world learning experiences in high school, such as mentor and mentee relationships, would strengthen the support systems that will be needed in college. Students are more likely to benefit from these programs as they are introduced to career exploration, decision-making for the future, and greater interest in oneself (Harlow & Bowman, 2016).

Counselors on the college campus also have an important role in acclimating first-generation college students as students will need social and emotional support to navigate this new experience (Tello & Lon, 2017). A large percentage (43%) of first-year students are

classified as first-generation college students (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). Student and faculty member connectivity are key to building the bridge in the relationships that will guide them through the college experience (Luedke, 2017). These students feel like they are all alone attempting to maneuver through the many different facets of the college campus (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Van Rooij et al., 2018). Johnson (2016) emphasized the impact of faculty mentoring relationships that have an enduring effect on college students, and more importantly, on the professional satisfaction of the faculty member. Positive adult role models can guide the student through some of the toughest decisions that will be made about their college education, such as class selection (Garza & Fullerton, 2018), whether to live on campus or at home (Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015) and how to navigate the college experience (Van Rooij et al., 2017). The divide between home and school must be lessened for first-generation college students to succeed in their educational endeavors (Azmitia et al., 2018).

The underrepresented students on the college campus will need financial, emotional, and academic support (Law et al., 2019). Since first-generation college students are also members of this underrepresented group, they often need more support as they begin their college journey (M. C. Jackson et al., 2016; Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016). These students may not receive the continuous reassurance needed from their families to attend college (Lowe & Dotterer, 2018). Compared to college-educated parents, first-generation college students' parents may not be equipped with the appropriate resources to assist their children in the journey to college education (Tierney & Venegas, 2016). Advice about college, the experience, or specific resources to understand and ease the college experience cannot be offered by these parents, but they support their child in the pursuit of higher education (Lowe & Dotterer, 2018). Parents are in a position to want to help their children, but they simply do not have the required hands-on

college experience (Lewis et al., 2015). This situation will cause conflict in the relationship as the student feels alone and unsupported through this journey (Majorano et al., 2017). Parents should strive to remain active in the student's life and offer as much emotional support as possible (Guassi Moreira & Telzer, 2015).

The ultimate supportive network lies with the parents of first-generation college students (Irlbeck et al., 2014; Ishitani, 2016; O'Shea, 2015). Parents are important to the college and career readiness of these students (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). Parents may not see the significance of students' academic achievements and excellence in high school (Toutkoushian et al., 2019). Further, advanced placement, dual-credit, and honors courses may not even be a consideration for these parents to encourage their children's participation (Giani et al., 2020). These initiatives taken during high school would greatly help their students transition into the college experience (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). All of this must be considered when thinking about the college and career readiness of first-generation college students (Martinez et al., 2017; Royster et al., 2015).

Familial support and social capital are linked to first-generation college students understanding the intricate details of college application and admission procedures (Means & Pyne, 2017). Navigating financial aid and choosing a career pathway is another area in which parents of first-generation college students may not be knowledgeable (Tierney & Venegas, 2016). Parents can play an important role as the student begins to think about the college or university they plan to attend (Freeman, 2017; Covarrubias et al., 2019). The proper college selection may lead to less indecisiveness in the long run about their college or university choice and career pathway (Rodriguez & Kerrigan, 2016). First-generation college students may have parents who do not want to assist them in preparing to transition to college (Harlow & Bowman,

2016). As a result, the needs of these students should be met by their supportive network in high school (counselors, teachers, and peers) to navigate the transition to college (Tello & Lonn, 2017). Considering the challenges first-generation college students experience during their college transition, stakeholders in the high school setting have an important role (Redding, 2017). The research conducted by Hébert (2018) sought to understand the experiences of low-income but high-achieving first-generation college students. The researcher analyzed the data from college administrators and several other offices on the socioeconomic status of first-generation college students and found that high-achieving, low-income students achieve academic success when they have a support system, consistent parental expectations, and involvement in religious and extracurricular activities. Although these families and students faced many different adversities, the support remained for their children to complete their education. It was concluded that educators with high expectations for students from a low socioeconomic status could encourage them to help them endure their circumstances. Hébert (2018) also found that having a one-on-one relationship with these students will increase their well-being and academic satisfaction. The underrepresented students in high school often do not seek assistance with college dreams and endeavors, but members of the supportive network should be available (Azmitia et al., 2018; M. C. Jackson et al., 2016).

The research found in the literature has substantiated the fact that parents of first-generation college students can be a barrier to their student's academic success on the college level (Goodwin et al., 2016; Irlbeck et al., 2014; Ishitani, 2016; Kantamneni et al., 2018; A. Kim et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2015; Lowe & Dotterer, 2018; O'Shea, 2015). However, some studies found the positive aspects of a supportive family that assists the student while in college (Nichols & Islas, 2016). Nichols and Islas (2016) identified parents as the most important form of social

capital for first-generation college students. The students attributed their academic success to their parents (Schwartz et al., 2018). Lewis et al. (2015) studied the support between parents and students and found a strong link between a supportive family network and first-generation college student's academic success. Although these are parents who do not have any college education (Adachi, 1979), the research concluded the possibility that a conducive and supportive environment can exist in their parent-student relationship. Palbusa and Gauvain (2017) examined parent-student communication factors that contributed to student academic success. First-generation college students' parents may not be able to provide as much college information as college-educated parents, but these students gain the much needed emotional support.

Summary

Clear identification of first-generation college students is one key to their college success. Colleges depend on the students' responses to enrollment applications to collect the educational achievements of parents. After identifying these students, colleges must decide whom to include in their statistical data. First-generation college students for some colleges were clearly defined when neither parent attended college, while others may narrow it even further to include only parents that graduated from college. These students represent a large part of the student body at most colleges. To meet the needs of this group, colleges have created advisory committees that offer support to students, scholarship programs, and talent search programs. These aims will offer the support that these students need to attempt and complete their educational goals. This phenomenological study's aim was to understand the lived experiences of high school and former high school students and their preparedness to become first-generation college students.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the self-determination experiences of first-generation college students. Greene et al. (2019) maintained that first-generation college students are often less prepared for college than their peers, and the support needed for these students may be more formidable than the needs of other undergraduate students. Understanding the psychological needs of first-generation college students may help to increase their intrinsic motivation, which adds support and meaning to the pursuit of degree completion (Goldman et al., 2017). With in-depth, semi-structured phenomenological interviews, the study sought to understand the motivations needed for these diverse students to begin and complete their college education. A qualitative research method was used to answer the proposed research questions. This chapter discusses the research design, setting, research participants, data collection, and data analysis of the research study. This chapter also includes the steps for ensuring the trustworthiness and ethical considerations of this study.

Design

This study examined the self-determination of first-generation college students using a transcendental phenomenological approach to qualitative research. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the qualitative method is used when the primary goal is to solve a problem or issue. This method of evaluation consists of textual data that should be critically analyzed for the trends and patterns that are represented in the data (Gall et al., 2006). For this research study, the qualitative method is appropriate to research and analyze the lived experiences of first-generation college students. The inherent features of this research study clarified and explored the perspectives, beliefs, and motivations of first-generation college students' self-determination

experiences. These are first-generation college students who have completed their first year of college. Since complexity and attention to detail are needed, the qualitative method allowed the research participants to freely discuss their lived experiences as first-generation college students, which allowed greater analysis of the phenomenon. The open-ended nature of this method encourages the research participants to allow their perspectives to be discovered and formed as the phenomenon is explored. Semi-structured interviews, a focus group session, and participants' letters are components of this qualitative method that provided meaningful insight into the first-generation college students' lived experiences.

The phenomenological study, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), explains the experience that all the research participants have in common. While sharing their experiences, the researcher can understand the meaning and significance of the research participants (Moustakas, 1994). The main goal of phenomenology is to simplify the individual experiences of a phenomenon and interpret the essence of the group (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Phenomenology was the most appropriate research design for this qualitative study because I sought to identify "what" first-generation college students experienced and "how" they experienced it (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). Their unique experience is important to future first-generation college students. Edmund Husserl (1931) supported the use of phenomenology in his philosophical writings (as cited in Moustakas, 1994), and this approach helped capture the lived experiences of this diverse group of students. After collecting data from present first-generation college students, I recorded the "essence" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79) of the phenomenon examined in this study. The research questions, data collection, and data analysis included in this study are supported by a phenomenological approach to qualitative research.

I specifically used a transcendental phenomenological approach to this research study that allowed a close examination of the lived experiences of this distinct group of individuals. This approach centered the study with descriptive text interwoven into the essence of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Descriptive text is a passage that offers an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and an explanation of how the phenomenon was interpreted by the research participants (Polkinghorne, 1988). Transcendental phenomenology allowed me to present the research participants' voices as they described the phenomenon of being first-generation college students. The approach focuses more on the descriptive experiences of the research participants than on the views of the researcher (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Moustakas (1994) contended that in a transcendental phenomenological study the research participants will provide detailed insights from their experiences. Irrespective of my personal understanding, the research focused on the participants' lived experiences.

Research Questions

The research questions, including the Central Question and Sub-questions, that guided this transcendental phenomenological study are as follows:

The central research question asked:

How do first-generation college students use self-determination to persist through their college experience?

The sub-questions asked:

1. How do first-generation college students apply self-autonomy to pursue their higher education goals?
2. What are first-generation college students' perceptions of support systems that foster the development of one's relatedness to their new educational experiences?

3. What are the unforeseen obstacles that challenge first-generation college students' competence during their first year of college?

Setting

For this research study, the setting was a Facebook group for first-generation college students. This type of online platform was selected to reach this specific group of students who share common interests and shared experiences. The Facebook group had a targeted description that identified the purpose and rationale for the group. The data collection sample for this transcendental phenomenological study was drawn from a population of first-generation college students who met certain criteria. They were identified as first-generation college students because their parents do not have any college education (Adachi, 1979). Additionally, the participants in this study were at least 18 years old, classified as a sophomore or higher at a university or college in pursuit of a bachelor's degree, and enrolled as either a full-time or part-time student. The goal of this research study was to examine how self-determination affects the lived experiences of first-generation college students. These experiences may vary for different age groups of first-generation college students as life experiences may vary depending on the student's age.

Participants

The participants for this research study were members of a targeted Facebook group of first-generation college students. It is a voluntary membership, and it offered a forum for these students to exchange ideas and connect with other first-generation college students. I used purposeful sampling to select the initial participants in the study. Creswell and Poth (2018) maintained the importance of purposeful sampling, which is based on one's selective judgment. This type of sampling was used to ensure that the research participants met the selection criteria

aligned with the purpose of the research study. According to Moustakas (1994), the most important standard for the selection of the research participants is to be certain that each one has experienced the phenomenon being examined.

Creswell and Poth (2018) and Polkinghorne (1988) suggested a selection of 5–25 participants who have experienced the phenomenon. To adequately describe the phenomenon of this research study and to answer the research questions, the total sample size included 12 participants. Snowball sampling was used to expand the sample of first-generation college students through other participants and ensure data saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This is a strategy of recruitment in which selected research participants are invited to help the researcher identify other possible participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were given this opportunity at the end of the one-on-one interviews, and the identified possible participants were contacted using Messenger. Identifying other individuals interested in the research study through association with the selected research participants is an important aspect of snowball sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data saturation was noted as it occurred (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In data saturation, the research participants have provided the extent of their understanding of the phenomenon (Gall et al., 2006). When redundancy occurs, there is the assurance that findings will be similar, and it confirms the emerging themes and interpretations (Gall et al., 2006).

Procedures

I first sought approval to gather data on human subjects (Appendix A) from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Upon IRB approval, I conducted a pilot study. Hassan et al. (2006) concluded that a pilot study is one of the most important parts of a research study as it allows the researcher to understand the accessibility and practicality of the research

before the research is undertaken. Valuable data that offer important feedback, richness, and quality to a research study can be gained from a pilot study (Luong et al., 2019). Kezar (2000) maintained that researchers should use pilot studies to fully utilize the maximum potential and benefits of conducting a proposed study. The pilot study allowed me an opportunity to practice my data collection tools, such as Facebook, Messenger, and Zoom. For the pilot study, I asked three individuals who met the study's selection criteria to participate in an individual interview, a focus group session, and complete the participant letters described in the data collection section below. Completion of the pilot study provided experience with the data collection methods, set the criteria for collecting the research data, and although I did not formally analyze the data from the pilot study, I informally analyzed the data to ensure that the research questions could be answered (Moustakas, 1994). Neither the pilot study individuals nor the pilot study data were included in the research study.

After conducting the pilot study, I placed the recruitment flyer (Appendix B) in various university and/or college Facebook groups. First-generation college students who showed an interest in participating in this study messaged me to receive a recruitment letter (Appendix C) with more information and a link to the screening survey (Appendix D). The screening survey was used to obtain demographical and background data, which identified prospective research participants. Once the selection criteria were met, prospective participants were asked to join an invitation-only, private Facebook group. Those individuals who joined the private Facebook group were sent an acceptance message (Appendix E) with the Consent Form attached that included instructions for signing and returning the Consent Form before their scheduled interview. This Consent Form (Appendix F) detailed the participants' rights and responsibilities as a research participant. A thank you message of appreciation was sent to those individuals who

completed the screening survey but were not selected for the research study (Appendix E). Participants who volunteered to participate in the research study were contacted by their preferred contact information to schedule an interview.

The Researcher's Role

According to Moustakas (1994), before conducting a transcendental phenomenological research study, I reflected on the personal meaning and significance of the research topic. The personal significance is that I was a first-generation college student, and this was my lived experience over 30 years ago. As the human instrument conducting the study and collecting the data, I engaged the process of *epoché* to bracket myself in this research study (Moustakas, 1994). When I left for college, I had no idea what I was about to encounter. Upon transitioning into college, I realized that I lacked the academic preparation for the college experience, but I did have a desire to continue my education. I had entered a private college about two hours from home, which provided me with the freedom of adulthood and an identity separate from my upbringing.

Currently, I am a secondary business education instructor to 11th and 12th graders in the same Mississippi Delta community in which I grew up. This may have some bearing on the biases that I brought to this research study. I see firsthand my students' relatable experiences in high school and transition into college, and consequently, I set aside these personal experiences. I bracketed my experiences using a reflexive journal as they related to my college readiness and the experiences of my students (Moustakas, 1994). I used my reflexive journal (Appendix K) to record any biases or beliefs experienced before beginning this research study. The reflexive journal contains descriptive details of my thoughts and emotions. I did not have any prior experience with the research participants in this study. When research participants were selected

for consideration, I ensured that I did not have a personal or professional relationship with them. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasized that sharing one's own experiences with the research participants may impact the data. Undertaking these steps minimized my biases in the research study.

This research sought to give voice to first-generation college students. The basis of this research study was a transformative framework, which sought to complete the research and, most importantly, enact effective change that will improve the quality of life for future first-generation college students (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During this research, it was my task to gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon related to first-generation college students and their experiences that may be significant for future first-generation college students.

Data Collection

The lived experiences of first-generation college students were explored in this transcendental phenomenological study. The participants were first-generation college students who were at least 18 years old, classified as a sophomore or higher at a university or college in pursuit of a bachelor's degree, and enrolled as either full-time or part-time students. After receiving approval from IRB and completing my pilot study, I began the data collection process with the research participants. In qualitative research, triangulation is used to confirm validity through the analysis of the research questions from different perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). Three data collection methods were used following the principles of Moustakas (1994). I used semi-structured interviews to identify themes and lived experiences, focus groups to connect the research findings, and letters to prospective first-generation college students that explored these students' thoughts and experiences.

One-on-One Interviews

Creswell and Poth (2018) found that semi-structured interviews keep the research participants focused on the research topic and allow for creative articulation of thoughts and feelings. Interviews are important to research, as they are needed to express human interactions and activities (Yin, 2018). The procedures used to conduct the interviews are grounded in the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which kept the focus on the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall et al., 2006). Interviews with a time frame of 60 minutes were conducted with individual participants of the study. Research data were gathered through various open-ended questions that expounded upon their experiences.

Interviews were conducted on Zoom and audio-recorded, with participant consent, to ensure accuracy when documenting the phenomenon. At the end of each interview, I used the snowball sampling technique. I asked each interviewee if they knew other first-generation college students who may be interested in providing their perspectives for the research study. I asked the participants who replied that they knew one or more individuals for the Facebook contact information and contacted those individual(s) through Messenger. Four new participants were acquired through snowball sampling and were given the screening survey to ensure that the selection criteria were met.

After the interviews, I watched the video of the Zoom meeting to document the firsthand experiences through descriptive and reflective notes (Appendix M) that accurately depicted the encounter. The interviews were transcribed after each interview to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the interview. After the interviews and focus group session, the participants conducted a process called member checking, which consisted of evaluating their one-on-one interview transcripts and their portion of the focus group session.

Open-ended interview questions were used to offer a deeper understanding of first-generation college students and the self-determination to begin and complete their college education. The interview questions were created using the phenomenological interview procedures and focused on understanding first-generation college students' lived experiences (Patton, 2015). The interview questions for this study are listed below:

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions (Appendix G)

1. State your name and current classification. Give a brief introduction of yourself.
2. How did you make the choice to attend college?
3. What do you know about a first-generation college student?
4. Describe your high school experience that either prepared or did not prepare you for college.
5. How prepared were you to attend college?
6. What do/did your parents feel about you being the first person in your family to go to college?
7. What are your long-term goals for the future once you graduate from college?
8. Where did you find the most assistance with college preparation? Parents? Older Siblings? School Counselors? Teachers? Neighbors/Friends?
9. What could your high school have done to prepare you to be successful in college? Parents? This university or college?
10. To what extent do you think high school students should be categorized as first-generation college students?
11. What issues, challenges, or doubts did you have to consider the idea of attending college?
12. What support services should be implemented to support first-generation college

students?

13. What additional information do you think is important to this research study that will benefit first-generation college students?
14. Why did you choose the university or college where you are/were enrolled?
15. What support have you received prior to this interview in preparation of attending college?

Questions 1, 2, and 3 followed Patton's (2015) suggestion to ask general knowledge questions began the interview. These questions eased the participant into the interview process but also allowed for individual characterization. The establishment of a relationship between the researcher and the participant is important through these opening knowledge construction questions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The questions provided background information that increased the understanding of the participants' points of view (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The study's central research question ("How do first-generation college students use self-determination to persist through their college experience?") was addressed in the first three questions.

The first sub-question ("How do first-generation college students apply self-autonomy to pursue their higher education goals?") was related to Questions 4–7. These questions detailed the experiences of each research participant. They were guiding the study through the self-determination theory to understand the sub-questions of the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The self-determination theory is indicative of inner motivation to achieve better learning outcomes by fulfilling the basic needs, competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2018). Parents play an important role in the transition of first-generation college students into the college experience (Greene et al.,

2019). Their input or lack thereof will directly impact the first-generation college students' basic needs being met (Davidson & Beck, 2019; Goldman et al., 2017; Greene et al., 2019).

Questions 8–13 were asked to gain specific data from the first-generation college students and address the second sub-question: “What are first-generation college students' perceptions of support systems that foster the development of one's relatedness to their new educational experiences?” Research studies have found that first-generation college students have considerable difficulties upon entry into the college experience (Pratt et al., 2019; Royster et al., 2015; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017; Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019). Winnie Ma and Shea (2019) determined that first-generation college students are less acclimated to the college experience and may lack the familial support needed to have a successful college experience. Further research has concluded that peer interaction and social integration lessened obstacles encountered for first-generation college students and increased positive college experience dynamics (Whitehead & Wright, 2017; Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019). It allowed the opportunity for contributions to future research as these students provided firsthand perspectives. Elaboration through the questioning techniques allowed first-generation college students to expound upon their experience but add additional perspectives if desired (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Questions 8–10 were created to probe into the first-generation college students' supportive feelings from family and others that fill the basic need of relatedness. Researchers have found that these important relationships are key to satisfying the internal needs of these students (Greene et al., 2019; Harlow & Bowman, 2016; Hébert, 2018; Tate et al., 2015). Questions 11–13 allowed the research participants to think reflectively about the support needed for future first-generation college students to offer successful outcomes for their college experience. The open-endedness of all the interview questions provided rich, thick

descriptions of the participants' experiences as first-generation college students (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

The last set of questions was created to understand the research participants' perspectives on future research for first-generation college students. These questions were in direct reference to the third sub-question: "What are the unforeseen obstacles that challenge first-generation college students' competence during their first year of college?" Research studies have found that first-generation college students have considerable difficulties upon entry into the college experience (Pratt et al., 2019; Royster et al., 2015; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017; Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019). Winnie Ma and Shea (2019) determined that first-generation college students are less acclimated to the college experience and may lack the familial support needed to have a successful college experience. Further research has concluded that peer interaction and social integration lessened obstacles encountered for first-generation college students and increased positive college experience dynamics (Whitehead & Wright, 2017; Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019).

Focus Group

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), focus groups are small groups of research participants who accept the invitation by the researcher to participate in an open dialogue of transparent discussion. These individuals share similar backgrounds, and the focus group interaction allows them to understand different perspectives (Patton, 2015). I invited the previously interviewed students to participate in one focus group for this research study. This allowed the participants to communicate cooperatively and collectively, which may generate desirable results in the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall et al., 2006).

The focus group's purpose was to develop common trends and themes that would further benefit the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using the self-determination theory, I

remained focused on the central research question, three sub-questions, and the procedures for the focus group (Patton, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The focus group session lasted approximately one hour. The focus group participants answered open-ended questions in a semi-structured format. The focus group sessions were conducted via Zoom. I audio recorded the focus group session and took notes (Appendix M), which assisted in analyzing the audio recordings.

Standardized Open-Ended Focus Group Questions (see Appendix H)

1. State your name and classification.
2. What is your experience as a first-generation college student?
3. When you are struggling in any aspect of college, who has provided you with the support you needed? Parents? Older Siblings? College Advisors/Mentors? Professors? Neighbors/Friends?
4. What is the greatest struggle that you have experienced while attending college?
5. When struggling academically, where do you turn for academic support?
6. What else can the university or college do to provide support to first-generation college students?
7. What do you think is needed to ensure degree completion for first-generation college students?
8. What were the advantages of being classified as a first-generation college student?
9. What were the disadvantages of being classified as a first-generation college student?
10. What are your plans after the completion of your college education?
11. If you did not complete your college education, what are your plans for degree completion?

12. What inspirational words of wisdom do you feel would benefit first-generation college students?

Questions 1–2 were designed to open the dialogue of the focus group and create an ice breaker moment. This helped to re-establish a rapport with the first-generation college students and me. As the students expounded upon their experiences, Question 3 allowed a more personal and extensive thought process to understand the phenomenon on another level. It explored the support from family and others that fulfills one of the basic needs, relatedness (Greene et al., 2019; Harlow & Bowman, 2016; Hébert, 2018; Tate et al., 2015).

Since struggles are subjective, different perspectives offered different outlooks. Yin (2018) found that focus groups are effective in compiling diverse experiences. The next set of questions allowed the research participants to think reflectively about their needs as first-generation college students. As they recalled their descriptive accounts of their experiences, the students focused more intricately on the details that matter personally. These questions also presented an opportunity for the students to network and connect with others that are like-minded. This network helped the students to feel that they are not alone in this journey. This dialogue offered an atmosphere where students were free to speak and voice their opinions. Question 4 sought to understand in greater detail the intricate struggles experienced by first-generation college students. These students may feel out of place, alone, and disconnected during their college experience (Whitehead & Wright, 2017; Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019). Question 5 communicated the advisement, support services, and techniques that are utilized at a point of academic struggle. Researchers have established that colleges and universities are implementing support programs that have proven beneficial to the academic success and retention rates of first-generation college students (Ishitani, 2016; Pratt et al., 2019). Careful

consideration and reflection in the discussion of Questions 6–7 were important to the study as they provided a specific range of feedback, clarity, feelings, and perceptions that may be useful to future first-generation college students. Vega (2016) determined that emphasis should not be limited to students enrolling in college but also on retention and degree completion. Questions 8 and 9 were intended to gauge the feelings of the first-generation college students and the label that has been used to classify them. Wildhagen (2015) explored the idea of whether the classification of first-generation college students benefits anyone besides the college or university. Degree completion is the goal of first-generation college students, and Questions 10 and 11 allowed the students to offer their plans after degree completion. These questions also enabled further discussion of their plans to achieve degree completion. First-generation college students should believe that degree completion ensures that the goals that they have set for their lives and career pathways can be achieved (Azmitia et al., 2018). The last question allowed the focus group participants to offer any additional discussion they felt would add to the research study.

Letters to Future First-Generation College Students

Each research participant was asked to write a letter to prospective first-generation college students that helped me explore the thoughts and experiences of these students. As Moustakas (1994) described, participant letters can provide valuable information in addition to personal interviews. These participant letters offered detailed perceptions about their first-generation college student experience as it relates to their self-determination to pursue the college experience. Additionally, the letters provided a roadmap for students anticipating the college experience and provided early advice and support that may be needed for degree completion. At the end of the focus group, the participants were asked to create these letters and send them back

using Messenger, which protected their confidentiality. The letters were scrutinized and coded for themes and significant statements and the impact on the essence of the phenomenon.

The instructions for the participant letters were as follows (see Appendix I):

Dear Student,

As a participant in this research study, you will be asked to complete the following writing activity: “Write a letter to future first-generation college students.” Think retrospectively of your experiences as a first-generation college student. This will take approximately 30-45 minutes.

Write a letter to these students explaining your experiences from this perspective. Please provide a descriptive and detailed account of your experiences by answering the following questions, which could benefit students who may experience similar situations. Your answer to the following questions may include any aspect of your experiences from entrance tests, admissions, peer and professor interactions, and college life.

1. What details would you share about your experiences that another first-generation college student would find the most helpful for their upcoming experiences?
2. What support systems have you found the most valuable to the motivational success and self-determination needs of first-generation college students?
3. What is your understanding of life as a first-generation college student?

Please attach your letter to this message upon your completion. Thank you so much for your participation.

Data Analysis

Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that qualitative data analysis consists of data organization, thorough data analysis, coding and development of themes, data representation,

and data interpretation. Data in this research study were analyzed using horizontalization, clusters of meaning, textural and structural descriptions, and imaginative variation. Using a simplified version of Moustakas' modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, the following procedures were used to analyze the data.

Epoché

Husserl (1931) found that researchers must remove their opinions about the phenomenon to understand the research findings. Moustakas (1994) stressed the importance that the researcher performs bracketing, which requires setting aside prior thoughts on the research topic. Patton (2015) explained that the researcher must take a deep, inward reflection of thoughts, feelings, judgments, and perceptions about the phenomenon and set them aside. My prior experiences with this phenomenon as a first-generation college student were bracketed out before the research study begins. Bracketing allowed an accurate depiction of the research participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) described the concept of *epoché*, which means that the researcher will “refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things” (p. 33). I disregarded any preconceived notions about first-generation college students and focused on the research data gathered in this research study.

I used my reflexive journal (Appendix K) to record any biases or beliefs experienced before beginning this research study. The reflexive journal contains descriptive details of my thoughts and emotions. My role as the researcher is important to a constructivist study as my own values are embraced in the research study (Gangwar & Savita, 2017). After each Zoom interview, I wrote my reflections. These reflections included any mental, physical, environmental, personal, and subjective observations during the data collection process. I often

reflect on my personal experiences as a first-generation college student, but the new insight was gained from understanding others' experiences. The purpose of this research study was to examine and understand how other first-generation college students experience the phenomenon. During data analysis, the journal offered a valuable resource to help me recall specific details or nuances that could not be recorded and transcribed. Information that was chronicled in my reflexive journal offered my unbiased perspective throughout the research study.

Phenomenological Reduction

Using an open and analytical mind, I used phenomenological reduction to find significance and meaning from the interview transcriptions. This allowed me to analyze all data gathered in the study (Moustakas, 1994). Reading the transcriptions of the interviews and the focus group session more than one time offered the best opportunity to analyze what the participants experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). I created a list of significant statements through the horizontalization of data analysis that fully described the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Statements that were redundant and overlapping were omitted, leaving the statements (or codes) with significant connections to the phenomenon. From a continuous review of the research findings and codes, the themes or abstract ideas emerged. These are recorded in Table 2 under the Results section of Chapter Four.

Textural and Structural Descriptions

I categorized the significant statements into textural descriptions of what was experienced by the research participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These intense descriptions of the lived experiences of the first-generation college students focused the study. Verbatim quotations captured the self-determination efforts of the participants, which provided more understanding of the phenomenon. I analyzed themes and patterns from all participants' transcripts to gain a

deeper understanding of the research. Codes were identified corresponding to the research questions, and themes were outlined and recorded to help understand the meaning or essence of the participants' lived experiences of first-generation college students (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Memos captured my thoughts as the researcher during data analysis.

Imaginative Variation

Imaginative variation revealed the structural themes that describe the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). While reflectively thinking of the experiences of these first-generation college students on the college campus, I provided a structural description of how their experiences happened (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Significant statements were categorized as structural descriptions of how the research participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A combination of textural and structural descriptions concludes this transcendental phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994). These descriptions encompass the phenomenon of the self-determination of first-generation college students.

Trustworthiness

As the researcher of this transcendental phenomenological study, I am responsible for establishing trustworthiness in the study. Trustworthiness in this research study was ensured by credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. The principles of Lincoln and Guba (1985) were used to create the foundation of trustworthiness in qualitative studies. The following explains how these principles are used to establish trustworthiness and their use within this study.

Credibility

Credibility exists in a research study when the results of the study are believable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The research findings should be an accurate representation of the data from the

research study (Merriam, 1995). Creswell and Poth (2018) described triangulation as using several data sources, methods, and schemes to collect data on the same research topic, which ensures the validity of the findings. With the following data collection tools, one-on-one interviews, a focus group, participants' letters, and a varying participant sample, triangulation was conducted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To increase credibility in the research study, member checks were used to allow participants to check their transcripts for accuracy and edit as needed. Peer review was used to examine the raw data and findings and interpret the research study before its completion (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) characterized peer review as consultation with professional peers who will address the emerging themes and help to develop an explanation for a phenomenon. I identified two professional peers who were not connected with my research study but were experienced with qualitative research to review the results for accuracy and developing themes. The credibility of my themes was strengthened by this peer review.

Dependability and Confirmability

To achieve dependability, I transcribed the interviews upon completion of each interview. I double-checked and reread the interviews line by line to ensure accuracy. The use of a good recording device and then transcribing the data increased dependability in the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used direct quotations from the participant interviews and the focus group to report my findings, thus increasing dependability.

Memoing was used to ensure confirmability by reviewing the memos and interpreting the findings. The recommendation is to memo during every data analysis session (Creswell & Poth, 2018) looking for codes and noticeable patterns and themes to emerge (Saldaña, 2016). I used descriptive data from the interview and focus group data to ensure the confirmability of my

research study. Patton (2015) explained that there should be an undeniable connection between the data and the data analysis.

Peer review was used to examine the raw data and findings and the research study's interpretation before its completion (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) characterized peer review as consultation with professional peers who address the emerging themes and explain a phenomenon. I identified two professional peers who were not connected with my research study but had experience in qualitative research to review the results and themes for accuracy. The credibility of my themes was strengthened by this peer review.

Transferability

By providing rich, thick descriptions of the research findings through the data collection and data analysis procedures, transferability is achieved (Creswell & Poth, 2018). With data saturation during the data collection process (Moustakas, 1994), the research findings can be transferable or used for other first-generation college students. According to Patton (2015), the researcher is responsible for providing enough pertinent information on the research topic that will benefit future research studies. An audit trail (Appendix L) was used throughout the data collection process as this allowed the findings to extend to other research participants and research studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The audit trail recorded the dates and times of the research process (Gall et al., 2006).

Ethical Considerations

Through the course of this transcendental phenomenological study, there were several ethical considerations. IRB approval was obtained through Liberty University, and the research participants completed the Consent Form. The research participants volunteered for the study and understood that their participation could be rescinded at any time (Moustakas, 1994). For

additional privacy and to establish confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for the research participants. Confidentiality was agreed upon and shown by the professional peers that conducted the peer review. The confidentiality of data includes data storage on a password-protected jump drive for a period of three years. Password protection for electronic files also ensured confidentiality. These files will be permanently deleted at the end of three years. I reviewed the data relevant to the study's problem and purpose and answered the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to provide the methodology of this transcendental phenomenological study. With each step of the process carefully described, the study explored the lived experiences of first-generation college students. The interviews and the focus group session were coded to create themes, which provided a rich description of the shared experiences of these diverse students. Multiple sources of data, including one-on-one interviews, a focus group, and participants' letters, were triangulated to increase trustworthiness. Detailed in this chapter was the selection of the research participants, setting, research design, data collection, data analysis, and my role as the researcher in addressing trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the self-determination experiences of first-generation college students. The research study's goal was to discover a deeper, richer understanding of the phenomenon and its significance to the first-generation college students who have encountered these lived experiences. To better understand the research participants' experiences, the central research question ("How do first-generation college students use self-determination to persist through their college experience?") was essential to direct the research study. The research sub-questions were as follows:

SQ1: How do first-generation college students apply self-autonomy to pursue their higher education goals?

SQ2: What are first-generation college students' perceptions of support systems that foster the development of one's relatedness to their new educational experiences?

SQ3: What are the unforeseen obstacles that challenge first-generation college students' competence during their first year of college?

This chapter presents the data analysis' overall findings, which will render the participants' voices into rich and meaningful descriptions. The phenomenological reduction of the data analysis (Moustakas, 1994) is revealed in the themes derived from the data collection methods used in the study: one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and participants' letters. Textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon from the 12 research study participants will conclude this chapter.

Participants

In this research study, 12 students participated. The research participants were first-generation college students of varying ages and educational, cultural, and racial backgrounds. I used purposeful sampling to select the initial participants to collect data relevant to this research study. Criterion sampling was used to ensure that my focus was on the first-generation college students who experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I selected first-generation college students whose parents do not have any college education (Adachi, 1979). Additionally, the participants were at least 18 years old, classified as a sophomore or higher at a university or college in pursuit of a bachelor's degree, and enrolled as either a full-time or part-time student. Table 1 includes the demographic data of the participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Data

	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Interview	Letter	Focus Group
1	Leslie	19	F	x	x	
2	Barbara	19	F	x	x	x
3	Anna	23	F	x	x	x
4	Dianne	21	F	x	x	x
5	Elroy	43	M	x	x	x
6	Bob	22	M	x	x	
7	Catherine	23	F	x	x	x
8	Max	21	M	x	x	x
9	Renee	20	F	x	x	x
10	Doug	20	M	x	x	x
11	Dennis	19	M	x	x	x
12	Mary	22	F	x	x	

To begin the data collection procedures, I posted the recruitment flyer (Appendix B) in various university and college Facebook groups. My colleagues also offered to help me identify eligible students by posting the flyer in their Facebook department groups. A week went by with no response from anyone, but I soon received interest from 20 students. I sent the students the recruitment letter (Appendix C) and the Screening Survey (Appendix D), and 17 continued to show an interest. Once I reviewed their Screening Survey for eligibility, I sent each student an Acceptance Message or Thank You Message (Appendix E). Attached to the Acceptance Message was the Consent Form (Appendix F), which included instructions for signing and returning the Consent Form before their scheduled interview. The Thank You Message was sent to four students, and one student chose not to participate because of time constraints. Included below is a brief description of each first-generation college student who participated in the research study. The participants' confidentiality is protected using pseudonyms.

Leslie

Leslie is a 19-year-old biology major who is classified as a sophomore. She was involved in a variety of clubs and sports during her high school years. Leslie was in the national honor society, and she graduated in the top 10% of her class. Presently, she is a member of several student organizations at her university, the TRIO program, and Sigma Gamma Epsilon. Leslie serves actively as the Student Recruitment Organizer for Sigma Gamma Epsilon. Leslie plans upon graduation to become a marine biologist or a wildlife biologist.

Barbara

Barbara is a 19-year-old sophomore who has a double major in English and Criminal Justice. She lives at home with her parents and works two part-time jobs to pay for her education. Her plans after graduation are to enter law school and one day become a family law

attorney. She is the oldest of her siblings, and she feels the insurmountable pressure of the tasks that she is undertaking. Barbara is active on the college campus with Phi Delta Phi and Black Law Students' Association memberships.

Anna

Anna is a 23-year-old psychology major classified as a senior graduating with honors, summa cum laude. Anna has already applied and has been accepted into the master's program at her current university. Her goal is to become a clinical psychologist and work with children and adolescents. Anna is a member of the E-Mentoring network, Mentornet, which played an active role in completing her degree. Although she has older siblings who attended college, she will be the first to achieve degree completion.

Dianne

Dianne is a 21-year-old junior education major. She is currently working on licensure for her degree requirements. Her dreams are to become an elementary teacher after completing her master's degree in education. Dianne is not a member of any clubs or organizations, but she feels that she had the best college experience. She met challenges when she realized that the school of education has a very competitive entry process. Networking with others and specific organization memberships would have benefitted her application approval. She was accepted into the master's program, and she has joined Pi Lambda Theta, Phi Beta Kappa, and Education in Action.

Elroy

Elroy is a 43-year-old psychology major who is classified as a senior. He is the oldest participant, and he is very proud of his educational journey. He immigrated with his family to the United States from Africa during his teens. He has been married for 25 years and has two

teenage children. Once he graduates, Elroy immediately plans to begin the master's program in psychology. He has spent the past two summers interning at a mental health hospital. His educational experiences have been well-rounded with networking opportunities, professional organization memberships, and skilled internships.

Bob

Bob is a 22-year-old sophomore who is majoring in computer engineering. He is not a traditional college student, as he decided to work immediately upon high school graduation. Bob is the primary caregiver for his parents and two younger siblings. He had the desire to continue his education, but the needs of his family took precedent. Bob has learned how to balance family, work, and school for the past two years. His high school counselor is the person responsible for Bob deciding to continue his education. He had to overcome financial challenges, the application process, and meeting deadlines. Bob is beginning the networking process in his department and hopes to become a member of various clubs and organizations.

Catherine

Catherine is a 23-year-old anthropology major who is classified as a senior. She is in the same honor society, Phi Beta Kappa, as another research participant, Dianne. Catherine took a gap year after high school as she was unsure whether she wanted to work or pursue a career. When she began her freshman year, she was still undecided about her major, and she did not make a definitive decision until the second semester of her sophomore year. Her parents were supportive of her gap year and her initial indecisiveness about her career choice. She found the most support during those times from one of her former high school teachers and advisors in the First Year Programs at her university. Although she was no longer a first-year student, Catherine utilized its freshman year services through her sophomore year. She is now a volunteer for her

university's First Year Programs, and she appreciates the connections and support systems of the program.

Max

Max is a 21-year-old junior, and his major is business management. After high school, Max went to his local community college, took the general and requisite courses, and graduated with an accounting degree. He is confident that his community college experience prepared him for his studies at the university level. Max received a full scholarship that allowed him to work one part-time job instead of two as he had worked since high school. Presently, he serves as the Accounting Society president, and he is actively involved in the Beta Gamma Sigma Honor Society. He is the youngest in his family, but he is the first to attend college. Max's future goals include completing his degree in the next year and finding scholarships to fund his master's degree. He plans to receive all degrees without assistance from student loans.

Renee

Renee is a 20-year-old sophomore sociology major with a minor in criminal justice. She and her mother relocated to a small town near the university when she was in the second grade. Renee's mother is a single parent, and their close relationship is important. Although her mom does not have any college education, she supports Renee and her career path. Her mother's financial struggles have decreased, which initially caused Renee more stress before considering a college education. She did not know how they would afford it. Her high school counselor was very supportive in helping Renee find grants and scholarships for which she qualified. The counselor also recommended her membership in several clubs that would offer support throughout her college journey. Renee is a member of the Social Work Club, and she plans to pledge into a Greek sorority in the fall semester.

Doug

Doug is a 20-year-old music education major who is classified as a sophomore. He graduated from high school with high honors and participated in the Upward Bound program at a local university. Doug believes that his participation in this program during his 11th and 12th-grade high school years contributed to his college readiness. He knew exactly what he wanted to major in, and he is already a budding entrepreneur. He has created beginner's piano lessons for area youth. This additional source of income has helped pay for his college education. Doug's dreams include receiving his music degree and becoming a music education teacher. He believes that the arts combined with college readiness will prepare students to enter any profession or career path.

Dennis

Dennis is a 19-year-old freshman who is a commercial aviation major. He is several thousand miles from his family and friends, but he chose this university because of its top aviation program. Although his parents are career individuals and his brother is an entrepreneur, he has their support in pursuing his college education. His parents are entirely funding his college education as they know it has been Dennis' dream to become a pilot since he was a little boy. He is not a member of any clubs or organizations, but he has heard of the term "first-generation college student" from his roommate. Dennis has done well academically in his freshman year and plans to achieve his bachelor's degree within three years by taking extra credits during the summers.

Mary

Mary is a 22-year-old social work major who is classified as a senior. She has already completed the licensure requirements to become a licensed social worker. Mary struggled

academically during high school and did not feel academically secure until her sophomore year in college. She changed high schools several times between ninth and 12th grades, and she believes that this contributed to her academic struggles. She did not receive the college and career readiness that she has heard about from her peers. Mary did know that she is a first-generation college student. Her mother and her siblings support her educational journey, but she feels very alone at times. Mary is a single mother of a baby girl, and she is aware of additional obstacles. Ultimately, her dream is to complete her master's degree in social work, but she realizes that she may have to work in her field first. She is currently looking for grants and scholarships that may benefit her plans.

Results

To begin the data collection process, I conducted one-on-one interviews with each participant via Zoom. The interview questions consisted of 15 open-ended questions, which each participant was asked to answer. All quotations from participants in this section are presented verbatim, including verbal ticks and grammatical errors in speech and writing to depict the participants' voices accurately. At the end of each interview, the participants were asked to complete a letter-writing activity that allowed them to offer advice, support, and information to future first-generation college students. All 12 participants completed the participants' letters after their one-on-one interviews. The focus group session was conducted via Zoom, and nine of the 12 participants attended the session. To allow a deeper understanding to emerge of the phenomenon, 12 open-ended questions were asked. The focus of the data collection was the central research question and three sub-questions.

Theme Development

To best describe the phenomenon of the self-determination of first-generation college students, 12 participants who met the selection criteria participated in this study. Twelve participants completed the one-on-one interviews and the participants' letters, and nine participated in the focus group session. Through open expressions about their experiences, the participants were direct and honest in their responses. Even though most of the participants had persevered through several years of college, each had vivid memories of their experiences from freshman year.

Four main themes emerged from the data analysis. Throughout the research study, all the participants shared experiences of each theme evidenced in the one-on-one interviews, the focus group, and the participants' letters. The participants discussed motivation, independence and social development, academic support and resources, and college retention and completion. The arrangement of the themes is structured in conjunction with the research questions. Provided in the next sections is the in-depth discussion of the codes and corresponding themes. Table 2 includes the codes and corresponding themes.

Table 2

Codes and Corresponding Themes

	Codes	Corresponding Themes
1	family, parents, single mothers, intrinsic, extrinsic, mentors	Motivation
2	socially unprepared, new independence, insecurity, labeling	Independence and Social Development
3	academic advising, counseling center, college tutoring, access to technology	Academic Support and Resources
4	freshman to sophomore year support, financial pressures, imposter syndrome	College Retention and Completion

Motivation

A common theme among all the participants was motivation, as they found it critical and influential in every aspect of their educational journeys. Their motivation is attributed to the commitment to persist through their college experience and seek educational achievement. In research conducted by Goldman et al. (2017), the researchers found that first-generation college students' motivation is linked to their self-determination, and it provides support as they pursue their education. Self-esteem, personal life, family stressors, and the complexity of courses may impact their motivational levels. Motivation must be present for one to think that their goals are achievable and to remain self-determined. Renee stated the following during her interview:

My mom is my biggest supporter. She has been a single parent all my life. All my life, it has just been me and her; us against the world. I will be the first in my family to receive a college degree. That is part of my motivation every day. Not just to achieve something that no one in my immediate family has, but to make my mom proud of me. I do not know my father, and I have no relationship with any of his family. My motivation is my mom and the rest of my family. I am encouraging my younger cousin to consider college.

Max shared:

My parents have no clue as to what I am experiencing while at college. I do not want to burden them with everything, and most of it they would not understand it. It becomes frustrating and lonesome at times, but I pull from the support system of my friends, mentors, and roommates. My parents motivate me to keep going when I do voice some concerns with them. My dad is so proud that he is already planning a huge graduation

party for me when I graduate. Their motivation is not directly what I need, but I know that I am lucky to have that. At least they do not discourage me and my dreams.

The new experiences that accompany college can be overwhelming, and the participants voiced concerns about branching out, considering the unfamiliarity with the learning environment. During the focus group discussion, Barbara emphasized, “My parents was a huge support as they reached out to their friends for advice when I came to them with issues. That reassured me that they are my biggest supporters.” The self-determination theory strongly aligns with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation factors that promote academic achievement (Vansteenkiste et al., 2018). For instance, although the participants have persisted through the first year of college, they have experienced obstacles impacting their motivation and self-determination. Bob shared during his interview, “I wanted to quit college several times; it has been tough to keep my momentum and drive for school. The well-being of my family is the most important thing to me.” Successful completion of the freshman year involves many different things working together, which are even more challenging for first-generation college students. College readiness, financial aid, college curriculums, and required school supplies may hinder these students. The drive to persevere and keep up with the demands of college will decline without motivation and assistance. Doug explained:

I ran into financial issues at the beginning of my sophomore year. It was one of the most stressful times of my college career. I knew that my parents did not have the money to help me, so I had to figure something out. The financial aid office offered me a payment plan to finish paying my tuition. I started back with teaching piano lessons to elementary students. My parents helped me as much as they could and combined with the lessons, I

was able to finish my freshman year out. I have continued with the lessons, and I have learned how to budget my money, manage my coursework, and continue my education.

Leslie lamented:

Although I was academically prepared for college, but I was not prepared for the loss that my family suffered. Both of my grandparents died within a few months of each other, and it was the hardest time for my family. I was not prepared mentally to deal with the grief that I experienced. It was the encouragement and motivation of my parents that pulled me out of a very dark place. They sought mental health professionals for me, and I pulled through it. I am still going through, but I now have the tools to manage my feelings and emotions. I know that everyone was initially worried about me.

The motivation of first-generation college students is paramount and is a major deciding factor in degree completion. Participants agreed that their motivation keeps them going through the good and the trying times, which positively contributes to their education. In the focus group session, Elroy admitted:

My children are my constant motivation. I want them to see me fulfilling my dreams.

My parents are descendants of an oppressed culture, and I want to reach beyond their expectations. And I am doing that by completing my college education. Although they don't know the right words to say to motivate me, they let me know how proud they are of my accomplishments. What I am doing is beyond any dreams that they had for me.

They wanted better opportunities when we came to this country, but they were careful to not dream too big. I am raising my children differently. I want to be the example.

The learning environment, the college courses' complexity, personal life struggles, and self-esteem have influenced students' motivation. Catherine expressed,

I knew that I could succeed in achieving my college education. My parents instilled in me from an early age that I was going to attend college. They wanted more opportunities for me than they had. Both of them came from backgrounds of poverty. Although they didn't go to college, they are a success story to just make it out of their neighborhood. They are my motivation when I get down or want to give up. They keep me going; they sacrifice so much for me.

One's belief in their success directly affects their motivation level. Dennis stated the following:

My motivation will always come from within. I know exactly what I want to do with my life. I cannot depend on anyone else to motivate me. My parents have been motivating me all of my life, and now it's my time. Besides, they are so far away that I had to pull from within because they are not right here with me. It's probably for the best.

Dianne further mentioned:

Being a first-generation college student, I was prepared for some challenges. My inner motivation was something that I didn't think about. I have a lot of siblings on both sides of my family. When I very young, my parents divorced, remarried, and started new families. Having this split between the two families was always stressful to me. I am the oldest and only child that they had together, so that causes tension. They both want the best for me, but it seems like a competition at times. I have learned how to motivate myself just in case I can't or don't receive it from them.

Mary confided that since the birth of her daughter, her motivation is coming from a different place:

My daughter is my main motivation now. My parents went from being my parents to grandparents, motivating me to achieve my goals and dreams to being the primary

caregivers for my daughter and funding my education to paying childcare costs. The dynamics have really changed, and we are all adjusting. Their motivation for me has the welfare of my daughter as the main concern. Whereas they use to just talk about what I was going through at college to the challenges, joys, and concerns of their new role, grandparents. I realize that I am lucky to have them. I wouldn't be able to finish school without their support.

Independence and Social Development

Several of the participants, Mary, Dennis, and Max, did not feel socially prepared for college. Their first-generation status united them, but their varying high school experiences and personal lives caused them to feel socially unprepared. Mary discussed, "I know that I am socially behind my peers because I changed high schools so many times during those years. I was pretty much a loner and didn't see the need to communicate with others." Dennis stated, "I did not realize how sheltered a life I had lived prior to college. My parents and my brother were my world." During the focus group, Max discussed:

Coming to my university from community college was a huge shocker for me. It was like night and day in comparison. I went from small classroom settings to 20 sections of one class with 35-40 students. The independence and social development that I had gained while attending community college paled in the expectations needed to succeed at a university. I had to acclimate to my new surroundings very quickly.

These participants loved the idea of leaving home and gaining new independence and freedom, but they did not understand the limitations in their experiences. During the formative years, absent of their parent's watchful eyes, first-generation college students want more

autonomy, but support is still needed to pursue their higher education goals (Wang & Nuru, 2017). Bob stated in his letter:

As a first-generation college student, you are not just changing the life of yourself but also the life of the upcoming generations after you. Taking that first step to go to college and be independent takes a lot of courage and determination.

In her letter, Leslie wrote:

I know being the first can be stressful or difficult for different reasons; maybe you do not have enough guidance on the process or there is a lot of external pressure for you to attend college. From my experience, the first steps can be a bit scary as you are not sure how to apply, where to go, if you are qualified enough.

They believed that their peers who are not first-generation college students had parents and family as a support system. This support system is what they believed enabled their peers to address better any issues that may be faced in college. Dennis offered, “My parents are very successful people in their careers, but they could not relate to my need to be more independent and social in college.” Dennis felt that he had to learn how to communicate with his instructors and other individuals in his aviation program. Since there were varying age groups in his program, the challenge was learning how to talk to everyone individually. Catherine explained, “The hard part for me was the professor interactions and college life in general. The admission process is easy especially with all of the ongoing technology, but the hard part of college for me was the interactions with professors.” The participants’ desire to earn a college education was steeped in building their independence and improving their well-being. Anna discussed:

Being the youngest daughter of my family, I was always spoon-fed, I always had my stuff done for me, which had made me dependent. One of the things that we as humans

do not enjoy much is dependency. Having independence is the key to power, one must have the independence to decide, and choose freely where they want to go. My parents always supported me in my decision to go to college and go as far as I want to go in life.

The participants also included their feelings of insecurity with identifying with other cultures. College was several participants' first experience with other cultures. Anna explained, "My high school did not have many different cultures and ethnicities. My college experience has helped me to develop relationships with people that do not look like me." Dianne admitted, "Before college, I was not familiar or even comfortable around other races. I just did not have that experience growing up." This thought came up when Dianne was asked, "How do first-generation college students apply self-autonomy to pursue their higher education goals?" Dianne met a diverse group of peers in the education department, and her professors had diverse backgrounds and cultures. This was an eye-opening experience, and she explained, "I want to become the best educator for elementary children one day. I realized that I had to embrace other cultures and diverse backgrounds to effectively teach children." Renee advised:

One of the experiences I had was with the diverse community in college. I went to a private high school, which made my social skills weak because I only interacted with people of the same community as mine. Going to college was a huge shock because there were all sorts of people, so one of the pieces of advice I would give a future first generation college student would be to be confident, talk to people, make connections with all sorts of people.

During the focus group session, Elroy identified one of his greatest fears as being labeled the "angry Black man." Barbara agreed with Elroy as she has been careful about her potential label, "angry Black woman." Elroy explained that "just trying to get your point across may

intimidate others.” He added, “I have learned how to effectively communicate with others, even those with differing opinions.” Barbara expounded, “It is important to listen for understanding and not necessarily rebuttal.” Catherine has learned “it is not always good to remain silent; that my feedback is an important contribution to the conversation. This totally contradicts my personality, and I like that.” In the focus group session, she shared, “

University professors have a hard job so they cannot keep holding your hand to lead you on. To be considered or recognized by a professor you have to make yourself recognizable. When I came to college I never talked in classes or professors, or instead, I never made friends in college. If I could go back to the start, I would do all those things that I didn’t.

All participants agreed that remaining open to understand and learn from others is beneficial to broadening their independence and social development. Each experience meets the basic need for autonomy and strengthens their commitment to their college education and degree completion (Davidson & Beck, 2019). Max confessed:

One of my best friends is from Pakistan. I wouldn’t have even thought this friendship was possible. We took some classes together last semester and we just connected. It has helped me to be a more rounded person because I am not afraid to ask him questions and understand his culture. He has straightened out a lot of misconceptions that I had.

Academic Support and Resources

All 12 participants described academic advising as a necessary resource that can contribute to success in college. Barbara stated, “I wish that I had taken more advantage of academic advising during my freshman year of college. I really struggled to find my way through different first-year challenges.” Elroy advised in his letter, “Find the library and writing

center as soon as you arrive on campus; it will be a life-saver.” The participants agreed that academic advising is different from college to college, but its services, discussing the college’s programs and policies, direction for educational and career goals, and deciding proper course selections, are important to the growth and maturity of college students. The desire for an interpersonal relationship with a group is referred to as relatedness (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). Self-determined students need to feel connected to their learning environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Dennis discussed:

When I arrived at the college campus, I felt like an alien in a new land. I had depended on my parents for everything, and this new experience was challenging. I knew that I could not keep my reliance on my parents to figure things out for me; I had to do that on my own. My advisor made me feel comfortable having the most mundane questions and concerns. I would not have made it through this first year of college without her. The aviation program is new to the college, so it was important for the school to pair each one of us with a mentor. This made me feel like I was not the only one that needed individualized help.

In her letter, Mary expressed:

My best advice for this would be to not be afraid to ask. Guidance counselors, advisors, or even teachers can be very helpful with the process. They can break it down and help you along the way. Personally, I did not ask around and did not have a lot of guidance on how to go to college but rather had a stroke of luck it seems. Looking back there were many resources available, but I did not take advantage of them. I think it would be great for you to take advantage of these resources to ease your path.

In his letter, Doug advised:

I would also like to let you know that it can get hard in college to manage stress, and during the times you feel as if you can't do it anymore don't let yourself stop. There is help out there for you, and I am sure so many of your class fellows are going through the same things. Counseling centers or a therapist can help you as a first-generation college student.

In the absence of their parents, first-generation college students will possibly use the college support services, such as tutoring and counseling (Lancaster & Xu, 2017; Seidel & Kutieleh, 2017). During the focus group session, Leslie and Renee said that they “experienced mental health issues with deaths in their families,” which led to them spending many hours in the counseling center. They admitted that they did not know that their colleges had a counseling center until it was needed. Renee said, “Since I was away from home, I had to deal with my loss by myself. I was in constant contact with my parents, but during this time, I felt more alone.” Catherine stated, “I have been overwhelmed with so many different situations throughout my college journey that I have relied on the counseling center. My parents supported me from afar, but I needed something more hands-on to make it through.”

College tutoring is another resource that the participants found important to their college success. Bob indicated, “I did not realize the benefits of tutoring until it was almost too late. I was failing math; it was bad.” Bob advised in his letter, “Find out about college tutoring, and do not be ashamed.” Barbara and Elroy admitted in their one-on-one interviews that they “have used the tutoring center every semester.” During the focus group session, Diane expressed that she found a good tutor through her “honor society membership.” She asserts that being a member has more than one advantage; she has made valuable connections. First-generation college students may feel stressed if they do not understand the content being taught, and

tutoring can help reteach and reinforce the learning material. Tutoring can reduce the stress that is associated with being underprepared and facing academic challenges. This will strengthen their self-autonomy, self-efficacy, and self-determination. During his one-on-one interview, Max said,

Although I had an associate degree in accounting, I still relied on the tutoring center. It gave me more confidence in accounting. Whereas I was ashamed about not knowing accounting formulas and equations, I now do not hesitate to still seek the tutoring center for guidance. I know the statistics on graduates who successfully pass the CPA exam. I want to do everything that I can to be sure that I am prepared for it.

The participants attributed access to technology as another valuable resource. Since technology has advanced, most college courses have an online component in the curriculum. Students will need access to the appropriate technology, such as a high-speed computer and Internet capabilities, to complete the coursework. In his one-on-one interview, Bob said, "I did not realize the advantage of my computer applications class in high school. I was not prepared to create documents and type." He saw how other students were proficient in typing and completing assignments, and he knew that he had to make improvements. In the focus group session, Anna, Dianne, and Elroy discussed that they experienced major computer issues. Anna stated, "I had to buy a new computer. I really could not afford one at the time, but I had to make the sacrifice." Dianne and Elroy expressed how they had to utilize the library and computer lab for an extended period until they could afford a new computer. Barbara revealed,

My parents bought me a new computer when I graduated from high school. We have Internet at our home that I am grateful for. In between working two part-time jobs, I really do not have time to visit the library or the computer lab to get work done. I can

work on assignments in between my job and classes. I know that this is a huge advantage.

Elroy stated that since he has changed jobs, he can utilize technology at his job after work. In her one-on-one interview, Leslie noted that “My university has more than one computer lab strategically placed around the campus. This works best for me, and I feel safe at night when I am late returning to my dorm room.” Having access to technology, Internet, and computers was an important aspect of academic development and support for these participants. In Catherine’s letter, she advised, “Check the bulletin boards in the computer labs; this is where students can find helpful information on so many topics. You may find tutoring services, part-time jobs, and items for sale.” The participants confirmed what researchers have conveyed, such as Law et al. (2019), that students excel academically when resources are available and accessible.

College Retention and Completion

The alternative to the available and effective support systems for first-generation college students is often the obstacle that challenges college retention and degree completion. Identifying these challenges is a way to find solutions. All participants discussed in detail the challenges experienced and overcome on their college journeys. Among the challenges were freshman to sophomore year support, financial pressures, and imposter syndrome.

All participants noted the lack of support after their freshman year. Several participants, Catherine, Doug, Leslie, and Anna, were members of their college’s First Year Program. Membership in this group helped the young first-generation college students to acclimate to the college experience. Leslie and Anna continue to remain friends with other members that they met in the program. Elroy admitted in his one-on-one interview, “I did not make much effort in

my freshman year to join my university's First Year Program; I wish that I had." He was in a different phase of his life with already having a family and other responsibilities. In the focus group session, Renee explained, "I struggled at the beginning of my sophomore year because I did not have the support that I had in my freshman year. I did not know what to do." Doug agreed:

When I began at my university, there was all of this help available. It's like it just disappeared and it was hard for me to transition without it. I had to seek help from some of the same sources that were available to me during my freshman year. I am glad that they didn't turn me away. My plan is to join some clubs and organizations soon.

Max felt, "A let down and disappointment is the only way to describe the abrupt loss of support. The only thing that saved me is that I had befriended one of the advisors, and we continued to communicate." First-generation college students may be adversely affected by the sudden loss of support from one year to the next. Finding new resources, friends, and mentors can be a challenge in an already challenging situation. However, first-generation college students believe in their competence that achieving their college education is a probable outcome (Garriott et al., 2015; Kyndt et al., 2018). Mary made the consideration, "Maybe they should create support systems that are specific to each classification. Even though I am a senior, I still have questions and need guidance." Elroy made a similar suggestion in the focus group session:

Yes, I am a senior, but I still struggle at times. Since I don't live on campus, I feel disconnected sometimes. Luckily, I have friends on campus, and they keep me in the loop about different things. I also stay informed from my university's Facebook group, but I don't really have a lot of time to be on Facebook. It would be good to have a support group for each classification.

Doug agreed, but with exceptions:

My university has so many different groups. Creating another group would not necessarily solve this issue. Students need to be more involved and proactive in their individual needs. Either that or you just have a bunch of groups and no members. What works for one may not work for others.

The only participant who did not have a job is Dennis. Whether they had one or two jobs or work-study, most participants believed that they balanced school and work the best way possible. Barbara shared in her letter,

College can be really expensive, and for me, if it was not for FAFSA I wouldn't be going to college, because I couldn't afford it. So, for the future first-generation student, I would suggest save up money before going to college and look into scholarships or any sort of financial help you can get go for it.

Bob admitted in the focus group session, "I had to reduce my hours from full-time to part-time because it became very hectic. I had to find a balance." Leslie explained:

After my freshman year, I figured out how to blend school and work. I coordinated all my classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, even if I had to take a night class. This allowed me to be free of classes on Monday, Wednesday, and Fridays, which I used to work, do my schoolwork, and catch up on sleep. I would not advise anyone to schedule classes for every day of the week. It can be very time-consuming and overwhelming, especially if you have a job.

In the focus group session, Elroy explained that he did not have many options as he is the sole provider for his family. "My full-time job is helping me to provide for my family and fund my education." Barbara expressed:

I am looking for an opportunity where I can work one full-time job instead of two part-time jobs. My boss at my second job works me into the schedule once I know my schedule at my first job. I appreciate him working with me. It would not work otherwise.

Anna stated, “My job has not interfered with my schoolwork as much as it does to my personal life. I don’t have time to socialize and just relax. I have learned how to balance school and work.”

Several participants were more academically prepared for college than others, which may have given them the advantage to balance college and a job. Although the participants learned how to balance the two, having a job while trying to complete a college education was challenging. Awareness of these challenges should help colleges and universities consider their effect on retention and degree completion rates.

All participants felt unmerited favor or a negative sense of belonging. They felt undeserving of their college education, especially during their freshman year. Imposter syndrome is characterized by a lack of confidence and is accompanied by feelings of inability that will to be discovered soon (Petee et al., 2015). These feelings were more evident when compared to their peers who did not identify as first-generation college students. Further, the participants deemed the additional support given for being a first-generation college student a consequence of their academic success. This increased the lack of confidence. Dianne explained, “I knew that I was a first-generation college student, but I didn’t encounter many others in my major.” Barbara lamented that “I was the only Black student in most of my classes, and I felt like I didn’t fit in.” Dennis expressed:

Most of my classmates were local. I am from California, and it was hard for me to relate to them. Our interests were so different, but we had the love of flying as a common thing. I had to reassure myself that I deserved to be in this program as much as they did. Elroy explained, “My strong African accent made me feel inadequate when speaking aloud. On paper, I could compete against the best, but I did not feel the same in my speaking voice.”

Ten of the 12 participants were members of a student organization, honor society, fraternity, or sorority. Anna explained in the focus group session:

I found the online mentor/mentee program, Mentornet, in my junior year, and it has made the difference for me. My mentor is a clinical psychologist at a major hospital. She has advised me on my course selection, and she has written a letter of recommendation as part of the application process for the psychology master’s program. I stumbled onto Mentornet just searching the Internet, and it was a good find.

When Anna mentioned Mentornet, the other science majors were interested in it. They had not heard of it before. Anna went on to explain the process of how to join and how to find a mentor. Leslie liked the fact that Mentornet is an online platform. She stated, “I just don’t have any time to physically make meetings; I miss my club meetings all the time. Maybe this type of format will work better for me.” Catherine understood Leslie’s point. She expressed,

I live in my sorority dorm, and this has helped keep me centered. These women are like my sisters . . . we are connected. They offer insight, encouragement, and support. I wouldn’t have made it through this last year without them. I have lived in the regular residence hall, so I have both experiences.

Renee reiterated this point in her letter: “Please join clubs/organizations that seem interesting to you in college. Get to know your professors, they may become your mentors and/or your

recommendation letter writers depending on what you want to do after college.” The relationships found in these memberships proved to be an asset for these participants despite feeling like an imposter. Imposter syndrome may be an unforeseen obstacle for retention and degree completion in colleges and universities.

Research Question Responses

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the self-determination experiences of first-generation college students. The data analysis was influenced by the participants' responses to the research questions about their self-determination experiences. The one-on-one interviews, the focus group session, and the participants' letters offered the participants an opportunity to provide details of their experiences. An explanation of the responses is discussed below.

Central Question

How do first-generation college students use self-determination to persist through their college experience? It was important to explore the lived experiences of first-generation college students' self-determination and how it is needed to persist through their college experience. In this study, self-determination factors referred to psychological needs that directly impact students' motivation to achieve academic success. All 12 participants in the study met the selection criteria as first-generation college students who were at least 18 years old, classified as a sophomore or higher at a university or college in pursuit of a bachelor's degree, and enrolled as either a full-time or part-time student. The unique characteristics of the participants contribute to the literature on self-determination and first-generation college students.

The study's findings revealed that first-generation college students persisted through their college experience by understanding their needs and seeking available resources. Also found in

this research study is their awareness of their identity and its importance and necessity to their academic success. Although the participants in this study did not use the term self-determination, they described this key concept in their experiences that motivated them to make decisions and control their lives. Catherine explained, “When I told my parents I wanted to go to college, they as an entire family decided to break all the norms and so-called ‘traditions’ of my ancestors to let me be free.” Dianne revealed,

My understanding of life as a first-generation college student has changed throughout the years. When I started college, I didn’t have many good views about myself. But over the years, I have realized that I might not see a change now, but I am doing a huge thing for future generations.

Self-determined students are passionate and motivated individuals, which allows them to increase their abilities to make meaningful contributions to their learning experience (Howard et al., 2016). Anna expressed,

Now that I am a senior and about to enter grad school, I have way more confidence than I had starting out. I can encourage the next first-generation college student to hang in there and don’t give up. There will be challenges, but you can achieve your goals. I have gone through so much since my freshman year, and it has made me a better person and student.

I know grad school will not be easy, but I’m ready.

First-generation college students understand that their self-determination is critical to their persistence through college (Ishitani, 2016; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). They have committed to pursuing their education and completing their academic goals. The challenges that affect their self-determination may vary depending on their experiences (Covarrubias et al., 2018). Yet, the

challenges raise the likelihood of first-generation college students' persistence and completion of their college education.

Participants identified challenges to their competence as a source of concern as a first-generation college student. These challenges are not consistent with the confidence that is needed to achieve their goals. Students examined persistent motivations as an important factor to student academic success. Familial support, mentorship, and friendships created a learning environment in which first-generation college students could apply self-autonomy, develop relatedness, and challenge competence.

Sub-Question 1

How do first-generation college students apply self-autonomy to pursue their higher education goals? The objective of this sub-question was to determine the first-generation college students' level of self-autonomy and how it was developed and applied during the college experience. According to Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, students must develop a sense of autonomy or self-regulation to engage in the learning environment successfully. The results of the data analysis revealed several factors of self-autonomy, which were further divided into codes and corresponding themes. The codes allowed for closer examination into the self-autonomy factors that these first-generation college students experienced. Based on the findings in the study, the following codes have been described as self-autonomy factors for first-generation college students: socially unprepared, new independence, insecurity, and labeling.

Many of the first-generation college student participants who persisted through college felt that they were not socially prepared for the college experience. Participants classified as higher than their sophomore year believed that they are more prepared now than they were as

entering first-year students. They mentioned that their communication skills have improved, and they have made major adjustments to college life. Other participants related how their participation in clubs and organizations has helped them feel capable of social interactions in their college experiences. Dennis stated, "I came from a close-knit family. We socialized among our other immediate family members." Mary expressed, "The high schools that I attended were very large schools with several hundred students in each class. Because I moved so much during this time, I didn't know anyone; it was too much of a hassle." Max discussed:

The small community college setting that I transferred from limited my expectations for my university. Coming from a small high school and then small community college, I just wasn't prepared for my university. I thought I knew how to communicate well with others until it was people from different cultural backgrounds than I was familiar.

Most of the participants believed that they were more academically prepared for college than they were socially prepared. All participants agreed that they have learned how to socially interact and communicate better since their freshman year, even on their jobs. From the self-autonomy factors that these participants experienced, the independence and social development theme emerged. Presently in her sophomore year, Leslie said, "I have been promoted to assistant manager at my job; my social skills have improved a lot." Dennis admitted, "It feels good to talk with new people and be at ease in that conversation. I realized that I had to speak for myself and learn how to do it quickly." Barbara discussed, "I found my voice in one of my anthropology classes. I believe that I am more effective in my delivery, and my confidence level is so much higher." Initially, the participants admitted that they observed others and their interactions and became more confident in their own social development. The insecurities, errors, and failures

are consistent with the growth needed to apply self-autonomy in the pursuit of their college education.

Sub-Question 2

What are first-generation college students' perceptions of support systems that foster the development of one's relatedness to their new educational experiences? All of the participants expressed their perceptions of the support programs available during their college journeys. In her one-on-one interview, Renee explained that "I wouldn't have made it without the counseling center. I was under so much pressure . . . I learned coping skills." Dennis chimed in, "The college tutoring was the miracle for me. I needed some serious guidance fast. I was failing my math class, and these were classes that I was already on a payment plan for." In his participants' letter, Bob wrote,

Use the services that are provided on your college campus. When you feel overwhelmed or insecure about ANYTHING, seek help. These services are available FREE for students. I was reluctant at first, but my counseling center and college tutoring center are my go-to.

All participants acknowledged that their relatedness or sense of importance was key to their academic success. Their focus centered on connecting and improving their relationships with others. They each wanted to be independent and self-reliant during their college experience. Elroy and Bob advised during the focus group session about the importance of seeking help from professors. Bob said, "I was intimidated at first to approach my professors in the beginning, but I realized that they were there to help." Elroy discussed,

I was reluctant to reach out to my professors. They had so many students, and I felt like just another number in their classes. But I approached one of my professors after class,

and that was the turning point. He took several hours one day to help me understand his coursework. He let me know that he appreciated me asking for help. He wished that other students would do the same. Asking for help let my professor know that I was interested in learning. That made the difference for me. I have developed a relationship with all of my professors now.

Effective support systems that are available to students are vital to their academic success and development. Colleges and universities should make campus resources and support services available to students to help build decision-making and critical thinking skills. These skills will prove beneficial in the long-term development of relatedness for these students.

Sub-Question 3

What are the unforeseen obstacles that challenge first-generation college students' competence during their first year of college? Whether the student classification is sophomore, junior, or senior, all participants believe they will graduate from college. They have experienced various obstacles throughout their journeys. The consensus of the greatest obstacle is financial insecurity from year to year. Max revealed,

I thought that my full scholarship covered everything, but I found out that I was short \$1,200. I didn't want to drop out of college; I had come so far. My parents helped me; they saved me. I am working extra hours now to pay them back, but I appreciate them having the money to bail me out.

Financial pressures are major barriers that hinder academic success. Although there are financial aid resources available, students may be unaware of the various sources that offer assistance.

Catherine stated, "I had saved up a good amount of money during my gap year, but I had to purchase a new computer and get some work done on my car. That took my savings to zero."

Barbara agreed that “I didn’t find out about grants that I qualified for until it was too late. When I realized that I could have received several grants and refunded the difference, I was so upset about it.”

All 12 participants have battled the imposter syndrome at certain points in their college journey. Elroy revealed, “Even though I am a senior, I still have feelings of inadequacy surrounding my academic abilities.” Bob explained,

Every time I hear from my mom, I question myself am I doing the right thing by being in college. I feel tremendous guilt that I am not there helping her with my sister and brother. She reassures me that she is okay and not to worry, but I do. I send her as much money to help with the bills that I can each month. It is a heavy burden that I carry. I wish for the day that I can help her more financially.

Leslie shared in her participant’s letter, “Don’t worry about your parents too much; they have been parents longer than you have been a student.” She admitted that this area was a struggle for her in the beginning. Barbara agreed in the focus group session, “I didn’t feel confident in my new role as student either. My parents always reassure me that ‘they’ve got it.’” Imposter syndrome is real thoughts that instill the fear and isolation that all participants experienced. They had constant feelings of unworthiness. Dianne said,

I questioned whether I should be an education major and if I should become a teacher one day. It has been my dream since I was a child to be a teacher. I went through a stage where I really considered changing my major. My advisor counseled me through it; it was tough. It’s such an honor to be a teacher, and I questioned my background and childhood wondering if I was fit.

All participants advised in their participant letters that first-generation college students join clubs and organizations to connect with supportive mentors and peers. Participants had mostly positive experiences as first-generation college students.

Summary

Included in Chapter Four were detailed descriptions of the research participants, themes, and narratives that the data analysis yielded through one-on-one interviews, a focus group session, and participants' letters. A total of 12 students participated in the study. The participants' voices could be heard through rich and detailed descriptions. Motivation, independence and social development, academic support and resources, and college retention and completion were the four themes that emerged through the data analysis. The themes answered the central question and three sub-questions and established the foundation for developing a deeper understanding of first-generation college students' self-determination experiences. The findings were presented in a narrative format and grouped by emergent themes. Participant responses were presented in quotations to reaffirm the answers to the research questions and the applicable themes.

The one-on-one interviews, a focus group session, and participants' letters yielded results that confirmed the self-determination needed to persist through the college experience. Overall, the participants described their first-generation college student experiences as rewarding, challenging, and self-determined. Important factors that were consistently discussed to successfully navigate, persist, and persevere through the college experience included intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, utilization of available resources, and effective communication skills. Even though most participants expressed their social and academic unpreparedness for college, all first-generation college students relied on various resources and tools to use self-

determination to persist through their college experience. Participants addressed the need for additional supports at the high school and college level to meet the self-determined needs of first-generation college students. All participants articulated pride, accomplishment, and gratitude in their academic performance through their freshman year and found greater confidence in their abilities to achieve their learning outcomes.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the self-determination experiences of first-generation college students. A group of 12 students was purposefully selected to participate in the study. This chapter summarizes the research results important to the first-generation college student's experiences at a college or university. This is followed by an empirical and theoretical discussion of the research results. Further, the chapter examines the study's theoretical, empirical, and practical implications, including the delimitations and limitations. Finally, there are recommendations for future study and a chapter summary.

Summary of Findings

Using Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological research design, four themes emerged that provided the essence of the phenomenon. These themes were motivation, independence and social development, academic support and resources, and college retention and completion. The study's research questions, which will be addressed here, were answered using these themes. Students' experiences from one-on-one interviews, a focus group session, and participants' letters were used to understand better the needs, accomplishments, and obstacles of first-generation college students. As the participants thematically identified their experiences, the central question and three sub-questions were addressed.

The study's results revealed important initiatives for colleges and universities to consider. To begin, first-generation college students need support and guidance beginning in their high school experience. Next, support and guidance are crucial during the first-generation college students' first year of college, but they will continue to need assistance throughout their college

experience. Finally, effective resources are needed for first-generation college students to overcome challenges and obstacles to persist through their college experience.

Central Question

How do first-generation college students use self-determination to persist through their college experience? The central question was answered from the descriptive details provided by the 12 participants on their college experiences. Four themes included participant experiences that examined the self-determination factors for them to succeed in their first year of college and complete their education. All participants discussed how important it is to have a supportive network of family, friends, mentors, faculty, staff, and advisors to provide guidance and assistance in navigating the college experience. They agreed that this support system was essential as challenges arose, and these individuals truly cared and wanted them to succeed. Financial insecurity is a major concern for many participants as they are the primary funding source for their education. Eleven of the 12 participants shared positive feelings about how their independence levels have increased since their freshman year and the importance of developing social skills.

Sub-Question 1

How do first-generation college students apply self-autonomy to pursue their higher education goals? All participants expressed varying situations that required them to exert their independence to manage conflicts and create balance in their lives. Autonomy is described as a person's ability to think and act independently (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Many participants shared sensitive details about the experiences used to support independence and social development, including racial insecurities, growing pains, and seeking help from others. All participants discussed using techniques learned from high school interactions, trial and error, and observing

others' interactions to build independence. All participants expressed the importance of developing self-autonomy as it is needed to consider meaningful alternatives and opportunities and create a dialogue with others.

Sub-Question 2

What are first-generation college students' perceptions of support systems that foster the development of one's relatedness to their new educational experiences? The participants sought counseling or realized that they should seek counseling for various issues that may lead to mental health crises or potential impediments that disrupt academic focus. The decision to attend college and leave their families continues to be a challenge for several participants. Three of the 12 participants do not have the familial support that others rely on to support them as they strive to reach their higher education goals. Anxieties and guilt often complicate first-generation college students' attempts to acclimate to college and pursue higher education. Surprisingly, the participants who lived near their homes but on the college campus felt they had forsaken their families for their education. Participants acknowledged several support services that have helped them cope with college life stresses, such as academic advising, the counseling center, college tutoring, and technology services.

Sub-Question 3

What are the unforeseen obstacles that challenge first-generation college students' competence during their first year of college? During the research for this sub-question, the themes that emerged were freshman to sophomore year support, financial pressures, and imposter syndrome. In all three data collection methods, most of the participants discussed these themes several times. These challenges are important in overcoming obstacles that hinder the achievement of their first-generation college students' learning outcomes in the first year.

Consideration for these themes to be addressed in the first year of college may be beneficial in improving persistence and perseverance for first-generation college students. Although several admitted that they were not socially prepared for college, their commentary in the data collection positively affected their academic, social, and personal well-being.

Discussion

The responses provided during data collection were sequential, and their meanings were clearly defined in the data analysis because the interview and focus group questions were asked in the order of the research sub-questions. Ryan and Deci's (2000, 2017) self-determination theory guided this transcendental phenomenological study to understand first-generation college students' lived experiences. The results were contrasted to the existing theory of Ryan and Deci (2000, 2017) to affirm and substantiate detailed descriptions of challenges and achievements for these students. Four themes emerged from the data analysis: motivation, independence and social development, academic support and resources, and college retention and completion. The significance of the empirical and theoretical knowledge included in the literature review is explained in the following sections and offers helpful insights to future first-generation college students.

Empirical Literature

Four themes emerged from this research study that applies to the empirical research included in the literature review. The themes are motivation, independence and social development, academic support and resources, and college retention and completion. The data that support the themes and connect the empirical research are discussed below.

Motivation

The first theme of this research study, motivation, is supported in the literature. All 12 participants expressed that motivation from loved ones, friends, and mentors has contributed to their persistence in college. This is noted empirically but also in the theoretical literature. Motivation is found in one's ability to see the meaningfulness of learning and its significance to one's well-being (Goldman et al., 2017; Van den Broeck et al., 2016). Many of the participants explained their motivations for completing their college education. For instance, Mary talked about how her parents kept her from quitting college:

My parents are the reason that I am still in school. I wanted to quit and just go to work every day. I was so tired of school and all the struggles that go with it. They always reminded me of my dreams to one day become a family law attorney. I know that I am the first in my family to attempt something like this. Both of my parents wanted to go to college, but they didn't have the support or financial means to go. This is what influences my parent's motivation to see me realize the dream.

Mary explained how her motivation waned after having her baby [out of wedlock]:

A baby doesn't stop your dreams, but it can cause a delay or make your dreams harder to achieve. My boyfriend graduated last semester, and he is now working in his field. My parents continue to support and motivate me to complete my education. I would not be here today without the roles that they play in my life right now.

Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory refers to the motivation that considers one's growth, personality, and psychological needs. The impact of motivation on first-generation college students during their college journeys has been reaffirmed in the recent literature. Receiving motivation from various sources, such as family, friends, mentors, advisors,

and professors, fosters well-being and a sense of belonging and reinforces the commitment to their college education (Lewis et al., 2015; Lowe & Dotterer, 2018). First-generation college students who are intrinsically and extrinsically motivated experience better learning outcomes (Ommering et al., 2018, Vansteenkiste et al., 2018). Further, clear evidence suggests that first-generation college students need additional care and motivational support to see the benefit of degree completion and address the obstacles that are faced (Bailey & Phillips, 2016).

All participants discussed the individuals who influenced their motivation: family, parents, children, and mentors. Participants also shared their surprising abilities to motivate themselves to develop strategies and actions to complete required tasks and educational goals. The necessity of non-intrinsic motivation to nurture perseverance and persistence is directly linked to the current literature findings that motivation is important to students' academic success (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Several participants discussed how they were motivated not to quit college. Participants revealed the varying sources of motivation through their college journey. Some relied on family, others relied on friends, and others found support and motivation from advisors and mentors. In his letter, Bob expressed, "Be sure to motivate yourself because you may not receive it from who you need it from the most."

Independence and Social Development

The research included in this study, which focused on first-generation college students who persisted through at least one year of college, adds to the empirical literature. According to Ryan and Deci's (2000, 2017) self-determination theory, students must build a sense of autonomy. Autonomy is the ability to control one's actions, emotions, and thoughts (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). All participants had completed their freshman year of college education. They had adjusted and progressed through one or more years of college despite the challenges

that were experienced. The development and evolvment of autonomy or independence helped them to overcome these challenges.

O'Shea (2015) noted that first-generation college students are likely just beginning to establish their independence and take personal responsibility for their lives. This research adds to the literature on first-generation college students by focusing on the lived experiences of students who attempted, persisted, and continue to persevere through college. This study examined their self-determination in relation to their newfound independence. The descriptions of these students' challenges could be meaningful to colleges in their attempts to maintain student retention and degree completion. First-generation college students will be motivated and inspired by college, but their growth and independence will also be impacted. These students' goal is to gain independence and develop mature relationships (Majorano et al., 2017). Renee advised other first-generation college students, "Check your circle. Make sure you are surrounding yourself with supportive people and of course give that support back."

Previous findings are supported in this study's results as independence and social development are commonalities in the learning environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The participants indicated that their social development was less difficult because of their autonomous activities that accompanied the pursuit of a college education. The research findings revealed that other variables contributed to the deficits in their social development. Those variables included social unpreparedness, first-generation status, insecurity, and labeling. The participants' interactions with their peers, faculty, staff, and mentors impacted their social development. Dennis expressed, "My aviation flight instructor kinda recognized my deer in headlights look that I had my first semester. He helped me to relax and just take it one day at a time."

The results added to the previous literature by substantiating the importance of social development to first-generation college students' preparedness for the college experience (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Gibbons et al., 2019; Goldman et al., 2017; Irlbeck et al., 2014; Pratt et al., 2019; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). Participants described feeling alone and incapable of handling their current situations in college. A desirable college experience provides a sense of belonging and connectedness that helps overcome academic success barriers (Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019). Due to unpreparedness and lack of social development, combined with their first-generation status, the participants initially struggled through their freshman year. Feelings of alienation surface as first-generation college students try to make sense of their new learning environment (Kanno, 2018; O'Shea, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). Academically, the participants suffered and realized that they had to take control of the situation. Anna confessed, "From my freshman to sophomore year, I had to make several major adjustments to my social interactions, and I am still making adjustments to this day."

Academic Support and Resources

Previous findings demonstrated that academic support and resources positively affect first-generation college students' academic experience (Wildhagen, 2015). Education stakeholders are aware of first-generation college students' barriers, challenges, and obstacles, but significant changes are still needed to support them (Redding, 2017; Schademan & Thompson, 2016). Because of the challenges that first-generation college students face, the data collected in this study confirm that their peers have a favorable advantage (Allan et al., 2016; Covarrubias et al., 2018; Redford & Hoyer, 2017; Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019). According to this research study, varying aspects of first-generation college students' learning environment and personal lives influence their academic success (D. R. Adams et al., 2016; Law et al., 2019). To

excel academically, first-generation college students need a supportive relationship with faculty, staff, and advisors. The participants expressed their critical need for academic advising and counseling, which positively affected their college retention. Even the participants who did not initially take advantage of these services could reflectively look back at their freshman year with regret.

College tutoring is also an essential support service for ensuring academic success for first-generation college students (Azmitia et al., 2018; Everett, 2015). First-generation college students need the assistance and support that college tutoring can provide by helping them develop independent learning abilities and skills (Felicetti et al., 2019; Lancaster & Xu, 2017). Tutoring has been found to improve the flexibility and adaptability skills needed to complete their college education (Lancaster & Xu, 2017). Many participants utilized tutoring services to fill the learning gaps and deficiencies realized on their educational journeys. Previous findings support the availability of tutoring services to meet first-generation college students' needs, especially since these students' time may be limited because of job and family constraints.

As technology continues to advance, it will become an essential part of the educational system (Calhoun & Dunbar, 2019). Students will need access to technology as its use is critical in assisting them in achieving academic success. This research contributes to the small body of literature on access to technology for first-generation college students as they may lack Internet and computer access. Access to technology has significantly improved student retention and persistence for first-generation college students (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2018). The participants expressed the importance of utilizing computer labs, the Internet, and other college resources as it increased their performance and academic fortitude.

College Retention and Completion

With first-generation college students accounting for 24% of college undergraduates, college retention is a concern as it is lower for them than other groups (Irlbeck et al., 2014; Malin et al., 2017; Schademan & Thompson, 2016; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). Previous findings show the successful way that student support programs for first-year programs help first-generation college students meet their educational needs (Tate et al., 2015). According to this research study, these programs narrow the achievement gap and assist first-generation college students in transitioning through the first year of college. Many participants maintained that the first-year programs at their colleges helped them adjust academically and socially during their freshman year. Participants expressed their concerns about the lack of support in post-freshman years that left them feeling abandoned and lost. This research contributes to the small body of knowledge on the lack of support for first-generation college students after their freshman year (Jamelske, 2009). These students are often not academically prepared for college, leading them to struggle even more in their sophomore year (Vuong et al., 2010).

The participants recounted in detailed descriptions the academic and social challenges they experienced and required support. Several participants advised the need for colleges to create strategies to assist first-generation college students during the sophomore year and beyond. To extend the literature, participants added that support programs like those created for freshman could be revamped specifically to assist every classification of students. Previous findings are supported in this study's results as the participants explained that these programs had increased their college retention and persistence to degree completion. In addition, participants noted that they are more competent in achieving their educational goals as they have persevered through their freshman year.

Financial pressures may cause concerns to surface at a time when first-generation college students are attempting the acclimation process into college (Ishitani, 2016; Pratt et al., 2019; Schademan & Thompson, 2016). The research in this study is supported in the empirical literature as all participants experienced financial pressures in various ways. All participants confessed that this sensitive issue was constantly on their minds. According to Wang and Nuru (2017), anxiety about financing their college education may cause their college persistence to weaken. According to this research study, several participants wanted to “quit” college and forgo their higher education goals. When first-generation college students add financial pressures to an already challenging situation, feelings of guilt may surface (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015; O'Shea, 2015). Current literature affirmed the significance of support from family, mentors, and advisors to assuage feelings of hopelessness, stress, and guilt. The added burden of financial pressures is not exclusive to first-generation college students, but the reality of the cost to finance their pursuit of higher education is more evident and cumbersome.

Imposter Syndrome

Whether from others or themselves, fear of judgment for first-generation college students can contribute to a type of thinking known as imposter syndrome (Peteet et al., 2015). Imposter syndrome is subconscious mindfulness in which a person does not feel deserving and deceives others and oneself (Jury et al., 2017). The results add to previous literature by corroborating first-generation college students' feelings as an unforeseen obstacle during their first year of college. All participants explained that they felt imposter syndrome in their freshman year, and others confessed that they have continued to suffer into sophomore, junior, and senior years periodically. According to Luzeckyj et al. (2017), first-generation college students likely

identify themselves based on how others see them. This can be especially troublesome for first-generation college students as they may continue to question their competence to persist and achieve degree completion.

Theoretical Literature

Ryan and Deci's (2000, 2017) self-determination theory is the framework for this study. Self-determination theory focuses on the three intrinsic and fundamental psychological needs that encourage individuals to grow and improve (Greene et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). This theory characterizes first-generation college students' autonomy, relatedness, and competence related to their educational journey and provides descriptive context to understand their lived experiences. This study's findings revealed a connection between participants' experiences and their possibilities for persistence and degree completion.

Ryan and Deci's (2000, 2017) perspective on self-determination is supported by many participants' responses in this research study. Several details are discussed in the study that may help minimize achievement gaps for first-generation college students as they navigate through college. Found in prior literature and this study's results, first-generation college students' intestinal fortitude is embedded in their family and intrinsic motivation, social development, career aspirations, and innate achievement abilities. Recognizing the needs of first-generation college students will ensure that colleges provide supportive learning environments for these students. Students will achieve their educational goals by persevering through challenges to persist to degree completion.

The research included in this study supports Ryan and Deci's theory by detailing the importance of the participants' intrinsic motivators assisting in their transition into and completion of their freshman year. The students' and parents' unfamiliarity in the college

transition and adjustment process may be highlighted in the students' obstacles while acclimating to the college experience. The study confirms Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory by stressing the importance of an individual's capacity to continue to be self-determined if one of their psychological needs is not fulfilled. All participants concluded that their motivational levels, independence, and competence were key factors in maneuvering through their educational journey. To rally first-generation college students' self-determination, certain efforts are needed to ensure that they persist through their college experience.

Ryan and Deci's (2000, 2017) self-determination theory is based on the fulfillment of three intrinsic motivators: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Autonomy is described as an individual having independent thoughts and actions free of control from others and expecting that their goals can be effectively achieved. Participants recognized the importance of establishing independence on varying levels, which ensures a well-rounded and prepared student. In discussing the students' preparedness for college, many participants expressed that their newfound independence surfaced at different periods of their freshman year. Dianne discussed, "College is a good time to do new things and try to be independent." Social unpreparedness, insecurity, cultural awareness, and labeling were experiences that several participants discussed. Autonomy acknowledges first-generation college students' new level of independence into college life in their efforts to improve college retention and degree completion.

In relatedness, Ryan and Deci (2000, 2017) proposed that a sense of belonging, connection to others, and meaningful relationships are vital psychological satisfactions that impact individual learners. The findings confirmed the significance of relatedness or a sense of belonging for first-generation college students. A supportive and diverse college environment was found to encourage relatedness. Confirmation of this is provided by participants attending

colleges that have first-year and other support programs. Participants expressed their awareness of a sense of belonging as they transitioned into college, which resulted in their boost in confidence. Their sense of belonging influences first-generation college students' desire to persevere. Faculty, staff, mentor, and advisor interactions fostered the development of first-generation college students' relatedness to their new learning environment. In her letter, Barbara stated, "At times, those around us can see our potential better than we can, so be open to all the support those around you can provide."

As described by Ryan and Deci (2000, 2017), competence is a sense of confidence and capability in one's activities and the belief that learning outcomes are possible. Participants' responses indicated that their competence had improved since their freshman year experience. Confidence and morale were strengthened, and competence was met due to the college campus's supportive network. Consistent and constructive feedback is necessary to establish and maintain self-determination to persist and persevere (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Participants expressed that even through unforeseen obstacles, they were stronger first-generation college students and individuals. Competence affects motivation and stimulates the desire to persevere until task completion (Meijers, 1998).

Implications

Many colleges have a significant number of first-generation college students (Pratt et al., 2019). However, little research has been conducted on first-generation college students' self-determination (Ishitani, 2016; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Throughout this research study, participants expressed their desire to complete their college education. The results of this phenomenological study affirmed the lived experiences of first-generation college students who have persevered through their first year of college might ultimately be beneficial to all

stakeholders. Participants expressed the strengths and weaknesses of being a self-determined first-generation college student. This study's findings can be used to inform classroom instruction, academic improvements, and advisory practices to assist this diverse group of students. The theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of this study are discussed in this section.

Theoretical Implications

In this study, Ryan and Deci's (2000, 2017) self-determination theory is the framework used to describe first-generation college students' experiences during their first year of college. Ryan and Deci's (2000, 2017) self-determination theory is a human motivation theory that proposes developing and identifying three core needs essential for humans to evolve. Therefore, it may be beneficial to apply the self-determination theory specifically to first-generation college students to make meaningful changes.

Support programs can be developed for first-generation college students to satisfy their needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. These new college support programs' goals should help students feel more autonomous, self-sufficient, or independent. In addition, mentors available within these groups should be positioned to offer assistance, answer questions, and provide valuable knowledge to first-generation college students to become independent. Further, the creation of first-generation college student-specific courses would task these students with accessible resources for present and future use throughout their college journeys.

Another support program should be created for first-generation college students to help them feel a sense of relatedness, meaningful relationships, and activities, or connectedness and belonging. Relatedness is particularly critical for first-generation college students as they may not have the social capital as they transition through college (Nichols & Islas, 2016; Schwartz et

al., 2018). These support services should encourage the students to form relationships with faculty, staff, advisors, mentors, and especially other first-generation college students. These relationships can help first-generation college students feel a sense of belonging and excel in college (Luzekyj et al., 2017; Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019).

Finally, support programs could be established for first-generation college students to promote feelings of competence in their abilities. For instance, college tutoring, career development, and professional and skill development could enhance their competence. Further, colleges could create programs like first-year programs. Still, these are specifically for first-generation college students as they would be geared to educate and prepare these students for demands, challenges, and obstacles. Colleges developing proactive support services like these will help first-generation college students acquire meaningful knowledge and competence to achieve their learning outcomes successfully.

Competent first-generation college students are more focused on degree completion (Demetriou et al., 2017; Greene et al., 2019). Feelings of relatedness for these students encourage loyalty to their college or university (O'Shea, 2015). With the addition of autonomy, first-generation college students persist and persevere to degree completion and remain loyal to their college or university (Holt et al., 2019). College support services should promote first-generation college students who are independent, connected, and competent. These self-determined individuals could be equipped to persist through their college experience.

Empirical Implications

The self-determination theory that influenced this research has useful empirical implications for all secondary and post-secondary stakeholders, such as secondary and college administrators, principals, teachers, parents, and students. Considerable research has been

conducted on first-generation college students, but few studies have focused on these students' self-determination to persist and complete their college education. The empirical implications of the study's findings provide high schools and colleges meaningful strategies for support services and the need for support personnel, such as faculty, staff, advisors, and mentors, to assist first-generation college students in their educational experience. Parents should make a conscious effort to address the obstacles that challenge first-generation college students' college retention and degree completion. The following are recommendations that may positively affect first-generation college students' persistence throughout their college experience.

Early Identification and Preparation

For first-generation college students, the high school to college transition is challenging. With these challenges are additional challenges that are specific to this distinct group. Although a considerable number of first-generation college students attend college, research should be conducted on the self-determination experiences of these students (Pratt et al., 2019; Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019). Researchers have studied factors affecting first-generation college students, such as family achievement guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Covarrubias et al., 2015), student retention (Ishitani, 2016; Pratt et al., 2019), career outcomes (Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019), socioeconomic status (Hébert, 2018; Schademan & Thompson, 2016), and college and career readiness (Martinez et al., 2017; Royster et al., 2015). It may be helpful to identify first-generation college students at the high school level and create support programs and services that can help students excel. These programs can be created to effectively benefit high school students as they decide to transition into college. The mentorships and relationships that can be created in high school designed specifically for first-generation college students may be an advantage in college. Education stakeholders should support this initiative to provide college

preparation information, financial aid and scholarship assistance, and career development for first-generation college students. Stakeholders can help ensure that this type of early identification and preparation will allow first-generation college students to enter college and focus on retention and degree completion.

Support Systems

According to the study participants, first-generation college students' academic achievement can be encouraged by several factors. First, participants described academic advising for first-generation college students, college tutoring, and access to technology as essential support systems that helped them persevere through their freshman year. Second, participants indicated periodic times throughout their freshman year that they did not know to whom they could turn to help address feelings of isolation and loneliness. Third, since college was a new experience for the participants and their families, they yearned for a dedicated place to meet their peers with shared experiences. Finally, although some participants expressed that academic advising was available, they were interested in connecting with other first-generation college student peers. Therefore, college stakeholders should consider providing a dedicated space, clubs, or organizations to assist first-generation college students adjusting to the college experience. These clubs, organizations, or allocated spaces should include skilled individuals with experience with first-generation college students and the challenges they face.

Another critical element of first-generation college students' academic success is college tutoring. Tutoring has been found to reinforce and enhance the necessary academic skills, such as studying and test-taking skills, that these students may lack (Azmitia et al., 2018; Everett, 2015; Felicetti et al., 2019). With the academic challenges evident for college students, first-generation college students may need additional skills and knowledge to maneuver coursework

and curriculum expectations (Lancaster & Xu, 2017). Online, after-hours, and weekends are efficient times for colleges to offer tutoring services to first-generation college students as these students likely have job and family constraints. First-generation college students need the convenience, availability, and accessibility of tutoring services to meet their academic needs (Felicetti et al., 2019). Most participants expressed that their use of tutoring on their college campuses was a valuable resource, while others were not aware of their colleges' tutoring services. College tutoring can help first-generation college students navigate areas of deficiency and make critical decisions that can save valuable time and money.

In today's academic environment, access to technology is essential for first-generation college students, as teaching and learning trends have changed in recent years (Calhoun & Dunbar, 2019). Access to technology is a major factor in students achieving academic excellence (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2018). This study found that first-generation college students need access to high-speed Internet and computers to thrive in non-traditional classroom settings. Traditional classrooms have converged with app-based and mobile learning, and thus first-generation college students need access and knowledge to meet these demands and changes (Calhoun & Dunbar, 2019). Colleges should provide free Internet access and 24-hour accessible computer labs placed strategically around the college campus. First-generation college students expect technology integration into their classroom instruction, and proficient and reliable access is valuable to college retention and persistence (Calhoun & Dunbar, 2019).

Sophomore Year through Graduation

First-generation college students' sophomore year is unique as the students have persevered through freshman year amidst unforeseen obstacles (Pratt et al., 2019). They navigated through academic and social unpreparedness, increased independence, and faced

financial constraints. After this careful navigation, first-generation college students must now focus on their sophomore year, which is filled with more expectations and challenges. In the sophomore year, participants expressed that they had to narrow their interest in a major and redefine their reasons for seeking a higher education degree. Participants expressed the need for additional support in their sophomore year. Several participants suggested that colleges should have support services that are predefined for each academic standing. When comparing freshman year to sophomore year, participants believed that there were more support and guidance during their first year. College retention and degree completion rates can improve if colleges emphasize the importance of sophomore year support until graduation for first-generation college students.

Practical Implications

This study's practical implications are important to all secondary and post-secondary stakeholders, including administrators, principals, teachers, parents, and students. For first-generation college students, this study's findings were relevant to the self-determination needed for these students to persist through their college experience. Secondary administrators, principals, and teachers can gain a deeper understanding of these students' challenging experiences based on the detailed discussions and feedback from the participants in the one-on-one interviews, focus group session, and participants' letters. Their perspectives can provide practical truths of first-generation college students' college experience and offer possible improvements to curriculums and support services specifically designed for this diverse group. Due to the parents not having any college education, the findings indicated that parental involvement might be challenging. The data revealed the need for secondary education

stakeholders to provide more opportunities and resources that allow parents to collaborate to increase parental involvement.

This study's consistent themes offer postsecondary stakeholders a better understanding of support programs that are essential for first-generation college students' academic excellence. First-generation college students are academically trained along with their peers during their secondary education to attend college. However, first-generation college students receive limited training applicable to their persistence and perseverance that will be needed to obtain their higher education goals. Some colleges provide academic support to their students as this has been found to promote academic success (Greene et al., 2019; Irlbeck et al., 2014; Tate et al., 2015; Winnie Ma & Shea, 2019). To adequately prepare first-generation college students, these students should be classified as first-generation college students at the high school level and receive specific and effective instruction. Based on this study's findings, secondary stakeholders can create a first-generation college student-specific curriculum, and postsecondary stakeholders can utilize the lived experiences discussed to create support programs for first-generation college students.

Delimitations and Limitations

The inclusions and exclusions that I made in this research study determined the delimitations. The study's location and participants were both identified as delimitations. The online platform, Facebook, was chosen for this study for its capabilities to reach this specific group of students who shared common interests and experiences. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling. Each participant was a first-generation college student since the research focused on their lived experiences. Additionally, the participants in this study were at least 18 years old, classified as a sophomore or higher at a university or college in pursuit of a

bachelor's degree, and enrolled as either a full-time or part-time student. This resulted in the exclusion of all first-generation college students who had completed their bachelor's degree or higher. For this study, I chose a transcendental phenomenological design with a focus on the participants' lived experiences rather than the researcher's perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The small sample size is one of the study's limitations. There is a possibility that different findings may have been generated if the sample size had been larger. Further, the research participants volunteered for the study, which could result from a sample that differed from one chosen using random sampling. Another limitation of this study is that I am a first-generation college student. I was familiar with some of the participants' experiences, which could have impacted the findings. Following Moustakas' (1994) process of *epoché*, I tried to bracket my experiences in this research study and accurately record the detailed descriptions that were presented. I believe that I was able to approach each encounter with the participants bias-free and support their experiences. Finally, all the participants had persisted through their freshman year of college, which may have an outward appearance that everything worked out. Consequently, the experiences described by this group of first-generation college students may not represent all first-generation college students, especially those who dropped out after their freshman year or did not persist through graduation.

Recommendations for Future Research

While the research findings described first-generation college students' challenges and unique perspectives, future research can still be conducted to increase these students' academic excellence. The importance of understanding first-generation college students' experiences can lead to curriculum changes, best practices, and differentiated instruction that will enable first-generation college students to achieve their educational goals. Future studies on self-

determination among first-generation college students, conducted with a broader sample of students, could be useful in deciding whether the current study's findings are indicative of all first-generation college students or exclusive to the participants in this study. Since this study focused on first-generation college students that persisted through their first year of college, future studies could examine first-generation college students who dropped out of college or did not complete their degree. This may provide additional data on the types of curriculum instruction and supports needed for first-generation college students. First-generation college students require specific guidance and support, beginning in high school and transitioning with these students into college. To prepare an appropriate learning environment that includes emerging and effective strategies for the retention and degree completion of first-generation college students, it is essential to understand the barriers and challenges these students' experience. These recommendations are supported by this study's findings, highlighting the need for stakeholders to be vested in proactive, interventional strategies to increase first-generation college students' self-determination.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the self-determination experiences of first-generation college students. The participants in this study were 12 first-generation college students who persisted through their college experience. Using one-on-one interviews, a focus group session, and participants' letters, the data were collected and coded using Moustakas' (1994) method of data analysis. Previous literature supports this study's findings on the challenges faced by first-generation college students, the necessity of a supportive network, and constructive plans for retention and degree completion. The findings add to previous research by providing comprehensive accounts of first-generation college

students' experiences, representing significant challenges faced by other first-generation college students. According to the findings, the participants desired to become more independent, involved in supportive activities with others, and improve their competence to withstand unforeseen obstacles. Recommendations for future research could explore the self-determination of first-generation college students who, for varying reasons, decide to forgo their higher education goals. The participants' reactions to this study may cause them to reconsider their first-generation college student status as an advantage rather than a challenge and become a proponent for initiatives for future first-generation college students.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

January 26, 2021

Chelsa Rash
Gail Collins

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY20-21-468 AN EXPLORATION OF SELF-DETERMINATION IN FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Dear Chelsa Rash, Gail Collins:

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval is extended to you for one year from the date of the IRB meeting at which the protocol was approved: January 26, 2021. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make modifications in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update submission to the IRB. These submissions can be completed through your Cayuse IRB account.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. 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.

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

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

AN EXPLORATION OF SELF-DETERMINATION IN
 FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS: A
 PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

IF YOU MEET ALL OF THE FOLLOWING CRITERIA,
 YOU ARE INVITED TO PARTICIPATE:

- A FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENT (student with parents who do not have any college education)
- AT LEAST 18 YEARS OLD
- CLASSIFIED AS A SOPHOMORE OR HIGHER AT A UNIVERSITY OR COLLEGE IN PURSUIT OF A BACHELOR'S DEGREE
- A FULL-TIME OR PART-TIME STUDENT

The purpose of this research study is to understand how first-generation college students use self-determination to persist through their college experience. The data you provide may contribute to the existing literature on the effects of self-determination required to transition first-generation college students from high school into and through college. Your participation will involve completing a Zoom interview, Zoom focus group, and a letter-writing activity with the researcher regarding your lived experiences as a first-generation college student. If you are interested in participating in this study, please message me to receive the recruitment letter with a link to a screening survey. [REDACTED], a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at [REDACTED], is conducting this study and can be contacted at [REDACTED] for more information.

Your participation is voluntary and confidential.



Appendix C: Recruitment Letter

XXXX xx, xxxx

Dear Student:

As a student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of a doctoral degree requirements. My research study's title is An Exploration of Self-Determination of First-Generation College Students: A Phenomenological Study. The purpose of my research is to understand the self-determination experiences of first-generation college students, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be a first-generation college student who is 18 years old or older, classified as a sophomore or higher at a university or college in pursuit of a bachelor's degree, and enrolled as either a full-time or part-time student. If willing, participants will be asked to attend a Zoom interview meeting concerning their experiences with being a first-generation college student. Interviews will last approximately an hour. You will be asked to participate in a Zoom focus group with other first-generation college students to discuss your shared experiences. This session will last approximately an hour.

Additionally, you will also be asked to write a letter to future first-generation college students. This process will take approximately 30 minutes. Upon completing the interview, the focus group session, and the letter to future first-generation college students, you will have an opportunity to review your transcription to ensure its accuracy. This should take about 15 minutes. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

Please click the link for the screening survey to help me confirm your eligibility as a participant. The screening survey will take no longer than 5-10 minutes to complete and should be completed within the next five days.

You will be contacted via Messenger and informed if you have been selected for participation in the study. If you are selected to participate in the study, you will receive further instructions to complete a consent form before participating in the study. The consent document contains additional information about my research, and it should be signed and returned to me via Messenger so that I may schedule your interview time and date. You will be asked to join a private Facebook group designed just for participants in this research study.

Sincerely,

A black rectangular redaction box covering the signature area.

Appendix D: Screening Survey

Willing research participants are needed for this research study to expound upon their lived experiences as first-generation college students. Below is a list of questions that will further indicate if you meet this research study's criteria.

Name _____
 Age _____
 Phone Number _____
 Facebook/Messenger Name _____
 Full-Time or Part-Time Student _____
 What is your current student classification at a university or college,
 e.g., sophomore, junior, or senior? _____

Are you pursuing a bachelor's degree?
 Check one: _____ Yes _____ No

Carefully answer each question about you and your family.

What level of education did your mother complete?
 High School _____
 Some College _____
 Completed associate degree _____
 Completed Bachelor's Degree _____
 What level of education did your father complete?
 High School _____
 Some College _____
 Completed associate degree _____
 Completed Bachelor's Degree _____
 Do you have siblings who have attended college? _____

Are you willing to contribute your shared experiences as a first-generation college student?
 Check one: _____ Yes _____ No

If you are willing to participate, indicate below your preferred days and times for scheduling a Zoom meeting for your interview and the focus group.

Days: _____ Times: _____

Appendix E: Message to Potential Participants

Acceptance Message

Xxxx xx, xxxx

Dear Student:

Congratulations, you have been selected to participate in my research study. Thank you for completing the participant screening survey and indicating your interest. The Consent Form is attached to this message. The consent document contains additional information about my research.

After reviewing the consent form, you will type your name and the date on the consent form and return it to me using Facebook Messenger. When I have received the signed consent form, you will be contacted by your preferred contact information to schedule the interview.

Thank you in advance for your participation in this research study.

██████████

Thank You Message

Xxxx xx, xxxx

Dear Student Not Chosen:

Thank you so much for your willingness to participate in my research study. However, you did not meet the selection criteria for the study. Thank you again for offering to participate.

Sincerely,

██████████

Appendix F: Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: An Exploration of Self-Determination of First-Generation College Students: A Phenomenological Study

Principal Investigator: [REDACTED], a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a first-generation college student. A first-generation college student is defined as a student with parents who do not have a post-secondary education. You must also be at least 18 years old, classified as a sophomore or higher at a university or college in pursuit of a bachelor's degree, and enrolled as either a full-time or part-time student. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take the time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to participate in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study will be to understand the self-determination experiences of first-generation college students.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher. The interview will be audio-recorded and conducted via Zoom. This will take approximately an hour.
2. Participate in a focus group with other first-generation college students and the researcher. The focus group session will be audio-recorded and conducted via Zoom. This will take approximately an hour.
3. Write a letter to a future first-generation college student. You will be asked a series of questions that will reflectively and introspectively guide your letter writing. This will take approximately 30-45 minutes.
4. Participate in the process called member checking to evaluate the transcripts of your interview and your portion of the focus group session. This will allow you to determine whether the researcher has accurately described the data that you contributed to the study. This will take approximately 15 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. However, you may benefit from participating in a collaborative conversation focus group with other first-generation college students.

Benefits to society include the following: 1) encouragement for first-generation college students to continue to embark upon their dreams of receiving a college degree and 2) expose all

stakeholders to your lived experience as a first-generation college student, so that future first-generation college students are effectively equipped for persistence and retention in their college experience.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

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. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Pseudonyms are used for all participants as additional identity protection. Interviews and focus group sessions will be conducted in a private Zoom meeting.
- Research study records will be kept securely, and the researcher is the only one with access to the records. Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interview and focus group audio recordings and transcripts of these recordings will be stored in password-protected files to ensure confidentiality of identities. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Assurance for focus group participants cannot be granted as other participants are involved, and the researcher cannot assure you that discussions will not be shared.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph or through Messenger. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is [REDACTED]. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, [REDACTED], at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the [REDACTED].

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

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

The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix G: Interview Questions

1. State your name and current student classification at a university or college, e.g., sophomore, junior, or senior. Give a brief introduction of yourself.
2. How did you make the choice to attend college?
3. What do you know about a first-generation college student?
4. Describe your high school experience that either prepared or did not prepare you for college.
5. How prepared were you to attend college?
6. What do/did your parents feel about you being the first person in your family to go to college?
7. What are your long-term goals for the future once you graduate from college?
8. Where did you find the most assistance with college preparation? Parents? Older Siblings? School Counselors? Teachers? Neighbors/Friends?
9. What could your high school have done to prepare you to be successful in college? Parents? This university or college?
10. To what extent do you think high school students should be categorized as first-generation college students?
11. What issues, challenges, or doubts did you have to consider the idea of attending college?
12. What support services should be implemented to support the first-generation college student?
13. What additional information do you think is important to this research study that will benefit first-generation college students?
14. Why did you choose the university or college where you are/were enrolled?

15. What support have you received prior to this interview in preparation of attending college?

Appendix H: Focus Group Questions

1. State your name and current student classification at a university or college, e.g., sophomore, junior, or senior.
2. What is your experience as a first-generation college student?
3. What support systems were helpful as you persisted through your first year of college?
Parents? Older Siblings? College Advisors/Mentors? Professors? Neighbors/Friends?
4. What is the greatest obstacle that you have experienced while attending college?
5. When struggling academically, where do you turn for academic support?
6. What else can the university or college do to provide support to first-generation college students?
7. What do you think is needed to ensure degree completion for first-generation college students?
8. What were the advantages of being classified as a first-generation college student?
9. What were the disadvantages of being classified as a first-generation college student?
10. What are your plans after the completion of your college education?
11. If you did not complete your college education, what are your plans for degree completion?
12. What inspirational words of wisdom do you feel would benefit first-generation college students?

Appendix I: Letter To Future First-Generation College Students

Letter to Future First-Generation College Students

Xxxx xx, xxxx

Dear Student,

As a participant in this research study, you will be asked to complete the following writing activity: “Write a letter to future first-generation college students.” Think retrospectively of your experiences as a first-generation college student. This will take approximately 30-45 minutes.

Write a letter to these students explaining your experiences from this perspective. Please provide a descriptive and detailed account of your experiences by answering the following questions, which could be beneficial to students who may experience similar situations. Your answer to the following questions may include any aspect of your experiences from entrance tests, admissions, peer and professor interactions, and college life.

1. What details would you share about your experiences that another first-generation college student would find the most helpful for their upcoming experiences?
2. What support systems have you found the most valuable to the motivational success and self-determination needs of first-generation college students?
3. What is your understanding of life as a first-generation college student?

Please attach your letter to this message upon your completion. Thank you so much for your participation.

Sincerely,



Appendix J: Example of Participant's Letter

Dear First-Generation College Student,

I know that things have not been very easy for you and you've faced challenges that students who are not first-gen don't have to face. I'm here to tell you that although it may be difficult at times to garner confidence when it comes to applying and going to college, you are more than capable to do so. There are resources out there for you, you just need to try your best to reach out. Talk to your counselors, teachers, family friends that have been to college, etc. Never be afraid to ask for help; I know I would not be where I am today without asking for help. Something that really helped me is joining this club called CPP in high school that is for first-generation students. The club waived my college application fees, taught me about the application process, got me in touch with many colleges, and ensured that I had the resources necessary for my endeavors. Please take initiative in all that you do although it might be daunting, it will always pay off. Another piece of advice I have for you is to check your circle. Make sure you are surrounding yourself with supportive people and of course give that support back. Check on yourself as well. I am well aware that this time can be very overwhelming so try not to be so hard on yourself, take breaks when you need to. When you get to college, try to be as social as possible. Academics are important but so is social life and having the right community. In fact, if you do the whole "social" thing right, it could even make you better in academics. I've surrounded myself with friends who motivate me as well as I motivate them. We study together, tutor each other, and keep each other in check. Having these friends are one of the main reasons why I'm doing so well in college now. Please join clubs/organizations that seem interesting to you in college. Get to know your professors, they may become your mentors and/or your recommendation letter writers depending on what you want to do after college. I hope this advice helps you and I wish you well on all your endeavors.

You got this!

Best,

Appendix K: Reflexive Journal

Comment	Date
<p>A first-generation college student was not a classification that I considered over 30 years ago when I entered my college experience. I know that I have biases from my prior experiences, even though my entry into college was many years ago. I am not sure if my college used any measures to identify first-generation college students.</p> <p>Theoretically, I can identify with researchers' assessment of feelings of being inadequate and not prepared to handle the challenges that I faced. Since I have been a business education teacher for the past 24 years, I see firsthand that current students are not any more prepared than I was years ago. The initiatives and programs that have been created are important to first-generation college students, but these students should be identified earlier.</p>	August 7, 2020
<p>I conducted the pilot study, and the participants agreed that all procedures and protocols were appropriate; minor changes were made. I was nervous as this was a new experience for me. The scheduling procedures with Zoom worked out very well. I created an interview and focus group protocol form, which helped me remain focused on my research questions throughout the process. I questioned myself on whether I should have offered some type of incentive for their participation. I purposefully remained silent when the participants were speaking, which helped during my transcription process. I realized that interviews would likely not last one hour.</p>	February 8, 2021
<p>I conducted my first interview, and I was still nervous; I just wanted everything to work out. Personally, I was bracing for a serious winter storm that majorly impacted the southern parts of the U.S., and I was on winter break from my job. My participant was very nervous, but she answered all questions thoroughly. I started transcribing the interview immediately after it ended.</p>	February 12, 2021
<p>By the fourth interview, I was more confident in my introduction and delivery of information. Although this participant lived in Texas, she was not directly affected by the winter storm. However, she did have family affected; I gave my concerns for their well-being.</p>	February 13, 2021
<p>I completed my eighth interview; this participant was very long-winded. He answered questions thoroughly, but his thoughts rambled and not in the order that I asked the questions. I had to keep this in mind when I transcribed his interview.</p>	February 15, 2021
<p>I completed my 12th interview, and I have scheduled the focus group for February 25, 2021. This was an overwhelming process. I received a response from someone who saw my recruitment flyer and was interested in participating in the study but could not commit to all three parts of the process. She felt that this was too much for me to ask of someone. I wondered was this the reason for the slow response in the beginning.</p>	February 19, 2021

<p>The focus group session was held today. Overall, it was a good session. I thought that it would be difficult to monitor who would answer questions, but most weighed in on all questions. Although they did not know one another, the participants seemed at ease during the session.</p>	February 25, 2021
<p>After receiving all the participants' letters, I was excited to see the details included in the letters. They made suggestions for first-generation college students that are relevant in today's college perspectives. I understand why I had to complete the <i>epoché</i> process. I had to remain focused on the participants' perspectives and not how I felt about their experiences. I was moved by their stories and what they had experienced and persevered through. My willingness to listen more intently during the interviews and focus group session was important to the process.</p>	February 27, 2021

Appendix L: Audit Trail

Date	Entry
June 20, 2020	Participated in a Zoom Info meeting to begin familiarizing myself with how to conduct meetings
November 17, 2020 – January 27, 2021	Sent permission requests to various first-generation college student, college/university Facebook groups asking permission to recruit participants
November 20 – December 14, 2020	Received permission to recruit participants from three first-generation college student Facebook groups
January 26, 2021	Received IRB approval to conduct study
January 27, 2021	Posted recruitment flyer in three approved Facebook groups
February 8 – February 10, 2021	Scheduled and conducted pilot study; Transcribed and reviewed the results; Received and reviewed the participants' letters; Made minor adjustments as needed
February 11, 2021	Sent recruitment letter and the link to the screening survey to potential participants
February 12 – February 25, 2021	Conducted one-on-one interviews and focus group session
February 27, 2021	Obtained all participants' letters
February 14, 2021 – March 5, 2021	Transcribed one-on-one interviews and focus group session; Sent transcription to participants for member checks; Received from participants
March 15, 2021	Completed coding and developed four themes; Completed Chapter Four and submitted to chair for review; Began writing Chapter Five

Appendix M: Samples of Descriptive and Reflective Notes

Responses	Notes	Date
Conform to cultural surroundings; [college] was something I was going to do; first in family	Identified as first-generation college student; self-determination; INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION	February 13, 2021
Parents stressed education; make sure that I'm giving my next generation a good start; motivation to go forward; seen hardships from older generation		February 14, 2021
Emphasized the importance of education; she always told me she'll support me and everything and she does. So that's definitely a huge part of why I'm here; that is a bit overwhelming		February 17, 2021
STEM program in high school; could've used more help in college preparedness; parents were excited; desires Ph.D. in the future	Adult; be my own person; trial and error; growing pains; AUTONOMY AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT	February 13, 2021
Not a lot of diversity in high school; made social skills weak; parents are proud; get a good job and go to graduate school		February 14, 2021
Wasn't prepared; professors are human; take initiative		February 17, 2021
Guidance counselors didn't push college, but they made it available; a day specifically for seniors to help them apply; parents could've pushed me more; self-motivate; you have to be willing to find the resources; program for first-generation college students; one-on-one coaching; support within school; had to be close to home	Clubs and organizations, mentors, faculty and staff, advisors, mental health; SUPPORTIVE RESOURCES	February 13, 2021
Brother helpful in what to do and not to do; specific teachers; regular meetings with advisors; student groups; cost of college; first-generation college student groups		February 14, 2021
Didn't do well in grades freshman year; not really talk about it; counseling center; lack of support; discrimination; needed more confidence in high school		February 17, 2021

Felt more at ease at college close to home; didn't have many friends here	Family and upward mobility; culture, diversity, representation, financial stressors, fear; COMPETENCE, PERSEVERANCE, FIRST YEAR	February 13, 2021
College was more affordable		February 14, 2021
Diversity is a good thing; alienation; community		February 17, 2021