

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY TO DESCRIBE THE PERSEVERANCE EXPERIENCES
OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

Andy John Benoit, Jr.

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University

2021

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the perseverance experiences of first-generation students at one community college in the Southern United States. Tinto's internationalist theory served as the theoretical framework for the study, which sought to answer the central research question: How do first-generation students at community college in the Southern United States describe their perseverance experience from their first to second year of college? There were four sub-questions included in the study: (1) How do college students describe the events that led them to persevere from their first to their second year of college? (2) How do college students describe the preparatory instances from high school that were most beneficial to their second year of college? (3) How do students who completed their first year of college describe the most impactful experience on their success and perseverance? (4) How do college students describe the instances which had an adverse effect on their perseverance experiences? Purposeful opportunity sampling was employed to obtain a sample population of 12 first-generation community college students who had shared experiences relative to the phenomenon of persistence. Data to examine the phenomenon in-depth were obtained using interviews, focus groups, as well as a reflective writing assignment which revealed 10 themes that included: (a) motivation, (b) peer support, (c) institutional support and interventions, (d) class and academic experience, (e) special skills learned, (f) engagement, (g) learning opportunities, (h) interpersonal experiences, (i) academic challenges, and (j) COVID-19. The study findings, limitations, and recommendations for further study were provided.

Keywords: assimilation, integration, interaction, motivation, persistence, perseverance, retention, transition

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. Even though my parents have both passed on, I know that they are with me and are proud that this journey has finally come to a successful end. They wanted me to pursue the educational endeavors that they did not have. I could not have achieved what I have both educationally and professionally without the gifts of perseverance, dedication, and hard work that were instilled in me. For everything they did for me, I am eternally grateful. Finally, to my other family and friends who have supported me during this journey, I appreciate you more than you will ever know – especially my brothers Seth, Andrew, and Corey.

Acknowledgments

The journey toward completion of the doctoral degree has taken many turns over the course of the past two decades, which included losing both my parents, working at four different institutions, and two different doctoral programs. Although I did not finish my first program, a Ph.D. program at Louisiana State University, I made the conscious decision to find a program I could finish and still serve as an active administrator in higher education – I found that program in the Ed.D. program in educational leadership at Liberty University.

Throughout the course of study over the course of the past three years, I have valued this program and its direct application toward my profession of serving students. I could not have completed the program and this dissertation without the dedicated faculty in the program and especially my chair, Dr. Barry Dotson. You were an excellent instructor in course work, and most importantly, a skilled practitioner who gave us a real-world perspective to servant leadership in higher education – which helped to provide guidance in critical moments in the completion of this document. I also want to express my gratitude to Dr. Sarah Pannone for her guidance, support, and the keen perspective of a methodologist of the highest caliber.

Finally, I could not have completed this program without the support of the many staff members who I am lucky to lead each day. I especially want to say thank you to Dr. Kelly Miller, President of Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi (and my boss) for her support and encouragement. In addition, I could not have kept my sanity without the support of colleagues and friends who have lent ears and provided advice over the course of my studies, particularly Cindy Perez, Deon Bergeron, and Chris Giles. Finally, I also want

to thank my colleagues Rito Silva, Patricia Dominguez, Jennifer Sramek, and Alex Solis for their assistance and support.

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List of Abbreviations

American College Test (ACT)

Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI)

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)

Texas Success Initiative (TSI)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Higher education as a discipline is changing, and the challenge of helping students gain worldly and applicable knowledge is becoming varied and critical to the good of the student and the public (Williams, 2016). Over 20 million students are entering colleges and universities each year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Nearly one-quarter of these students are first generation students, or students who are the first members of their families to attend college (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Schademan & Thompson, 2016). In addition, nearly one-half of all students across the country are being educated in community colleges (Snyder & Cudney, 2017). Because this demographic is so significant to the population of students entering institutions, higher education leaders have concentrated attention and action on issues relative to student persistence, perseverance, and preparation. This concentration has become critical for student success and graduation (Braxton & Francis, 2018).

This chapter provides the background for the phenomenon surrounding student perseverance in college and will be applied specifically to a population of first-generation community college students relative to the perseverance experiences that have led to continued enrollment from year one to year two in college. This information is followed by situation to self where I discuss the beliefs and experiences which guide my interest in the perseverance experiences of first-generation college students from first to second year in college. The theoretical framework for the study is outlined as well as the problem and research focus. Finally, the significance of the study and the research questions that serve as a foundation for the methodology of the study are outlined. The chapter concludes with definitions that are integral to the scope of the study and a chapter summary.

Background

Over time, the enrollment of college students has become increasingly diverse and has included students from various demographic backgrounds (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2019). Approximately 33% of these students are the first in their families to pursue higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). For colleges and universities, the challenge is not only how to educate these students, but to prepare them to be successful in life. This challenge has become a front-line issue for administrators, faculty, and staff at institutions across the country since students are not persisting, which impacts both the students and the institutions academically, socially, and financially. In fact, nearly 40% of all students at higher educational institutions in the United States are not returning for their second year at their current institution (National Student Clearinghouse, 2018). The problem of students persevering in their educational endeavors from first to second year is best examined in a historical, social, and theoretical context.

Historical

As higher education has evolved in the United States, differing statistics relative to student perseverance and completion have defined public and private institutions as well as two and four-year colleges and universities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). This definition has arisen from the evolution of the American educational system over time. Over the course of the past half century, since the initial passing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, the educational system in the United States has been undergoing change at all levels as government interest and intervention has been dealing with the evolving complexity of society. During this time, studies have found that nearly one-third of American students are performing at proficiency levels that have been deemed as unacceptable on national

assessments (Razik & Swanson, 2010). This level of achievement has been driven by growing changes in a variety of socioeconomic variables and in families. This achievement gap is not closing to the extent that is necessary to meet social and economic needs in the country where approximately one-third of all students are not prepared for college level study (Razik & Swanson, 2010). The level of preparation is glaring and transitory when connected with the fact that since 1999, the proportion of students who are first-generation has grown to over 50% of the students enrolled at today's community colleges, which marks a significant population of students (Cataldi, Bennet, & Chen, 2018; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). The most recent trends over the past decade show a moderate effect on student retention at their current institution from year one to year two from approximately 59% in 2009 to 61% in 2017 (National Student Clearinghouse, 2018). For four-year public institutions, this rate has only moderately changed from 69.5% in 2009 to 71.5% in 2017 (National Student Clearinghouse, 2017). At two-year public institutions, the rate has been far lower and less changed from 48% in 2009 to 48.9% in 2017 (National Student Clearinghouse, 2017). Considering that nearly 3.5 million of the 20 million students entering colleges each year are students who are entering college for the first time, the harsh reality hits that over a million students are not being retained at their current institutions for the second year of their college journey.

Social

First-generation students fail to persist at higher educational institutions at rates which are greater than those of continuing generation students (Glaessgen, et al., 2018). First-generation students typically have the lack of family understanding of the elements surrounding academic study at a college or university. For many first-generation students, there is a disconnect to their academic environment specifically relative to their socio-economic status, family background,

and prior academic preparation (Longwell-Grice, et al., 2016). The academic background of this group can be characterized as unprepared and ill equipped to handle the rigors of college compared to their continuing-generation peers (Atherton, 2014). The benefit for these students to persevering toward their degree is that college completion creates higher income for graduates and others, enhanced health rates and life expectancy, and increases to social involvement and development programs (Trostel, 2017).

Theoretical

College students have varied experiences and motivations that ultimately affect engagement and achievement in their educational setting, which tend to be significant to student development and progression (Wu, 2019). Student integration is fundamental to persistence. The theoretical lens that is being used for this study will be Vincent Tinto's (1975) interactionist theory. Tinto (1975) focused concentration on persistence experiences relative to the individual student's perspective of their academic and social interaction. Discussions relevant to persistence can be found in various studies and from a variety of perspectives. However, more focused research is needed to understand in greater detail the perseverance and persistence experiences of the growing population of community college students. Therefore, the theoretical framework for this study is built on Tinto's (1975) interactionist theory as it relates to the concepts of academic and social integration and will build upon the body of knowledge dedicated to the phenomenon of student persistence and perseverance among first-generation college students at community colleges

Situation to Self

Like many students entering college, I entered the higher education environment as a first-generation college student. During my time as an undergraduate, I was mentored by various

faculty and staff members who took a vested interest in my academic and social integration as well as my progression toward the baccalaureate degree. Following my commencement, I began what would be the first chapters in a 27-year career in higher education. The crux of my career has been in the field of enrollment management in areas of increasing responsibility which have ultimately led to my service as an executive level administrator in public higher education. Throughout my career, I made the support of first-generation college students central to my service. Therefore, the persistence of first-generation college students is paramount in my professional and personal concentration. And, because the largest amounts of students do not progress from year one to year two (National Student Clearinghouse, 2018), the subject of my study is centered on the perseverance experiences of first-generation college students from the first to the second year in college.

As an educational leader, I contend that students do not persist from the first to the second year of their college career for a variety of different reasons. This contention is best aligned with ontological assumptions as they relate to the nature of being as relayed through multiple perspectives regarding the nature of reality through various viewpoints (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case, the researcher cultivates the viewpoints as themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The worldview or interpretive framework that is best aligned for this study is centered around postmodernism as it is constructed on the various conditions and theoretical perspectives that include class, race, gender, and other group affiliations that surround the uniqueness that is society (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Slife & Williams, 1995).

Ontological Assumptions

Ontological assumptions address issues related to reality and the perceptions that people have related to particular situations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the basic thoughts

related to perseverance experiences of community college students who have finished their first year in college are addressed through interviews, focus groups, and through a reflective writing experience. From these data collection techniques, the various student viewpoints were collected to determine specific themes or meaning groups.

Epistemological Assumptions

Epistemological philosophical assumptions address the specific relationship, or closeness, between the researcher and the individuals being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, I was able to engage in rich levels of communication with students in various formats that provided engaging opportunities to understand the experiences which led to persistence for each of the students. Because the data collection techniques are varied, I was able to build stronger rapport with each participant, which provided for greater understanding.

Axiological Assumptions

Axiological assumptions are tied to value systems, theoretical concepts, lenses of concentration, and cultural differences for both the researcher and the subjects (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, I recognized the importance that education and student perseverance play for student success and advancement. This recognition is tied to experiences that I have had as both a student and as an educational administrator for over a quarter of a century, which has shaped value systems and the lens through which I understand the challenges facing students.

Problem Statement

The problem facing educational leaders, especially those at community colleges, is that a significant number of students are not persisting from their first to their second year of college. Detrimental student success outcomes are important factors facing students, institutions, and institutional funding mechanisms (Jia & Maloney, 2015). Therefore, the perseverance of college

students from first to second year in college is an important cornerstone for student and institutional success (Ishitani & Reid, 2015). Even further, the fact that a significant portion of entering students are first-generation college students makes the focus even more critical (National Student Clearinghouse, 2018). In fact, if college students do not resolve transition issues in their first year, the odds of them persevering in their education and progressing toward their degree is greatly reduced (Stewart, Lim, & Kim, 2015; Wilson, 2016). Over 20 million students are entering colleges and universities each year with well over one-third of them being students who are first-generation college students, therefore perseverance experiences are important to consider (Braxton & Francis, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2016; National Student Clearinghouse, 2018). This becomes magnified when it is considered that first year student persistence is ultimately a primary indicator relative to student success and graduation (Braxton & Francis, 2018; Hepworth, Littlepage, & Hancock, 2018).

This study adds to, and extends, the multitude of research that has been done over the years relative to student persistence, a great deal which has been focused on four-year institutions. In fact, most of the early studies and models related to retention and student persistence focused on four-year institutions (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Yu, 2015). Some researchers have, however, focused primarily on two-year community colleges. For example, Bers and Smith (1991) focused on the strong influence of student intent on academic and social integration for community college students, while Simpson (2016) centered their study on the perceptions of experiences that traditional aged students had in community colleges that led to persistence. Braxton, Hirschy, and McLendon (2004) studied non-residential community college students and found that academic engagement in the classroom was critical to student success. Even further, Stennick (1989) wrote of the persistence impacts that new full-time community

college students experienced. Prior researchers dedicated to studying persistence at two-year community colleges also found that first to second year persistence is a problem for many community college students, especially those who are particularly high achieving and are from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Deil-Amen, 2011; Feldman & Zimlbler, 2011; Wilson, 2016). This central point regarding first to second year enrollment is also recorded by researchers who found that the largest number of students fail to retain after the first year of college (Feldman & Zibler, 2011; Hossler, Kuh, & Olsen, 2011). Finally, Napoli and Wortman (1998) found that the low rates of persistence among community college students are associated with influences from their social foundational elements like their families and friends. While there have been many areas exposed over the past few decades, few studies have focused on perseverance experiences of first-generation college students in community colleges, centering on their first to the second year of college. The driving need for this study is that a significant portion of community college students, in some cases over 40%, are not persevering from the first to the second year of study (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Since researchers have pointed out that students in community colleges are different than those students in four-year institutions and they are more likely to not persist and complete a college education, the case can be made that with significant retention shortfalls at these institutions, critical concentration on student retention and persistence must be made (Yu, 2015). Furthermore, with first-generation students making up over 20% of the total college population in the United States today (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017; NCES 2018, Pryor, Hurtado, DeAngelo, Blake, & Tran, 2010) and between 38 and 56% of those students who are enrolled as undergraduates at institutions which are either two-year or less than two-year public institutions (Redford & Hoyer, 2017), this study addresses a current gap in the literature

by addressing the perseverance experiences of first-generation college students in community colleges, especially those from their first to second year in college.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe first-generation college students' perseverance experience from the first to the second year of enrollment at a community college in the Southern United States. For the scope of this study, persistence from the first to the second year of college was defined as whether a student who was a first-time freshman in one fall semester has subsequently enrolled in the following fall semester. The theory guiding this study was Vincent Tinto's interactionist theory (1975) as it is relevant to behavior in the educational setting and the interaction, as well as the integration of students into the academic setting. Specifically, this theory was applied to the study in order to understand the behavior of first-generation college students as they have transition experiences that relate to their entry into college and their perseverance from year to year as they persist toward degree.

Significance of the Study

This study sought to add to the body of knowledge related to student persistence as the perseverance experiences are important to fully understand their perceived effect on first-generation college students. There is a great deal of data that exists relative to overall student persistence. However, most of the studies conducted relative to community college students has been related to a certain age group of students, or the specific preparations, activities, dropout factors, or interventions themselves and not primarily on first-generation students in this setting (Bern & Smith, 1991; Cholewa & Ramaswami, 2015; Fowler & Boylan, 2014; Nakajima et al., 2012; Royster, Gross, & Hochbein, 2015; Simpson, 2016; Stennick, 1989). This study focuses on

the perseverance experiences of a certain population of 12 first-generation students at a community college in the Southern United States.

This study has empirical and practical significance for students, families, educational leaders, and for society in general. Because the focal point of the study is to develop an understanding of the experiences that lead to the perseverance of first-generation community college students from first to second year, the study provided me an opportunity to solicit student feedback that may provide avenues for institutions to implement programs to help this population of students become successful when they transition and ultimately enroll in four-year institutions. Although there are many precipitating factors which make this study relevant to these students, it is important to understand that the student success of first-generation students provides the greatest opportunity to impact to a population which represent nearly a quarter of the college population (National Student Clearinghouse, 2018). This factor has the potential impact to workforce development and productivity.

Relevant current research indicates that student perseverance and persistence are impacted by varied factors. One of the most accurate predictors of student preparation for college and an indicator for student success is the high school grade point average and that counseling provides the basis for future support mechanisms (Cholewa & Ramaswami, 2015). In addition, what students experience once they arrive on campus and their involvement as students determines their level of institutional commitment and can support their perseverance which ultimately leads to persistence in their studies (Fowler & Boylan, 2014). To this extent when students enter college, the hope is that they are prepared to be successful. Essentially, preparing students to be successful early on is important to ensure persistence in college (Royster, Gross, & Hochbein, 2015). This is exceedingly important at two-year institutions which have

extraordinarily diverse demographics, including a large portion of first-generation college students.

This study has theoretical significance for higher educational practitioners who must find ways to manage student transition and provide avenues to student success. Students at two-year institutions sometimes need more interaction and assistance relative to perseverance and success. Particularly, first-generation students are innately stressed and have multiple factors which affect their successful transition and assimilation. They have little family knowledge or support relative to college transition issues; this includes doing things like filling out financial aid forms, applications, and entrance exam applications (Glaessgen et al., 2018). Fundamentally, first-generation students must find the determination and motivation to succeed without what some would deem as adequate preparation. Researchers also found that students' self-determination was enhanced when then their parents were supportive and engaged in college planning. Parental examples help set educational standards for children and the students typically were more engaged and more highly motivated from the process (Mitchell & Jaeger, 2018). Using Tinto's (1975) interactionist theory as a lens helped to provide context for assimilation strategy and could contribute to student persistence and perseverance.

Research Questions

This study focused on the perseverance experiences of first-generation community colleges students through means of a transcendental phenomenological design. The theoretical lens that was used to understand student persistence and perseverance experiences is Tinto's interactionist theory (1975). Although there are a great variety of areas which could shape research and data collection concerning the topic of student perseverance experiences for first-

generation college students, this study focused on one central research question and four supporting questions.

Central Research Question

How do first-generation students at a community college in the Southern United States describe their perseverance experiences from their first to second year of college?

The population of first-generation college students is on the rise as a significant population of college students are the first in their families to attend college (National Student Clearinghouse, 2018). In addition to this fact, nearly half of all students are enrolled in community colleges and these institutions typically have remarkable numbers of students who do not persist from their first to second year of study (Feldman & Zimbler, 2011). Therefore, this question helps to establish the central strategy of understanding the perseverance experiences of first-generation college students.

Sub-Question One

How do college students describe the events that led them to persevere from the first to the second year of college?

A significant number of community college students do not return for their second year of study (Feldman & Zimbler, 2011). This question aligns to the problem statement in that it deals specifically with the perseverance of students from first to second year and that it seeks to pinpoint the intervention events that led to continuation of study. The perseverance experiences that students have are important to social interaction and integration into university life (Demetriou, et al., 2017).

Sub-Question Two

How do college students describe the preparatory instances from high school that were most beneficial to their transition into college?

There are a wide variety of factors that typically affect student perseverance behaviors (Wilson, 2016). This question relates to the topic of perseverance in the fact that it seeks to identify what activities the students felt were most beneficial in preparing them for transition to college. Student transition preparation and activities tends to affect their perseverance (Longwell-Grice, et al., 2016).

Sub-Question Three

How do students who completed their first year of college describe the most impactful experience on their success and perseverance?

Because college experiences and interventions are varied, it is important to understand which factors are most impactful (Wilson, 2016). Identifying important experiences which have impacted student success and perseverance helps to pinpoint areas for growth and enhanced service. In many cases these areas include academic and social interaction activities (Ishitani 2016; Tinto, 1975).

Sub-Question Four

How do college students describe the instances which had an adverse effect on their perseverance experiences?

It is important to truly understand why students chose to continue their study and if there were instances that detrimentally impacted continuation. This question is specifically relevant to pinpoint behavior batters of students who persisted, with specific concentration to factors which led them to contemplate non-continuation of study. For many students of various socio-economic

backgrounds, these areas are different and are impactful toward decisions of perseverance (Longwell-Grice, et al., 2016).

Definitions

There are many terms that are used in the literature and analysis provided to understand the impact perseverance experiences have on retention of first-generation college students. The applied and operational definition of the following terms is central to this analysis:

1. *Academic preparedness* – refers to appropriate knowledge requisite for college placement, credit, and transfer (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).
2. *Continuing generation* – students who have at least one parent who has some college experience (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).
3. *First-generation* – students whose parents have no college experience (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).
4. *Four-year institution* – a public or private post-secondary institution of higher education offering at least a bachelor's degree (National Student Clearinghouse, 2018).
5. *Persistence* – continued enrollment from one semester to another toward degree attainment (NSC Research Center, 2015).
6. *Retention* – the continued enrollment from semester to semester and year to year (NSC Research Center, 2015).
7. *Student success* – refers to student retention and degree completion and reflects student preparation to use necessary learned behavior for personal, civic, or professional pursuits (WASC Senior College and University Commission, 2019).

Summary

A significant portion of the college student population entering college each year is first-generation college students. According to the National Student Clearinghouse (2018), nearly 40% of students do not return to their institution for a second year. With revenue being tied so significantly to student enrollment at many institutions of higher learning, educational leaders are concentrating on strategies which help lead to higher levels of student perseverance. This significant problem of students continuing their enrollment is driven by the fact that many students are plagued by lower levels of preparation when entering the universities. These levels of preparation are affecting student preparedness and success as they enter the workforce, which ultimately affects their productivity. Therefore, the focus of this study rested on describing the perseverance experiences of first-generation community college students.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A comprehensive literature review was completed to explore and align information related to the problem of student persistence and perseverance in higher educational institutions. This chapter will present information related to this topic and enable direct and correlated relationships to community college students. In the first section of the chapter, the primary theory related to student persistence, academic, and social integration will be addressed. Following this theoretical application, the relevant and related literature in the field will be addressed in two main thematic areas of impact tied to academic and social integration. Academic integration will provide literature on academic preparation and readiness, academic predictors to readiness, the impact of academic advising, as well as instructional support and counseling. Social integration will include literature related to the preparedness of first-generation students, the socio-economic and family background of students, along with peer interaction and the concepts of student identity and confidence. The review of literature defined a gap in the current field which shall establish the need for this study.

The theoretical framework in a research study provides the fundamental basis for the collection and application of research. Theoretical framework relates various perceived constructs and provides association to previous and current research and conclusions (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Specifically relevant to this research study, is related research and theory tied to behavior patterns of student success, persistence, and perseverance. The theory that was used to frame this study is Vincent Tinto's interactionist theory (1975). Tinto is an educator and sociologist who is viewed by many as one of the seminal theorists for student retention and persistence. Tinto's interactionist theory (1975) is rooted in integrative actions and has been

refined through longitudinal models designed to identify the root causes and solutions for student attrition (1987, 1993). The interactionist theory focuses on student interaction which is centered on the student's willingness to interact socially and assimilate into the institutional environment. Fundamentally, the model considers the impact of financial resources, the student experience, and academic interactions as relevant to student persistence (Tinto, 1993). The integration of academic and social experiences are important pillars to student success and have been further explained in a more directed approach in three distinct examinations.

Interactionist Theory

Mertes and Jankoviak (2016) indicated that Tinto's interactionist theory has become one of the most widely tested, cited, and critiqued models in literature pertaining to these topics. The basic premise of the theory is that students enter college with a distinct set of characteristics (gender, race, family background, academic preparation) that affect their initial transition and commitment, as well as their pathway toward achieving the goal of graduation (Mertes & Jankoviak, 2016). From this, students proceed through three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation (Mertes & Jankoviak, 2016). The separation stage is marked by students leaving their old support systems and enter the transition phase where they transition to their new environment, even though they are not quite assimilated (Mertes & Jankoviak, 2016). The final stage of incorporation is where students are integrated into the academic and social environmental systems of the institution (Mertes & Jankoviak, 2016). It is during these stages where students' backgrounds and characteristics play a role in the overall integration into the environmental system (Evans, McFarland, Rios-Aguilar, & Deil-Amen, 2016; Mertes & Jankoviak, 2016). Even though Tinto's theories have become widely accepted for their ability to address these stages and the elements surrounding persistence (Bensimon, 2007; Mertes &

Jankoviak, 2016), researchers have found that it does not evenly apply to all types of post-secondary institutions, including community colleges (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Deil-Amen, 2012). Deil-Amen (2012) favored more of a blended approach to student interaction where socio-academic moments are impactful for integration. It is worth noting that for the purposes of this analysis, socio-academic moments are connected to the academic and social integration in the overall college setting as described by Tinto (1975, 1993).

Concentration on Student Persistence

Tinto's theory examines the student persistence process as a context of the student's academic or social interaction in college. The model outlines various behaviors and actions which attribute to whether a student does not persist and drops out of the institution (Stewart, Lim, & Kim, 2016; Tinto, 1993). Tinto believed that students who attend college had a certain set of characteristics and commitments that affect their college transition and ultimately their performance in college (Stewart et al., 2016; Tinto, 1993). He theorized that students begin with a wide array of personal characteristics, a certain level of family support, prior academic preparation, and experiences which shape the longitudinal process of their persistence and likelihood of departure (Stewart et al., 2016; Tinto, 1993). Tinto also believed that financial situation affects the persistence experience (Stewart et al., 2016; Tinto, 1993).

Refinement and Concentration on Attrition

Research also indicated that Tinto (1975) has consistently refined his model, as evidenced in 1987 and 1993, as he has further concentrated on the factors causing student attrition and their potential solutions. This model is the basis of many studies related to student persistence and retention (French, 2017). Tinto conceived that the environments of colleges and universities are directly connected to students as they integrate themselves into their new

environmental context (French, 2017; Tinto, 1975). Tinto's theory is mainly focused on first-year experiences as that time period is believed to be the greatest impact on student persistence decisions (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000; French, 2017; Tinto, 1987). The theory is based upon academic and social integration as primary links to persistence. Academic integration is thought to be supported by past academic measures and student preparation as representative of how a student is best situated to be successful and integrated into the institutional system (French, 2017; Tinto, 1975). The social integration construct focuses on support systems and student characteristics as indicative of connectivity and integration likelihood as the student transitions into college (French, 2017; Tinto, 1975).

Theoretical Relevance

The relevance this theory poses to the integration and behavioral activities of college students is the founding premise that shaped the examination and conclusions drawn from studying the factors which impact student perseverance from the first to the second year. Prior to this present study, there was a strong focus on the persistence activities surrounding students in four-year institutions, but very limited research that described the perseverance experiences of first-generation students in community colleges. This study used this theoretical foundation as a basis for examining the problem further. Predominately, the overarching thematic areas of student and academic interaction and integration were the critical lenses for these conclusions and the contemplation of relevant and related literature.

Related Literature

Student perseverance and college retention are important issues confronting leaders in higher education. In fact, the issue is critical since many colleges and universities across the nation and around the world are struggling to retain students as nearly 50% of students fail to

persist toward completion of either a certificate or a degree (Green & Wright, 2017; Petty, 2014). Furthermore, approximately 28% of first-year students in four-year institutions and 44% of students in community colleges do not persist to their second year of study (Feldman & Zimbler, 2011). At the heart of the retention issue seems to be a lack of retaining students that are of higher ability and of lower-socio-economic backgrounds (Deil-Amen, 2012; Feldman & Zimbler, 2011; Wilson, 2016). Student persistence is, therefore, fundamentally important to student success and perseverance (Green & Wright, 2017). There are a variety of factors that contribute to perseverance behaviors affecting student enrollment that include: pre-college experiences, early encouragement of degree aspirations, various psychosocial factors, budgeting/employment, various levels of interaction and social support, assimilation, family background, as well as success strategies and integration experiences (Wilson, 2016). The various behavioral factors provide a link with high school and college curriculum, academic guidance, community, financial resources, as well as social and individual development (Wilson, 2016). To further understand the issues relevant to the overarching perseverance experience, it is critical to understand student persistence and the community college, academic preparation and readiness, academic predictors to readiness, the impact of academic advising, further instructional support and counseling, preparedness of first-generation college students, the socio-economic and family backgrounds of students, peer interaction, as well as student identity and confidence.

Student Persistence and Community Colleges

It is important to fathom the history and development of community colleges around the country relative to helping students persist. Community colleges were developed to offer educational opportunity to communities by providing access to general education and workforce

development programs (Cohen et al., 2014; Snyder & Cudney, 2017; Young, 1997). It cannot be understated that community colleges are vital providers of access to many students, especially those from first-generation and diverse socio-economic groups (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014; Juskiewicz, 2014; McNair, Couturier, & Christian, 2015). Community colleges offer students varied experiences and academic pathways both in the practical and theoretical sense as students enroll at these institutions to enhance skills and provide the necessary avenues to prepare for continued education at the four-year setting (McNair et al., 2015; Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014). The fact that community colleges educate nearly one-half of the students in higher educational institutions makes the persistence and perseverance of community college students important. Even so, community colleges are plagued with some of the lowest retention rates (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Martin et al., 2014; Yu, 2015). Increasing these rates could ensure an educated and engaged citizenry, thus make a substantial impact on a variety of technical, economic, and educational sectors around the country (Deberard, Spelmans, & Julka, 2004; Li, Seaminathan, & Tang, 2009; Martin et al., 2014; Snyder & Cudney, 2017). In his book, *Leaving College*, Tinto (1987) outlines the various causal factors that impact student decisions not to persist. The primary student success factors tend to be tied to intention and commitment as they relate to the academic and social integration experiences of the students (Snyder & Cudney, 2017; Tinto, 1975). As higher levels of intention and integration develop in college, the instances of student persistence and graduation and graduation enhance; thus, the assimilation into college is critical for the transition period which is the first year of college (Ishitani, 2016) and therefore, an adequate exposition of the related literature should be built upon the two primary thematic pillars of academic and social integration as identified in the theoretical model established by Tinto (1975).

Academic Integration

The transition to college study is paramount for student success and is a key area that supports the academic and social integration into college life (Ishitani, 2016b, Shaeper, 2019). The educational career is often shaped by the manner in which the transition to college occurs. In order to successfully navigate the waters involved in the transition, student preparation begins with high school study and extends to activities which begin with college matriculation. Academic integration is essentially when students assimilate into the academic life of their particular college or university (Karp, Hughes, & O’Gara, 2008; Tinto, 1975). In greater detail, assimilation experiences focus on the student’s ability to adapt to college life through connections they achieve among their peers and with faculty members (Adams, Meyers, & Beidas, 2016). Academic integration is an instrument of retention that is viewed as effective for retaining students for their first year (Ishitani, 2016). The construct of getting students assimilated to the college academic setting is precipitated in many cases through their level of preparation and their approaches to institutional support mechanisms designed to support their success. Academic integration and assimilation have many avenues to engage students, but typically include academic preparation and readiness, academic predictors and readiness activities, academic success engagements and advising, instructional support and counseling, student academic motivation levels, academic interventions, and institutional characteristics.

Academic Preparation and Readiness

Academic preparation and performance are widely viewed as acceptable means of predicting student success and perseverance (Westrick et al., 2015). Some researchers have even found that student background and levels of preparation academically can be more important than other integration and persistence factors (Carales, 2020; D’Amico, Dika, Elling, Algozzine,

& Ginn, 2014). In many cases, secondary institutions align their curriculum focus to improve student outcomes and preparation for college (Bickerstaff, Barragan, & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2017). Regardless of their ultimate level of preparation, students enter college seeking to enhance their lives or career opportunities. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), the number of students engaging study in degree-granting post-secondary institutions during a year is approximately 20 million. Performance indicators for this population have exhibited challenges related to their preparation and readiness for college study. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2012), the challenge facing students and these institutions is that among those who took the ACT examination, student readiness levels were between 29 and 66% for student test-takers (66.3 for English, 43.4 for mathematics, 51.8 for reading, and 29.3% for science). The data becomes even more confounded when the following areas that impact academic preparation and readiness are considered: critical thinking relative to readiness, predictors of college success, and getting students on track for college.

Critical thinking skills are important for all students to master, especially students planning to attend college. These skillsets are important factors to consider along with academic preparedness to determine college readiness (Lombardi, Knowitt, & Staples, 2015). Each student thinks and processes information differently, so the processes surrounding their synthesis of information is critical. An understanding of a student's mastery of problem formulation, research, interpretation, communication, and precision (accuracy) are primary indicators for measurements of readiness (Lombardi et al., 2015). Understanding student critical thinking and content mastery centers on an understanding of these elements and promotes an understanding of student readiness and progression since the early days of their education. The data points surround their academic achievement and their demographic backgrounds. The most useful data

point which predicts college success is the student's high school grade point average, even more than student performance in developmental coursework (Jackson & Kurleander, 2014).

When students enter college, the hope is that they are prepared to be successful. Some students are and some are not. Researchers have shown that preparing students to be successful early on is important to ensuring their ultimate persistence in college, beginning as early as eighth grade (Royster, Gross, & Hochbein, 2015). To achieve this, school counselors play an important role helping students develop educational and career aspirations (Deslonde & Becerra, 2018). Parents also play an important role regarding getting students on the right track, but their role is shaped by previous educational experience and performance (Royster et al., 2015; Westrick et al, 2015).

Students entering colleges and universities do so with differing levels of prior academic preparation. Students at community colleges enter college often unprepared or underprepared for college work (Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014). These institutions tend to enroll more students from low income, first-generation families, and underrepresented socio-economic groups (Martin et al., 2014; Horn & Nevill, 2006). Many of their students require remediation or developmental coursework to bring them up to a level that will assist in their likelihood of success (Martin et al., 2014; Townsend & Twombly, 2007).

Academic Predictors to Readiness

Readiness can be understood by concentrating on various predictors to success. Academic predictors are perhaps the best areas of focus for their measurements. In addition to the importance of grade point averages, high school coursework, student demographic influences, and other factors are important points of concentration.

The college preparatory coursework taken by students in high school can be very important predictors of whether a student is successful in college. Students who have higher levels of academic preparation in high school typically pass introductory courses in English and mathematics at higher levels (Woods et al., 2018). With initial ACT readiness indicators indicating challenging readiness indices for students (NCES, 2012), this further preparation from a college preparatory set of courses taken in high school help ensure student success.

Each student is unique, whether the institution is a two or four-year college or university. The level of academic preparation and the proactivity of students promotes readiness. Indeed, whether students are proactive in utilizing university services provides as an indicator for success. Specifically, participating in counseling and advising programs fosters readiness and leads to student persistence and success. Those students who were deemed college ready are more likely to seek out academic counseling than those of their less prepared peers (Melzer & Grant, 2016). The danger is that without the access to the social integration and guidance provided during academic advising, the path to success for students who enter college underprepared will be hindered. Research also suggests that support and integration build upon readiness and student success. Academic readiness (grades, courses) are important indicators to student persistence. If students are integrated into their social and academic environment (faculty interaction, advising, activities, etc.) student academic potential is impacted even more than institutional commitment to student success (Hepworth et al., 2018).

Recent studies have indicated that standardized test scores, like the ACT, have lower value for indicating whether or not a student is prepared for college work. Allensworth and Clark (2020) indicate that the highest impact on college readiness includes the concentration on achievement and performance as is relatively expressed in high school grade point averages

(GPAs). It is worth noting, however, that the academic rigor could indicate differences among schools when high school GPA is considered as a metric for student success. The GPA is, therefore, a way for schools to indicate pathways for student enhancement and improvement and as a guide for student preparation and transition (Allensworth & Clark, 2020; Jackson & Kurleander, 2016).

Academic Success and Advising

Researchers have found that for every advising appointment, the odds of student success and retention were increased by 13% (Swecker et al., 2013). There are many different types of academic advising programs at post-secondary institutions. For many of the institutions, dedicated freshman advisors focus on transitioning students into academic and social environments. For others, professors serve as mentor-advisors to help students integrate intrusively into academic disciplines. The most popular structure of advising is through a centralized model. Centralized advising is important to student success on a variety of levels based upon what is provided to students: curriculum analysis, course section advising, career planning, major advice, directions to appropriate campus resources, and ultimately the construction of success strategies (Kot, 2014).

For first-generation college students (and students from underrepresented groups), the deficit they have in any familial experience relative to academic study tends to affect academic success. This can be resolved through interaction in a structured advising program focusing on these powerful elements. Students from this demographic group tend to value help from teachers and their advisors (if they understand the roles), but they also value their connections to their communities (friends, roommates, etc.) as well (Glaessgen et al., 2018). Colleges and universities have witnessed the imperative to commit resources which provide these significant

advising opportunities needed to help students persist. Researchers have found that in order to meet the needs of first-generation students, institutional leaders need to provide dedicated advisors for this group and that they should ensure adequate amounts of time for interaction between advisors and students (Swecker et al., 2013).

Academic advising plays a key role in student persistence and chances of graduation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Therefore, helping ensure student success through advising is critical to many institutions; so much so, institutional leaders have sought to implement intrusive advising models that help students reach degree attainment goals while helping to ensure pathways for transition and success (Donaldson, McKinney, Lee, & Pino, 2016). For community colleges it can be even more critical based upon the fact that these institutions tend to have students from varied backgrounds, who are non-traditional, or who are underprepared for college work (Cohen & Brawer, 2014; Donaldson et al., 2016). Because of this, intrusive advising programs are becoming more plentiful at these institutions. Students who participate in intrusive advising programs are required to see an assigned advisor a prescribed number of times, participate in degree-planning activities, and receive individualized success guidance (Donaldson et al., 2016). The downside of this type of advising is that it is required, the advising tools are limited and more prescriptive, there is a lack of ability of the student to be self-selective for their courses, it presents an increased need for advising appointments, and there are additional resources required for student transitional activities (Donaldson et al., 2016). The overall contribution to the goal of student progression and success is that students will understand and can be guided down a pathway toward attaining their educational goals, they will gain confidence and have a participatory role in their degree progression, and they will feel more comfortable engaging with advisors and faculty members (Donaldson et al., 2016).

Instructional Support and Counseling

Support is critical to student readiness and ultimately to success. Student success and persistence depend heavily on student support systems in the college environment due to emotional, psychological, or personal issues that affect the student's ability to persevere (Bishop, 2016). Instructional support carries many forms – from peer interaction to engagement with academic advisors and faculty. Each of the various forms provides opportunities for collaboration, socialization, and knowledge development. One of the best ways to build the socialization prescribed for student success is to build opportunities for peer interaction. Engaging relationships like tutoring, mentoring, and advising help students to impart knowledge and expertise to their peers in a setting that is less formal than if it is done by a faculty member or a counselor. These positive interactions can be impactful despite any prior academic preparation of the student who receives the knowledge from the peer (Bonner & Thomas, 2017). Peer interactions are only a part of an understanding of the tools which help students enhance their success potential. Traditional models of student success focus on the foundational element of professional counseling from academic advisors or faculty members. Cholewa and Ramaswami (2015) concluded in a study published in the *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice* that students who completed three to four hours of counseling each semester had a better grade point average than did their peers who did not. As prior studies have indicated the importance of the grade point average as an indicator of readiness, these connections foster the criterion for future student persistence.

As important as peer support is, the level of faculty-student interaction can be critical to students achieving the desired success outcomes (Carales, 2020). Students who have meaningful interaction with faculty over the course of their academic study tend to achieve higher levels of

student success (Astin, 1993; Sidelinger, Frisby, & Heisler, 2016). In addition, students who are connected with faculty tend to be able to set and meet academic goals and achieve higher levels of self-regulation in their academic progression (Sidelinger et al., 2016). This is likely due in large part to the fact that faculty tend to collaborate about course materials, as well as to support the enrichment of the overall academic and college experience through these relationships (Booh-Butterfield, 1992; Sidelinger et al., 2016; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). These relationships and the rapport created by the interaction can help to reduce anxiety, enhance communication, and increase persistence (Braxton et al., 2008; Sidelinger et al., 2016).

Academic Motivation

Academic performance and preparation are key indicators for student success but are strongly supported by whether students are motivated to learn (Clark, Middleton, Nguyen, & Zwick, 2014). In its simplest terms, academic motivation represents students' ultimate desire to complete their education and it facilitates their learning engagement and overall educational experience (Hulleman, Barron, Kosovich, & Lazowski, 2016; Wu, 2019). When students attend higher educational institutions, they often gain a sense of attainment or accomplishment that helps them perform to a certain level of expectation (Clark et al., 2014). In fact, motivation in the academic setting is viewed by psychological researchers as one of stronger predictors of academic success (Clark et al., 2014; Robbins, Lauver, Le, Davis, Langley, & Carlstron, 2004). Academic motivation is, then, the precipitating factor for individuals to pursue advanced study or a degree (Clark et al., 2014). The coordinating factors for student success and motivation may vary from student to student and are exhibited either intrinsically or extrinsically. Intrinsic motivational factors tend to be the ones that make the largest impact on student integration and success in the college setting as students adapt to the various demands of their studies (Clark et

al., 2014). It is this ability to adapt either academically or socially that is the precursor for the current focus on student persistence and perseverance in higher education (Clark et al., 2014; Padgett & Keup, 2011).

Academic motivation is a primary source of engagement and is a strong influence on ultimate student outcomes and persistence (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008; Au, 2015; Roksa & Whitley, 2017; Trolan, Jack, Hanson, & Pascarella, 2016; Wu, 2019). Motivation can in total, or in part, help support the contextual academic experience and the levels of student engagement and career success (Wang & Eccels, 2013; Wu, 2018). The overall levels of student motivation are what enhances student self-perception, achievement, and persistence, especially among community college students (Fong, Acee, & Weinstein, 2018; Fong et al., 2016). Self-perception for these students helps to support the adoption of goals, the drive to success, as well as the ability to handle the various challenges in and outside of the academic setting for community college students (Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014).

Community colleges serve as a vital preparatory platform for student progression and preparation. One of their key charges, seeing that 50% of all students entering higher educational study begin at community colleges, is to create pathways for students to continue their education and pursue baccalaureate degrees (Allen & Zhang, 2016). In disciplines in STEM areas (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), community colleges play an important role toward degree attainment, especially students who are from lower socio-economic backgrounds or who are first-generation (Allen & Zhang, 2016; Starobin & Laanan, 2010). Students in these institutions sometimes experience gaps in ability to properly prepare for the transition, while others engage in adequate preparatory activities (Allen & Zhang, 2016). In order for some students to achieve their set goals, they must engage in a higher level of self-motivation and

commitment in order to overcome any communication issues or advising inequities that might hinder their progression in the field or with transfer to a particular institution (Allen & Zhang, 2016).

Students in the community college or four-year institutional settings must be committed to providing the ultimate attention necessary to sustain their motivation. Student attention to the various academic elements necessary to sustain their persistence is viewed as one of the prominent skill sets requisite for knowledge exchange and the completion of various learning-related tasks (Chih-Yuan Sun, Oh, Seli, & Jung, 2017). Student attention placed on particular academic goals helps to increase the likelihood of learning and the lowering of distractions which may inhibit perseverance experiences (Chih-Yuan Sun et al., 2017; Weinstein & Palmer, 2002). Therefore, the concentration that a student places on academic tasks supports motivation and is a strong indicator of persistence, academic achievement, and overall student well-being (Allen, 1999; An, 2015; Chih-Yuan Sun et al., 2017; Guiffrida et al., 2013; Koska & Whitley, 2017; Trolan et al., 2016; Wu, 2019).

Academic Interventions

Students enter the educational setting with varied experience and preparation that are key targets for institutional academic intervention. These intervention programs, in many cases, are designed to impact student persistence and perseverance. Both colleges and universities are now focused on crafting strategies designed to better study habits and student concentration on learning within the educational community (Aquino, 2011). Intervention programs constructed to impact student persistence and retention are often focused on transition to college life, success in college, as well as addressing the need to enhance skills and abilities (Wibrostki, Matthews, Kitsantas, 2017). While these programs may vary from institution to institution, some common

elements exist, such as the incorporation of bridge programs, supplemental courses to support academic development, learning communities, and the extension of orientation transition (Wibroski et al., 2017).

Establishment of summer bridge programs helps both community colleges and four-year universities address foundational needs related to academic preparedness, but they also help establish a lifeline that exposes students to intensive academic settings which can result in higher persistence and completion rates (Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013; Douglas & Atwell, 2014; Wibroski et al., 2017). These opportunities can, not only, provide a vital experience for students which may have little prior higher educational experience, but they can create a sense of belonging that will support their transition (Wibroski et al., 2017).

While summer bridge and transition course programs help to provide necessary academic support and experience, institutional leaders are also implementing first-year seminar programs that are extending freshman orientation and other programs designed to support collegiate transition. First-year seminar programs typically concentrate on developing critical thinking skills and discipline specific concentrations that help develop critical skill sets necessary for student success and self-awareness (Barton & Donahue, 2009; Wibroski et al., 2017). These seminar programs help cultivate self-regulated behavior among students and an appreciation for what is necessary in the learning process that will help them navigate the learning environment (Wibroski et al., 2017; Zimmerman, 2000). This self-regulation is sometimes the defining factor for whether students achieve their academic goals (Wibroski et al., 2017; Zimmerman, 2000). Researchers have found that these programs often result in enhanced student GPA, engagement with curricular and co-curricular activities, as well as improved work ethic (Barton & Donahue, 2009; Wibroski et al., 2017).

The construction of seminar programs provides the necessary guidance for students who enter the academic environment of a higher educational institution, especially for those students who come from backgrounds with little or no higher educational experience. To extend the opportunities for student success generated by these programs, higher educational institutions are also engaging learning communities to increase student outcomes and persistence (Busch & Spaulding, 2011; Wibroski et al., 2017). For example, Bush and Spaulding (2011) found that students who engaged in a discipline specific learning program in psychology had a higher GPA at the end of the first year, earned a higher percentage of attempted hours, and persisted to the second year at a higher rate (Wibroski et al., 2017). Learning communities provide important connection between students in the academic setting by taking courses together (Tinto, 2003). The academic engagement in the learning communities is the antithesis to isolated learning activity for students and can provide cooperative learning and foster student learning and perseverance (Tinto, 2003). By students taking classes together, a sense of belonging is cultivated which can provide the necessary support for students to progress from their first to second year of study (Gonzales, Brammer, & Sawilowski, 2015; Wibroski et al., 2017).

Institutional Characteristics

There are a variety of characteristics which affect the educational choices, experiences, and ultimate success of students (Lei, 2016). These characteristics include campus environment, library, demographics of the institution, student-faculty ratio, institutional type, course delivery and structural format, campus facilities, services available to help student succeed, living arrangements, student engagement activities, and even employment opportunities (Lei, 2016). Institutions are using these targeted institutional facets to help provide avenues for student belonging. This sense of belonging has the ability to promote student engagement, well-being,

and ultimately student success and persistence (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Therefore, a strong sense of institutional commitment is important for achieving belonging which may determine elements of student success than can be created by institutional characteristics and commitment (Lei, 2016). Institutional commitment on behalf of the colleges and universities themselves involves a plan to focus on student success and provide the necessary support mechanisms to ensure academic, social, and financial support activities on their campuses (Lei, 2006; Tinto, 2005).

Social Integration

Academic preparation is a critical indicator for student performance, but non-academic factors are often deemed equally or greater impacts on student persistence and perseverance (Bickerstaff et al., 2017; Tinto, 1987). Social integration predominately occurs when students create relationships and begin to interact with others outside of the classroom (Karp et al., 2008; Tinto, 1975). The fundamental elements of student motivation as well as social and psychological engagement are roles of student success (Dumke et al., 2017). As a result, constructs related to social integration directly impact non-persistence and student transfer (Ishitani & Floor, 2018). For many students, their ability to integrate into the social structures of their college or university are affected by influences such as their first-generation status, socio-economic status or backgrounds, interactions from family and peers, as well as their student identity and confidence.

Challenges and Preparedness of First-Generation Students

Transition to college for many students is shaped by prior educational preparation (Holles, 2016; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). With so many students having an opportunity to attend college today, larger numbers of first-generation students attend college each year, so

much so that the total represents 20% of college students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017; Pryor, Hurtado, DeAngelo, Blake, & Tran, 2010). Typically, these students have experienced less opportunity to understand the fundamental design of the college experience and tend to have lower academic or familial support in the process. Fundamentally, first-generation students are viewed to be at a disadvantage relative to social, academic, preparation, and family support (Schelbe et al., 2019). The context surrounding this population is so data rich that it is impossible to grasp every nuance relative to the factors that lead to their persistence. Academic preparedness (readiness) and the interaction of lower income first-generation students is perhaps the best place to begin.

Some first-generation students tend to believe that various socio-economic and familial limitations affect their college readiness. In fact, the resiliency that must be learned by first-generation students is substantial (Schelbe et al., 2019). Data drawn from statistical sources has even proven a correlation with lower standardized test scores and high school grade point averages than for continuing-generation students (Atherton, 2014). Researchers have found that there is no difference between first-generation status and student perception about their preparedness levels in mathematics, writing, and general academic preparedness (Atherton, 2014). These students typically have challenges understanding the complexities surrounding academic performance and their college and career readiness, which can generate roadblocks to persistence. These roadblocks are often magnified to where only about 11% of first-generation students complete baccalaureate degrees within six years (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017). Another way of looking at the issue is that first-generation students are about four times more likely to drop out than their continuing-generation peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). When first generation students enroll in college, they are often relegated to making up for

academic deficiencies by needing to complete remediation, which is exacerbated by the fact that many of these students are less likely to seek help from their peers or from faculty (Jenkins et al., 2009; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017; Riehl, 1994). Their level of preparedness often limits accessibility and success of academic integration opportunities, thus affecting student performance and persistence (Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017).

One significant demographic descriptor for a significant portion of first-generation students is low-income. These students make up approximately 24% of the total undergraduate college population in the United States (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Schademan & Thompson, 2016). Understanding that first-generation students typically have the most challenges regarding readiness, leads to the assumption that they need more interactivity with social constructs to promote student persistence. In this case, one of the best integration mechanisms employed to enhance the preparedness of first-generation students is a relationship with faculty. This is of importance because faculty serve as cultural agents for students and their interactions form mechanisms (practices and procedures) for student success (Schademan & Thompson, 2016).

First-generation students drop out at higher rates than do continuing generation students (Glaessgen et al., 2018). Each year, about one-quarter of first-generation students will not return for their second year of college, compared to only 7% of other students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). First generation students typically have the lack of family understanding of the elements surrounding academic study at a college or university. For many of these students, there is a disconnect to their academic environment specifically relative to their socio-economic status, family background, and prior academic preparation (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). The academic background of this group can be characterized as unprepared and underperforming in some cases. Counselors and post-secondary educational professionals understand that standardized test

scores and high school grade-point average are good indicators for student success in college as they are the two most frequent academic factors used to gauge whether students should be admitted to college. In considering first generation students, researchers have found that students who had one or both parents graduate from college scored 32-48% higher on the SAT Verbal component and 20-38% higher on the mathematics component of the SAT (Atherton, 2014). Atherton (2014) also found that students with 'B+' or better grade point average in high school were generally those students with parents who had completed at least some college. First-generation students balance the stresses of college entrance, transition, and success without entrenched foundations for long-term success.

First-generation students are innately stressed and have multiple factors which affect their successful transition and assimilation. They have little family knowledge or support relative to college transition issues; this includes doing things like filling out financial aid forms, applications, and entrance exam applications (Glaessgen et al., 2018). Fundamentally, first-generation students must find the determination and motivation to succeed without what some might deem as adequate preparation. Researchers also found that students' self-determination was enhanced when then their parents were supportive and engaged in college planning. Parental examples help set educational standards for children and the students typically were more engaged and more highly motivated from the process (Mitchell & Jaeger, 2018). Even so, it is important to note that in community colleges, variables such as socio-economic status, degree expectation, language/citizenship barriers are precursory factors that exist for a large group of students as they are tied to transition and assimilation. (Carales, 2020).

Socio-economic and Family Background

Students whose socio-economic backgrounds are low or under-represented, as well as those who are first-generation, have some of the largest challenges relative to persistence (Deslonde & Becerra, 2018; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017; Wilson, 2016). Indeed, socio-economic status has been linked to academic performance as well as physical and mental health (Brantlinger, 2003; Longmire-Avital & Miller-Dycee, 2015). Even further, parental occupation and education level is one of the most static and important agents affecting student success (Longmire-Avital & Miller-Dycee, 2015). This impact is especially felt among high-achieving low-income students (Deil-Amen, 2011; Feldman & Zimler, 2011; Wilson, 2016). These results are at critical levels for community colleges (Napoli & Wortman, 1998; Wilson, 2016; Wyner et al., 2007). The income level for families, especially those in underrepresented groups has a strong impact on student achievement, especially when families have been in communities or areas that have experienced poverty over a prolonged period of time (Longmire-Avital & Miller-Dycee, 2015).

The plight of these groups has been a point of contention since the No Child Left Behind Act (2011) was instituted in which lawmakers sought to address achievement and access gaps for students from underrepresented groups (Huang & Zhu, 2017). In addition, the accountability metrics have even fallen upon schools and school districts (Huang & Zhu, 2017). Even with all this concentration, achievement gaps for students from lower socio-economic status groups has continued to widen (Huang & Zhu, 2017; Reardon, 2011). Furthermore, some students have even developed a lower sense of self-efficacy based upon academic experience and their level of performance (Wiederkehr et al., 2015). Within the last decade, educational policy shifts have put greater levels of concentration on community colleges because they serve the needs of workforce and college readiness (Carales, 2020; Lester, 2014). In addition, community colleges are at the

forefront of the issue due to the fact they educate a large portion of students across the country and serve as a primary educational agent for low-income, first-generation, and/or underrepresented populations (Cohen et al., 2014; Snyder & Cudney, 2017; Young, 1997).

Fundamentally, students who are first-generation or who are from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to have challenges assimilating and working within the academic environment as compared to their continuing-generation peers (Katreovich & Aruguete, 2017; Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014). These students are more likely to be easily engaged with the social dynamic of the university and have lower levels of interaction with faculty and advisers (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Jenkins, Miyazaki, & Janosik, 2009; Katreovich & Aruguete, 2017). First-generation and low-income students are often categorized by an increasing need to work in order to support themselves and their families, which also impacts their interaction and engagement (Katreovich & Aruguete, 2017; Kuh, 2008; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). The level of engagement is often as a result of these economic impacts and social constructs driven by family members who had limited understanding or interaction with collegiate academic settings (Katreovich & Aruguete, 2017). In community colleges, the primary factors that impact student engagement that often either support or pull them from study are financial aid, work obligations, and family commitments (Carales, 2020).

Parent and Family Influence

For many students in higher educational settings, the influence that their family and peers have on their educational endeavors are paramount (Jabbar, Serrata, Epstein, & Sanchez, 2019). These groups are widely perceived to have the strongest influence on information, support, and action (Jabbar et al., 2019; Miller & Goldrick-Rab, 2015). Families play a large role in shaping student choice and serve as an integrating foundation into the higher education context (Jabbar et

al., 2019; Nora, 2001; Tinto, 1993). To this end, parents are often believed to be a motivating influence on student decision and autonomy (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). For first-generation and low-income students, support from and connection to parents and families are believed to be one of the most critical elements for access and integration to college life (Jabbar et al., 2019; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018).

Students entering colleges and universities today tend to lean on their parents and relatives as support mechanisms for motivation and the resources necessary for college persistence and student success (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). Parents and family members who have a track record of participating as volunteers in prior school settings leads not only to a higher likelihood of enrollment in higher education, but to student progression (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018; Perna & Titus 2005). Parents who have experience interacting with teachers, counselors, and school personnel have experience navigating academic environments and tend to use this experience to support their students in both initial college choices and ongoing decision making, which results in their children attending college in greater numbers (McKillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). Parents and family members who have little college experience or time spent advocating for their students are less prepared to offer guidance and encouragement along the way (Choy, 2011; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2011; Savitz-Roemer, 2012).

Parent and family influence and commitment to student supports can help provide the necessary validation for students to form self-motivating and self-determining activities that are critical to college success (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2011). The feedback levels that these individuals provide are essential for the creation of a view of competency and the overall commitment to motivation and persistence (Jabbar et al., 2019; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In

the community college setting, where greater numbers of first-generation and lower-income students are found (Martin et al., 2014), some family members have the expectation of being more involved than those parents with students in a four-year college or university setting (Bers & Galowich, 2002; Jabbar et al., 2019). Even so, some family members in these institutions have found the community college environments can be difficult for their plans to support the educational pursuits of their children (Jabbar et al, 2019).

Peer Interaction

Students who are engaged outside of the academic environment with their peers tend to assimilate to the collegiate environment (Karp et al., 2008). In fact, the level of student engagement with their peers and sense of belonging affects their attitude and performance relative to whether or not they persist in college (Green & Wright, 2017; Karp et al., 2008; Tinto, 1975); it is also indicative of higher levels of academic exchange and higher grade point averages (Evans, et al., 2016). Many students have an innate need to find a social level of engagement that supports and cultivates their self-esteem and self-efficacy (Petty, 2014). These activities are also a supportive mechanism in constructing a means for continuation and extension of academic study. In addition to this, literature suggests that students who engage in collaborative interaction with their peers inside the academic environment are apt to achieve a marked level of success. Collaborative learning environments encourage student learning interaction and increase the odds of students returning for their second year of college (Loes et al., 2017). Fundamentally, students who are first-generation benefit from activities such as these because they help students who enter college with a pre-conceived and adherent network that can have deficiencies which may inhibit student success (Ishitani, 2016). In addition, this level of activity has the potential to address the multiple factors that are relevant to the adjustment

activities and creation of a sense of belonging through social engagement with their peers (Deil-Amen, 2011; Feldman & Zimbler, 2011). Even further, the level of interaction with peers on the college campus to tie the academic and social facets of college life together by creation of integral on campus supports and networks is necessary for students to attain levels of comfort and success (Bergerson, 2007; Chhen Stewart, 2012). This support network fosters a sense of belonging that creates connectedness and a feeling of being accepted, valued, and respected by others (Green & Wright, 2017; Strayhorn, 2012). Some of the strongest support mechanisms are experienced from students who reside on campus, which creates avenues for student interaction and lead to higher likelihood of persistence (Ishitani, 2016).

Online social interaction provides avenues for student experiences and the creation of desired persistence outcomes (Evans et al., 2016). As technology has been advancing, the ability of students to connect with various networks has become more and more common place. When students interact through various online platforms, they have the ability to respond to questions and event invitations as well as to share dialog exchanges with their peers which can supplement or sustain campus involvement (Evans et al., 2016; Junco, 2012). Over time, these social platforms have varied and become more and more widespread in the academic setting. These platforms provide the type of socio-academic exchange suggested by Deil-Amen (2012). Online engagements have changed the way connection, communication, and exchange occur (Evans et al., 2016; Wellman 2002) as social media has helped to enhance levels of engagement between students, faculty, and staff relative to student persistence and academic support (Evans et al., 2016; Seanz, Hatch, Bukoski, Kim, Lee, & Valdez, 2011; Zander, Brouwer, Jansen, Crayen, & Hannover, 2018). The levels of engagement have formed a connection to campus life that is critical to the college experience (Jorgenson, Farrell, Fudge, & Pritchard, 2018). This connection

facilitates higher levels of emotional well-being, better health, and a lower risk of depression or violence (Jorgenson et al., 2018; McNeely & Falci, 2004).

Student Identity

The manner in which a student perceives their own self-image and ability to succeed is important relative to how they view themselves and impacts their ultimate persistence and perseverance behaviors (Bowman & Felix, 2017; Rosenberg, 1979). This concept of identify can help sustain and even decrease the other factors relative to student success (Bowman & Felix, 2017). Student identity often is developed and enhanced by the connection to social identity groups such as gender, race, or even nationality in the academic setting (Bowman & Felix, 2017; Settles, 2004; Settles, Jellison, & Pratt-Hyatt, 2009; Das, Dharadkar, & Brandes, 2008). The fact that college students are impacted by their social engagement is a mitigating factor to persistence as it is intrinsically tied to student engagement, commitment, and ultimate progression (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Bowman & Felix, 2017; Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1993). Ultimately, it is perceived that the connection between predictors to success can be tied to student identity. This identity can be developed through academic preparation and integration in addition to extra-curricular and social activity as advocates for retention (Bowman & Felix, 2017; Mayhew, Rockenbach, Bowman, Seifert, & Wolniak, 2016).

Student character attributes and strengths can also serve as contextual elements of their identify and impacting agents for academic integration and overall student success and persistence (Browning, McFermott, Sacffa, Booth, & Carr, 2018). Building avenues to strengthen character and supported behavior can delete barriers for attrition, which is vital when more than half of all student stop-outs happen in or after the first year of college study (Browning et al., 2018; Deberard, Spelmans, & Julka, 2004). For many students, the learned

character attributes of hope and gratitude are key indicators to persistence (Browning et al., 2018). For example, when students leave institutions, it is often being driven by whether students have the hope that they will achieve their goals at that institution (Browning et al., 2018; Snyder, 2002). For others, gratitude is tied to whether they have developed holistically based upon engagements at the particular institution which create a sense of appreciation for the shared experiences (Browning et al., 2018; Mofidi, El-Alayli, & Brown, 2014).

Student Confidence

The ability of students to believe that they are prepared to succeed in the academic environment is the cornerstone for confidence (Bickerstaff et al., 2017; Sander & Sanders, 2006). Confidence supports student self-esteem, self-efficacy, and ultimately their performance (Bickerstaff et al., 2017; Petty, 2014; Wood, Newman, & Harris, 2015; Wood & Turner, 2011). Student perceptions are often shaped by their personal experience and history and are often associated with behaviors and concepts such as academic identity, aspirations, motivation, and their achievement in the academic setting (Bandura, 1993; Bickerstaff et al., 2017; Cech, Rubineau, Sibley, & Seron, 2011). Self-efficacy and student confidence impacts persistence outcomes positively through decreasing anxiety, enhancement of assimilation to the campus culture, self-satisfaction with the institution, centering on academic purpose, goal attainment, and development of skills necessary to succeed in the institution (Wood et al., 2015). The stronger the self-efficacy, the stronger the student connection to and application of their abilities to tackle complex assignments and responsibilities (Bandura, 1997; Bickerstaff et al., 2017). Essentially, the higher the level of self-efficacy, the greater likelihood the student is to have positive academic outcomes for integration, achievement, engagement, and persistence (Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1992; Wood, Newman, & Harris, 2015; Zander et al., 2018). Studies have gone on

to show that student negative perceptions about their ability to assimilate into the university setting and their thoughts concerning mastery and the academic environment can impact their engagement levels and their success (Rendon, 1994). In community colleges in particular, the level of student confidence is often impacted by the fact that there are more non-traditional students and students who fail to make the transition to two or four-year degree completion (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). The level of feedback and earned student success is a critical area of concentration for cultivation of confidence and student persistence in the community college environment (Bickerstaff et al., 2017).

Summary

With the demographic of students entering colleges and universities changing, leaders at both two and four-year institutions have been trying to secure interventions that are designed to strengthen the odds of persistence (Sneyers & DeWitte, 2018). To that end, the factors surrounding the initial readiness or preparedness levels of college students as well as their social and academic engagement once they enter college have been important elements affecting student retention and graduation. For many educators, this is of utmost importance because the transition to higher educational study has shown to be such an important factor for students, especially those who are first-generation and are from varying socio-economic backgrounds (Ishitani, 2016; Schaeper, 2019). For several decades researchers and theorists have sought to better understand the factors for student persistence, as evidenced through the progression of student and academic integration theories like those of Vincent Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993). Even so, a gap in research has been developing specifically related to the persistence of first-generation college students enrolled at community college. With more first-generation college students entering colleges and universities each year, this topic becomes of utmost importance

for matters of persistence. In addition, its importance is supported by the fact that two-year institutions have the lowest rates of student persistence and completion.

The persistence and perseverance activities of students enrolled at four-year institutions of higher education have been studied in great detail; focused studies for two-year institutions and community colleges have been the center of far less concentration even with the challenges they face for retention and student progression. By concentrating on persistence concepts related to students who do persist in this environment will allow educational leaders to develop programs to support initial transition and student success. Therefore, by examining the instances related to student success and integration provides a basis for understanding the perseverance activities which support the greatest likelihood of student completion.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe first-generation college students' perseverance experiences from the first to the second year of enrollment at one public regional community college in the Southern United States. Vincent Tinto's (1975) interactionist theory served as the theoretical basis for this study as it suggested the importance of interaction as a precursory indicator for student persistence. The examination of student experiences provided a mechanism to understand the nature of the phenomenon of student perseverance and the implications upon the students and their institutions. Because the nature and practice of educational institutions is changing due to the increasing number of students who are first-generation and of lower socio-economic means (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), educational institutions are focusing a greater level of attention to value-added experiences and programs designed to support student success (Chhen Stewart, 2012).

This study gathered qualitative research data through the incorporation of interviews, focus groups, and a reflective writing assignment. The participants were first-generation students who completed their first year of enrollment at a community college in South Texas. The data collected was analyzed using personal bracketing, significant statements, meaning units, as well as textural, structural, and composite descriptions. For overall context, this chapter will focus on the design and scope of the study, research questions, the setting of the study, participants selected and included in the study, the role of the researcher, data collection techniques, data analysis mechanisms, trustworthiness, and relevant ethical considerations.

Design

This qualitative study employed a transcendental phenomenological design to analyze and describe shared perseverance experiences a group of first-generation college students at one community college. The qualitative approach was appropriate for this study because the method provides focus on, “a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.7). Qualitative studies require researchers to dedicate appropriate field-based research activities in order to engage with subjects to ascertain descriptive understanding of actions, activities, or circumstances (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This qualitative study related to a transcendental phenomenological approach in order to allow the researcher adequate means to describe the shared perseverance experiences of community college students from their first to their second year in college. Phenomenology is, in its simplest terms, is the pursuit of knowledge that seeks to obtain the essence of the human experience tied to a certain circumstance or phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). In conducting human science research, the phenomenological approach provides the empirical basis which fosters analysis and descriptions of a particular circumstance so as to better understand the overall experience (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenological studies allow researchers to identify phenomenon to study and collect information from several individuals who have shared experiences relative to the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This method was appropriate to this study because it provided that I develop a connected field-based understanding of perseverance experiences through the various data gathering techniques employed (interviews, focus groups, and the reflective writing assignments). The use of a transcendental phenomenological method enabled me to have a thorough exposition of the perseverance experience students have in order to confound results and identify

recommendations for further study.

Research Questions

This data gathered throughout the course of this study sought to answer one central research question and four sub-questions. The questions which guided this study are:

Central Research Question

How do first-generation students at a community college in the Southern United States describe their perseverance experience from their first to second year of college?

Sub-Question One

How do college students describe the events that led them to persevere from their first to second year of college?

Sub-Question Two

How do college students describe the preparatory instances from high school that were most beneficial to their transition into college?

Sub-Question Three

How do students who completed their first year of college describe the most impactful experience on their success and perseverance?

Sub-Question Four

How do college students describe the instances which had an adverse effect on their perseverance experiences?

Setting

The research site for this study was one public community college located in the Southern United States. For the purposes of this study and to ensure anonymity, the institution was identified as Coastal College (the name of the institution was replaced by a pseudonym). Coastal

College has an enrollment of over 10,000 students on several campuses and serves a population which is nearly two-thirds Hispanic, over 60% female, and made up of over two-third first-generation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Over 90% of students receive financial aid and have first to second year student persistence rates of over 60% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). The institution is under the jurisdiction of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (2020) and is focused on college and career readiness, student success and developmental education, as well as career and technical education/workforce initiatives. This institution was selected due to its proximity, the large amount of transfer student interaction with, and due to the similarity of the student body profile to my home institution.

Participants

The participants of this study were 12 students who had completed the first year of their enrollment or until a sufficient number of recruited participants provide thematic saturation. Thematic saturation provides that data should be collected until no new themes emerge (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). The number of participants fell within the acceptable parameters for phenomenological studies which typically require between 5 and 30 participants (Creswell, 1998; Polkinghouse, 1989). The sample population was selected through an opportunity sample of students meeting the selection criteria through purposeful means. Purposeful sampling techniques are widely acceptable in qualitative research for the identification and understanding of select members of a population related to a phenomenon (Horwitz et al., 2015). First-generation student volunteers, who were at least 18 years of age and entering their second year of college were solicited from the initial purposeful sample identified through collaboration with academic and student services advisors at Coastal College until an acceptable population of 12 students had been secured. In order to construct the purposeful sample, I worked with the

institutional advisors to send emails to the identified cohort of students entering their second year of college. Once individuals of the sampling group were identified through recruitment, I provided each participant with the necessary participant consent form. Table 1 details the students who were identified and agreed to participate through recruitment.

Table 1

Participants and Identified Demographics

Participant (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Major
Amy	Female	19	Hispanic	Nursing
Barbara	Female	20	Hispanic	Architecture
Casey	Male	20	Hispanic	Fire Science
Dean	Male	20	Hispanic	Architecture
Eric	Male	21	Asian	Architecture
Fred	Male	20	Hispanic	Architecture
Gisele	Female	20	Hispanic	Criminal Justice
Hank	Male	30	Hispanic	Business
Ian	Male	53	Hispanic	Automotive Science
Jane	Female	21	Hispanic	Architecture
Katie	Female	33	African American	Sociology
Lance	Male	20	Hispanic	Architecture

Procedures

The process surrounding the conduction of phenomenological research is rooted in the systematic approaches taken by Moustakas (1994) in that it seeks to provide methods for data analysis and contextual mechanisms for understanding. The procedures most closely aligned to the type of research that were adopted for this study were: determining whether the phenomenological approach is best, identification of the particular phenomenon to be studied, the philosophical assumptions, collection of data from the particular individuals experiencing the shared phenomenon, generation of analytical themes from the particular data, providing descriptions of the shared experiences, reporting the essence of the phenomenon or shared experiences, and presenting the understanding obtained of the shared experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This study focused on the phenomenon that was the perseverance experiences shared by first-generation students enrolled in a community college in the Southern United States who had completed their first year of college. Upon completion of the proposal manuscript, I obtained approval from senior campus administrators at Coastal College (Institutional Review Board) to introduce the study and obtain approval to proceed with the study on their campus. Following this approval, I obtained IRB approval from the Institutional Review Board at Liberty University providing the necessary information to support data gathering and analysis (Appendix A). After all approvals were received, I contacted the Director of Enrollment/Advising at Coastal College to outline the study and seek cooperation, as well as to request a Microsoft Teams meeting with the Director and the appropriate advisors. I then met with the selected institutional staff to explain the way the research was to be conducted. Following this meeting I organized a Microsoft Teams group for student interviews, student focus groups, and for the reflective

writing assignments. After the group had been reserved and organized, I began the process of working with each of the advisors to send emails to prospective participants, which abided with institutional and Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) protocols. This involved the communication with student advisees in order to obtain students interested in participating. After the initial communication, the researcher placed the participants into a purposeful sampling group. There was a total of 12 student participants.

Upon securing the sample population, the researcher obtained an informed consent form (Appendix C) then communicated the research study schedule for each participant which included plans for the student interviews, the focus groups, and the reflective writing assignment. At this time, the participants were also informed of the nature of conduction of each data collection method and how the data was to be analyzed. The participants were informed that detailed notes would be kept during each session as well as recordings of both the interviews and focus groups to facilitate transcription. They were reassured of the confidentiality of their participation. Finally, students were informed that they would receive a Coastal College spirit package and a \$ 25 Amazon gift card as an incentive for their participation. After all volunteers had been informed and organized, I began the data collection techniques.

Student interviews were organized for thirty-minute periods over an identified time period negotiated with student participants. After each interview had been scheduled, I sent a reminder to each participant. When the time for the interviews arrived, I reinforced the process to the students, asked if they have questions, then proceeded with the interview. At the completion of the interview, I informed the students of the next steps and provided information for the focus group and the distribution of the reflective writing prompt. I asked for any final questions, then thanked the student. During each interview, the Teams interview was recorded and ultimately

transcribed after the conclusion, which aided in analysis. During each interview, I took detailed notes of student responses.

The focus groups happened in a similar fashion, but in two engagements. I scheduled each engagement on a random timetable after six students had completed their interview. I reminded the student participants of the engagement and began each in a similar fashion as the interview. I recorded the session in the Teams environment and transcribed it after the session. Notes were taken during the focus groups that detailed student responses, discussion observations, and other pertinent information. Both the focus groups and interviews took place in the Microsoft Teams environment and was managed and maintained on a laptop/tablet as a central device. At the conclusion of the interviews and focus groups, I sent transcribed discussion to the students for them to check the accuracy of their statements. I asked the students to send back feedback, if they had it, within an acceptable amount of time.

For the final data collection engagement, students were provided a prompt connected to a reflective writing assignment. The prompt was given at the conclusion of the interviews and students were asked to answer the prompt on a technological platform over a prescribed period of time. Once all the written responses were received, I saved save them to a collective file on my primary technological device.

The Researcher's Role

As the researcher, I was a human participant and instrument of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As a human instrument, it was important to bracket out any personal experiences or circumstances through the *epoché* process outlined by Moustakas (1994) in order to fully comprehend the perseverance experiences of the student participants in the study. To this extent, it was incumbent upon me to disclose that I was an active senior executive leader at a public

four-year university in Texas who had been in the field of enrollment management and higher education for 27 years. I have dedicated my career to providing educational opportunity and access to students from a variety of demographic and socio-economic backgrounds. I did not have knowledge of, or a relationship with, each of the individuals who are participants in the study. I did, however, share one common element with the research participants in the fact that I was a first-generation college student. In the course of this study, I did take all necessary steps and insurance points necessary to use language and practices that was respectful to all participants during the study (Creswell & Gutterman, 2019). It should also be noted that I did not have prior knowledge of the leadership team of the participant campus, and I was not related to and did not have supervision over any of the leadership team or administrative contact points. Even so, I did bring a potential bias to the study in that I have worked extensively with students in both two year and four-year higher educational settings and have experiences in counseling and assisting students as they enter college for well over two decades.

Data Collection

Data collection is important to the execution of research studies. “We visualize data collection as a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.148). Indeed, data collection is critical to support qualitative data collection and analysis. Qualitative data collection is largely supported through interviews and observational techniques that seek to understand the detailed views of study participants (Creswell & Gutterman, 2019). This study focused on three specific methods to collect data: interviews, focus groups, and from reflected writing assignments.

Interviews

Interviews are integral parts in the data collection for qualitative study because interpretation of information and ideas is at the heart of qualitative research activity (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). This researcher administered an interview via Microsoft Teams format to student participants at the participating institution. Each individual interview was with the student participant and the researcher in the prepared Microsoft Teams room for approximately 30 minutes. The researcher welcomed each participant and reminded them that the interview would be recorded for easier transcription of results. For quite some time, researchers have sought to record their interviews in order to provide for transcription and further analysis, even in some cases videotaping the interviews (Warren, 2001; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). The questions detailed in Table 2 were administered to each student participant. These interview questions were not modified after a brief piloting of the questions.

Table 2

Individual Interview Questions

Questions

Introductory Questions

1. Please begin by telling me about your background, including where you are from and what major you are pursuing in college. (Icebreaker question).
2. Tell me about the initial concerns you had beginning college. (Icebreaker question)
3. Why did you choose to attend Coastal College? (Icebreaker question)
4. Why do you believe people pursue a college education? (Icebreaker question)

Questions Regarding Sub-Question One – Perseverance Experiences

5. How would you define your overall student experience at (insert name of community college)?
6. You have entered your second year of enrollment at Coastal College. Please describe the events that are leading you to continue your enrollment from the first to the second year.

Questions Regarding Sub-Question Two – Description of Academic Preparedness

7. How would you characterize your level of preparation for college-level study when you entered the College?
8. Please describe which preparatory experiences from high school that were most beneficial to your college transition.
9. How would you describe your academic performance in your first year at (insert name of community college)?

Questions Regarding Sub-Question Three – Specific Experiences

10. Now that you are in your second year of study, how would you describe the challenges you have faced in your chosen field of study?
11. Please describe the experiences you had in your first year which were most impactful on your success and persistence.

Questions Regarding Sub-Question Four – Actions as a Result of Experiences

12. Describe any activities or engagements you had which you viewed as detrimental to your success?
13. You have committed to your re-enrollment for next year. How would you describe the experiences that most shaped your decision to persist to your second year?
14. If you were leaning to not returning, please describe experiences that would most likely result in you not persisting?

Questions one through four were meant to be opportunities to break the ice between the researcher and the participant. This was supported by the fact that qualitative inquiry supported by interviews is based upon conversation between the researcher and the participants (Warren 2001; Kvale, 1996). Once this conversational interaction was established between the researcher and the participant, the exchange of ideas and context occurred in the subsequent questions.

Questions five and six sought to establish the nature of the perseverance experience that the student had at their institution and the interventions that fueled the likelihood of their re-enrollment. These questions sought to establish a beginning level of connectivity and were overarching in scope for further in-depth examination of engagement and interaction. These foundational questions created the parameters of discussions that built the inquiry on what students know and were willing to talk about (Magunsson & Marecek, 2015).

Students had multiple reasons why they persevered in their studies. Researchers have found that students seek out activities, academic experiences, and relationships in their community. By engaging in these activities, they enhanced their understanding of the social and academic environment in an impactful way (Demetriou, et al., 2017). From this, student perseverance activities are largely vested in the interactivity they develop and maintain with individuals who can offer guided interaction, mentorship, and advice. Hence, student persistence can be ensured where there is focus on primary events surrounding freshman transition to college: freshman activities, development of effective study skills, instructor-student relationships, and adequate academic services and support (Turner & Thompson, 2014).

Questions seven, eight, and nine were all relative to the student's academic and social preparation coming in from high school. Question seven dealt with the characterization of

participation and preparation for academic study, while question eight covered specific instances that prepared them for success in college. Question nine shifted focus a bit and looked to establish a linkage to academic performance in college. Since the population selected were all first-generation college students, it is worth noting that they typically enter college with less support and preparation than their continuing generation peers (Longwell-Grice, et al., 2016). In addition, they typically require more integration to understand the nuances associated with being successful in college (Atherton, 2014). Therefore, this question sought to establish the preparation, support, and engagement that were prevalent in the cases for each student.

Questions 10 and 11 focused on specific experiences, the challenges, and impacts, that students had experienced during their first year in college, particularly relative to their field of study and which experiences were particularly impactful to their perseverance. Student academic integration is shaped directly through their academic performance (course grades, grade-point average) and by their intellectual advancement (Ishitani, 2016). Their social integration is developed through their peer, faculty, and staff interactions in the academic setting (Ishitani, 2016; Tinto, 1975). These questions endeavored to get to the heart of how well students performed and the exact levels of interactivity and engagement that heightened their desire to persist from year one to year two.

Questions 12, 13, and 14 were designed to identify activities which supported student success, re-enrollment for year two, and which activities or events had adverse effects on their enrollment. To understand the likelihood of students to persevere, it was important to first identify the mitigating factors supporting success and re-enrollment. The converse of this was also important and led to a focus of what would most likely lead to non-continuation. Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) found that Latino (Hispanic) students in the Southwest United States had

certain factors which commonly affected their perseverance. Essentially, transition from high school to college presented barriers and difficulties to college transition, financial aid funds did not meet their costs for education, and the college-home life balance is difficult to maintain. These questions attempted to obtain the exact measures that most affected and impacted perseverance among a more diverse dataset, who is completely first-generation in a similar environment.

I first tested the interview questions on three first-generation students from a regional institution in the Southern United States in order to determine the validity of the questions and whether they are applicable to students in the college setting. Using pilot study opportunities such as these allow researchers to test validity of data collection methods and review for appropriateness (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Upon securing the validity to the subset of the population, I conducted the in-person interviews of the sample population over the course of a six-month period after they had concluded their first year of study. At the conclusion of the interviews, I compiled my notes and transcribed the tables of the interviews verbatim to look for common themes in the responses.

Focus Groups

The purpose of focus groups is to collect detailed, rich, and pertinent information and data from an audience relevant to a topic or situation (Carey & Asbury, 2012). In this study, I conducted focus groups for the student sample population of the participating college following the interviews. The population was the same students who were participants in the individual interviews. Students were limited to two smaller focus groups of six students each and were asked similar questions in their focus groups to those which were asked during student interviews (Appendix D). I conducted each focus group virtually in a Microsoft Teams room and

provided initial notification and reminders to student participants prior to the engagement. Each focus group was completed within one and one-half hours. The sessions were recorded, and detailed notes were kept by the researcher. Introductory remarks were made and then students were led into the questions. At the conclusion of the focus groups, appropriate conclusionary remarks were made. Following the engagement, I compiled and reviewed notes and transcribed the recording of the focus group. The data was reviewed, and overarching themes were ascertained. Questions used to collect student information were open-ended and served as a reflective opportunity for students (Appendix E). The focus group questions used in the collection of data provided in Table 3 were piloted at the same time the interview questions were piloted prior to administration.

Table 3

Focus Group Session Questions

1. What were the primary guiding points that led to your enrollment in college?
2. How would you describe your initial preparation to succeed in college? This could be academic or even social.
3. What were the most influential activities and/or programs that helped you during your first year in college?
4. Did you feel that your status as a first-generation college student hampered your development academically or socially in college?
5. Taking into account the experiences you had in college, what activities or interventions most likely influenced your choice to either continue or discontinue enrollment? Why?

The focus group began with an introductory question as to understand what led students to enroll in college. Introductory questions such as these help to establish a conversational tone in the interview and build a relaxed and collaborative setting for the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

Question two focused on both the academic and social preparation that began for them in elementary and secondary education and extended to the college setting. This question was tied to the subset questions seven through nine of the initial interviews and led to the foundational understanding that first-generation students have less preparation than their continuing-generation peers (Atherton, 2014; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016).

Question three provided an avenue for the students to identify any particular experiences, activities, or interventions in the college setting that helped them progress during their first year. The foundational support for this question began with questions five and six, as well as questions 10-14 of the individual interview and sought to establish the instances that aided in their transition and success (Demetriou et al., 2017; Turner & Thompson, 2014).

Question four asked the students to identify whether their first-generation status negatively impacted their academic and social development and college. This tied into the foundational literature that indicated a disadvantage for first-generation students relative to social, academic, preparatory activity, and family support (Atherton, 2014; Schelbe et al., 2019).

Question five provided an opportunity for synthesis by the students in establishing reasoning of the activities or interventions which most likely led to their decision to continue their enrollment from the first to the second year.

Reflective Writing Assignment

The third method of data collection used in this study was a student reflective writing assignment. Reflected writing assignments help students understand the way others have impacted their lives and may challenge basic assumptions they once held (Isaac et al., 2015). It was my intention that this data collection method would provide an opportunity for student participants to synthesize their experiences in a more concrete and expository way. Each student participant was provided the writing prompt at the conclusion of their individual interview. Each student then had several days to provide a written response through an identified technological interface. The prompt asked them to outline the activities that have been most impactful to their perseverance of study toward their second year in college (Appendix E). At the completion of the assignment, I collected the reflection responses then compiled my notes and reviewed the writing assignments to ascertain the thematic areas which impacted student perseverance. Table 4 provides the prompt that will be provided to each student participant.

Table 4

Reflective Writing Assignment

“Please discuss the positive or challenging experiences of your first year in college. In detail, please explain the impact instances which are led to your decision to continue your enrollment.”

Data Analysis

The appropriate and adequate analysis of data are integral to understand the perseverance experiences of community college students. In qualitative research, data analysis includes obtaining and organizing data which enables the synthesizing of the information to understand

the nature of experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The process of analyzing data in this study began with bracketing out personal preconceptions through *epoché* (Moustakas, 1994) and then by organizing the data into significant statements, meaning units, and ultimately into textural, structural, and composite descriptions.

Personal Bracketing

Moustakas (1994) outlined the *epoché* process of the researcher excluding personal experiences with the phenomenon, in this case persistence or perseverance experiences. In this process, I disclosed my status to the participants and my current institution was excluded.

Bracketing out personal experiences helps to ensure a bias free environment and valid results.

Significant Statements

Data collection techniques provide the basis for understanding the phenomenon of perseverance experiences. In the scope of this study, I identified statements in interviews, focus groups, and from student reflective writing about perseverance experiences. Student information provided in interviews and focus groups was transcribed using Microsoft Teams. Following the transcription, I allowed each participant to check the transcripts to validate their statements, which helped to establish truthfulness and internal validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). From this information, I pinpointed significant statements through horizontalization and assigned statements equal value (Creswell & Poth; Moustakas, 1994). The process then enabled me to identify unique statements for further extrapolation. This process helped guide the initial identification of thematic elements.

Meaning Units

Meaning or thematic units are created to code statements into various themes or areas of understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The generation of the theme is an outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection, not something that is in itself coded (Saldana, 2009, p.139). This study used the first cycle coding method of theming the data which allowed various categories to emerge from the data that has been collected from multiple sources (Ezzy, 2002; Saldana, 2009). It was most appropriate to this study as it is often used for studies that use participant interviews, artifact gathering, and participant-generated documents and events (Saldana, 2009). This grouping practice was used to aid in the interpretation of thematic elements and experiences that are directly tied to the central research question and the sub-research questions related to perseverance instances and impactful events and instances that led to continued enrollment. Throughout this study, I continuously evaluated the information presented through the data collection techniques which provided a strong mechanism for constructing meaningful units. The construction of these units ensured non-duplication of data and presented the most relevant information. The coding process began with precoding significant statements, preliminary organization, and formatting of the data, using thematic analysis, and the generation of codes for easy grouping. Coding was performed manually then transcribed to electronic means. I used the qualitative coding software, NVivo 12 from QSR International because of its ability to synthesize unstructured text, interviews, focus groups, and journals.

Textural, Structural, & Composite Descriptions

Textural description is where the researcher will write about the various experiences of the participants related to their perseverance (Moustakas, 1994). Student examples in this case were defined and provided for meaningful narrative and understanding. For structural

descriptions, the researcher focused on how the perseverance experiences were contrived in the setting and context to the individuals and those around them (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, composite descriptions enabled the researcher to compile the essence of the shared experiences from the data collected as a result of the particular group, in particular the elements which shaped their persistence condition to continue enrollment (Moustakas, 1994). The description of what the participants experienced was built in this case (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is critical to establish the credibility, transferability, and conformability of data and findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study sought to limit bias on behalf of the researcher and the subjects in order to create an environment where an exchange of information will be open and honest. To this end, I used three techniques to establish trustworthiness including member checks, audit trails, and reflexivity.

Credibility

Credibility helps the researcher to establish trustworthiness in linking the findings of the study to a situation to generate validity of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Credibility in this study was established by member checks. I sought participant feedback relative to the data collected during the study, study findings, and the interpretation of the results. Data from each data collection method (interviews, focus groups, and the reflective writing assignment) was provided to each student participant upon the compilation and initial analysis of the data. This enabled feedback and generation of content accuracy and reliability of the findings.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability refers to the participants reviewing the findings and the data that supports the given recommendations, while confirmability refers to the applicability of the findings to

other research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, dependability and confirmability were ensured through recorded interactions during interviews and focus groups, transcriptions, an audit trail, and through research notes. Microsoft Teams provided an avenue for the engagement experience to be validated through recording and transcription. The transcription was shared with student participants to confirm their statements and support the ultimate outcomes. In addition, an audit trail allowed the researcher to employ a validation strategy for undertaking the research process and the student experiences over time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, it enabled the researcher to preserve the accuracy of information presented, analysis, and findings through external review (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this instance, I kept a journal (notes) throughout the research process and provided it to an external auditor to reconcile whether the findings and interpretation were supported by the process and the data that was collected. The schedule and outline of all research activities is included in Appendix G. This mechanism was important to ensure that bias does not play a factor in the process or in the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Transferability

Transferability refers to whether the findings of the study could be generalizable in other settings or contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, I ensured that the findings were transferrable to other contexts by clearly outlining the research context as well as the appropriate assumptions that could be drawn from the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I disclosed my basic assumptions and understandings about the biases, values, and experiences that I developed over time from my personal and professional experiences related to student success, attrition, persistence, and perseverance experiences. This, along with a thick, rich description of the site and student participants was important to establish an environment where consumers of the

information may make decisions about the transferability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

In this study, the subject of ethics was of utmost importance to ensure fairness and non-bias for the researcher and the participants. Therefore, I took necessary practices to ensure proper adherence to ethical practices and procedures. First, each student participant was able to assent to their initial participation and had the right to withdraw from participation at any time (as referenced by the Consent Form in Appendix C). Second, due to coding processes, there may have been a possibility for misrepresentation of findings; by a defined and expository process for assigning statements into meaningful thematic units, the researcher mitigated this likelihood by providing for a brief peer audit to confirm accurate thematic representation. This peer review was performed by an unaffiliated peer of the researcher to ensure consistency and accuracy of data interpretation and coding. Finally, there was a possibility of disclosure of results that are overly positive or overly negative; this was avoided by a reflective and detailed narrative of the varied student perspectives. Other potential ethical situations which may be relevant to the study were that data collection and storage was regularly moved onto a personal external hardware device and will be maintained for a period of three years and destroyed. All physical notes were scanned to an electronic file at the conclusion of the project and will be kept and disposed in the same manner. In addition, the influence of current relationships of the researcher with the leadership of the two target campuses may have led to bias or the risk of data confidentiality issues.

Summary

This chapter provided a detailed outline for the research methodology that was used to ascertain the perseverance experiences of students in community colleges from their first to second year. The research design used was qualitative in nature as it focused on understanding and describing the shared perseverance experiences of students, which is foundational based upon the transcendental phenomenological method. The data collected in this study helped to provide useful insight to help institutional leaders better identify and understand the complexities of what helps students succeed and persist at their institutions. The researcher outlined the use of data gathering techniques including interviews, focus groups, and a reflective writing assignment to gain appropriate student feedback. All participants in the study were given assurances of anonymity, avenues to opt out at any time, and certain ethical practices were followed to ensure validity and applicability of the data. The data collected was rich and valuable in order to identify the appropriate persistence impacts affecting these students.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to determine how first-generation students at a community college in the Southern United States describe their perseverance experiences from their first to second year of college. In conducting human science research, the phenomenological approach provides the empirical basis which enables analysis and descriptions of a particular circumstance to better understand the overall experience (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, the central research question in the study sought to examine the richness of the shared experiences of 12 students from one target community college in South Texas. This chapter provides the background information for each participant and their thoughts relative to their persistence and perseverance experiences while students at the community college, which I have given the pseudonym, Coastal College. Information from the students was gathered through interviews, focus groups, and reflective writing assignments in order to develop themes of understanding. These themes shall be presented in this chapter, along with significant statements and direct quotations from students that are relevant for understanding and in answering the central research question and the supporting sub-research questions as is reflected in the summary.

Participants

The population of 12 first-generation community college students, enrolled at Coastal College in Fall 2019, who had intent and action which supported re-enrollment during Fall 2020 were identified through collaboration with staff at Coastal College. After each student provided initial indication of their willingness to participate, the Student Informed Consent Form (Appendix C) was provided for student signature. Once the approval was received, their research

cycle began with a scheduled one-on-one interview with the student. Each of the interactive parts of the research cycle (interviews and focus groups) were held through Microsoft Teams due to remote/online operations of Coastal College, irregularity of other acceptable areas to meet, and due to ease of use. The reflective writing assignment part of the research cycle was provided to each student at the conclusion of the interview via email (MS Word attachment). Each student that participated in the research study was provided a pseudonym as indicated below along with their primary background information, and what primary elements drove their educational pursuits.

Student 01 – Amy

Amy is a 19-year-old, Hispanic female, who is a Nursing major from Port Aransas, Texas. She is an extremely driven student that has a laser-focused set of goals and has surrounded her academic pursuits around meeting this goal. As a first-generation student, she has acknowledged challenges in approaching the persistence and perseverance necessary to continue through. Even so, she has maintained focus. Amy stated, “I will continue to do my best and always push through the hard times because I have lots of goals that I want to reach, and I can only do that by graduating college. I know that things will continue to get harder after the first year of college, but I am not better equipped to take on these challenges.”

Student 02 – Barbara

Barbara is a 20-year-old, Hispanic female, who is an Architecture major from Corpus Christi, Texas. Barbara had experience in high school with courses in Architecture which helped to pique her interest. From this exposure, she set on a path that was structured toward pursuit of architecture as a field of study and expected that her educational timelines would be set in place toward achievement. The foundation for her educational pursuits was built upon her feeling that,

“people pursue a college education to learn more about their careers that they want for the rest of their life; and if they’re really passionate about that career and want a good job for themselves, college is very important.”

Student 03 – Casey

Casey is a 20-year-old, Hispanic male, who is a Liberal Arts/Fire Science major from Corpus Christi, Texas. Casey chose a major that he felt identified with his interest. He was never a stellar student coming from high school but did have personal interests that funneled into an applied career path. Initially he thought past academic performance and the experience he had within the high school setting would drive his performance. Even so, he persisted because he knew education was important to his future career pursuits. He provided, “When you go into a job interview, you know the fact that you have any college education whatsoever is already a bonus. It goes to show that you know what you are doing.”

Student 04 – Dean

Dean is a 20-year-old, Hispanic male, who is an Architecture major from Corpus Christi, Texas. He is an ultra-motivated student with a clear focus on his career that its basis from familial interest. Despite not having excessive financial resources, the support from his family and peers ushered him forward. Dean is a leader who pushes those around him to achieve and lives the promise as well. He indicated, “When people are going to college, I believe it’s for change and for wanting better; (for me) a better life for my family, to help financially.”

Student 05 – Eric

Eric is a 21-year-old, Asian male, who is an Architecture major from Corpus Christi, Texas. His family immigrated to the country and his primary parent maintains majority conversation in their native language. He indicated that his family learned about the culture and

how important it was to create the educational foundation was for their children. In his educational pursuits, Eric has never forgotten his background and has sought to be a role model for his younger siblings. He shared that, “I believe people pursue college education because it's just normalized. People expect you to go to college and it's basically after high school. My reason for going to college is because family-wise...I want to help my family and better provide for them and to have an easier life with them.”

Student 06 – Fred

Fred is a 20-year-old, Hispanic male, who is an Architectural Technology major from Corpus Christi, Texas. Initially, Fred was not thinking about going to college right after high school but found that beginning the community college was cost-effective and an avenue that would lead to a career which rose from his gaming and design interests. He stated, “I think education is very important. I gained an interest in it (from games) and chose an area because it seemed to reflect on interest from my childhood and it was worth a try... and it became something I loved; and I am going to continue on with it.”

Student 07 – Gisele

Gisele is a 20-year-old, Hispanic female, who is a Criminal Justice major from Robstown, Texas. Gisele is a spirited young lady who has definitely certain that she wanted to extend her education beyond high school. Her interest in continuing education was fueled through the exposure to dual enrollment classes taken in high school and a hands-on major that supported her interest. She began the community college because of academic limitations of the TSI and the cost, but it ended up beginning a strong foundation for her career. She explained, “I feel like people do it to further their careers (attend college), because without a degree, you are at a disadvantage. Without it, you do not have more opportunities and experiences.”

Student 08 – Hank

Hank is a 30-year-old, Hispanic male, who is a Business Management major originally from California, but now resides in Corpus Christi, Texas. Hank's academic career was a bit rocky dating back to high school. He was not a stellar student and had multiple attempts at starting college, despite poor past academic performance. He landed at the community college as a place to begin to learn skills that would be necessary for a better career. He stated that, "people attend college to better oneself and getting an education helps to move up in the world. It's not the only step, but it significantly helps you. Specifically, you choose the right courses and the best degree available to you and your ability." When he got to the community college, he changed his view on what education was and had positive interactions that fueled his educational endeavors.

Student 09 – Ian

Ian is a 53-year-old, Hispanic male, who is an Automotive Science major who resides in Corpus Christi, Texas. He is a parent and an armed services veteran. Ian continues to work in the military services area. He began the pursuit of education a bit later in life (over three decades) to help prepare for a career change and as a positive indicator for his children. He had apprehension when he began study at the community college, especially since most of his fellow students were right out of high school. However, he never lost sight of his belief in why continuing his education was important. Ian offered that education is necessary and that, "people pursue a college education so that they can get better job offerings and better positions."

Student 10 – Jane

Jane is a 21-year-old, Hispanic female, who is an Architecture major originally from who resides in Corpus Christi, Texas. Jane is a student with a focused pathway in place for pursuit of

a challenging major. Her exposure to her major began in high school and has been facilitated with support from faculty and peers along the way. This foundation led her to higher education and a beginning at the community college, which provided a financial windfall. In this environment, she engaged in a structured pathway which enabled her to be engaged in a positive fashion with many in her field, but she was nearly derailed by negative engagements with a faculty member. Jane's belief in education preparation, like many of her peers, centered on preparations for the future. She stated, "I believe that people go to college for a better chance at having a good job."

Student 11 – Katie

Katie is a 33-year-old, African American female, who is a Sociology major originally from Dallas, but now resides in Corpus Christi, Texas. She is a parent and an armed services veteran. She moved with her family after her husband had a career re-location. Katie began her studies as a mathematics major but switched to Sociology after interactions with various faculty and as a result of her desire to help veterans. She chose to continue her education to, in her words, 'enter the career that you want to be in, to search out your passion.'

Student 12 – Lance

Lance is a 20-year-old, Hispanic male, who is an Architecture major originally from Mexico City, but now resides in Corpus Christi, Texas. He has been in the United States with his family for 13 years. As a first-generation student who had the support of his family, Lance had been searching for a career path in high school; however, he could not find the thing that he liked, until he centered on Architecture. Seeing that architecture required a certain educational pathway, he knew he needed to pursue advanced education. He began to look at the community college because it was more affordable than going to a four-year university to start. He began his

journey because he had strong beliefs in why people pursue a college education. Lance indicated, “I feel like it opens up a lot more opportunities in life, whether you’re trying to find a job or learn certain skills. To do things in life, I think it’s great to have an education.”

Results

The purpose of this study was to describe the perseverance experiences of first-generation community college students. The qualitative design of the study enabled the underlying shared experiences to be understood. Data was collected from the student participants through individual student interviews, focus groups with fellow participants, and through the completion of a reflective writing assignment. Upon collection of all the data through the three sources, the student experiences were gathered, reviewed, and compared to field notes that were collected during the interview and focus group process. The process of analyzing data began with bracketing out personal preconceptions through *epoché* (Moustakas, 1994) and then organizing the data into significant statements, meaning (thematic) units, and textural, structural, and composite descriptions which provided avenues to examine the particular phenomenon of student perseverance experiences.

Theme Development

At the conclusion of compiling the various components of the research, the process of coding data began. Theme development is a result of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection, not something that is in itself coded (Saldana, 2009, p.139). This study used a coding methodology that included theming the data which allowed various categories to emerge from the data that was collected from multiple sources (Ezzy, 2002; Saldana, 2009). This type of data coding was most appropriate to this study as it is often used for studies that use participant interviews, artifact gathering, and participant-generated documents and events (Saldana, 2009).

Therefore, the process of thematic development began with identifying significant statements and applying them into categorical meaning units in NVIVO 12. To do this, I reviewed each transcript from student interviews, focus groups, and from their writing assignments to ascertain key statements made to the corresponding questions. This data was then compared to my field notes taken during the entire process where I had identified impactful statements that expressed student feeling. All of the data collected during the research instances were then loaded into NVIVO 12 where I highlighted the statements for thematic generation. Once the statements were processed, several significant thematic areas were evident and aligned to categories associated with the central research question and each of the sub-research questions. The main categories and 10 significant thematic areas are defined below in Table 5.

Table 5

Themes, Subthemes, and Codes

Major Themes	Subthemes	Primary Codes
Motivation	Institutional Support/Interventions	Support, tutoring, progress, connections
	Class/Academic Experiences	skills, academic exposure, commitment, knowledge, encouragement, career
	Special Skills	Communication, feedback, technical skills, feedback, understanding, collaboration

	Academic Challenges	Adjustment, adaptation, modality, constraints
Support	Personal Engagement	Cooperation, belonging, support, influence, interaction, desire
	Learning Opportunities	Hands-on, interest, real-world, impact, internships, opportunity
	Interpersonal Experiences	Rewarding, challenging, criticism, discouraging, pace
	COVID-19 (Pandemic)	COVID, challenging

Data collected from student interviews, focus groups, and the reflective writing assignment support the themes, subthemes, and identified codes connected with the categories and are associated with the corresponding research questions.

Motivation

Each of the students that participated in the study indicated various motivating factors that helped to contribute to perseverance and persistence in their studies. Motivation, throughout the exchanges with the participants, was one of the phenomenological instances that was pervasive. The intrinsic values of the motivation fell across a wide spectrum of sub-themes which included family, classes/connections, progress, completion/grit, and the desire to serve.

For many first-generation students, the desire to succeed is prompted by their

engagements with their family and personal support groups. Several students indicated that significant factors of motivation for them to pursue or persist with their studies was their family. For example, Dean indicated that his family experience drives him to achieve and provides motivation to succeed:

I earned my associates, and you know, I'm very proud of that. It's something my dad wanted me to do, because my dad wanted to do that, but he wasn't able to finish school. So, I'm able to achieve something he would do, and do it for the both of us; that alone has brought me very far, it kept me motivated. My family in general came with motivation because I wanted to do good for myself, but you know if I do good, they do good... because whenever I succeed, I feel like my family is going to succeed because I'm able to represent us as a whole. That's something that I like to base my character off of. It just provided extra motivation.

Eric also shared the desire to persevere with his educational endeavors. His family connection was one of setting an example:

I think my main goal when rolling into college was pretty much setting a better example for my younger siblings because growing up, I didn't live a lifestyle that many other kids lived and stuff. I thought that, you know, going to college would open up a lot more opportunities in the future, and I feel like setting a great example for my younger siblings would definitely benefit their future as well as mine.

As a non-traditional student, Ian viewed the perspective from a parental lens. Ian stated:

My daughter was 20 at the time (when I was in my first year) and she was starting to go to school also. And I figured, well, if she's going to school, I'm going to school and I'm trying to push her to go to school. I can't quit, even though I already had just finished

failing a class. So that helped me push harder during tutoring and doing more online. I wanted to show her that even though I'm 53 years old, I can still continue and her being 20, she could do it.

Katie echoed the belief related to family support. "Keeping this accomplishment in mind (achievement in the honor society), having my husband and my daughter encourage me every day, and seeing how my determination is reflected in my GPA; this is what leads me to continue my enrollment at Coastal College. I love it here." She also said that goals can also be a motivational factor to erase doubt. She went on to state:

My goal is what motivates me to ignore the looks of doubts in (some of) my family's eyes when I speak of my schoolwork assignments. They cannot understand why I would quit a profession that I wanted, only to go to school at such an old age.

The progress one makes toward student progress, achievement, and ultimately degree completion can also be motivational as illustrated by Jane who stated, "Progression of my work (is motivating). If you would see my work from before and from now, it's different. It's way different from the teaching of the professors. I want to see my profession and actually be able to be comfortable in my later life."

Lance also had the same belief in performance being motivating. He indicated, "I think you know, overall, I wasn't the most successful student in certain of my classes, but I feel like the work that I was putting out was the best of me. You know, I put everything that I could into that. It was all my effort. I feel like putting all my effort and hope into it really helped me motivate myself to continue my education." Lance went on to explain that engagement with other students was also a source of progress and motivation:

I would say that I was in a program along with several other classmates. ACT is a club

that was for architecture students, which I feel like really helped me personally to figure out what I needed to work on, what I needed to improve in becoming a better student overall. I think that was a big motivation towards like my whole experience with college. Casey also saw progress as a motivational factor. He added, “(I saw) how much I had grown in a single semester. I didn’t really want to change everything in a snap by transferring to a university or by just not going to college. I wanted to keep momentum going and I thought the only way I could do that was if I stayed at Coastal College.”

While progress and achievement are a critical factor for some, the connections made with other individuals in the academic setting is a connected motivational factor. Dean stated that, “Success in the major (is) the fire for wanting to achieve more.” He went on to share:

The classes for architecture drafting and design in my first semester have motivated me into continuing my education because I have been very eager into learning more in the field of architecture. The work itself is a passion of mine which makes me want to do the work, because I look forward to excelling and portraying my designs and renderings to others like and unlike myself.

Barbara supported Dean’s assertions about the major and class environment. Barbara offered that, “Meeting new individuals with the same drive to be creative and be innovative was very motivating.” She continued, “I had a lot of good experiences with classmates and professors and just learning more about my field, it really just motivated me to keep going and trying harder to do my best each semester.”

Hank also offered that support and encouragement can be key. “Yeah, I guess you could say the encouragement was the biggest thing that was going on there (at Coastal College). The encouragement to keep going forward...push through even if you fail a class, this that happens to

a lot of people,” he explained.

Although progress can be a positive factor, students found the need to sometimes focus on completion and their own personal grit as motivation. Amy noted, “I know college can be very intimidating to a lot of people and I now understand why a lot of people drop out. I had to dig deep to find the motivation to move forward.” She went on to explain, “I will continue to do my best and always push through the hard times because I have lots of goals that I want to reach, and I can only do that by graduating college.”

As a non-traditional student, Ian’s view was a little more targeted at completion. He expressed, “I didn’t do the college activities, so I can’t say anything like that helped me out. I would say probably the only thing that kind of helped me out would be when I would complete a class and I would get that much closer to getting my degree. That’s something that kind of kept me going.”

For some students, the desire and belief in perseverance is motivated by a variety of areas that are defined by the need to serve others. For example, Katie declared, “I want to help people, specifically veterans. I want to work in social work. Too many veterans are dying by suicide, too many veterans have PTSD or other mental issues; that is a problem that I want to help fix. That is what motivates me every day as I get ready for class.” In a separate major, but motivated by the similar desire to help others, Amy revealed, “I decided to continue my enrollment in college because I so desperately want to become a nurse practitioner to help people.”

Institutional Support and Interventions. Institutional support and interventions are purposeful actions that are engaged by the college in order to support student persistence. Amy provided an overarching understanding of how important this support and these interventions are to students. She professed that, “So many times I thought about giving up because I felt like I

would never adapt to the college level of academics. But every time I got to that point, student resources at Coastal College helped save my sanity.” Amy continued:

It (institutional support) was a little new to me because in my high school, my counselors didn't really push college that much. So, if I had a question a lot of the time, they didn't really answer it...or walked around it so I would have to figure it out myself. At Coastal College, if I ask a question, they give me a straightforward answer or how to get it. All the people that I've encountered are super helpful. They're always just wanting you to succeed at each resource.

Casey agreed with Amy, “I can relate to that. There wasn't... I didn't really get a lot of help from high school, but going into Coastal College, I thought it was gonna be the way most people describe universities – where it's like a hey man, you pay us, we do our job and actually you're on your own. At Coastal College, that really wasn't the case. You know you had people who genuinely wanted to help you succeed and achieve certain goals and that was really cool. It kind of changed my perspective on community colleges.”

Katie had a similar perspective about the feel of Coastal College when she posited, “High school ... gave us homey vibes, you know, like everyone was talking to everyone like normal...like its family. Then once we enter Coastal College, it was kind of like the same atmosphere... like there was really nothing that threw off anybody. Katie noted:

So, I thought it was a good connection... the transfer from high school to Coastal College. I will say for veterans, they help out a whole bunch. With Veterans' Upward Bound, they offer you stipend to attend their seminars and when I was a math major, they gave me a personal tutor who helped with problems. Since I'm running out of my GI Bill, they helped me apply for my Hazelwood Act and all of that. They're really helpful with

me transferring to another college and everything.

Ian added his assent in that he felt the support mechanisms he utilized helped him find pathways to perseverance. “I’d have to say that program Coastal College got a few years ago, that Veterans Upward Bound program helped me get registered, set me up with the tutoring, and practically did almost everything for me to get enrolled.” He also indicated that a few other mechanisms of support helped him progress:

The programs that are there, the tutoring for the math also some of the programs they had for speech class are going to help you out. Anything to do on lab also anything you wanted to figure out, you can just do YouTube (informationals) and I think that helped out a lot.

Amy and Casey also felt that tutoring and academic interventions were helpful. Amy offered:

I think...the study groups that they offered and the tutoring sessions (helped). Whenever I felt overwhelmed with information or I felt like I'm not smart enough for this, I don't know what I'm learning, or I can't do this, I would go to those tutoring sessions, and they would help break it down for me more to where it was easier for me to understand and to where I would be like, you know what, I can do this. It's easier for me now that I understand.

Casey provided similar beliefs as Amy:

The tutoring really helps; they're good at like helping you understand everything you know. Whenever I thought, I kind of knew too little to take this class... they helped me understand it in ways that I knew I would like to grasp the knowledge.

Gisele and Jane also demonstrated their beliefs that Coastal College’s support mechanisms were very user-friendly. Gisele indicated, Coastal College is on top of their game...if I order a

transcript, it'll be ready; if I have any information about FAFSA or any financial aid assistance, they're there to help. They're on call all the time. So, I really am grateful for that." Jane added, "...programs like the SSS, a trio program, help you with all the tutoring, scholarships, internships, resume building and all that."

Barbara, Dean, and Eric felt that the institutional support within their academic community was helpful in persisting and reaching their ultimate goals. Barbara indicated that, "I feel like at Coastal College, I guess the people around you really to care and like to help you. My advisor was really helpful with my classes and transferring to UTSA. I feel like it was just really nice to have someone involved with the school helping me and I don't know, it was just nice to get extra help from him (advisor) and other professors. She continued:

I didn't really have that in high school. I didn't really have any like connections with my counselors or like teachers, so it was just a little different and it was like a good different."

Dean drew support from within the major. He offered, "The program itself held everyone to a standard of what we expected. It helped me because it made me more accountable for my work, and it made me want to produce better work... especially with my peers, you know surrounding me, everyone kind of had to meet a certain threshold. Dean extended:

Like I said, you really didn't wanna be put back when it comes down to putting that into a portfolio, it's not going to be a strong candidate for being accepted into the next design class, so I would say the architecture program itself helped me in my success in college.

Eric held similar beliefs to Barbara and Dean, just extended with faculty supports. "I do have faculty that I see like...I think they're family. There were some memorable times there. We made some relations and I think I am at the point to understand, you know, how to work with others,"

he disclosed.

Class or Academic Experiences. Five student participants found that prior academic exposure to learning engagements similar to their college major helped them transition into their higher educational pursuits. Jane indicated that her high school had foundational courses which supported her desire to major in architecture. “At my high school, they offered a bunch of architectural classes to prepare me for what I'm taking here at Coastal College or when I was there at Coastal College,” stated Jane.

Being in the same area of study, Barbara agreed with Jane. She added, “I would say the same thing. The high school I went to, we also had a couple of architecture classes, and it just helped me understand the programs were going to use better and ... different stuff regarding architecture. So that was one thing that really prepared me for it.” Barbara expressed:

My first year I was barely learning and like just getting my feet wet into the program and it was really exciting. The stuff that we had done on all our projects in our assignments ... people that were already further along than me in the program with the stuff they've done, it was really inspiring to me, and I liked it.

In high school, Amy had academic experiences that provided critical resources for her collegiate study. “I had taken some medical terminology classes and some other health science classes in high school, so once I started to take anatomy and the other nursing classes, I was already familiar with the terminology and the labeling and all that,” Amy stated. Gisele had a somewhat different experience in that her classes were dual credit courses taken while on her high school campus. Gisele provided, “I took dual credit classes in high school, so I was already familiar with how everything works online and stuff. So, it was like not too big of a transition, but I was familiar with Canvas and what they offer.”

Special Skills Learned. In high school and the college preparatory environment, students are often afforded the opportunity to develop special skills or experiences that assist them in making successful transition to the collegiate environment both academically and socially. Two-thirds of the students who participated felt that special skills learned through immersive opportunities helped ease their transition. Amy, Dean, Gisele, and Jane all had experiences taking either advanced placement, preparatory, or dual enrollment classes that provided the familiarity with collegiate coursework.

Amy offered, “I think the most beneficial class that I had was probably AP Anatomy my senior year because we were taking a lot of lab practicals and exams. We had to study multiple hours every week and we had to be on top of that at all times, and I think that is the closest class that I had to what my college classes are like and that did give me some sort of preparedness.”

Jane agreed with Amy, “I took advanced placement classes. I actually took classes in high school for architecture. I took an architectural design, and I took engineering design presentation. So, I was a bit prepared for it (college courses).”

Dean and Gisele had the opportunity to take collegiate coursework while in high school as part of preparatory or dual enrollment programs. Dean stated, “I had honors in high school, so I had already been in college courses, and I was ready for it. Although, nothing in high school can compare to the architecture program and the time commitment.” Dean also believed that this knowledge preparation also extended beyond the traditional classroom. He added:

I was taught hard work in high school and was a leader in sports, that made the transition easier. The transition to college level courses was supported by experiences (outside the classroom) in high school.

Gisele also felt that college courses gave her exposure in high school, but actual courses in

college were a bit different. “I was definitely prepared. I was experienced with online dual enrollment classes from Coastal College, which only threw me a bit off because it was a different experience inside the college classroom,” Gisele stated. Her experiences in the classroom environment were also supported by her communication development. She offered:

My communication skills were developed and played a big factor as did overall preparation for classes. If you have a concern or you need help with something, then you have to communicate with them (professors); so, I believe those (high school) experiences may have helped me when transitioning from high school to college.

For Barbara and Hank, courses were important in high school, but it was the takeaway experience with notetaking that was helpful in their transition. Barbara expressed, “In high school a lot of teachers emphasized note-taking, when professors are (about) talking or just turning in and doing homework out of school, it was really helpful.”

Hank affirmed Barbara’s belief and commented about taking that knowledge and extending in college. “Just taking notes was one of the most important things that I learned ... how you are taking notes and how efficiently you can take notes, learning what needs to be written down and remembered versus filler information that could be looked up later,” Hank indicated.

Similar to the concept of taking notes, Eric insisted that organization learned in high school helped prepared him to succeed and manage his time well. He offered, “The most beneficial thing I had from high school to help me with college was that they helped me be really organized. My organization is in my hands ... how I use my time wisely.” Lance agreed that organization was beneficial and offered appreciation for the structured environment. He stated, “My teacher for English in high school was very strict with how we were always on time, and

she would take things personal with us (with preparation). She would treat us as if we were her own kids and not just like regular students. I think she was a huge benefit and helped with my preparedness for college.”

Academic Challenges. Incoming students sometimes have challenges transitioning and finding the appropriate balance with regard to their academic pursuits. In fact, nine of the 12 participants in this study noted various academic challenges ranging from course delivery, adaptivity to the courses, rate of delivery, as well as time management. Amy had problems when her courses shifted online in the second semester. “I had one online development class and the professor never did connect with anyone else in the class. So anytime we had posted a question, it went unanswered unless another student could answer. It was really frustrating because I was doing pretty bad on the tests in the beginning because I didn't understand what we were having to learn; but I never got any answers back to my question, so I didn't know what I needed to work on.”

Hank also had problems with the delivery method as well with some of the more complex courses he had. In addition, just getting to campus and the will to engage was a challenge at times. “Transportation was a major factor at times. I had just gotten my license. Also, the severe lack of motivation, because that's happened to me in the past, where I push myself through some classes and I just didn't see the point of it,” Hank admitted. He went on to indicate the complexity of maintaining concentration was a concern. Hank continued on, “...the amount of information I needed to keep track of and the demand of intense studying when needing to pass the exam was difficult as is the transition to a different major.”

Ian shared the same concern Amy and Hank did about the online courses. He stated: “I took too many online classes during the summer and the speed was a lot faster than I

anticipated so I fell behind. And actually, I flunked one class because it was way too fast paced.”

His academic challenges were not limited to this as he also fell behind with in content experience. He contended:

A lot of the students that I was going to class with were already in the field (air conditioning at the time), so they were way ahead of me. I had no idea what I was actually doing; so, I was, again, I was way behind compared to everybody else.

Architecture is a challenging major in its own right, but Dean said the new challenge was the pace of course delivery and keeping up was a challenge he observed. Dean indicated, “A challenge to the rapid pace of class delivery is soaking in all that beneficial knowledge while completing the work required and given.” He also shared that it was tough, especially when learning critical skillsets that were important in the major. He continued:

Some of the challenges that I faced were learning how to architecturally draw or render, designs, learn the proper diction, and properly acquire time management amongst my other classes.

Barbara agreed, “managing time in the architecture program was challenging, especially with the larger and complex projects.” Fred extended this to include being able to maintain the timeframe of what you’re doing and managing schedules of when all the various projects were due in the program. Fred provided:

Turing in late assignments (on time) is important. Design class is very time consuming. Anyone entering that program has to know that it's really important to at least consider trying to maybe start ahead of time or be flexible with your schedule when it comes to your designs.

The program experience Eric had was hampered by limitations in execution when courses

took more of an online modality. He shared, “When I’m taking just basic classes like English, math, or social studies, I perform better online; but when it comes to the major, architecture, I prefer it in person. Because of COVID, my online classes for my basics was no problem. In the major, it was more difficult because I’m more of a hands-on person.”

Lance applied himself in the major in similar fashion and was able to adapt in most classes. However, the complexities of one course in the architecture program provided a bit of a roadblock to his continuation. Lance explained, “I failed a course, and I was almost not able to graduate because of the class. I think that really opened my eyes and showed me that I needed to work a little harder in order to succeed.” He went on to explain:

I had a hard time adapting to a lot of the challenges I went through. I had to stay up late nights, sometimes just to finish homework, or I would have to stay after school late hours to just be able to complete projects ... I think that was a big difference compared to high school.

Gisele also felt that adapting to time constraints when maintaining everything that was involved with college. She shared, “Maintaining my grades as a full-time student while balancing out work and extracurricular activities was a challenge.” Amy also had adaptational challenges with everything involved but was more specific in the application for her studies. She stated, “In science classes, I wasn’t really prepared so I didn’t know how tough those were going to be and it was hard to grasp some of those concepts which were completely new and different to me.”

Peer Support

A majority of the students in this study indicated that finding support from fellow students within the academic setting can be a source of collaboration, cooperation, and motivation. Barbara provided that, “Spending hours after class in the studio working on projects,

taking snack breaks, and sharing ideas and criticism about one another's project created strong bonds." She went on to explain:

I feel like because we were together all the time, like every single day, we got really close, and it was nice to hear from everyone; they would give their opinions on your project, and you could give your opinion on theirs. It was just really helpful. We had professors but it was nice to get our own critiques from each other, so I think it really benefited us going forward with our projects and continuing projects.

Jane also affirmed Barbara's beliefs. "I would say it is influential for me with our architectural students... we are only a class of 12 so we basically benefit off each other; we're constantly getting feedback from our classmates to better ourselves. If one needs help with their drawing or design, whatever, we are there to offer our help. I think my studio culture was very strong. I just say it like it was very like a family because we got really close to each other." Fred echoed the bonds indicated by his fellow architecture students, Barbara and Jane, "...so throughout my beginning year in design class, we met people and became friends."

Lance also indicated that he believed interaction and support from his classmates was a strong support mechanism to continue his studies. Lance stated, "I feel that being interactive with my classmates and stuff like that, and hearing that they actually enjoyed my work really helped make me feel better and can help me continue doing what I do."

Hank experienced peer support through an immersive experience with more advanced students. He indicated, "Advanced students would come into the course, sit in with the professor, actually record the material, and host after class session study sessions." He went on to offer:

If I remember right, it was a grant that needed to be renewed every so often, so the student worker was really helpful. Every now and then I would have to communicate

with this person just to clarify some information and things of that nature as to the program itself (nursing). It really gave you an idea of how much work is involved, how much memorization, and then I guess what's at stake because if you're wrong with just one wrong measurement, injection, and anything, that could easily kill someone. So, this is the realization and actual experience that helped me during the program.

Amy had a somewhat different experience with her fellow students in the laboratory or classroom setting but did have avenues for collaboration. "I had in person lab one day a week, so I didn't get to see my classmates very much. We would try to organize study sessions and stuff online for when we weren't together so that we could help each other out with the tests, and assignments, and lab questions, and everything like that," she stated.

Gisele also cultivated strong interaction with her fellow students. She offered, "I think meeting all my friends was awesome. I have lifelong friendships now with some people, but it's kind of great talking to other people because in my field, criminal justice, when you make friends and you talked to all the other students, you could just see ... different careers that you can actually join at the end."

Personal Engagement. The sense of belonging students have in college is built by a variety of factors. In some cases, it rests in the engagement that is generated through interaction between students, faculty, and advisors. For three-fourths of the students in this study, engagement by these individuals was very impactful on their success or perseverance. For many of these students, multiple individuals had an impact. Dean was impacted through engagement with fellow students in the classroom setting. He explained, "We had spoken to a former student, and hearing about her success story, the opportunities that she's gotten... I've categorized myself in that's what I want for myself. He continued:

You're hearing from former architecture students and seeing (former) architecture students know their success and where that's gotten (makes me) want me to follow in their footsteps but also follow down that same path. People can get confused sometimes; you're going in the same steps, but you don't really want to follow the same steps you want to follow the same path. It's not always a bad thing, but if you can go on the same path and not the same step, it's a big difference.

Dean also explained that his academic success was also connected to his academic advisor's intervention. "My advisor has literally been there, like a brother, for me and my other classmates. He makes sure we have been on top of our artwork, on top of our classes, on the right schedule. If we ever need anything, he's been there."

Barbara also shared Dean's belief that the exposure and connection to other students was vital. She submitted, "I would...say that the ACT club that we had... was really cool. Experiencing the first year alongside my classmates and doing stuff with them was great. In the whole architecture program, I met a lot of really cool people, and everyone was very helpful and friendly." Her experiences with her classmates and those involved in the program was supported by her engagement with her advisor. Barbara indicated:

My advisor was really good; he always talked to me about classes, and he would always check in on how my grades were. At one point, I didn't really know if I wanted to stay in the architecture program and he just kept pushing me to continue and just do it... and see what happens and I'm really glad that he did. I really loved how he advised; I even brought my sister and some of my friends to him so that he could help them. So, I had a really good experience with him as my advisor.

Gisele supported Dean and Barbara's premise that student interaction associated with the

academic environment helped provide positive impacts toward persistence. “Another positive experience I had throughout my first year of college was getting the chance to be part of Coastal College's criminal justice club.” Co-curricular endeavors like this club are sometimes an important connector to what happens inside the classroom. Gisele’s engagement was also impacted by intrusive advising in her major. She stated:

Well, my advisor was great too; he always had the classes set up for me and if I wanted to pick something on my own though he was like, well, that's not really ... you shouldn't pick that because you won't benefit from the class. So, he was ... definitely awesome with helping me make my schedule and guiding me in the right path. When I went in, I didn't really know where to start; so, he was awesome getting back to me quickly and just being there for me throughout these two years of Coastal College.

Lance believed that his perseverance experiences were impacted by both engagements with his fellow students and his professors. “My professor, she told me that I did really great work for being a first year and that she didn't have a lot of students who did such excellent work as I did. That really boosted my confidence with my work and helped me grow overall.” This growth was supported by the enjoyment of further interaction. Lance added:

The reason why I decided to continue my architecture career was because I found that it was really fun. The people that surrounded me made it more fun than I expected it to be. I made a lot of great friends with both professors and students, and they made it feel like a second home.

Several students believed that their strongest engagements came from interactions with their professors and advisors. Jane exhibited a strong and interactive relationship with her advisor. She explained:

...he was very beneficial for me, consistently motivating me, guiding me on the right path whichever classes I needed to take, they were already set up before I even got a chance to talk to him. He's always there to recommend us for internships and job opportunities, even when like one of my professors was very discouraging, he was there to uplift my spirits and continue to push me to keep going and further on my architectural journey.

With her foundation for success built with strong advisor engagement, Jane did feel that professors provided strong support mechanisms early on. "My first semester at Coastal College was amazing...I had professors that were very invested in helping me further my education. When I began to move further into my architectural courses, I encountered a wonderful professor who impacted my architectural journey in so many ways. This professor offered many encouraging words and was very understanding in personal matters," Jane boasted.

Like Jane, Eric also had positive experiences with faculty and advisors who made a compelling impact on his journey. "Without my advisor, I would be in trouble and probably (would have) given up on college. My advisor played a major part in my college life, and I appreciate him a lot for it. My first year of college went out smoothly because of his help, and he is still helping me currently," Eric shared. This relationship with the advisor gave Eric the tools to navigate the world of the college environment, while it was continued through engagement with his faculty members. Eric offered:

What made me continue with my degree... just continuing college itself was basically my advisors and my professors. They really encouraged me to keep going when I'm...really thinking about changing majors and I tell (them) about it because they were open enough to let me talk to them about my problems.

Amy added more impactful instances through experiences with professors and advisors who helped her manage a challenging nursing major. Amy stated, “I did speak with an advisor a few times to help me make sure that I was always on the right track, and it was nice to have that resource from somebody who knew what they were doing. She continued:

I went into my first advising meeting, I was so overwhelmed with everything I had no idea where to start, what classes to take, and he broke it down for me by each semester and wrote down what I needed to take every semester that would go towards my degree plan; so that just made me feel so much better. It made me feel like I knew what I was doing now, like I knew what I needed to take to get to where I wanted to be; it gave me confidence that I was on the right track, that I was doing the right things that I needed to.

Amy also found a support system from the nursing faculty. “I had a professor that was supportive. She has been so inspirational that she was literally the kindest person I have ever met; she just made a huge impact on my life,” Amy admitted.

The most significant impact to Hank’s perseverance experiences was his engagement with his professors. He indicated, “During my first year at Coastal College, a few professors I interacted with directly provided a caring and supportive atmosphere. The first professor for anatomy and physiology always took her time to explain things covered in each session. She would consistently pause the lectures to allow for questions from her students or provide realistic examples. He also shared further instances:

A faculty member furthered her devotion to her students by establishing exercises meant to reduce stress before and after exams and offered ideas on how to better manage time and studying -- emphasizing quality over quantity. Also, one of our professors would always talk to you after class, come in a little early, always go through examples. She

would slow down her pace just to actually make sure every student understands what they're learning.

While the classroom engagements were also important to Casey, he was convinced about the impact made upon his perseverance by advising interaction. Casey pointed out, “The experiences I had with the advisors in the career counseling (made an impact). When I explained my troubles of the first semester, they were really helpful, and they really were the ones to help me balance life in school and they helped me overcome most of my difficulties within the first year. He also added connective experiences with his major advisor:

When I told her I wanted to change my major to fire science, she was like, ‘well hey you know, let me sign you up for classes that apply to both majors to where if you decide you don't want to do fire science, you'd still be working on ...everything you do would still apply to this liberal arts major.’ That was pretty cool, it was really helpful. They made me feel like I wasn't the only one with no idea...you're not the only one with this problem.

There's like 200,000 college kids that are thinking the exact same thing and so she kind of helped me out.

Learning Opportunities. Engagement with faculty, staff, and students served as a springboard for impactful experiences on success and perseverance for a good number of students in this study. Several students extended the experiences to include supplemental learning or experiential engagements in their major. The experience Gisele had in criminal justice provided an enriching experience that kept her engaged in the major. She stated:

Within my first year attending college, I had the opportunity to work hands on in my field of study. I was given the chance to conduct an investigation that gave me a feel of what it would be like to work in my career field. Receiving that opportunity gave me the strength

and courage to pursue my actual career...it was a hands-on opportunity and I really enjoyed it, so I said I want to continue doing this and so that's why I'm transferring (to a certain four-year university).

In the intensive major of architecture, Dean indicated that the classroom experiences with his teachers helped create opportunities in the field that were motivational and kept his interest. He indicated, "Shared experiences with teachers...they seem to really like the major of architecture and they've shared their experiences and the same love that I do. If they can do it, I can do it and its only more motivation to want to pursue my master's degree. As a fellow architecture student, Barbara shared the same experiences Dean had and felt that engagement and practical application in the classroom or academic setting was important for her success. Barbara offered:

We had to present in front of actual architects, and they were our jurors who gave us feedback on our projects." She went on to indicate that these opportunities were critical for development and was important to connect with her classmates. Barbara noted, "And it was like 'there's bonds created,' which was really helpful, it's really helpful in the classroom experience. Now that its online ... it's just a little different.

Fred agreed that practical applications in the courses helped him to gain knowledge and refine his skills. Fred stated:

So, I guess the most impactful thing was my design class. So, I think one of the successful things about my design class was how we created original things from the top of our head. Because we had to do presentations, my communication skills improved as I had fear of presenting in front of people. In my design three course (I was) pushing myself to work harder. It was more in depth into the real world of architecture.

In nursing, Amy had the experience of engaging with advisors and faculty that provided the

framework for a more in-depth concentration in her major. Amy indicated that, “(she learned) more about what their nursing program was, met with advisors more, looked deeper into the curriculum, and had (practical) experience with classes.”

Interpersonal Experiences. In complex settings, like higher educational institutions, there is always the opportunity for negative engagements between individuals. In this study, eight of the 12 participating students had negative interpersonal exchanges or reactions that had adverse effects on their perseverance experiences. Jane indicated that several professors had positive exchanges with her, which provided strong engagements in the academic setting. However, she kept coming back to one relationship with a professor in her architecture major that made a negative impact on her educational experience. Jane revealed:

I had a very discouraging professor. She basically did not let me design to my capability. So that was kind of discouraging. She's probably the worst professor I've had at Coastal College and she's very discouraging, like constantly putting me (and other students) down. Her way of teaching was not great. The obstacles I faced in her class left me discouraged and unmotivated about the work that I enjoyed doing. The professor was just outright rude; she made it very difficult for me even to want to continue on in my architectural journey. She belittled me every time we met for class and bashed my designs while calling it constructive criticism.

Casey also experienced negative interactions with a professor which stemmed from methodology, delivery, and the language barrier of the faculty member. He indicated, “I remember one bad math professor and for starters, nobody in the class could really understand what she was saying because she ... had an accent.” He continued:

Every time we asked her to repeat something, we still didn't understand her. So,

whenever we would ask her for help on the math problems, the only thing she would tell us is you need to go to the math learning center. So, we would, and they would help us out to do the problems, but then she would count our answers wrong because we weren't doing it the way she taught it. So, we said that we don't understand how you're teaching it. So, you're telling us to go to the math learning center and you're counting our answers wrong because it's their way, not yours, like why? It was kind of weird. It was really irritating for a while.

Katie had negative experiences in a mathematics course which challenged her and ultimately seemed to provide the framework for her major change from mathematics to sociology. She explained:

I have to add ... a negative experience. It would be my calculus class in like he the way that he (the professor) was... I don't think he was a really good professor. He kept bragging about how easy he would make it and, in class, your foundation for calculus would not be good because he makes it so easy that you really don't have a challenge. You don't know what you're doing because he basically gives you like a guide too. It's just weird how he does it. I read his reviews and the same people were complaining with the same complaints that I had and he's not really a good professor.

Katie continued with a negative experience when she tried to gain assistance from the student success center to support her class issues:

I would add the only complaint I had with the Student Success Center was that one student who, had a bad day, didn't feel like tutoring me. I think that they were with the peer students...they kind of need to, you know, fix how they talked to some of the students who go in there for help because it turns you off for wanting to go in there for

help. The way she came at me that day, it just made me not want to go there anymore. I started going to the math learning center and I started using Veterans' Upward Bound more.

Gisele had many positive experiences with professors in college, but there were some that were discouraging. She shared the following instance:

There are some professors that are really discouraging, and they'll be like one that told me that my writing wasn't even college level writing. He kind of was hypocritical because the next time I wrote something then he was like 'this is outstanding.' So, I guess professors like that...it's just like they kind of discourage you and there's no reason for it, because you're just working as hard as you are.

Eric took advantage of the many opportunities in his major to interact with his fellow students. However, he did indicate that he had several negative issues with some students he encountered which sometimes made the situation spiral to where he helped them and let his work suffer. He shared, "I had more negative people around when I was befriending people, I'm more of the open type, and that's how I was raised. I couldn't say no and then from there, because I couldn't say no, I was able to help them finish their projects and then rushed mine and did not do too well."

Lance also echoed some of the challenges Eric faced with students. He offered, "I had a few problems with certain students, not purposefully done, but I had a few (interpersonal) conflicts with certain students at Coastal College and I think that kind of made me lose a little interest in the career and studying at Coastal College."

Some students, like Fred, attempted to manage all the situations that came at them, but had a challenging time managing everything. Fred indicated that his program was practical, fast paced, immersive, and pushed him to better his communication skills by interacting with others

and presenting to audiences, which seemed to affect his level of stress. He pointed out, “Stress is kind of the barrier to my success. There are usually things that I stress about in school, even though I may be ahead.”

COVID-19. Of all the academic challenges that played a role in applying adverse effects to perseverance experiences, COVID 19 was the one that was unplanned and had widespread effects across the country and for the vast majority of students from Coastal College involved in this study. Some of the students indicated that their academic lives were completely disrupted when classes were transitioned online mid-semester spring 2020 and some indicated that the solution was not ideal for them to have the tools to succeed. For example, Katie experienced a turn in her level of confidence. “When classes went online, I wasn’t as motivated, so I was doing things on my own time; I was turning in work the day it was due, so it dropped my grades some.”

Dean also had a challenge when things went online, and it affected his major adversely. He expressed, “I would say that because my major is architecture, it deals with a lot of hands on and in person, face to face... and when COVID, you know first came about, the school completely went online and to be honest with you, it wasn't the most pleasant experience. He maintained:

It’s kind of like you got robbed of information... and knowledge... and learning so, you know there's nothing you can do about it. There's nothing teachers can do about it. I mean, things have to be followed. Protocols have to be followed and I just feel like it affected negatively, and you know there's no telling, but it's only getting worse.

Hank’s experience with COVID-19 also included impacts on the way he was able to function academically in a proactive way. “COVID gave me trouble on one or two of my courses and it didn't really go great. It was just understanding the material in the time frame and trying to

communicate with the professors. I also had trouble just adjusting to the new applications and the new way of life at the time,” Hank stated. In other classes, he offered that it was hit or miss:

On the one hand, it (COVID-19) severely restricted professor-student interactions, but, on the other, on the other hand, it did open up the course more. I didn't have to jump into lectures... you could go through the entire course of the day. You could easily just jump in here from paragraphs, jump out, do what you need to do at work, and just do that for throughout the day. On the one hand...kind of restrictive, but on the other it opened it up.

Amy had trouble applying the online instruction to a hands-on major where she had to have practical applications. She offered:

I was taking all of my anatomy and chemistry lab classes online so when we had to do the labeling tests, I wasn't even sure what I was looking at because I didn't have that model in front of me. I wasn't able to move it around and look at the pieces. I was just looking out at a printed picture that I had in my room, and I didn't even know what it was and what I needed to be doing with it.

Jane agreed with Amy in that hands-on learning took a bit of a back seat at times during the pandemic and forced students to learn differently. She revealed:

I'm a kinesthetic learner. So, everything for me is like hands on and when I got switched to hybrid classes I would get, well, first of all, my last semester at Coastal College my professor was not present. He lived in Illinois, so when all of our classes were resumed, and we'd have to go to the classroom just to be on the zoom call, so it's kind of...it's just a different learning style that I wasn't used to. I mean, I excelled in the class, but it's still something that I had to get used to because the studio culture was not the same as it was pre COVID.

The experience Casey had during COVID was unexpected as well and was constrained by the way his faculty members were able to navigate the new environment. He disclosed:

It was rough when COVID first hit because it was out of nowhere. At first, it was spring break and an extra week of spring break, and then the rest of your classes and all of your finals were just online, and it took a lot of us off guard. I think it took the teachers off guard as well, because not a whole lot of my teachers knew how to use Canvas (online portal). It got to the point where my teacher was like 'hey, I have no idea how to check your grades. So, when you take your final, take a screenshot or a picture of it and just email it to me.' So, we were like wait, what, like what do you mean he had no idea how to check our assignments this semester? After that, things (eventually) got better but when COVID first hit it was really rough.

In a similar experience, Gisele had adaptation issues to the new reality of COVID-19 educational delivery. She offered:

Yeah, I feel like they should have given us like a little bit more time to adjust instead of just throwing out all these assignments on us. And just like, OK, we switched online. You can do everything on your own now and you don't have to show up to class or anything. OK, I don't know, it's just for me. It was hard. It was definitely stressful when you have to submit all these assignments on the same day, or you have to get a group of people just to go on zoom and everything. So that was that was hard. When COVID hit, they could have been a little bit more lenient.

Themes Associated with Research Questions

The two major themes and eight sub-themes were correlated to the central research question and the four sub-questions. The central research question provided the basis for the

establishment of the major themes. The sub themes each identified elements that supported positive or negative impacts related to perseverance experiences.

Central Research Question

The central research question in this study was, “How do first generation students at a community college in the Southern United States describe their perseverance experience from their first to second year of college.” This question was crafted to support the strategy of understanding the perseverance experiences of first-generation college students, specifically from their first to second year. The various responses provided by participants during the data gathering process centered on two main themes: motivation to pursue or continue education as well as support provided by peers, advisors, and faculty members in the educational setting.

Motivation was exhibited by students across the study. There were a variety of ways that motivation fostered perseverance, but most centered on family, peer connection, and achievement in general. Dean indicated that his motivation toward succeeding began with his family and the field-related interest that his dad had. He explained, “It is something my dad wanted me to do, because he wanted to do that.” His father was not able to pursue the higher education, so Dean was driven by this and his desire to succeed because, in his words, “if I do good, they do good.” Ian believed that the example he set for his daughter to complete education provided the motivation he needed to continue. He stated, “I’m going to school and I’m trying to push her to go to school. I can’t quit, even though I already had just finished failing a class. So that helped me pushed harder...” Lance believed that his motivation came through the effort he put into his classes. He explained, “...the work that I was putting out was the best of me...I put everything that I could into that. It was all my effort. I feel like putting all my effort and hope into it really helped motivate myself to continue my education.” Barbara offered her source of

motivation had a root into the experiences and connections in the classroom. She offered, “I had a lot of good experiences with classmates and professors and just learning more about my field, it really just motivated me to keep going and trying harder to do my best each semester.”

Motivation was exhibited across the study by the student participants in a number of areas as was closely followed by their indication of support from their peers, and institutional supports as a means of perseverance. Jane, Barbara, and Lance provided that interactions and supports from their peers provided the means of confidence and motivation to succeed. Barbara explained, “I feel like because we were together all the time...we got really close and it was nice to hear from everyone; they would give their opinions on your project, and you could give your opinion on theirs. It was really helpful.” Barbara also explained, “...we’re constantly getting feedback from our classmates to better ourselves. If one needs help with their Drawing or design...we are there to offer our help. I think my studio culture was very strong.” Lance believed that the support was critical to his success. He stated, “I feel that being interactive with my classmates...and hearing that they actually enjoyed my work really helped make me feel better and can help me continue doing what I do.” Casey had a somewhat different take in that he believed that institutional supports were key to his success. He stated, “The tutoring really helps; they’re good at like helping you understand everything you know. Whenever I thought, I kind of knew too little to take this class...they helped me understand it in ways that I knew I could grasp the knowledge.”

Sub-Question One

The complexities that permeate the decisions that confront students today related to whether or not they persist is at the cornerstone of this study. Sub question one focused on the description of events that led students to persevere from their first to their second year of college.

One significant thematic area developed relative to this question in that each of the students in this study benefitted from instances of institutional support and intervention. For example, both Katie and Ian believed that support they received from Veterans Upward Bound helped to keep them on the right track. Katie explained, “With Veterans Upward Bound, they offer you a stipend to attend their seminars and when I was a math major, they gave me a personal tutor who helped with problems.” Ian added, “The Veterans Upward Bound program helped me to get registered, set me up with tutoring, and practically did almost everything for me to get enrolled.” Along with this, both Katie and Ian expressed that tutoring provided at the institution was critical, which was also supported by Amy and Casey. Amy explained, “...the study groups that they offered and the tutoring sessions (helped). Whenever I felt overwhelmed with information or I felt like I’m not smart enough for this...I would go to those tutoring sessions, and they would help break it down for me more to where it was easier for me to understand...” Casey has a similar experience as he provided, “The tutoring really helps; they’re good at helping you understand everything you know...they helped me understand it in ways that I knew I would like to grasp the knowledge.” Jane indicated that programs like Student Support Services (SSS), a trio program, help you with all the tutoring, scholarships, internships, resume building, and all that.” Finally, some students, like Dean believed that specific supports in the academic setting were important. He stated, “The program itself held everyone to a standard of what we expected. It helped me because it made me more accountable for my work, and it made me want to produce better work...especially with my peers, you know surrounding me, everyone kind of had to meet a certain threshold.”

Sub-Question Two

As much as motivation and institutional supports are critical to the success of students in

the college setting, this study examined the preparatory instances from high school that were most beneficial to student transition into college. In examining the data from the various research engagements, two primary themes were observed by a majority of the student participants. Essentially, students believed that the experiences that they held in their academic setting were integral, as well as the skills that they learned from direct experience or experiential engagement. Some student participants, like Barbara, had courses in high school that provided the academic foundation for college work. She indicated, “The high school I went to, we had a couple of architecture classes, and it just helped me understand the programs we’re going to use better...” Amy also found that past academic experiences learned in high school were critical resources. Amy explained, “I had taken some medical terminology classes and some other health science classes in high school, so once I started to take anatomy and the other nursing classes, I was already familiar with the terminology and the labeling and all that.” Dean also took courses which he believed helped prepare him, but only to a certain extent. He provided, “I had honors in high school, so I had already been in college courses, and I was ready for it (collegiate course work). Although, nothing in high school can compare to the architecture program and the time commitment.

Extending into the collegiate academic setting, some students held that their coursework and learned skills from direct experience provided the platform for success. For instance, Gisele felt that her communication skills were expanded through dual enrollment and preparatory exposure. She offered, “My communication skills were developed and played a big factor as did overall preparation for classes. If you have a concern or you need help with something, then you have to communicate with them (professors); so, I believe those (high school) experiences may have helped me when transitioning from high school to college.” Hank also believed that

knowledge attained in transitional activity helped to provided foundational elements. He explained, “Just taking notes was one of the most important things that I learned...how you are taking notes and how efficiently you can take notes, learning what needs to be written down and remembered versus filler information that could be looked up later.”

Sub-Question Three

The crux of phenomenological research is to understand shared experiences. In this study, it was essential to understand the impactful experiences that students had on their persistence and perseverance in college. Two main themes emerged in examining this category: engagement and learning opportunities.

When students find belonging, they tend to have a built-in support mechanism for sustainability. Dean believed that some of his sense of belonging began with learning form other students. He stated, “When you’re hearing from former architecture students and seeing (former) architecture students know their successes and where that’s gotten (makes me) want to follow in their footsteps.” Barbara shared this belief in interaction with students through exposure with a student organization. “Experiencing the first year alongside my classmates and doing stuff with them was great. I met a lot of really cool people, and everyone was helpful and friendly” Some students felt that engagement with their fellow students was important but felt that interaction with faculty and advisors was also important. Gisele explained, “My advisor was great too; he always had the classes set up for me and if I wanted to pick something on my own though, he was like, well that’s not really...you shouldn’t pick that because you won’t benefit from the class. When I went in, I didn’t really know where to start; so, he was awesome getting back to me quickly and just being there for me throughout these two years of Coastal College.” Jane also felt that advising engagement was important. She indicated, “...he (my advisor) was very

beneficial for me, constantly motivating me, guiding me on the right path whichever classes I needed to take, they were already set up before I even got a chance to talk to him. He's always there to recommend us for internships and opportunities..." Extending beyond advising, Hank indicated that engagement with faculty members was a significant impact on his perseverance. He indicated, "A faculty member furthered her devotion to her students by establishing exercises meant to reduce stress before and after exams and offered ideas on how to better manage time and studying."

The engagement between students, faculty, and advisors was established as important elements of student persistence and perseverance. Extending from this, students also felt that learning opportunities were also vital. For example, Dean provided, "Shared experiences with teachers (is important for him) ...they seem to really like the major of architecture and they're shared their experiences and the same love that I do. If they can do it, I can do it, and its only more motivation to want to pursue my master's degree." Gisele also felt the engagement and shared experiences with faculty in the academic setting were important because of the generated experiential learning opportunities. She stated, "Within my first year of college, I had the opportunity to work hands on in my field of study. Receiving that opportunity gave me the strength and courage to pursue my actual career..." Fred also used his class experiences as a foundation for perseverance. He indicated, "Because we had to do presentations, my communication skills improved. In my design three course (I was) pushing myself to work harder. It was more in depth into the real world of architecture."

Sub-Question Four

Much of the research collected from the student experiences centered on the various positive impacts associated with their persistence or perseverance. There were, however,

experiences that the students indicated that were negative and had adverse impacts toward their perseverance experiences. Fortunately, the actions taken by the institution or assistance provided by resourceful faculty and staff provided the avenues for the students in the study to continue their enrollment. In studying the information provided through the student interactions, it was clear that three themes were primary agents of adverse effects: interpersonal experiences, academic challenges, and COVID-19.

Interpersonal experiences can be positive, but in some cases be negative impacts on persistence and perseverance. Jane had a negative impact from interaction with a faculty member but did not let it quench her determination. She shared, “I had a very discouraging professor...(she) was just outright rude; she made it very difficult for me to even want to continue on in my architectural journey...(she) bashed my designs by calling it constructive criticism.” Beyond faculty, some students also held negative experiences with their peers. Eric indicated that some of his negative interactions with others impacted his ability to keep current with his work. He explained, “I had more negative people around when I was befriending people...I couldn’t say no ...and because I couldn’t say no, I was able to help them finish their projects and then rushed min and did not do too well.”

Even though some students did have interpersonal experiences that challenged them, others had challenges in the academic setting itself. Amy had problems interacting and participating effectively in a course that shifted online. She explained, “I had one online development class and the professor never did connect with anyone else in the class. So anytime we had posted a question, it went unanswered unless another student could answer.” The challenges Ian faced in the classroom were driven by delivery at times. Ian indicated, “I took too many online classes during the summer and the speed was a lot faster than I anticipated so I fell

behind. And actually, I flunked one class because it was way too fast paced.” Dean also experienced the same issues with delivery that extended into the ability to properly execute in his classes. Dean provided, “Some of the challenges that I faced were relearning how to architecturally draw or render, designs, learn the proper diction, and to properly acquire time management amongst other classes.”

The challenges faced by students interpersonally and within the academic setting were real and were at times fueled by the final negative indicator that prevailed in the research, COVID-19. The students in this study had very profound feelings about how the pandemic affected their persistence and perseverance experiences. Dean indicated, “It’s kind of like you got robbed of information...and knowledge...and learning so, you know, there’s nothing you can do about it.” Katie also experienced impacts that cut into her confidence. She explained, “When classes went online, I wasn’t as motivated, so I was doing things on my own time; I was turning in work the day it was due, so it dropped my grades some.” Casey felt that the pandemic brought challenges for interaction and engagement with faculty as well. He shared, “I think it took the teachers off guard as well, because not a whole lot of my teachers knew how to use Canvas (online portal) ...my teacher was like, ‘hey, I have no idea how to check your grades...’” Finally, Gisele felt stressed by the entire process. She expressed, “Yeah, I feel like they should have given us...a little more time to adjust instead of just throwing out all these assignments on us. It was definitely stressful when you have to submit all these assignments on the same day...”

Textural, Structural, & Composite Descriptions

Qualitative data collection provides researchers with opportunities to collect and analyze rich data that can provide light onto various situations or phenomena. For textural descriptions, I wrote about various experiences of the participants related to their perseverance as illustrated in

interviews, focus groups, and the reflective writing assignment. For structural descriptions, I concentrated attention on how the perseverance experiences were contrived in the setting and context to the individuals and those around them. Finally, through collective data, review, and reflection, I was able to gather understanding of student shared experiences that helped me to produce a composite description of their persistence condition which led to perseverance and enrollment continuation.

Textural Description

After collecting and evaluating data, I was able to develop a composite textural description of the participant group. The description is as follows: the students in the study had an innate sense of motivation that came from a variety of sources. Many of the students spoke of family being a cornerstone to educational motivation and continuation as Katie shared, “Simply put, my daughter and my husband...everything that I do is for them. No one in my family, other than a cousin now has a bachelor's degree.” Others like Dean indicated, “It’s something my dad wanted me to do, because my dad wanted to do that, but he wasn't able to finish school. So, I'm able to achieve something he would do, and do it for the both of us; that alone has brought me very far, it kept me motivated.” Even further, students saw factors like progress in their academic pursuits as motivating, “Progression of my work (is motivating). If you would see my work from before and from now, it’s different,” Jane noted.

Throughout the various subject areas that were probed in the research engagements, the participants connected activity that led to ultimately being motivated to succeed through the various levels of support that were provided, thus the levels of support also were noted as an important impact on student persistence and perseverance. This was evidenced by what Eric indicated about the support he received from his advisor. He indicated, “Without my advisor, I

would be in trouble and probably have given up on college. My advisor played a major part in my college life, and I appreciate him a lot for it. My first year of college went out smoothly because of his help and he is still helping me currently.” Even further, the connection and support provided by one of her faculty members provided the support that motivated Jane to continue. Jane offered, “I experienced personal issues and had a professor that was supportive. She has been so inspirational. She is literally the kindest person I have ever met. And she just made a huge impact on my life.” This level of support was also sustained by student support as Barbara indicated, “I feel like because we were together all the time, like every single day, we got really close, and it was nice to hear from everyone; they would give their opinions on your project, and you could give your opinion on theirs. It was just really helpful. We had professors but it was nice to get our own critiques from each other, so I think it really benefited us going forward with our projects and continuing projects.” Essentially, the “what” experienced by the students was indeed the motivation which provided the reasoning and example given by their families, peers, faculty, and advisors which enabled them to persevere to continued enrollment.

Structural Description

Textural descriptions detail the various thematic elements of the shared experiences. The structural description details the “how” perseverance experiences were contrived in the setting and context to the participants. There was an underlying environment that was echoed throughout the research engagements, that of interaction. In describing their perseverance experiences and the motivations they had to move forward with their enrollment, how they experienced the motivation and support was the key to understanding the phenomenon for the students. Students experienced their decision from various interactions in their educational

setting. These interactions were facilitated by institutional support and interventions, intensive engagements, and through learning opportunities.

Institutional support and interventions provided the means for the college to provide services that could aid the students to persist. For example, Amy shared, “I think...the study groups that they offered and the tutoring sessions (helped). Whenever I felt overwhelmed with information or I felt like I'm not smart enough for this, I don't know what I'm learning, or I can't do this, I would go to those tutoring sessions, and they would help break it down for me more to where it was easier for me to understand and to where I would be like, you know what, I can do this. It's easier for me now that I understand.” Many other students continued when they indicated that programs like the learning center, tutoring, Veterans Upward Bound, and federally funded TRIO programs helped provided needed connection and support for their studies. For many of the students, their whole idea about college life and community college changed due to the services and connections that were provided as Casey indicated, “You know you had people who genuinely wanted to help you succeed and achieve certain goals and that was really cool. It kind of changed my perspective on community colleges.”

For many of the students in this study, experiences in high school helped provide the connection to the collegiate academic setting. Several students indicated that experience with advanced placement classes, dual enrollment, or classes that were subject-matter oriented to their college major helped ease the transition. However, the transition and persistence motivations were connected in large part to how they engaged with others, particularly students, faculty, and advisors. Jane indicated that interactions with her advisor were key, “I went into my first advising meeting, I was so overwhelmed with everything I had no idea where to start, what classes to take, and he broke it down for me by each semester and wrote down what I needed to

take every semester that would go towards my degree plan; so that just made me feel so much better.” The interaction that Lance had with his professor provided acknowledgement and encouragement. Lance explained, “My professor, she told me that I did really great work for being a first year and that she didn't have a lot of students who did such excellent work as I did. That really boosted my confidence...” Barbara believed that student contact early on built relationships and provided for a good atmosphere. “Experiencing the first year alongside my classmates and doing stuff with them was great. In the whole architecture program, I met a lot of really cool people, and everyone was very helpful and friendly,” she stated.

Finally, learning opportunities provided the necessary interaction for students in a variety of majors take an experiential approach to learning concepts and skills necessary to persist in their area of interest. Gisele disclosed, “Within my first year attending college, I had the opportunity to work hands on in my field of study. I was given the chance to conduct an investigation that gave me a feel of what it would be like to work in my career field.” For others, learning new programs, learning how to navigate the necessary internships or other hands-on opportunities provided avenues to interact with practitioners that enabled practical learning and kept their interest.

Composite Description

The generation of the composite description of the persistence condition was able to be contrived based upon the review of data and development of the textural and structural descriptors. This engagement provided the basic understanding of the perseverance experiences expressed by the participating first-generation community college students at Coastal College and was something that was involved and supported by support and interaction from family, peers, advisors, and professors alike. Motivation and support fueled by the interaction that

students had with those around them helped facilitate various connections that created a sense of belonging and helped them to persevere. In a number of student statements, they indicated areas like, “connection to faculty helped us to,” or “connecting with former students who went through the program,” or “being able to connect with your classmates” helped to illustrate the whole value of the interactivity of the engagements.

An overwhelming majority of the first-generation students in this study felt that the most impactful experiences that led to their perseverance from the first to the second year were engagements with their peers, faculty, and staff as well as the learning engagements that were provided within their academic setting or major. As Barbara said best, “And just like the more people I've met made me realize this is for me (the connection to her major) and I want to stay in it.” Students also felt that their success stemmed from a variety of sources tied to social and academic interventions like group projects, study groups, presentation teams, tutoring, or mentorship with advisors and faculty.

Summary

This chapter provided the information, descriptors, and results obtained from the various data collection methods used in this transcendental phenomenological study. The data gathering techniques included the following three components that were completed by 12 first-generation community college students: individual student interviews, focus groups, and a reflective writing assignment. The data was coded, reviewed, categorized, and summarized using 10 themes which provided the basis for answering the central research question and the four sub research questions: How do first-generation students at a community college in the Southern United States describe their perseverance experience from their first to their second year in college? How do college students describe the events that led them to persevere from their first to second

year of college? How do college students describe the preparatory instances from high school that were most beneficial to their transition into college? How do students who completed their first year of college describe the most impactful experience of their success and perseverance? How do college students describe the instances which had an adverse effect on their perseverance experiences?

When considering the foundation for the central research question, perseverance experiences, two overarching themes clearly permeated the student feedback: motivation to persist or persevere and the various elements of the motivation, and the concept of support from their peers and those in the educational setting. The examination of sub-question one and the specific events that led to perseverance from the first to the second year, the primary theme of institutional support and interventions came to light. In reviewing sub-question two and the preparatory instances from high school that were most beneficial to transition, the themes of class or academic experiences and special learned skills arose. Further concentration into sub-question three and the first-year impactful experiences on success and perseverance led to the development of two themes, engagement and the other being learning opportunities. Finally, the examination of sub-question four dealing with adverse effects on perseverance experiences, three themes were defined: first, interpersonal experiences; second, academic challenges; and third, COVID-19.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The persistence and perseverance of students is significant, especially since a growing number of students are the first in their families to attend college (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Schademan & Thompson, 2016), and nearly half of all students in higher education are enrolled in community colleges (Braxton & Francis, 2018). This study sought to add to the body of knowledge related to student persistence as the perseverance experiences of first-generation community college students. Most of the studies applied to community college students have been related to a certain age group of students, or the specific preparations, activities, dropout factors, or interventions themselves and not primarily on first-generation students in the community college setting. Therefore, this study sought to describe the perseverance experiences of 12 first-generation college students in a community college in the Southern United States.

This discussion chapter focuses on summarizing the findings of the research along with discussions and theoretical implications related to Tinto's interactionalist theory. In addition, it includes theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study along with limitations and delimitations. Finally, recommendations for further research relative to this timely topic are included.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe first-generation college students' perseverance experience from the first to the second year of enrollment at a public regional community college in the Southern United States. The various research questions that shaped this study dealt with the various elements that described the

perseverance experiences that impacted enrollment persistence. The responses to each of the questions are examined below.

Central Research Question

The central research question that this study asked outlined was: *How do first-generation students at a community college in the Southern United States describe their perseverance experience from their first to second year of college?* The 12 student participants in this study described their various perseverance experiences through both positive and negative experiences. They expressed motivation and support as being principal factors of their perseverance and were supported through interactions sustained by various levels of engagement with their peers, faculty, and advisors.

Sub-Question One

The first sub-question presented was: *How do college students describe the events that led them to persevere from their first to second year of college?* The student participants felt that the university provided many events which supported their success and perseverance. Several students indicated tutoring and study groups as strong connectors to learning enhancements, while other students mentioned the various engagements inside the classroom which related to their knowledge enhancement being sustained by faculty who were willing to answer questions or spend extra time with them. Furthermore, some students indicated that places like the learning center, writing center, federally funded TRIO programs or even the Veterans Upward Bound program provided the necessary resources for success. Finally, the intrusive or complimentary advising that was provided in some of the areas were vital elements that provide easy transitionary and sustaining engagement.

Sub-Question Two

The second sub-question was: *How do college students describe the preparatory instances from high school that were most beneficial to their transition into college?* For many students, high school programs like dual enrollment, advanced placement classes, or even classes that provided subject matter corresponding with their major interest provided the most beneficial impacts on their academic transition to college life. Some of the participants felt like skills imparted in high school that helped them with organization or things like notetaking were critical for development. All the while, some students indicated that some of their high schools failed to adequately prepare them for the rigors of what to expect in college like managing their time or meeting deadlines.

Sub-Question Three

The third sub-question examined was: *How do students who completed their first year of college describe the most impactful experience on their success and perseverance?* This question helped present the structural understanding of how most students obtained the motivation or support necessary to persist to their second year. All of the student participants felt that engagement with members of their community in the college setting helped them to persevere. In this sense, community is described by their student peers, their faculty members, or their advisors. Students felt that working with their fellow students on projects or even to provide feedback was critical to skill development and communication. In addition, some students felt like connecting with faculty members helped provide access to expertise and even the empathy needed to help them get through tough times. Finally, engagement with their advisors helped them to truly navigate the complex waters in the academic setting and provide the guidance necessary to understand how to persevere toward graduation and into careers.

Sub-Question Four

The fourth and final sub-question in this study was: *How do college students describe the instances which had an adverse effect on their perseverance experiences?* This question helped provide the avenue to understand the negative impacts students had on their perseverance. Thankfully, all twelve students persevered on to their second year; however, many experienced various adverse points during their enrollment. Several students had experiences with faculty members that could best be described as disheartening, while some students experienced negative interactions with other students who were either personally or academically motivated. Furthermore, challenges in adapting to speed of instruction, time management, and the volume of work in the academic area left most students trying to figure how to adapt to college. Finally, the development and exposure to learning during the pandemic environment and COVID-19 impacted all the students as learning was shifted from in-person to online delivery and was marked by hard adjustments for hands-on learners or hands-on majors, faculty members who were not adept to teaching in the online platform, or to personal adaptation to the new environment.

Discussion

This transcendental phenomenological study contributed to the empirical and theoretical literature that was addressed in chapter two in several ways. The overall findings of the research support the literature on student success, persistence, and intervention and support the concepts outlined in Tinto's interactionist theory. In addition, they pinpoint the need for continued examination of perseverance trends among various groups of students.

Empirical

The ability of students to persevere in college has been at the forefront of literature for some time and has become a critical phenomenon as leaders in many colleges and universities

are trying to come up with strategies to address why significant number of students fail to persist toward degree or even certificate completion (Green & Wright, 2017; Petty, 2014). Many community colleges provide educational opportunities to first-generation students and underrepresented groups (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014; Juskiewicz, 2014; McNair, Couturier, & Christian, 2015) and deal with patterns of low persistence, especially among first-generation students (Glaessgen et al., 2018). Research continues to support interventions from colleges designed to strengthen persistence (Sneyers & DeWitte, 2018). This study sought to bring light to the essence of the shared experiences students have regarding their perseverance in college, ideally in the first to the second year.

Academic and social integration are key elements to student success in college. Research indicates that academic preparation and readiness are important to student success and perseverance as many students enter college to enhance their lives or careers (Bickerstaff, Barragan, & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2017). The students in this study supported this concept as the primary reasons that many of them gave to get a college education were to build a career, help their families, or to build a chance for a better life. The desire of many students and educators is that they enter college ready to be successful and have the right experience from high school or from support from their families (Royster et al., 2015; Westrick et al., 2015). For some students in this study, high schools failed to do the job in preparing students to provide enough preparation, but that the interventions that they experienced in college helped them to persist. On the other hand, some students believed that taking dual enrollment classes, courses which provided skill development, advanced placement classes, or those that provided exposure to the future academic major were critical in making a solid transition to academic life in college.

Academic success and advising are connected and vital to student success. Studies have found that the odds of retention are increased by 13% every time students meet with advisors (Swecker et al., 2013). In addition, when advising is centralized and streamlined, students have assistance with understanding their courses, curriculum, career planning, and campus resources necessary to be successful (Kot, 2014). In this study, students placed engagement with their advisors as a critical element to interaction and ultimately to the motivation to persevere. Students indicated that their advisors provided the understanding, direction, and guidance necessary to support planning and development of their academic life from transition to continuation. In addition, they felt that the advice given to them helped them to navigate all the curricular and co-curricular elements necessary for their perseverance.

The support that institutions provide is sometimes the difference between a student continuing and a student withdrawing. Researchers have found that support is essential to student success and perseverance due to many issues confronting students in the collegiate environment (Bishop, 2016). The instances of peer interaction, interaction with advisors, mentoring, tutoring and the like provide avenues to academic preparation and persistence (Bonner & Thomas, 2017). These findings were supported by the students in this study who expressed that institutional support and interventions was critical to helping to find avenues of guidance and support like study groups, tutoring, learning centers, writing centers, federally funded TRIO programs, Veterans Upward Bound, or other major-supported groups. Several of the students believed that participating with other students or with staff designed to help them to connect their academic issues provided comfort and the understanding necessary to persist.

Motivation is a critical element to success in the academic environment. Academic motivation represents students' desire to complete their education and it facilitates their learning

engagement and overall educational experience (Hulleman et al., 2016; Wu, 2019). Motivation in the academic setting is viewed as one of the strong predictors of academic success (Clark et al., 2014; Robbins et al., 2004). Indeed, this was shown to be one of the strongest elements of student persistence and makes up the core of the textual understanding in this study. Students in the study indicated motivational elements across all domains and thematic areas critical to their perseverance. They felt, at various times during their academic career, that family, the desire to succeed, and the motivation they found from interactions with their peers, faculty, and advisors in the academic setting was the strongest interactions that led to their persistence and perseverance. This supports the research and is very important to consider as community college leaders are looking for ways to improve transition and degree attainment of students in their institutions, especially with 50% of students in higher education being in community colleges (Allen & Zhang, 2016).

Social integration of students in the college setting is an important indicator for student persistence and perseverance (Bickerstaff et al., 2017; Tinto, 1987). Throughout the course of this study, students indicated the importance of interaction with their peers, faculty, and advisors to their overall success and perseverance. Considering that all 12 of the students in the study were first-generation, this understanding was important to note relative to the relationships and connections with others. Research indicates that first-generation students typically have less understanding of the college experience and lower academic or family support, thus being at a disadvantage for social and academic preparation necessary for success in college (Schelbe et al., 2019). These students are at a greater disadvantage to drop out than their peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The students in this study indicated that their chosen institution, Coastal College, provided the necessary interventions necessary to address any gaps that existed in the success

foundation they had coming into college during the transition period. For example, students found that opportunities for guidance and interaction with their peers, faculty, and advisors help provide avenues for navigation of the complex academic and social waters associated in the curricular and co-curricular environment. They also expressed that the availability and access to intervention areas like tutoring, learning centers, writing centers, and programs that provided counseling or support like TRIO or Veterans Upward Bound were critical to their perseverance. Many of these students did not have access to these type of engagements prior to college and were new to the opportunities.

The engagements students found in their academic environment through intervention were built upon interaction. Peer interaction was also a factor feeding motivation to persist, as indicated in this study. Prior researchers found that students who were engaged outside of the class setting tended to help students assimilate better into the collegiate environment (Karp et al., 2008). Furthermore, researchers found that the level of interaction students had with their peers helped to tie in the academic and social parts of college life that were important to overall student comfort and success (Bergerson, 2007; Chhen Stewart, 2012). This study confirmed this research in that students' interaction with their peers formed bonds which aided in academic development while building the skills necessary to communicate and find ties to the entire collegiate setting. Several students indicated the interpersonal relationships they built helped extend to their connection with their faculty and advisors as well. For some students, the bonds were continuing as they were making plans to transfer to four-year institutions.

Student identity and confidence were also vital to their persistence and perseverance experience, as this study found. Researchers believe that how students perceive their self-image and ability to succeed impacts their persistence and perseverance (Bowman & Felix, 2017;

Rosenberg, 1979). In addition, the confidence that students have supports their self-esteem, self-efficacy, and performance (Bickerstaff et al., 2017; Petty, 2014; Wood, Newman, & Harris, 2015; Wood & Turner, 2011). Students in this study believed that their interactions with their peers, faculty, and staff supported their confidence in learning how to navigate college and the skills necessary to excel in their major. Students provided examples of being able to work with their peers on projects and provide feedback to each other as vital elements of their skill development and the quality of their work. Several students indicated that the marked progression of their work could be seen from the beginning of college to the end of the first year. They also indicated that the confidence generated through positive interactions in the academic setting was important and helped provide the extra push to persevere, even when some were considering changing majors or even discontinuing.

Finally, persistence and perseverance studies among students enrolled in their first year at higher education institutions have been propagated and are widely available (Browning et al., 2018; Chhen Stewart, 2012; DeBerard, Spelmans, & Julka, 2008; Feldman & Zimbler, 2011; Ishitani & Reid, 2015; Roksa & Whitley, 2017; Royster, Gross, & Hochbein, 2015; Engle & Tinto, 2008). The study and concentration on the persistence of community college students, especially those of first-generation students, are far less widely available. This study provides the support and necessary extension for the empirical research that exists in the field for both first-generation and community college students. In addition, it provides valuable insights for practitioners to develop interventions and interactions that are designed to support student motivation and the desire to complete.

Theoretical

The theoretical framework of this study was founded on Tinto's interactionist theory

(1975). This theory was used as the crux of this study because it was founded on the concepts of academic and social integration of students. The theoretical premise is that students come to college with a set of characteristics that affect their commitment, transition, and path toward graduation (Mertes & Jankoviak, 2016). Students progress through the stages of separation, transition, and incorporation, all leading to academic and social integration (Evans et al., 2016; Mertes & Jankoviak, 2016). This theory is widely cited in the higher education profession, especially by practitioners who focus on student retention and progression.

The theoretical premise about students coming into college with a defined set of characteristics that would lead to commitment, transition, and their pathways forward was examined by focusing on specific instances in this study that focused on student perseverance. Overall, the 12 first-generation community college students in this study believed that they had relationships with their family, peers, or from specific engagements or instances that motivated them to persist. Many of them came into college with limited amounts of experience but were supported by interventions that helped to fill the void; others came in with foundations that included academic experience which provided a natural transitional element. For many of these students, their commitment was instilled early on, fostered by engagement experiences, and sustained by motivation and confidence to persist they received from the interactions they had.

Tinto's interactionist theory (1975) focused concentration on persistence experiences relative to the individual student's perspective of their academic and social interaction. This study examined the academic and social interaction and found that they were critical elements to student perseverance and persistence. The participants in this study showed that their motivation and desire to persist was founded on the experiences that they had in their first year. They did express belief that academic experience and skills learned in high school did help their transition,

but the interactions they had in the college setting were critical to their success. The participants indicated that the institutional support and interventions availed to them helped provide the necessary skills to remain connected in their academic environment. In addition, the experiences they had in the academic setting helped to advance their skills and interest in their particular major, which were motivating factors. However, it was the social or interpersonal interaction they had from engagement with their student peers, faculty, and advisors that was a sustaining factor to their decision to persist.

The question early on was whether or not Tinto's interactionist theory (1975) would be easily applied in the case of community college students as well as it could to four-year students. In this study, the theory not only applied perfectly, but the outcome of the study clearly sustained the importance of academic and social interaction of students as the mitigating factors of motivation and ultimate perseverance toward completion and goal attainment.

Implications

Student perseverance has been shown to be vital to community colleges who, relevant literature has shown, are impacted by low persistence rates. The implications of the research propagated by this study seem to fill gaps in a rising vital area of educational concern.

Furthermore, this study had several theoretical, empirical, and practical implications that were relevant for various professionals or stakeholders in higher education as new policies and practices which impact student success are considered.

Theoretical

This transcendental phenomenological study used Vincent Tinto's interactionist theory (1975) as a foundational basis for analyzing student perseverance experiences. The theory essentially provided the framework for understanding student transition and ultimately the

interaction necessary for academic and social integration of students into the educational setting. The phenomenon of student experiences examined in this study centrally addressed the context and outcomes of the academic and social integration of the participating students. The study found that motivation and support were the critical elements necessary for student persistence and perseverance. For example, Jane found the motivation to persist through the elevation of her work. She indicated, “If you would see my work from before and from now, it’s different. Its way different from the teaching of the professors. I want to see my profession and actually be able to be comfortable in my later life.” Others like Eric found different inspiration, “The impact (motivation) for me to continue college was a family matter,” he offered. Barbara found support from her peers through shared collaboration as a mitigating area for perseverance. She stated, “Meeting new individuals with the same drive to be creative and be innovative was very motivating.” Not all was positive relative to preparation, however. Amy shared, “It was a big change moving from high school studying to college studying; The time that I needed to dedicate to studying for my classes was very challenging because a lot of times I felt like there weren't enough hours in the day.” Therefore, the thoughts that prior academic experience and preparation were the primary factors to persistence and perseverance were out paced by student indication that institutional intervention or support could solve areas of unpreparedness and motivation.

Students in this study believed that the experiences they had with their fellow students in and outside the classroom were critical to provide growth and motivation to succeed. In addition, they indicated that the resources and support provided by their faculty and advisors afforded the avenues for navigation, academic conviction, and the confidence necessary to persist. Lance took indicated, “I personally had amazing teachers and amazing advisors ... and all sorts of great people surrounding me.” Jane supported that belief as she posited, “My advisor has been an

amazing person that is super invested in his students. He continued on even when I was having problems with a faculty member; he would tell me not to stop and to keep going - just very motivating and very invested in his students.” Hank found his support among the faculty he interacted with. He indicated the importance of faculty interaction in helping to provide the support necessary to persist. He demonstrated, “One of our professors would always talk to you after class, come in a little early, always go through examples. She would slow down her pace just to actually make sure every student understands what they're learning.” It is through these impactful instances that students felt most motivated toward the goals they had in mind.

From the applied perspectives indicated by the first-generation community college students in this study, the fundamental elements of academic and social interaction outlined by Tinto’s interactionist theory were proven to be vital to persistence and perseverance. Students found motivation from the family, faculty, staff, and peers which established the necessary amount of social support they needed to succeed. Academically, the students found the interaction among these groups along with the shared experiences in the classroom and the skills that were developed provided the necessary academic platform to achieve.

Empirical

This study supported the current literature where researchers provided the basis for the establishment of academic and social integrators as key to student persistence and perseverance. Researchers have shown that academic supports and intervention are critical to student progression. Academic integration is an instrument of retention...and is effective for retaining students for their first year (Ishitani, 2016). In addition, the ability that students have to adapt to college life is many times focused on their connection to their peers and faculty members (Adams, Meyers, & Beidas, 2016). Because of the lack of collegiate experience in the family

setting, first generation students tend to find the necessary interaction in the academic setting through the engagement of their advisors (Glaessgen et al., 2018; Kot, 2014). Even further, the instructional support provided in their academic areas provides connection to student support that centers not only on knowledge integration, but also on emotional, psychological, and personal development necessary to persevere (Bishop, 2016). Students in this study clearly believed that connections between their peers, faculty, and advisors were the primary motivating factors for success and perseverance. Barbara stated, “When first meeting with my major advisor he really emphasized that keeping my grades and staying on track with classes would better my chances of being able to transfer to a university.” Dean felt like his faculty were really connected to the major. He shared, “They seem to really like the major of architecture and they've shared their experiences and have the same love that I do. If they can do it, I can do it and its only more motivation to want to pursue my master's degree.” Barbara felt that engagement with her peers made the difference. She explained, “Spending hours after class in the studio working on projects, taking snack breaks, sharing ideas and criticism about one another's project created strong bonds.” The interactions with peers, faculty, and advisors were seen as beneficial for growth in the major, in skill development, and in their overall confidence.

Students in this study also confirmed the importance of social integration into the educational setting that was established in the literature. Relevant research found that constructs related to social integration positively impacted student persistence (Ishitani & Floor, 2017). Barbara believed that her student experience was impacted, “when classes were mainly in person because I got to talk to my teachers a lot and I got help from other students.” Lance believed that engaging with faculty in the academic setting made it easier to find the confidence to advance. He offered, “My professor told me that I did really great work for being a first year and that she

didn't have a lot of students who did such excellent work as I did, and that really boosted my confidence with my work. It helped me grow overall.” Learning in the classroom environment and through applied projects helped some students find their competitive edge while working with others. Eric professed, “The most impactful thing that happened to me is befriending my colleagues from the classmates I had in there (in class), and because I'm more of a competitive type.” Overall, students found that their ability to engage with others provided the motivation and confidence necessary to continue in their major and persevere toward their ultimate goals.

Several prior studies indicated the importance of prior educational preparation on student transition and success (Holles, 2016; Longwell-Grice, et al., 2016). Some students, like Gisele, felt that experience with college courses while in high school helped prepare them for success. Gisele stated, “I was definitely prepared. I was experienced with online dual enrollment classes from Coastal College.” Others felt that the skills cultivated in high school helped prepare them to handle a variety of tasks as Barbara illustrated, “In high school a lot of teachers emphasized note-taking when professors are talking or just studying and doing homework out of school, it's really helpful.” However, the participants felt that this was only part of the story and that the interactions and interventions within the college setting helped extend their preparedness and enhanced knowledge attainment. For example, Gisele indicated, “I stayed on top of my grades and if I needed help there were people there (at Coastal College) that could help me. There were definitely a lot of the academic advisors, and they were amazing.” Katie felt like the interventions offered to her as a veteran were second to none. She mentioned, “Veterans services was great. They really catered to us a lot; they make sure that we succeed and give us all the resources we need to succeed.” Other students felt like tutoring, student support services, and the writing center provided similar interactions.

Practical

The participants in this study explained that motivation and support were critical to their perseverance experiences. The information provided by the students will not surprise some practitioners who are adept in field-based best practices. The indications provided by the students about the importance of interaction should be a primary indicator that collegiate leadership should expand ways for students to engage with their peers, faculty, and staff on a recurring basis.

The students in the study indicated that they valued engaging with their peers in the academic setting and extended that into working with them on projects outside of class. These opportunities helped them to build comfortable relationships, develop skills to interact with others, and growth in their contextual applications of what they were learning. The students found these engagements as some of the most impactful motivations to continue their enrollment. Therefore, educational leaders should follow the example and help students to work more in groups and get outside of the traditional class setting more. The advent of new forms of technology have broadened what we all consider classrooms and can definitely make this possible.

The interaction with faculty members is something that cannot be substituted for in the academic setting. The student participants indicated that positive relationships with their faculty can be very supportive, motivational, and even inspirational. They found the ability to learn new skills through the practical application of ideas and experience from their faculty as vital to their growth. One of the students even indicated that they could literally tell how much they grew over the course of time due to the teaching and guidance of their professor in a hands-on environment. Hence, the importance of more time for faculty to take learning outside of a book and making it

practical and relevant in order to work with students in a more engaged way. In some areas, it will literally be impossible due to class size, but in more advanced settings or in coursework where skills are learned and applied, it is important that nurturing faculty be afforded the opportunity to impart knowledge and help students figure out its applications directly.

The impact advisors make in the academic setting cannot be underestimated. Nearly all of the students in this study discussed how, at one time or another, an advisor helped them navigate a difficult situation, provided the guidance to understand their curriculum, or helped sustain the motivation to continue their education. There is a great deal of staff at every college or university who have the potential to help students with these areas. Mentors, counselors, advisors, ombudspersons ... whatever they are called, can be agents of student success and persistence. One student in this study thought he was going to enter into the college setting, and it was going to be like on television with 200 people in a classroom and people would not care if they made it through or not. Thankfully, that is not the case most of the time. However, challenges like these along with preconceptions of what they think college is can disparately affect first-generation students who enter the college setting. Educational leaders should strongly consider supporting and enhancing opportunities for engagement, especially when the likelihood of persistence multiplies each time a student meets with an advisor.

Finally, practical applications for student persistence cannot be complete without pointing out the importance of targeted interventions. In this study, students indicated that interventions provided at their institution enabled them to find a connection to their coursework and the resources to help deal with problems, answer questions, or sustain interest. They mentioned things like tutoring, study groups, advising, the learning center, writing center, and even federally funded programs like TRIO and Veterans Upward Bound as assets that were

important to their success. Therefore, institutions should continue to provide these types of engagement and support. Leaders should also ensure that staff are trained appropriately and skilled in the art of empathy and customer service.

Delimitations and Limitations

There were several delimitations involved in this study. The first is that I used a purposeful sample of 12 first-generation college students from only one geographical location, South Texas. For the purposes of this study, this acted as a representative group. A question as to applicability of the findings across all community colleges could be made based on this small size and scope of location but was in the acceptable range of sample for the research method (Creswell, 2007). Another example would be that the study was delimited to students who were 18 years of age who had completed a year of study during entering fall 2019 and who had decided to return in fall 2020. Finally, the use of volunteers provided an opportunity sample which was contrived for convenience and access. This sometimes does not provide generalizability of the findings.

Limitations in this study are focused on an identified target group of students at Coastal College who met the age, first-generation, and enrollment requirements. Due to the nature of the enrollment at Coastal College and the location of the study, the vast majority of the volunteer students were Hispanic, as more than 60% of the population of the region is Hispanic. In addition, the fact that the pandemic arose during the study made volunteer recruitment and data collection a very intensive, drawn out, and time-consuming process. Finally, the study is limited due to its qualitative nature and the bias that I as the researcher might have, being a practitioner in the field. To exclude this potential bias, the process of *epoché* outlined by Moustakas (1994)

was utilized and field notes were kept by the researcher in case any potential bias would be identified.

Recommendations for Future Research

Because the field of education is constantly evolving, practitioners must stay abreast of best practices and the trends that are affecting student persistence and perseverance. This study adds to the body of knowledge on student perseverance and should serve as an instigator for more study and research on the subject as it relates to community college students, especially first-generation students. Because the numbers of first-generation students are likely to rise, the necessity to understand the factors necessary to provide adequate support to these students is critical. Furthermore, this study focused on first-generation community college students in an area of South Texas where student demographics are largely Hispanic in nature. Further study that is broader and encompassing of more ethnicities, with greater diversity in majors, and in different parts of the country should be developed to extend the applicability and transferability of the findings. In addition, comparative study following the conclusion of the pandemic to examine more longitudinal comparison might be beneficial. For example, further study concerning the perseverance experiences in the online environment compared to those students experienced in the in-person environment may indicate differences that could impact the way students are served during periods of disasters and emergencies as well as for those students who chose educational delivery in either all online or in hybrid formats. Finally, there were several themes which represented significant impacts to perseverance which deserve further examination – institutional interventions and the impact of learning experiences. Both of these areas are related to academic and social constructs which impact perseverance but can likely be examined

for their weight related to certain majors or even for impacts related to services provided by the institution like financial aid or learning communities.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the perseverance experiences of community college students. This study sought to address the deficiency that exists in the research for first-generation college students at the community college level. To address the need for further research in this area and to extend the body of knowledge that currently exists relative to student persistence and perseverance, this study focused on the following central research question: How do first-generation students at a community college in the Southern United States describe their perseverance experience from their first to second year of college. Four sub-questions were also asked: How do college students describe the events that led them to persevere from their first to second year of college? How do college students describe the preparatory experiences from high school that were most beneficial to their transition to college? How do students who completed their first year of college describe the most impactful experience on their success and perseverance? How do college students describe the instances which had an adverse effect on their perseverance experiences? The data that supported each of these questions were collected from 12 first-generation community college students from Coastal College in South Texas. The data gathering techniques included student interviews, focus groups, and a reflective writing assignment. From the review and categorization of the data, 10 thematic areas were identified and included: motivation, peer support, institutional support and interventions, class or academic experiences, special skills learned, engagement, learning opportunities, interpersonal experiences, academic challenges, and COVID-19. The principal findings of the study indicated that students found that

their motivation and support was critical to their perseverance experiences and that interaction and engagements with their peers, faculty, and advisors were instrumental factors.

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APPENDIX A – LIBERTY UNIVERSITY IRB APPROVAL**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

January 5, 2021

Andy Benoit

Barry Dotson

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-287 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY TO DESCRIBE THE PERSEVERANCE EXPERIENCES OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

Dear Andy Benoit, Barry Dotson:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

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.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at rb@liberty.edu.

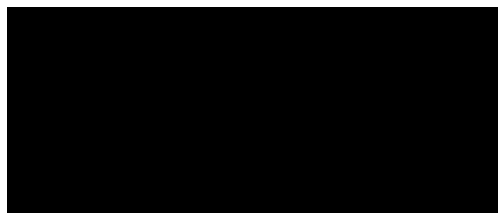
Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office

(THE ABOVE DOCUMENT WAS RECEIVED VIA EMAIL ON 01/05/2021).

APPENDIX B – RESEARCH SITE/COLLEGE IRB APPROVAL LETTER

November 6, 2020

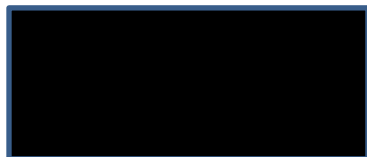
Andy Benoit
EdD Candidate
Liberty University

Dear Mr. Benoit,

As Chair Pro Tempore of the [REDACTED] College Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have carefully reviewed the IRB application submitted in reference to the study titled, “A Phenomenological Study to Describe the Perseverance Experiences of Community College Students.” Please consider this letter notification of your IRB approval. Your study is approved and exempted from full IRB review because your research involving human subjects affiliated with [REDACTED] College is limited to interviews and research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings involving normal education practices.

If you have any questions, please contact me.

Sincerely,



[REDACTED], Chair Pro Tempore
Institutional Review Board
[REDACTED] College
[REDACTED].edu

APPENDIX C – STUDENT PARTICIPATION INFORMED CONSENT

Title of the Project: A Phenomenological Study to Describe the Perseverance Experience of Community College Students

Principal Investigator: Andy Benoit, M.Ed., Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University School of Education

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be at least 18 years old and a student who was enrolled at ██████████ College in Fall 2019 and subsequently enrolled in Fall 2020. All students must have been enrolled full-time (at least 12 hours) in Fall 2019, Spring 2020, and in Fall 2020. Participants must be enrolled in an academic track program preparing them for either completion of an associate's degree or transfer to a four-year institution.

Participants must not be ESL (English as a Second Language) students. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

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

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

The purpose of this study is to describe first-generation college students' perseverance experience from the first to the second year of enrollment at one public regional community college in the Southern United States.

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 an individual interview with the principal investigator/researcher. This interview should be no more than 30 minutes in length and will be administered over the Microsoft Teams platform. The interview will be recorded.
2. Participate in a focus group with approximately five other students. The focus group shall be for approximately one-hour and will be administered over the Microsoft Teams platform. The interview will be recorded.
3. Complete a reflective writing assignment of at least two pages addressing a prompt relative to your perseverance experiences. The prompt will be provided at the conclusion of your interview and will be due back to the researcher within five days via email as an attached Microsoft Word document.

The interviews will be scheduled first, followed two days later by the focus group. All communication with the principal investigator/researcher will be through e-mail.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

The indirect benefit of participation includes that you will provide important feedback on college persistence and perseverance and participating in a qualitative study that will provide information to the body of knowledge that may help educational leaders enhance services for students like you.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

There are no conceived risks to participation in the study that would not be normal to the collegiate educational experience. Therefore, the risks are equal to any normal risks that you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private, and the confidentiality of your participation will be maintained. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in private Microsoft Teams rooms and will not be assessable by anyone outside of the researcher and the participant(s).
- Data, notes, and manuscripts from the writing assignment will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted. A back-up copy of the data will also be stored on a private external hard drive owned by the researcher, which will be securely stored in a locked cabinet; the contents will be kept for three years.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed via Microsoft Teams. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings. A back-up copy of the electronic recordings will also be stored on a private external hard drive owned by the researcher, which will be securely stored in a locked cabinet; the contents will be kept for three years.
- The researcher will work to maintain participants' confidentiality. However, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

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

Each participant will be provided with [REDACTED] spirit swag and a \$ 25 Amazon gift card at the conclusion of participation.

What are the costs to you to be part of the study?

There are no costs to participate in this study.

Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?

The researcher serves as Vice President for Enrollment Management at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. Your participation in this study will not impact transfer credit or admission status if you are seeking transfer to that institution. In addition, the researcher has no financial interest in the outcome of this study. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if

this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or ██████████ College. If you decide to participate, you are free to not 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/phone number included in the next paragraph. 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. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

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

The researcher conducting this study is Andy J. Benoit, Jr. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at ██████████. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Barry Dotson, at ██████████.

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 Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515, or email at irb@liberty.edu

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/video record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Date

Subject Signature

APPENDIX D – INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Introductory Questions

1. Please begin by telling me about your background, including where you are from and what major you are pursuing in college. (Icebreaker question).
2. Tell me about the initial concerns you had beginning college. (Icebreaker question)
3. Why did you choose to attend Coastal College? (Icebreaker question)
4. Why do you believe people pursue a college education? (Icebreaker question)

Questions Regarding Sub-Question One – Perseverance Experiences

5. How would you define your overall student experience at (insert name of community college)?
6. You have entered your second year of enrollment at Coastal College. Please describe the events that led you to continue your enrollment from the first to the second year.

Questions Regarding Sub-Question Two – Description of Academic Preparedness

7. How would you characterize your level of preparation for college-level study when you entered the College?
8. Please describe which preparatory experiences from high school that were most beneficial to your college transition.
9. How would you describe your academic performance in your first year at (insert name of community college)?

Questions Regarding Sub-Question Three – Specific Experiences

10. Now that you are in your second year of study, how would you describe the challenges you have faced in your chosen field of study?

11. Please describe the experiences you had in your first year which were most impactful on your success and persistence.

Questions Regarding Sub-Question Four – Actions as a Result of Experiences

12. Describe any activities or engagements you had which you viewed as detrimental to your success?
13. You have committed to your re-enrollment for next year. How would you describe the experiences that most shaped your decision to persist to your second year?
14. If you were leaning to not returning, please describe experiences that would most likely result in you not persisting?

APPENDIX E – FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What were the primary guiding points that led to your enrollment in college?
2. How would you describe your initial preparation to succeed in college? This could be academic or even social.
3. What were the most influential activities and/or programs that helped you during your first year in college?
4. Did you feel that your status as a first-generation college student hampered your development academically or socially in college?
5. Taking into account the experiences you had in college, what activities or interventions most likely influenced your choice to either continue or discontinue enrollment? Why?

APPENDIX F – REFLECTIVE WRITING ASSIGNMENT

The researcher will facilitate a student reflective writing assignment in a field-based setting during an instance at a certain point after students completed their first year of college. Each student will receive the writing prompt at the conclusion of their interview participation via e-mail; they will have a set period of time (three days) to address the prompt and return to the researcher in the appropriate technological platform. The researcher shall record notes on the instance and evaluate the writing assignment for themes. The purpose of the instances will be to gauge overall student feedback relative to persistence and shall lead to the identification of appropriate themes for their experiences. At the conclusion of the assignment, the researcher shall obtain the student feedback and evaluate the information as appropriate.

The topic for the reflective writing assignment is as follows:

“Please discuss the positive or challenging experiences of your first year in college. In detail, please explain the impact instances which are led to your decision to continue your enrollment.”

APPENDIX G – RESEARCH JOURNAL

The Research journal below contains dates and notes from the researcher as appropriate to the study timeline as well as data collection activities.

Date	Category	Description
11/04/2020	IRB	IRB submission for research location.
11/06/2020	IRB	Initial IRB submission, Liberty University.
11/09/2020	IRB	Received IRB approval for research location.
11/09/2020	IRB	Initial Liberty IRB application returned for revisions.
12/08/2020	IRB	Revised IRB returned with request for further revisions.
12/10/2020	IRB	Revised IRB returned with revisions.
01/05/2021	IRB	Received IRB approval for Liberty University.
01/20/2021	Data	Reached out to referred contact at research location for recruitment commencement.
01/28/2021	Data	Received 5,240 contacts from research location and encouraged to reach out to them to solicit participants.
02/02/2021	Recruitment	Reached out to dissertation chair confirming use of Liberty email for prospecting research participants. Confirmation received.
02/04/2021	IRB	Supplied copy of IRB approval for

		SOEDocReview.
02/06/2021	Recruitment	Sent first group of student emails to test responses (28 sent; response).
02/15/2021	Recruitment	Sent second group of student emails to test responses (25 sent; no response).
02/18/2021	Recruitment	Began to test other platforms for mass emails.
03/01/2021	Data	Inquired about use of Qualtrics for emails.
03/04/2021	Data	Completed Qualtrics training.
03/05/2021	Data	Qualtrics access granted.
03/05/2021	Recruitment	Reached out to primary research location contact to solicit more recruitment opportunities. Additional review scheduled for 03/15/2021 (week after third email).
03/08-12/2021	Recruitment	Third email campaign for study participants.
03/17-31/2021	Recruitment	Outreach to contacts at community college for assistance in student recruitment. Academic department representatives sent solicitations for volunteers. Communication sent to researcher from community college representatives with volunteer names.
03/17 – present	Recruitment	Follow up communication with 20 referrals from community college. One student declined; five students submitted consent

		documents as of 04/30/2021.
04/19-27/2021	Interviews	Interviews began with five students who had submitted consent documents; held via MS Teams. Immediately following the interviews, reflective writing assignments submitted.
5/1, 5/9/2021	Recruitment	Follow-up with initial students who were identified as potential participants.
5/24, 6/15, 6/21/2021	Recruitment	Follow up email sent to qualified candidates identified from community college.
6/15 – 6/28/2021	Interviews, Research Activity	Interviews with four additional candidates who submitted consent documents, held via MS Teams. Immediately following the interviews, reflective writing assignments submitted to students. Follow-up activities engaged to encouraged students to submit writing assignments.
6/29/2021	Update	Update email sent with research status to all students who had completed their interviews regarding the scheduling of focus groups.
07/01 – 08/12	Activity	Interviews with four additional candidates who submitted consent documents, held via MS Teams. Immediately following the interviews, reflective writing assignments

		submitted to students. Follow-up activities engaged to encouraged students to submit writing assignments.
07/15 – 08/13	Activity	Intensive review of data. Writing of dissertation.
07/23/2021	Activity	Focus Group 1 held via MS Teams. Once transcription complete, emails were sent with attachment for participants to provide feedback and/or corrections if necessary.
08/13/2021	Activity	Focus Group 2 held via MS Teams. Once transcription complete, emails were sent with attachment for participants to provide feedback and/or corrections if necessary.
08/14 – 19/2021	Activity	Intensive review of data. Writing of dissertation.
08/19 – 22/2021	Activity	Final writing and revising of dissertation.