UNDERSTANDING FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE PERSISTENCE OF FIRST-
GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS FROM APPALACHIAN DISTRESSED COUNTIES:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by
Richard Daniel Hunley

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the reasons for persistence to graduation of first-generation college students from ARC (Appalachian Regional Commission) distressed counties. This study sought to answer the following questions: a.) How might first-generation college students from distressed areas in Appalachia describe their persistence experiences? b.) How do cultural and familial factors affect this population of students in terms of persistence and endurance? c.) How do social and academic factors affect this population of students in terms of persistence and endurance? Using purposeful sampling, 12 first-generation college students from Appalachian distressed counties who persisted to graduation were identified and interviewed as part of this study. The study identified two main themes that helped describe the persistence experience of this population: their influences and their experiences. Academic self-efficacy, cultural background, family support and overcoming challenging circumstances all worked to shape the persistence experience of first-generation college students from Appalachian distressed counties.

Keywords: Persistence, Endurance, Appalachia, Distressed, First-Generation

Dedication

This research is dedicated to every first-generation college student from Appalachia who has challenged the odds and earned their degree. I hope this research does justice to your experiences and helps others understand the challenges that you have overcome to be college graduates.

Acknowledgements

To my wife, Kesha: You have been with me every step of the way. Your love and encouragement while I have been working toward this goal have meant the world to me. I am grateful for your belief in me and your undying support.

To our three exchange students, Apichaya, Lennard and Kazuya: While Kesha and I may not be your natural parents, we love you as if you were our own. Being able to be a part of your journey while I was working on achieving this dream helped make me a better man. I look forward to watching each of you live out your dreams in the years to come.

To my parents, Eugene and Joyce and my siblings, their spouses and their children: I want to say thank you for pushing me when I needed it and for being there when things weren't going well. Mom and Dad: You instilled in each of your children the importance of an education and a love of learning. None of us would be where we are without the example that you provided for us.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Each fall, thousands of students begin their journey to obtain a college degree. Whether they enroll in the local community college, private liberal arts schools, or large regional or statewide universities, they come ready to face the challenges that are ahead of them, seeking to make his or her mark in the world. Many of these students are the first in their immediate families to navigate the college system. Many also come from rural areas like Appalachia, an area that stretches from the eastern seaboard to the Gulf Coast, and encompasses all or parts of thirteen states (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d). Shortly after orientation is held and classes start, these new freshmen begin dropping out of college. Work starts to get in the way of class attendance. Commuting to and from campus becomes expensive. Students begin to party and stop attending classes. Family members pressure students to come home at the first sign of homesickness. Students become isolated and start to feel alone, having made no connections with anyone on campus.

This departure trend continues not only throughout their first semester, but throughout their first year on campus. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) shared that only one-quarter of first-generation college students complete a college degree. Census data from the year 2000 suggests that only 17% of adults in Appalachia have obtained a bachelor's degree (Shaw, DeYoung & Rademacher, 2005). This number has increased slightly in the 2010 census to just above 20%, but issues still remain (Pollard & Jacobson, 2013).

While research has been performed detailing why students leave college (Tinto,1987), there is limited research available on why students tend to persist to graduation, particularly among students in culture groups like Appalachia, where nearly 80% of the adult population does not have a college degree (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d). With the odds stacked

against them, why did they endure? What can be learned from these students to help create an understanding about why some students succeed and some do not?

Background

For much of the past 30 years, *persistence* and *retention* have become buzzwords on college campuses. Social scientists and educators have been attempting to understand the reasons why students who start college end up leaving before completing their degree. While Vincent Tinto may not have coined the terms persistence and retention, he is often considered the father of retention research and theory and the person who is most often mentioned and cited by others looking into the same topic. Tinto (1987) posited that students who do not make a connection to campus are more likely to fail to persist. In order to retain students, colleges and universities have developed programs like freshman year experience and learning communities, both of which include not only academic components but also typically have a social component as well (Hall, 2007). Where these interventions have been positively implemented, retention has been positively influenced (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Schrader & Brown, 2008).

Colleges and universities have also looked to develop programs to address the specific needs of first-generation college students. Due to the lack of educational role models for these students, colleges work to develop programs to provide these models. One such effort is through the U. S. Department of Education Federal Trio programs, which are designed to assist first-generation college students to attend and succeed in college. Included in these opportunities are the following: Upward Bound, Educational Talent Search, Student Support Services and Gear UP (U.S. Department of Education, n.d). These students, who are the first in their families to attend college, often tend to have not been exposed to a post-secondary role model and have lower academic self-efficacy (Ali & Saunders, 2009). According to Jehinger (2008), first-

generation students often feel as if their life experiences are not nearly as valuable as their classmates. Due to this decreased belief in academic ability, first-generation students may find it harder to persist to graduation.

While not all first-generation students come from Appalachia, many students who come from Appalachia are also first-generation college students. In addition to the traditional obstacles first-generation students face, Appalachian students may also endure additional challenges such as low socio-economic status, rough physical terrain to get to and from school, a lack of educational preparation, lack of positive educational roles models and a lack of information on how to apply for and pay for college (Rural Students, 2006).

The current research sought to more closely examine Appalachian college students who persisted to graduation. Much of the previous research in this field of study tends to explore the reasons that college students leave (Tinto, 1975; 1987). These reasons include a lack of connection to campus, financial issues, family issues, and lack of academic preparedness (Bean, 1980; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Tinto, 1987). With schools in at least 13 states having Appalachian populations from which to draw, it is important to understand the experiences of the members of this population who complete a bachelor's degree, to find out what influenced them to persist in the face of challenging odds when so many of their cohort did not (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d).

Situation to Self

As a native of an Appalachian distressed county and as an administrator in a Federal Trio Student Support Services program that seeks to raise the retention rate of first-generation college students, it is important that I have a better understanding of why some students persist when others do not when faced with similar circumstances. The college where I work has a large

population of first-generation college students, many of whom come from distressed counties in central and eastern Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia. Understanding the experience of those that persist to graduation may help colleges develop and implement programs or interventions that will allow them to retain more and more students. Determining whether or not there are common themes to the stories of the students who persist may help better identify students that are targets for admission as well. Although I was not a first-generation college student, several members of my family were, as were my wife and brother-in-law, both of whom persisted to graduation and have gone on to outstanding careers working in mental health counseling and in the Army, respectively. The research seeks to understand the persistence experience of this population, (i.e., my wife and brother-in-law) and to guide and aid in the development of programs that may help them persist to graduation.

This study was conducted using a constructivist approach. Constructivism is based on the assumptions that our constructs of the world around us are based upon the perceptions that we have of the world around us (Creswell, 2012; Culbertson, 1981).Constructivism is generally associated with the work of Jean Piaget (Applefield, Huber & Moallem, 2001). Because the research is of a qualitative nature, I operated under certain philosophical assumptions. There was an epistemological assumption that I would interact with the participants who are a part of the research in order to understand the multiple realities of the phenomenon being studied. (Creswell, 2012). Interviews were conducted with participants, their stories were solicited and points of information that further piqued the interest of the researcher were addressed. I operated under the rhetorical assumptions of a more informal rhetorical structure, where the information shaped and guided the narrative and the findings of the research. The purpose of qualitative

research is to understand and interpret information, as opposed to explaining or predicting as is the case with qualitative research (Creswell, 2012).

Problem Statement

The problem is the lack of college graduates with at least a Bachelor's degree within the first-generation college student population in Appalachia. Only 25 % of first-generation college students complete their Bachelor's degree within six years of entering college (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). First-generation college students and students from poor backgrounds, as the majority of students from distressed areas of Appalachia are, often enter college underprepared (Engle & Tinto, 2008). These students test into developmental courses at higher rates than do second or subsequent generation students or students with a higher socio-economic status (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Rural students from low socio-economic backgrounds face challenging circumstances to complete their degree due to work requirements or family pressures (Martinez et al., 2009). Hand and Payne (2008) indicated that students from Appalachia experience localism, or a deep sense of connection to the place where they were born and raised. With these factors and other cultural considerations contributing to the low graduation rates of these students, it is important to understand the experience of Appalachian, first-generation college students that persist to graduation in order to better serve other students who come from the same background (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the reasons for persistence to graduation as described by first-generation college students from ARC (Appalachian Regional Commission) distressed counties. For the purposes of this study, distressed counties were defined as counties with high poverty and unemployment rates and low

per capita income. These counties have already been identified by the Appalachian Regional Commission. Persistence was defined for the purposes of this study as having completed a Bachelor's degree.

Significance of the Study

It is important to understand why first-generation college students from Appalachia persist, as only one-fifth of the population obtains a college degree (Pollard & Jacobson, 2013). Poverty rates in Appalachia are nearly 5% higher than non-Appalachian areas (Werner & Badagliacco, 2005). With larger numbers of people in poverty, earnings are lower for those who are fortunate enough to have a job (Bollinger, Ziliak & Troske, 2011). Only 1 in 10 people from low-income families, which many first-generation Appalachian families are, have a Bachelor's degree by the time they reach the age of 25 (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). The Appalachian area has been ground zero for much of the war on poverty, with numerous pieces of legislation passed since the 1960's to address the growing poverty problem (Bollinger, Ziliak & Troske, 2011). Even today, Appalachia lags behind the rest of the country in educational achievement (Bollinger, et. al, 2011). With educational attainment becoming more and more important to the economic success of not only individuals, but to the country as a whole, it is important for colleges to graduate as many students as possible (Executive Office of the President, 2014).

Providing insight into the educational experiences of this population may provide opportunities for colleges and universities, particularly those with large numbers of first-generation students or whose population includes large numbers of students from Appalachian distressed communities, to better develop academic and social support opportunities for these students. Because of the dearth of persistence research for this particular subset of first-generation college students, this study sought to provide much needed information that might

play a role in how colleges and universities interact with these students in the future. With a shortage of research on the Appalachian population as it relates to college retention and persistence, this research hoped to open up discussions or further research that will continue to address the needs of disadvantaged students.

Research Question(s)

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do first-generation college students from distressed areas in Appalachia describe their persistence experience?

Knowing that the persistence experience of first-generation students differs from that of second and subsequent generation college students (Pike & Kuh, 2005), it is important for researchers and practitioners to have a better understanding of this population, in order to develop ideas on how best to serve them.

2. How do cultural and familial factors affect this population of students in terms of persistence and endurance?

Family pressures and cultural concerns often influence whether or not a student persists to graduation. Hendrickson (2012) indicated that often family members of students from this area do not see the need for a college degree and are often very vocal about it. Many Appalachian students are influenced more by family, than by the need to get their degree. Understanding how students who persisted dealt with these family issues should provide greater insight into the mindset of this population.

3. How do social and academic factors affect this population of students in terms of persistence and endurance?

Many rural students and first-generation students begin college academically underprepared (Schreiner et.al, 2011). This research sought to understand how students in this population overcame the lack of preparedness, in what ways they became connected to campus, and what other reasons that participants identify for persistence.

Research Plan

This transcendental phenomenological study sought to understand the essence of the persistence experience of first-generation college students from Appalachian distressed communities. Because the research sought to understand the experience and describe it, a phenomenological approach was used (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenological research is "designed to do justice to the lived aspects of human phenomena" (Giorgi, 1985). With limited research completed on the persistence experience of first-generation students from Appalachia, it is important to understand the experience of these students before trying to identify specific variables that can be changed or manipulated to affect the population. Giorgi (1985) indicated that we have to describe the phenomena in whole to gain a better understanding of what actually happened before we begin to understand what it means through analysis.

Data collection consisted mainly of interviews with first-generation college students from distressed areas of Appalachia that have persisted to graduation with a Bachelor's degree. Creswell (2007) indicated that interviews are the best data collection method for a phenomenological study. Moustakas (1994) concluded that long interviews with participants with open ended questions help to reach a more comprehensive version of an experience. Pertinent documents or electronic submissions were requested from the students concerning their experiences and had any been provided, they would have been considered as well. The

researcher sought to find significant statements of meaning that may lead to themes that help understand the experience of this population (Creswell, 2007).

Delimitations

Participation in the study was limited to individuals over the age of 18 who have completed a Bachelor's degree. This population was selected because, while it is possible to achieve a Bachelor's degree before the age of 18, it is uncommon, especially in the area being studied. While there are many first-generation college students who meet the traditional college definition of persistence, which is often considered maintaining enrollment from fall of one year to fall of the next year, the goal is still ultimately to obtain a Bachelor's degree. Only students from counties considered at one point to be distressed by the Appalachian Regional Commission were considered for interview. These counties have the highest poverty rates and lowest per capita income rates. These counties may not be considered distressed now, but were considered distressed during the time frame that the participant was growing up.

Definitions

For the purposes of this research, the following definitions were utilized to understand the terms that are being discussed.

1. *First-Generation College Student*- A first generation college student is one who is from a family where neither parent has graduated from college (Mehta, Newbold and O'Rourke, 2011).

2. *Appalachia*- The legal definition of the Appalachian region includes 406 counties in 13 states: all of West Virginia, and parts of Kentucky, Virginia, Alabama, Georgia, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee (Tang and Russ, 2007).

3. *Persistence*- Persistence is defined as returning to college each semester until a bachelor's degree is obtained. The definition is rooted in the research of Vincent Tinto (1975).

4. *Self-Efficacy*- a person's judgment of their own capabilities in order to reach a certain type of goal that they have set for themselves (Bandura, 1986)

Summary

The purpose of the research was to better understand the persistence experience of Appalachian, first-generation college students, a population vastly underrepresented in the retention and persistence research. With nearly 80% of the college-age population in this area without a college degree (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008), colleges and universities who serve students in this area are working harder and harder to understand these students, develop programs and delivery methods that appeal to them and to retain the ones that started college in the first place. The research was completed utilizing a phenomenological approach. The researcher spent hours interviewing participants to capture their stories and then synthesized the findings in this study, providing the essence of the persistence experience of first-generation college students from Appalachian distressed communities.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter serves to provide an understanding of the research to date in the area of persistence and to identify the gap in the literature that this study was developed to address. By housing this research in the theoretical framework of Tinto (1975), Bandura (1986) and Mezirow (1991), a historical background is provided for this research. In addition, research exploring the themes and concepts that are addressed in the research questions, as well as the interview protocol, is included in a thorough review of the pertinent literature. By indicating what information has already been studied, it provides the gap in the literature that this study was designed to fill.

Theoretical Framework

This study was performed utilizing a constructivist approach. Jean Piaget is most widely credited with advancing the concept of personal constructivism (Liu & Chen, 2010). The concept of constructivism is best described as an active learning approach, where the learner actively seeks knowledge instead of passively acquiring it (Liu & Chen, 2010). Applebaum, Huber and Moallem (2001) added that the constructivist view on learning focuses on knowledge construction rather than knowledge acquisition and delineated the three main types of constructivism. Piaget is most commonly associated with endogenous constructivism (Applebaum, Huber & Moallem, 2001). In this type of constructivism, learners negotiate the meaning of experiences that differ from those that they may have had in the past. When faced with a new experience, learners draw upon previous experiences to help develop an understanding of what is occurring.

Retention of students has been a buzzword on college campuses since the 1970's (Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012). While American colleges have been in operation since shortly after the settlement of Jamestown and the pilgrims landing on Plymouth Rock, colleges and universities only in the last 100 years have begun to wonder how to address the sometimes alarming number of students who leave college without completing a degree. The first in-depth study on college student attrition and retention was completed by McNeely nearly 80 years ago. McNeely (1937) found that students who departed college in the 1930's left for reasons such as financial difficulties, illness, and academic dismissal. Following World War II there was a significant amount of growth in college admissions as soldiers returning from war entered to complete degrees (Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012). This growth continued into the 1960's as the Civil Rights Act gave African-Americans the opportunities to attend any college they chose and not just Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's).

While during this period enrollments were booming, there were some underlying issues with retention, persistence, and attrition. Spady (1971) developed a model that compared the interaction between inherent student characteristics and the campus itself. Spady (1967) compared student departure with Durkheim's (1961) Theory of Suicide. Spady (1967) indicated that students who did not adapt into the college culture were more likely to leave, while Durkheim (1961) indicated that people who could not assimilate into society were more likely to commit suicide.

While Tinto (1975) is often credited with the first real model of student departure, his work owes a lot to that of Spady. Hader (2011) shared that Spady felt Tinto took credit for work that he had completed. Because Spady decided not to pursue a case of plagiarism against Tinto, Tinto ultimately became the person whose name is associated with the most popular of student

departure theories. However, Spady was the first person to take the statistics that were already available on retention and persistence and to develop an over-arching idea of why students left college and suggested that students who have more interaction with the campus environment are more likely to stay (Spady, 1971). Based on work originally put forth by Spady, Tinto developed it into his Interactionalist Theory of Student Departure (1975).

Much of retention research over the past 40 years has been examined through the theoretical framework established by Vincent Tinto in 1975. Although Tinto has revised his theory on at least two occasions (1987, 1993), the basic premise of the theory still exists. Tinto (1975) posited that both social and academic integration are among the most important factors for student retention. Getzalf, Sedlacek, Kearney, and Blackwell (1984) suggested that Tinto's model relies on student characteristics and abilities interacting with the campus community to determine whether or not they will stay in college.

Tinto (1988) identified three major stages of passage that a student must go through in their college career. The first stage is separation, which occurs when the student must remove himself or herself in varying degrees from previous areas where they had relationships. Tinto suggested that this is often the most stressful of the stages. The second stage, according to Tinto, is transition. In the transition stage, students still have some connections to their old life and are beginning to acquire new relationships in their life as a college student, but are not fully engaged in either. The final stage is integration. Students have to pass through the first two stages and reach total incorporation into the college life. New norms are associated with college and students have to figure out what those norms are.

Tinto (1993) argued that students must be involved with the college campus if schools are going to be able to address the retention issue effectively. Tinto also pointed out that faculty and

students should have some form of contact outside of the classroom. This allows for students to feel that the teacher values them as a person and not just as a student in their class. His research suggested this positive interaction can play a role in retention. Be it through learning communities, peer tutoring, or a positive relationship with faculty members, students are more likely to remain on campus if they have a greater connection to campus (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

Much of Tinto's recent work leaves the theoretical construct behind to speak about how colleges can and should be implementing programs to help retain students (Tinto, 2006). This gap between the wealth of retention research and practice at the colleges and universities in which retention is an issue continues to exist. Tinto (2006) also indicated that not all of the ways that have been developed to address retention and persistence will work at all institutions. Each institution has its own culture and set of rules and while learning communities may be what a four-year private liberal arts college needs to implement to address retention, it may not be what community colleges need to do in order to help students develop positive relationships with someone on campus.

What we find, however, is that students who have developed this positive relationship on campus are more likely to have developed strong self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is an important construct as it relates to retention and endurance research. Bandura (1986) defined self-efficacy as a person's judgment of their own capabilities in order to reach a certain type of goal that they have set for themselves. Bandura indicated that all individuals possess a system that allows them to have some control over their thoughts, feelings, and actions and that system serves as a regulatory function that provides individuals with the capability to influence their own cognitive processes (Pajares, 2002). Bandura (1986) also believed that self-efficacy helps to influence the

choices that individuals make as they participate in activities in which they feel comfortable or

skilled and seek to avoid areas where that is not the case. Self-efficacy also plays into the

concept of grit, or perseverance (Pajares, 2002). Individuals with high self-efficacy will strive

longer to overcome an obstacle than someone with lower self-efficacy. Bandura (1986) pointed

out that the higher the self-efficacy, the more likely the individual would participate in a more

challenging task and persist to successful completion

       In this case, students enter college with the intent to graduate. Sander and Sanders (2003)

used the word confidence to describe self-efficacy. Students with lower self-efficacy are less

likely to be successful in any endeavor, particularly college as they will not choose to employ

methods that will lead to success (Williamson & Williamson, 2003). Schunk (1984) indicated

that students with lower self-efficacy were less likely to persist and more likely to academically

achieve at lower levels.

       Pajares (2002) shared several sources where self-efficacy beliefs are developed. One

such example is through mastery experience, where students see the effects of the actions that

they take and these interpretations lead to the development of their own self-efficacy. Secondly,

self-efficacy can be gleaned through vicarious experience, or by watching the effect of the acts of

others (Pajares, 2002). Williamson and Williamson (2003) added, however, that self-efficacy

cannot be an automatic reaction to outside stimuli. A third way to develop self-efficacy,

according to Pajares (2002), is through social persuasions. Through the judgments of others,

students may develop self-efficacy as a way to prove someone wrong or to prove them right for

having had a belief in them. The final way to develop self-efficacy is through physiological

states. For example, a student who has low self-efficacy may have difficulty with academic tasks

such as group work or presentations because they do not feel that they can contribute in a meaningful way.

Williamson (2005) argued that high academic self-efficacy is one of the primary contributors to student success. Olson (2014) however, indicated that while first-generation college students have to overcome significant barriers to even get to college, because of their low academic self-efficacy, these students may not view themselves as successful. Goodwin (2006) said that even when these students are successful, because of low self-efficacy, they may not translate any academic success that they may have to the workforce.

Bandura's research often focused on learning through observation or acquiring information through people, through books or through the electronic media (Miller, 2002). As Tinto suggested (1987), students who are more likely to persist have a positive social role model to emulate and observe. Ali and Saunders (2006) suggested that students who have a positive social role model are more likely to persist than a student who does not have this role model. Bandura (1993) shared that people motivate themselves through forethought. This allows them to set goals for themselves and develop courses of action that will help them be successful (Bandura, 1993). Those who believe they will succeed typically do. Students who persist often have a higher self-efficacy than non-persisting students (Miller, 2002). Non-persisting students may not have all of the tools necessary to deal with the changes to their environment that comes from going to college. One such tool is adaptability, or the ability to take on the characteristics of a college student and find a place where they fit in. A second tool is establishing a proper support system. Non-persisters may not have the ability to establish a support system. Too often, those that do not persist are pulled in many different directions trying to supply the basic needs to their

families, while attempting to go to college, which leaves them unable to develop a support system that understands what they are going through.

Maslow (1954) indicated that motivation can be seen through the prism of his Hierarchy of Needs. As Petty (2014) shared, the lower level physiological and social needs must be met before a person can move into the higher level needs of esteem and self-actualization. Many first-generation college students become stuck in trying to fulfill their basic needs and are unable to reach self-actualization. Petty also indicated, however, that there was a link between intrinsic motivation and academic success in first-generation college students. This leads to the question: From where does this intrinsic motivation come (Petty, 2014)?

Blackwell and Pinder (2014) indicated that this desire came from a sense that the student needed to take control of their own lives. Reeve (2005) identified that motivation comes from both internal and external sources. Internal motivation tends to rely on the cognitive and emotional experience of the student (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). Trevino and DeFreitas (2014) shared that Hispanic first-generation college students' academic achievement was positively influenced by intrinsic motivation. Students who do not have a strong internal locus of control tend to drop out of courses and college due to lower motivation (Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014). External factors that seem to shape motivation are parental expectations and peer influences. Blackwell and Pinder (2014) indicated that self-efficacy is highly influenced through parental support and encouragement and this support and encouragement often leads to higher academic outcomes and self-motivation to succeed. Garza, Bain and Kupcynski (2014) referred to this process as resiliency. Researchers have determined that students who set goals, who develop interpersonal relationships and have high intrinsic motivation, are more likely to be resilient and persist to college completion (Cavazos, et.al. 2010).

A third lens to view this proposed study through is the work of Mezirow. Mezirow (1991) proposed that development, or change over time with age, is a vital component of transformational learning. As Merriam (2004) stated, transformational learning is when one's own values, beliefs and assumptions compose the lens in which the personal experience is made sense of. Mezirow (1991) believed that learning is impacted by one's surroundings and experiences and that in order to grow and learn, one may even have to replace some of those older perspectives with a newer, more developed perspective. Before transformational learning is to occur, Mezirow (1978) indicated that adults must come to the realization that some previously held cultural roles and relationships may not allow for this type of transformational learning.

Review of the Literature

Retention and Persistence

Schools have been seeking new and innovative ways to keep students even when they may not understand the underlying social and non-academic reasons for attrition. Among the reasons that schools are more involved in retention efforts include stagnation in the number of new college enrollments and increased costs in recruiting new students (Greene & Greene, 2002). Colleges and universities are seeking ways to re-recruit and keep more of their currently enrolled students.

Bean (1980) suggested that student retention is most affected by the life of the student and what their background has been and how background variables such as finances and family support affect a particular student. While many schools work to address the institutional barriers that can affect retention, what Bean suggests is that much of attrition and retention cannot really be addressed by the schools, but has to be addressed by the individual students. Schools can play

a role in addressing these issues, but they must be mindful that outside forces are typically what cause the most issues as it relates to retention.

One of the ways that many colleges have tried to address the retention issues is by creating freshman year experience programs. Many of these programs include both an academic component and a social component (Hall, 2007; Schrader & Brown, 2008). These programs are geared to assist the underprepared students to succeed in college (Schrader & Brown, 2008). Many of these programs provide services such as supplying information about campus resources, intrusive advising, and teaching students how to interact in a college classroom with their professors and with fellow students. Research suggests that schools where these programs have been introduced have seen increases in retention (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Kennett & Reed, 2009; and Schrader & Brown, 2008).

Astin (1975) suggested that students who are more likely to persist to graduation are those with a strong academic past, those students who had higher degree aspirations, those that completed homework and turned it in and students whose parents had a higher educational level. The population for this study tends to have very few of these things going for them. Most are struggling students who have trouble with their homework and all are first-generation students, meaning that neither parent has a college degree. Seidman (2005) suggested that schools with a well-developed and well planned retention program that focused on early identification of struggling students and early and often interaction and intervention with those students would provide an increase in the retention rates of these schools.

First-generation College Students

There are several definitions of first-generation college students in use throughout the literature. For the purposes of this research, the definition of Mehta, Newbold and O'Rourke

(2011) will be used. A first-generation college student is one who is part of a family where neither parent graduated from college, which is also the definition used by the U.S. Department of Education in defining first-generation for the purposes of its federal Trio programs (Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, & Goodwin 1998).

Basic demographic characteristics of first-generation students indicate that they are more likely to be women than men, older than the traditional college age, with at least a part-time job and they are likely to have children or other dependents at home (Nomi, 2005). While these students do face challenges that make them more likely to not persist, those that do persist indicate that their college experience was more satisfying than students who are not first-generation students (Nomi, 2005). These students also tend to be ethnic or cultural minority students as well (Unverforth, Talbert-Johnson & Bogard, 2012).

Nearly one quarter of all college students fall into the category of first-generation, low-income students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). First-generation students are nearly four times more likely to drop out of higher education during their freshman year than second generation or subsequent generation students are (Engle & Tinto, 2008). When looking at six year graduation rates, this population fails to graduate half of entering students within six years (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

The challenges faced by first-generation college students are well documented in the research. Ali and Saunders (2006) indicated that the lack of an educational role model contributes to the attrition of first-generation college students because students develop doubts about their own abilities. Tinto (1987) indicated that this lack of a collegiate role model shapes how students begin to develop relationships with various campus officials and faculty members that can help them be successful in college. First-generation students are more likely to persist to

college if they have a positive social role model to observe and unlike other student populations, this is not a parent.

Engle, Bermeo and O'Brien (2006) shared that first-generation college students identified three areas where successful first-generation college students found the most support in their journey to post-secondary education. When someone (guidance counselor, parent, admissions counselor, etc.) provided the student with information to help raise aspirations for college, either through connecting college to the job or career that the student was interested in or by sharing the myriad of options available to help pay for college, students were more likely to make a successful transition from high school to college. A second area was through pre-college programs that helped students navigate the admissions process. Because of the lack of an academic role model at home, the staff of pre-college programs often become like surrogate family members. Finally, first-generation students shared that taking the time to become academically prepared for college, by taking transitional classes or participating in a summer bridge program, helped them transition more successfully to college. However, in many cases these opportunities are limited. Because of that, not all first-generation college students have the same experience.

Jehinger (2009) suggested that first-generation students often feel undervalued once they arrive on campus. Due to not having an educational role model who can provide some perspective of the process, first-generation students may feel as though they do not fit in. This can lead to feelings of frustration and feelings that they are not able to adjust socially or academically (Woosley & Miller, 2009).

The development of identity is important to all college students, but especially first-generation students. Alessandria and Nelson (2005) pointed out that for first-generation students

to develop a sense of belonging while at college, they often have to reject their culture of origin to some degree in order to acclimate into the college culture. Students feel out of place in the college setting (Genco, 2007). First-generation students, particularly those from tight knit family units, may find themselves having a difficult time with their changing identity. Erikson (1968), however, said that no matter what challenges one faces, his or her identity begins to form near birth and does not stop changing until death. Pike and Kuh (2005) shared that first-generation students are often less engaged in the college lifestyle and less likely to integrate into diverse college experiences than students whose parents were college graduates.

First-generation students are often among the most underprepared students to enter college. These students often come from ethnic or racial minority groups. These students do not receive any financial assistance from their parents and have many obligations for their time and resources (Engle & Tinto, 2008). First-generation students do not truly understand what it means to be the first in their families to go to college. They do not perceive themselves as a first-generation college student (Donavan & Johnson, 2005).

First-generation students face unique challenges that their second-generation cohorts do not have to face. Reid and Moore (2008) identified some of these challenges. First-generation students do not have anyone who can help through the admissions process and they often attend college closer to home so that they can commute to college and continue to support the home (Reid & Moore, 2008). These students often bring a plethora of experience to college but their experience does not always help them easily adapt to becoming a college student (Jehangir, Williams & Jeske, 2012). The challenges that first-generation students face don't end when they enter college, whether those challenges are financial, academic or cultural (Lederman, 2008). Additionally, those stressors can increase while the student is in college. Finding money to pay

for textbooks, allowing time to utilize the tutoring labs, or finding the right organization to join can cause additional stress.

Reid and Moore (2008) also indicated that first-generation college students are also more likely to work part-time jobs, thus adding to the stressors that are traditionally associated with college. Mamiseishvilli (2010) suggested that one key factor for attrition in college is holding down a job. Students who work 20 hours a week or more are more likely to leave college in their first year than students who work less than 20 hours or do not work at all (Bozick, 2007). These students have a harder time making a connection with the campus, because of having to work due to the often limited finances of their parents (Lightweis, 2014). With having to work to support the family and commuting to college, there is often a lack of willingness to fully engage in campus life (Barry, Hudley, Cho, & Kelly, 2008).

First-generation college students often don't understand or know about the support systems in place at most colleges and universities. As Hopkins (2011) pointed out, a first-generation college student attending college for the first-time is entering a completely new culture. Irlbeck, Adams, Akers, Burris and Jones (2014) indicated that because of their lack of knowledge about this new academic culture, first-generation college students may not acclimate as well, understanding the system or knowing where to go for help in navigating it. For this and other reasons, first-generation students often do not utilize the support systems in place on college campuses (Pascarella, et.al, 2004).

Poverty

Ladd (2012) reported that the poverty rate in 2010 was 17%, with a child poverty rate of 21%. This is the first time that number had increased in nearly four decades, beginning with President Johnson's War on Poverty in the 1960's. Ladd (2012) also indicated that students who

live below the poverty line are less likely to achieve at high levels than those that come from more advantaged families. Much of the efforts to reform schools do not take into account the disproportionate number of students in poverty and the fact that the same programs that may lead to success with students not in poverty can often widen the achievement gap when it comes to students in poverty (Ladd, 2012) Boyd, Kamaka and Braun (2011) also indicated that students in poverty are not only likely to not perform well academically, but also are likely to be less healthy. Most interventions typically only try to address one aspect of poverty and do not look at people as a whole (Boyd, Kamaka & Braun, 2011). Stull (2013) indicated that a families' socio-economic status does play a role in the academic achievement of a student. It also plays a role in the parental expectations for academic success. Stull (2013) shared that the higher the socio-economic status the higher the percentage of parents who expect their children to complete at least a Bachelor's degree.

Cox, Pianta and RimmKauffman (2000) shared that teachers reported that rural students, students in poverty, and minority students often have classroom difficulties. Kozol (1991) argued that this is because these students tend to attend inferior, poorly funded elementary and middle schools. Because of the global economy, it is imperative for schools to understand why some students are not prepared for school and to help catch them up so that they can become a productive member of society (Stull, 2013).

Students who are from low socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to participate in dual-credit opportunities, or opportunities to acquire post-secondary class credit while still in high school (An, 2013). Laureau and Winenger (2008) indicated this may because parents of students from low socio-economic families tend to cede control of educational decisions to either the student or the school, whereas higher socio-economic students are pushed and encouraged by

their families to complete these courses to get ahead. Research suggests that students who participate in dual-credit opportunities are more successful academically than students who do not (Allen & Dadger, 2012).

Federal Trio Programs

Until the 1960's, first-generation college students or students in poverty had no formalized government program designed to address their needs. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Educational Opportunities Act that created the original Trio program, Upward Bound (Graham, 2011). The program was designed to take potential first-generation college students and other disadvantaged students and prepare them and assist them in getting into college. Today, in addition to pre-college programs like Upward Bound, the Trio programs also include Student Support Services, which is designed to assist first-generation and low-income students once they reach college and the Ronald McNair Post baccalaureate Program, which assists students wishing to obtain a doctoral degree (Graham, 2011). Roach (2013) indicated that there are 2,800 Trio programs spread over 8 distinct programmatic areas serving nearly 800,000 students across the country. Participation in these programs has a positive effect on college enrollment and educational attainment for the students who participate in the programs (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). Much of the success of the program is attributed to its emphasis on early intervention (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). Campbell (2010) shared that these programs emphasize tutoring, personal and financial counseling, career counseling, financial aid assistance, and supplemental instruction in mathematics, writing and reading. Since the establishment of Trio programs through the Higher Education Act in 1964, nearly 2 million people have graduated from college who participated in Trio programs (Campbell, 2010).

Appalachian Culture

Appalachia is often described as an area of natural beauty, but with limited educational, recreational, social or career opportunities for its people (Ali & Saunders, 2006; Anglin, 2002). Tang and Russ (2007) shared that the legal definition of the Appalachian region includes 406 counties in 13 states (all of West Virginia, and parts of Kentucky, Virginia, Alabama, Georgia, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee). Brewer (1978) indicated that many people did not intend to stay in the area, but as they passed through, illness, rough terrain, or broken down wagons left many stranded in the area. Because of the rugged mountains, many people never left once they found themselves in Appalachia. Many of the people who migrated to this area were unskilled laborers who were not educated either in the traditional sense or in the skills that were most in demand at the time such as blacksmithing and wood carving (Caudill, 2001). For nearly 150 years after the first settlers into the area, very little infrastructure was developed. People lived whole lives without ever leaving the hollow (a small rising valley region between two hills) that they were born in. Elam (2002) pointed out that those who settled in the Appalachia area were a rugged group who wanted to be left alone without being interfered with by the government. Many of the settlers had left areas of Europe where there was constant interference from the government.

Appalachia remains a mostly rural area that has few people, as many former residents have moved into other areas of the country to find work (The Rural and Appalachian Youth and Families Consortium, 1996). Cooper, Knotts & Elders (2011) found that nearly one-third of those that had moved out of the area to more urban settings still identified as Appalachian. The 2010 census, however, indicated that people may be moving back to the Appalachian area in larger numbers (Ludke, Obermiller & Rademacher, 2012). Those that do stay, have to face the

lack of job opportunities. Hall (2014) indicated that two thirds of the 420 Appalachian counties have experienced unemployment rates higher than the national average over the past several years.

Families developed close ties and these ties were strengthened by the fact that the closest non-family neighbors could be miles away (Tang & Russ, 2007). Individuals had to rely heavily on their family and neighbors, because the nearest town was often too far away. Anderson (1964), indicated that "Nature conspired with its rugged terrain to keep them enclosed, and for more than 100 years they were virtually out of touch with the rest of America" (p. 443). Doctors or nurses would have to ride in on horseback due to the roads, such as they were, being impassible for any form of motorized transportation (Breckinridge, 1972).

While Appalachia has often been characterized as an area that has limited educational opportunities and few job prospects, coal mining has traditionally provided Appalachian men with a way to make a decent wage while trying to take care of their family (Ali & Saunders, 2006; Owens, 2000). For much of the 20th century, coal mining was the most common occupation for many Appalachian men. Because of the large amount of coal in the area, there was always a job available. In many areas, coal companies ran a monopoly, providing housing, food, schools, and even churches for the miners and their families (Stevic & Uhlic, 1967). Because of the readily available jobs in the mining industry, higher education was not even a consideration for many Appalachian students.

With the coal boom now a distant memory, there is a shortage of job opportunities for the residents of the area. This has led to higher levels of poverty, high levels of unemployment and the outmigration of young people from the area (Anderson, 1964). Many Appalachian residents have turned to government assistance to meet their basic needs (Anglin, 2002).

While the term Appalachian refers to a geographic area, it also refers to the collective of people who populate this area. In many cases, being considered Appalachian is pejorative. People from outside the region think of the area as "poor, isolated and shoeless mountain people, with too many children and little or no formal education" (Elam, 2002, p.11). People from the area are often stereotyped as *redneck* and *hillbilly* (Bailey, 1997; Tang & Russ, 2007). Media reports on the area even today tend to exaggerate these stereotypes while discussing the problems that are associated with poverty, but doing relatively little to point out the strides being made to become a more open, educated culture (ABC News, 2009),

Massey (2007) shared that stereotypical images of Appalachian people have been around for much of the past two centuries. Popular literature, television, movies and songs have all played a role in perpetuating those stereotypes. Massey (2007) provided examples of Appalachian people who have perpetuated the stereotype of Appalachians as backward, hillbillies or rednecks. Among those she mentions are Lyndie England, the West Virginia soldier who participated in the prisoner abuse at Abu Gharib prison in Iraq and Patsy Ramsey, mother of murdered beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey. Some outsiders may describe Appalachia as a desolate, backwards place, but those who have studied the region indicate something completely different. The area is often described as one where place and people are valued, where family ties are strong, where religion is vitally important (Billings & Blee, 2004; Tang & Russ, 2007; and Wright, 2012).

Appalachia and Education

Haaga (2004) indicated that educational attainment is the characteristic that local elected officials most often refer to when trying to lure new business into their area. This is no less true of the Appalachian region. Unfortunately, elected officials in Appalachia have less reason to be

optimistic of a company locating in their region. With a college graduation rate that lagged

behind the national average by nearly 7 percent in the year 2000, and with nearly one-quarter of

the population having less than a high school diploma, the Appalachian region continued to

struggle to attract new businesses in the first decade of the new millennium (Haaga, 2004; Shaw

et.al, 2005). The educational outlook for this area over the next couple of decades does not look

promising. The traditional college age population is expected to stay relatively stagnant (Haaga,

2004). This may lead colleges to try to increase efforts to retain currently enrolled students at a

higher rate.

Culture is important to the Appalachian student population. Vgyotsky's (1962) research

on socio-cultural learning theory may apply to the factors that play a role in Appalachian student

retention. Miller (2002) described culture as "shared beliefs, values, knowledge, skills,

structured relationships, ways of doing things, socialization practices, and symbol systems" (p.

172). This region of the country has distinct cultural characteristics that differ from traditional

American culture. Appalachian students rely heavily on family when making decisions (Ali &

Saunders, 2006).

Similar to students in other cultures, however, Appalachian students focus on the skills

that are most valued in their communities. Self-reliance and independence are key characteristics

that the typical Appalachian resident value. Many Appalachian students have parents who not

only did not go to college; they also did not complete high school, as nearly a quarter of the

Appalachian population has less than a high school diploma. (Haaga, 2004; Hand & Payne,

2008). Because they did not go to college, some Appalachian parents may not place a high value

on a college education. Expectations for most children in Appalachia were to graduate high

school and then get a job to support the family, typically in the coal mines or factories. Because

of the shut-down of coal companies and factories moving off-shore, many jobs in the area now require a college degree.

Due to its rural nature, students from Appalachia face several challenges when matriculating to college. Because of the emphasis on skills such as self-reliance, Landy and Landy (1971) described the skills that many Appalachian students bring to college as atypical. While skills such as surviving in a hostile environment may help them navigate through their daily lives in Appalachia, it can make it more challenging to get through the barriers associated with college (Landy & Landy, 1971).

Barriers to Persistence

Academic Barriers

Appalachian students often come to college academically underprepared. Schrader and Brown (2008) indicated that nearly two-thirds of students who come to college are not prepared for the demands that college place on them. Academically prepared students are more likely to persist than those that are not academically prepared. Fowler and Boylen (2010) indicated that nearly half of all students who enter college require at least one developmental or skill-building course to help them prepare for the rigors of college work. Typically, these skill-building courses fall in the areas of writing, mathematics, or reading. While developmental education programs can provide assistance to students who are need of skill-building courses, these programs often fail to complete the mission, with nearly two-thirds of students who start in a developmental course sequence not completing the sequence (Bailey, Jeong & Cho, 2008).

Developmental courses, however, do provide students with an advantage. McCabe (2003) suggests that developmental programs should have two main goals: 1.) Preparing students for tougher academic requirements and 2). To ensure the success of the students. Student success in

this case would be completing the developmental programs, maintaining passing grades in non-developmental coursework and ultimately graduation. Boylen (2009) also suggested that frequent assessment and immediate feedback are two important components of developmental education courses (Roueche & Wheeler, 1973; Silverman & Casazza, 1999.)

Educational persistence is not common among Appalachian students (Hand & Payne, 2006). Students do not often have the experiences, identified by Reason, Teranzini and Domingo (2006) in their discussion on academic competencies, which college students should have. Appalachian students tend to not have had the academic experiences that many of their non-Appalachian peers have had. Because of lack of funding, field trips are limited. Students are not often engaged in their own learning experiences (Reason, Teranzini & Domingo, 2006). Tutoring and extra-curricular activities are often limited. First-generation students often face similar challenges, as they are often considered to be poorly prepared academically, less likely to have completed the college entrance tests, and often take fewer hours in their first semester in college (Murphy & Hicks, 2006). Because so many Appalachian students are also first-generation college students, this is not surprising.

Once students are on campus, it is vitally important for them to make connections not only socially, but also academically (Tinto, 1975; Wang, 2012). Wang (2012) suggested that finding an on-campus mentor is a key component of success for first-generation college students and that teacher-student relationships share certain characteristics of other types of relationships. Frymeir and Houser (2000) suggested that teachers and students need to communicate like friends. Without proper communication, Appalachian students can tend to feel more isolated.

Moralas (2012) argued that liberal arts education can be a key component to addressing some of the challenges that are faced by first-generation, low-income college students. He also

shared that underprepared students often have an aversion to taking these liberal arts courses because they do not understand how they will help them., Moralas (2012) also showed that these students often feel differently after having taken a liberal arts series of coursework, finding that students have a sense of freedom and liberation from the issues that typically are associated with first-generation, low-income students.

Schools are also often trying to build the appropriate support services to assist high-risk students in being successful. What Gladeiuex and Swail (2000) found however, is that students who plan to go to college often have better reading skills and math skills as early as eighth grade. Many of the students who do not have the requisite skills are first-generation, Appalachian college students. Abrams and Jernigan (1984) suggested that special small classes, tutoring and a committed study skills program serve to assist high risk students in developing and maintaining positive GPA's.

With new financial aid requirements requiring students to make minimum academic progress, first-generation college students have stricter academic requirements now than in the past. (Brost & Payne, 2011). First-generation college students report that the new requirements allowed them to understand and confront their problems, particularly when they were under the penalty phase of the new requirements. Because of the need to file an appeal and make plans to improve academically, first-generation students find themselves having to take ownership of their mistakes (Brost & Payne, 2011).

Gore, Wilburn, Treadway, and Plaut (2011) pointed out students need more than just academic skills in order to reach success. Students must have the confidence to utilize the skills in the learning situation. Too often, Gore, et.al (2011) said, students have fear toward being

successful in the academic arena. Academic success, particularly in first-generation students or students from Appalachia, can cause rifts with family and friends.

Recent research has identified a non-cognitive factor that is identified as grit (Duckworth et al, 2007; Young & Hong, 2014). Duckworth et.al (2007) defined grit as perseverance and a passion for reaching long-term goals through addressing challenges head on, maintaining effort in the face of failure and overcoming plateaus in progress. Howe (1999) argued that while talent and ability are certainly important in any undertaking, the ability to persevere can be equally important. Duckworth et.al (2007) indicated that most often those who are successful, particularly in the world of athletics, but also in other aspects of life are those who practiced their skills and worked to improve. Innate ability is important, but the ability to show perseverance can also lead to success. Strayhorne (2013) went on to show that grit is often a good predictor of success in a given area although there is limited research in determining whether grit is a factor that may play a role in the retention and persistence of first-generation college students.

Social Barriers

In addition to academic factors that can affect persistence and retention, social factors can play a role as well. Theorists including Tinto (1975) have suggested that social integration into college can play as large a role in persistence rates and decreases in attrition as academic factors do (Hall, 2007). Hall posited that some of these factors that can lead to attrition can often be perceived as positive, such as marriage or running a successful business. However, these social factors provide a negative impact on students.

Among the social stressors that can play a role in the transition to college are moving away from home, family and friends; leaving a safe and familiar environment and a need to develop new relationships (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009; Dyson & Renk, 2006). These life

changes can cause stress at any time, but this stress can be heightened when transitioning to college. Because of the myriad changes, students work to develop new social groups to share their experiences with, since many of their friends and families will not understand what they are experiencing (Coffman, 2011).

Appalachian students who go to college tend to stay closer to home than non-Appalachian students. Williams and Luo (2010) suggested that geographic proximity plays a role in retention. Among students who go to college within 50 miles of home were more likely to be retained than those that went farther away.

A key social factor that often plays a role in retention is whether or not a student feels a connection to campus. As Tinto (1975) suggested this is a key component of his retention model. Many colleges utilize programs such as Freshman Year Experiences, Learning Communities and Common Reading programs to create an emphasis on students becoming more involved with teachers and other staff members on college campuses from day one (Ferguson, 2006; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; and Jehangir, 2008).

Research tends to corroborate the idea that social integration is a key component in retention. Beck and Davidson (2001) shared that social integration on campus is often a key determiner of academic success. If students are making connections to others on campus, they are more likely to excel in the classroom. Schudde (2011) suggests that living on campus tends to positively affect retention. Napoli and Wortman (1998) indicated that when students receive positive support from their peers, they are more likely to be retained. A perceived attitude of the advisor caring for the student was an important factor in retention as well (McArthur, 2005). Barbatis (2010), shares that students who are involved in campus organizations are more likely to persist. While social integration plays a role in retention as a whole, Appalachian students

tend to have "a fierce sense of independence" (Ali & Saunders, 2006, Pg. 39). This can limit these students from seeking assistance or it can hamper their ability to grow their social network on campus.

Early intervention is the key to limiting attrition based on social factors. Early on in the college-going experience, students tend to develop homesickness and lonely feelings (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Among the interventions that colleges tend to try to use to combat these feelings are orientations that last from a few days to a few weeks (Beck & Davidson, 2001). Becoming involved with a small group of students and an instructor as part of a study session, becoming part of a learning community, or participating in a small group common reading book discussion with peers are all ways to become more socially integrated into campus (Ferguson, 2006; Jehangir, 2008; and Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005.)

Family Barriers

Any discussion on the family barriers that are faced by Appalachian students from distressed counties has to begin with the fact that many of them are first-generation college students. As the first person in their family to go to college, they face unique challenges and concerns including lack of educational role models, achievement guilt, and social isolation from their family of origin. These barriers provide a difficult challenge for a young adult to face in the middle of making a transition to college.

Family history of education plays a large role in the retention of students (Miller, 2006). Knowing where it is one comes from academically often helps students understand where it is that they come from and to identify where it is that they wish to go and what they wish to accomplish academically. Students who come from a first-generation home may face struggles in college that students from a second-generation or subsequent generation home may not.

Bryan and Simmons (2009) indicated that social isolation is a barrier that many first-generation students feel when they go to college. Students feel isolation from their families and families feel isolated from their student. Because of the fact that the family members have no history or knowledge of college, it is hard for them to understand what the student is experiencing. When the student is away from the family dynamic, parents can sometimes start encouraging the student to simply drop out of school and return home. Parents of first-generation students have little to no frame of reference from which to provide guidance, leaving the student to look elsewhere to learn to navigate those challenges.

Miller (2007) suggested that family members often make fun of students who go to college and then come back with new ideas, changes in the type of music that they listen to, changes in the style of clothes that they wear, and changes in hairstyle. All of these are outward expressions of the transformation that is taking place with students who go to college. Many family members, especially in the Appalachian area, will start to look upon the student with an aura of distrust (Miller, 2007). This can lead to what Covarrubias and Fryberg (2014) called family achievement guilt. This guilt is felt because the college-going student is experiencing opportunities that are not readily available to the rest of their family who are not attending college. Covarrubias and Fryberg (2014) indicated that this family achievement guilt is expressed more by first-generation students than by second and subsequent generation college students, as would be expected.

Parents are considered key components and the single most important influence on the decisions made by students of all backgrounds, especially for those from a rural background (Reagor & Rehm, 1995). However, rural parents do not have the same access to resources that non-rural, middle class families have. These homes are typically more likely to be broken and

students have fewer opportunities to travel. Children often inherit their parent's educational level (Davis-Kean, 2005; Gofen, 2009). If the parent went to college, the child was more likely to go to college. If the parent just graduated high school, the child was more likely to succeed at that level. While parents do have influence in the decisions of students, Peterson, Stivers and Peters (1986) suggested that non-family significant others can sometimes have similar influence in decisions made. The significant others are often extended family members, family friends or role models.

With the homes of many first-generation students "broken" (Davis-Kean, 2005), it is important to note the effect of divorce on college students. Soria and Linder (2014) posited that college students who come from homes of divorce have trouble developing appropriate relationships with peers and faculty in college than do students who come from a two parent home. While the lack of emotional attachment is challenging, college students from divorced families also often experience tougher financial problems, including having unstable nutritional routines (Ross & Miller, 2009).

Some research suggests that parents remain part of helping students, particularly first-generation students, learn to navigate the new culture that they become part of when they go to college. If parents are not being helpful, they often can be a hindrance. Budney and Paul (2005) indicated that colleges should start early in helping both parents and students with the adaptations that need to happen for a successful transition to college. Examples of adaptations that colleges can make or services that can be provided include early orientation, summer bridge programming and mentorship programs. By providing students with early opportunities to make a connection to campus, you increase the likelihood that they will be retained and persist to graduation (Tinto, 1987).

Gibbons and Woodside (2014) also indicated that the role of the father in the family plays a unique and huge role in the career and educational experiences of first-generation college students. Fathers tended to have different educational expectations for sons than for daughters, with sons expected to go on to college. Daughters, however, were expected to go out and start their career in the workforce (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). This educational bias from fathers seems to be a continuation of a time when women were not allowed to go to college. Gibbons and Woodside (2014) also shared that when daughters were encouraged to go to college by their fathers, the daughters often did not pursue the career path that their father had hoped they would pursue.

Family involvement in the educational process is often considered a predictor for retention. This is not necessarily the case for first-generation college students. McCarron and Inkelas (2006) indicated that the best predictor for success in college for first-generation students was the student's own academic self-efficacy. Parental involvement in educational decisions as a teenager was not a strong predictor of college success and retention. However, Williamson (2005) argued that early family influences do have an impact on academic self-efficacy, with these early influences contributing to their own beliefs in the importance of academic performance and achievement.

One possible way schools are beginning to address these family concerns is through online education. With many colleges offering degrees online or though distance education programs students are not having to leave home as often to complete a degree. Stotzer (2012) shared that social work programs were among the first types of programs to begin looking at alternative ways to educate students. This could be through weekend or evening format courses, correspondence courses, or online learning. With the technology finally catching up to the rural

areas, more and more students have access to this type of degree and it could lead to ways of addressing barriers and increasing student persistence among this population. Hannum, Irvin, Banks, and Farmer (2009) shared that many rural school districts are utilizing distance education, which can lay the groundwork for students to consider this technology in the future.

Summary

While much has been written concerning the Appalachian culture and how it can affect education and much has also been written about the persistence stories of first-generation college students, there is a dearth of literature on the persistence stories of Appalachian first-generation students. There are many reasons that students choose to go to school and many factors that can influence whether or not they persist to graduation. With this unique population, it is time for researchers to begin to understand the reasons that these students graduate in the face of incredible odds.

Research has identified several barriers that first-generation college students from Appalachia must face in order to persist to graduation. Cultural barriers such as stereotyping and poverty; family barriers, such as first-generation status and educational achievement guilt; social barriers, such as commuting to campus and lack of connection to campus; and educational barriers, such as lack of preparation and lack of opportunity all play a role in the lack of educational achievement of this population. These barriers are tough to overcome as only one-fifth of the population of this area has obtained a college degree (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). This research is designed to understand how students who come from this area and face the barriers that have been laid out in this chapter ultimately succeed and persist to college completion.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the persistence experience of first-generation college students in distressed counties in Appalachia, with the main focus on the distressed Appalachian counties in Kentucky, Virginia and Tennessee. Building upon the retention research of Spady (1971), Bean (1980), and Tinto (1987), this study was crafted to understand the reasons that students from this particular underserved population stay in school against incredible odds. Through in-depth, semi-structured phenomenological interviews, the study sought to understand the persistence experience of first-generation college students from Appalachia and what social, academic, and familial factors influenced that experience. The study used standard qualitative research methods in order to seek answers to the research questions posed. In the following pages, the research design, methods used to collect the data, and the methods used to analyze the data will be discussed in depth.

Design

For this study, a phenomenological approach was used. Creswell (2007) shared that a phenomenological approach is used when seeking to describe the meaning of a particular phenomenon of a group of individuals. In the case of this study, the phenomenon is college persistence. The researcher sought to understand the essence of the college persistence phenomenon for first-generation students from distressed communities in Appalachia, as it is inherently different from the phenomenon of persistence for other populations. Instead of trying to understand a single case, this study sought to identify the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Historically, phenomenology has been a term used in philosophy for over 250 years (Kockelmans, 1965). As a qualitative research method, however, phenomenology finds its roots in the work of Husserl (1970). Ray (1994) indicated that Husserl was interested in proving that philosophy could be considered a rigorous science. Husserl believed that using the method of epoche, or bracketing one's views, then one could "seek the roots or beginnings of knowledge in the subjective process" (Ray, 1994, p. 119). This process of transcendental phenomenology is based strictly on describing the phenomenon without assigning interpretation to what is being said.

Cohen and Omery (1994) identified two variations of the field of phenomenology: eidetic phenomenology as posited by Edmund Husserl and ontological phenomenology as developed by Martin Heideggar. Eidetic phenomenology is often called descriptive phenomenology and the purpose of this type of phenomenological study is to understand the meaning of an experience by understanding those that have had the experience (Cohen & Omery, 1994). Ontological phenomenology, also called hermeneutical phenomenology, is geared toward interpretation of events rather than describing the event.

Morse (1994) indicated that there are four cognitive processes inherent in the data analysis of qualitative research. The first process is comprehension; in this step, researchers should gather as much information as they can about the phenomenon being studied. It is suggested that the researcher learn as much as they can about the setting, the culture and the study topic (Morse, 1994). However, in a phenomenological research approach, it is important for the researcher to bracket out this prior knowledge so as not to cloud the researcher when completing the research (Morse, 1994). The researcher has to be able to view the phenomena

from the perspective of the participant. Comprehension is only reached when the researcher has enough information to write a detailed, rich description of the phenomena (Morse, 1994).

The second cognitive process inherent in qualitative research is the process of synthesizing. This process of merging several experiences together can help describe a typical example of the phenomenon (Morse, 1994). During this process, the investigator should be able to identify some norms that occur in the phenomena. By identifying these norms, the researcher will be able to better understand how the phenomenon works. Morse (1994) identified theorizing as the third process in qualitative research. It is considered "the sorting phase" of the analysis (p. 33). In phenomenological research, this is the point where the researcher is developing the themes that are emerging from the research.

The final stage that Morse (1994) identified is the reconceptualization phase. In much of qualitative research, this is where the researcher would try to generalize the research to other populations experiencing similar circumstances. In a phenomenology, that is the case as well. If the data has truly reached a saturation point, the stories of the provided by the participants would lead to the same emerging themes. While many participants might experience the phenomenon differently, the themes would likely remain the same.

This phenomenological study took the transcendental approach described by Moustakas (1994). The study aimed to describe the experiences with the researcher's own biases bracketed out. Through the transcripts of interviews with those who have experienced the phenomenon and any documentation provided to the researcher, significant statements were identified. Significant statements are words or phrases that have meaning to the participants or are directly connected to the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994). This process of horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994), will help to illuminate the experience of the phenomenon by those being interviewed.

Creswell (2007) identified the next step in the process as taking the significant statements that are identified and developing clusters of meaning. These themes or clusters are then be used to write a description of participants' experience. From this description comes the essence of the experience.

Moustakas (1994) identified three core processes of transcendental phenomenology following the collection of the data. The first process is called epoche, also known as bracketing. During this process, the researcher has to identify everyday understandings, judgments and knowings and set them aside. This allows the researcher to look at the information with a fresh set of eyes. The second core process is the transcendental-phenomenological reduction process. Moustakas (1994) said that this process is where each individual experience is considered in its own singularity. It is through this process that the textural description and the essence of the phenomenon begin to emerge. The final process is the process of imaginative variation. Moustakas (1994) indicated that during this process that the structural description presents a more complete picture of the conditions surrounding the phenomenon.

Creswell (2007) identified the next step in the research is taking the significant statements that are identified and developing clusters of meaning. These themes or clusters will then be used to write a description of participants' experience. From this description comes the essence of the experience. Moustakas (1994) posits that phenomenology tends to focus on the way things appear, removed from bias. This process is concerned more with the complete picture, taking the experience and looking at it from all sides until a unified essence emerges (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Questions

Given the purpose of this study was to better understand the persistence experience of first-generation college students from distressed areas identified by the Appalachian Regional Commission, the following research questions served to frame this investigation.

1). How do first-generation college students from distressed areas in Appalachia describe their persistence experience?

2). How do cultural and familial factors affect this population of students in terms of persistence?

3). How do social and academic factors affect this population of students in terms of persistence?

Setting

The setting for this study was the counties in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia identified as distressed according to the Appalachian Regional Commission (see Appendix A). These counties are considered distressed because of high rates of poverty and unemployment (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d.). Potential participants were identified through various methods, but mainly through colleges and universities that have Federal Trio programs. Directors of these programs were asked to help identify graduates of their programs who meet the qualifications of the study. Participants were also selected based on the researcher's knowledge and previous work in the Appalachian areas of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia. Because the participants were graduates, this limited any kind of administrative interference on behalf of the colleges and universities that participants attended. This area was selected because it is the area being studied and these particular states are within a reasonable distance for the researcher to travel for conducting interviews. The phenomenological approach is rooted in asking questions

that lead to a clear direction and puts into focus the meaning of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

These locations also have several counties considered distressed in the Appalachian Regional Commission area. The state of Kentucky, for example, has the highest number of counties that are considered distressed (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d.).The three year average unemployment rate for Appalachian Kentucky is 11%, higher than all states with the exception of Mississippi and Ohio (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d). The poverty rate in Appalachian Kentucky leads all states with nearly one-fourth of the population living in poverty.

Participants

This study explored the experiences of first-generation college students from Appalachian distressed counties that have persisted to graduation with a Bachelor's degree. Purposeful sampling was used to identify individuals who met each of the qualifications set forth for the study (Creswell, 2007). Through the researcher's role as someone who is from the area, potential participants were identified through contacts at several colleges and universities in the geographic footprint of Appalachian Kentucky, Virginia, and Tennessee. Potential participants were initially contacted through email or phone conversation. Snowball sampling was also used in order to make sure that the data received reached the saturation point. Individuals who participated in the study were asked to share the names of others who may qualify for the study (Creswell, 2007). The researcher interviewed 12 participants for the study. Data saturation was achieved at this point. The researcher determined that data saturation was reached when no new significant themes or experiences emerged from the interviews. Participants were initially contacted through email, social media or via phone conversation. Participants were given a basic

overview of the research and then were asked if they would be willing to participate. Once they agreed to participate, a formal interview time was set up.

The researcher worked to vary the sample as it relates to gender and age to have a more representative sample. Six males and six females ranging in age from 20 to 60 were interviewed for the study. Englander (2012) shared that in qualitative research that it is important to have a representative sample. It was also vital to ensure that the participants selected fit the parameters established by the researcher. For the purposes of this study, participants had to have been born in or spent a significant portion of their formative years in the geographical area that was identified and had to have been from the first-generation to complete a bachelor's degree in their family.

Because of the focus on the distressed communities of Appalachia in Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia, the population interviewed for this study closely aligned with the college going population from this area. Of the 12 individuals interviewed, nine were from Kentucky, due to the fact that Kentucky has the most distressed communities of any state in the Appalachian region. With that being the case, this limited the opportunity to have participation in the study by African-Americans, as the population of African-Americans is limited in the Appalachian counties of Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia that were eligible for participation in this study. Two participants were from Tennessee and one was from Virginia.

Of the individuals who were interviewed for the study, five participants had only completed a Bachelor's degree. Seven participants had completed at least a Master's degree; with one of those having gone on to complete an Ed. S. Degree and two additional participants were in the process of completing a Ph.D. at the time of the interviews. Occupationally, participants were varied as well. Four participants worked in higher education, while two

participants worked in K-12 education. Other occupations represented by the population interviewed include: pastor, life coach, conservation officer, security officer, and manufacturing.

Procedures

Following approval of the research proposal, Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission was sought to begin gathering data from human subjects. The IRB was provided with the interview protocol and an informed consent form that all participants were asked to sign with information pertaining to their rights and responsibilities as a participant in the research. Following IRB approval in July 2014 (see Appendix 4), the researcher made contact with potential participants, identified through federal Trio programs, college alumni offices, and through other contacts at colleges and universities in the region to determine if they were eligible and/or interested in participation in the study. Eligible participants were individuals who had completed at least a Bachelor's degree and were either born or spent some significant part of their pre-college formative years in Appalachian distressed counties in Kentucky, Tennessee or Virginia. This initial contact occurred either via email, social media or phone. Once participants were contacted, deemed eligible to participate and agreed to participate in the study, the researcher scheduled a time for an in-depth interview following the protocol established with the IRB.

Each participant was presented with a copy of the informed consent form approved by the Institutional Review Board. The researcher discussed with each participant the rights and responsibilities they had if they chose to participate in the research. All participants willingly signed the informed consent form and each was provided a copy. In addition to giving consent to participate in the research, participants were also asked to indicate whether or not the interviews could be digitally recorded and all agreed to this process. All interviews were digitally captured

and transcribed by the researcher, with the audio files kept in a secure location on a password protected external hard drive which is kept in a locked desk drawer. The transcribed interviews were saved in password protected files on the same external hard drive. Following the completion of the research, all information will be kept for one year past the publication of the study and then disposed of following the guidelines set up by the IRB.

The Researcher's Role

As a native of an Appalachian distressed community, I understand the challenges that these individuals face in their quest to complete college. I ask myself the same question that Fickey (2012) asks; can one's work be useful and meaningful to one's home place? If the findings of the research lead to developing programs that help this population or leads to a greater understanding of the Appalachian area, in terms of education, then the answer to that question would be a resounding yes.

While I was not a first-generation college student, many of my family members were. My parents were the first in their families to attend college. My wife and brother-in-law were also first-generation college students. I also currently work with first-generation, low-income and disabled college students through the Student Support Service Federal Trio program. The students served by the program face many of the challenges identified earlier.

Because of my connection to this population, no current staff member or student participating in the program where I work were contacted for participation in this study. In addition, no immediate relatives were considered for participation in this study. As a native of Appalachia, some possible cultural bias may exist. I worked to bracket out my own experiences with first-generation college students and my own experiences as an Appalachian college student. Bracketing took many forms, and included the process of journaling throughout the data

collection process, allowing me to reflect on the data (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Through

journaling, I was able to identify any presuppositions and then look at the data with a fresh eye

and perspective. A second method used to bracket out experiences was through interviews and

conversations with outside sources. These interviews and conversations took place prior to,

during and following data collection as a way to uncover themes that may hinder the data

collection and analysis process.

Data Collection

While there are several forms of data collection that can be used in a phenomenological

study, the most common types of data collection are the use of in-depth interviews with

participants and analysis of documents that can corroborate the stories of the participants that are

presented. For the purposes of this research, interviews were the main source of information

received by the participants in the study. Participants were also given the opportunity to provide

documents, such as transcripts, letters or Facebook posts that would help shape their stories.

Interviews

Much of the data collected in a phenomenological study comes from interviews

(Creswell, 2007). Hutchison and Wilson (1994) indicated that the main role of the researcher is

to serve as an investigator who is seeking understanding of a particular phenomenon. It is vital

that interview questions are linked to the research questions that are being investigated

(Hutchison & Wilson, 1994).

Hutchison and Wilson (1994) indicated that in the case of transcendental

phenomenology, it is important that those who are interviewed tell their stories and that the

stories are recorded verbatim. Twelve individuals were interviewed for this study. Each

interview was digitally recorded and was transcribed by the researcher. Questions for the

interviews were developed based on the literature and sought to capture the essence of the persistence experience of first-generation college students from distressed areas of Appalachia (see Appendix 2). These semi-structured interviews took place with individuals who have graduated from college and interview questions covered topics related to the persistence experience of these students while in college, while also seeking to understand the background of the participants. As many of the events that shape our present are events that took place in our past, the purpose of understanding the background of the participants was to see if there was a commonality in the backgrounds of the members of this group. Understanding family life, financial circumstances, friends and the area that the participants grew up was important in eliciting the stories that provided the essence of the persistence experience of first-generation college students from distressed communities in Appalachia. Interviews typically took approximately, on average, one hour to complete. Interviews took place in multiple locations, dependent upon where the participants were from. The researcher traveled to meet with individuals in their hometowns, meeting in public spaces to make participants feel more at ease and to limit the distractions that sometimes occur in homes or offices.

Document Analysis

As a component of data collection, participants were asked to provide documents (grade reports, social media information, letters, emails, etc.) for further review. No participants chose to provide this information. Had participants provided this information, they would have been asked to sign forms giving the researcher permission to access and use the information provided in order to comply with FERPA (Federal Educational Records Privacy Act) guidelines. This information would have been gathered and reviewed with the knowledge and consent of the participants.

While having this information may have provided further depth to the participant's stories, the interviews themselves were in-depth enough to gain the true essence of the persistence experience. Participants likely chose not to provide this information because they did not understand its relevance (with the social media posts, as all but three of the participants graduated from college before the advent of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter), or they simply no longer had access to the information (such as letters or emails from home when they were in college or their grade reports/transcripts). Because the researcher has a social media connection with each person who was interviewed, through either Facebook or LinkedIn, popular social media sites, the researcher has access to previous posts and pictures presented by the participants on their social media sites. Again, as mentioned earlier, only three participants had completed their degree during the prevalence of these social media sites, so the researcher did not feel it necessary to review their posts as it likely would not add any depth of information to the interviews.

Data Analysis

Creswell (2007) described several ways that data in a phenomenological study can be analyzed. For the purposes of this study, data was analyzed using horizontalization, establishing clusters of meaning, and providing textural descriptions. As part of data analysis, it is important for the researcher completing a transcendental phenomenology to bracket out or hold in abeyance any preconceptions related to the study (Beech, 1999). As a native of an Appalachian distressed community, the researcher had to first set aside any preconceived notions or judgments that would cloud his ability to perform the research. Due to not being the first person in my family to attend college and obtain a degree, there were no preconceived judgments to set aside in this case. The process of documenting and identifying these potential biases was a good

way for the researcher to understand that the information provided may or may not support initial assumptions as to why students from distressed Appalachian communities persist to graduation.

The researcher listened to each interview multiple times. During the first review of the recordings, the researcher focused strictly on what was said while making some notes of themes emerging. Following the first review of the recordings, the researcher transcribed the interview verbatim. The researcher then read the transcripts multiple times and made notations and identified themes emerging from the interviews. Utilizing Nvivo qualitative research software, the researcher was able to cluster statements and thoughts of the participants into common themes. Following the reading of the transcript, the researcher listened at least one additional time to the digital recording to make sure that nothing pertinent has been left out. Due to several factors, often beyond the control of the researcher, the process of interviewing and transcribing interviews took eight months to complete. This was longer than anticipated by the researcher but considered fairly common in qualitative research.

Horizontalization

The process of horizontalization includes analyzing the data collected (i.e., interviews, documents and observations) to identify significant statements that provide a deeper understanding of how participants experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Moreover, this process asks the researcher to list every statement relevant to the experience. Moustakas (1994) then indicated that it is important to test each expression for two basic requirements. 1.) Does the statement contain a moment of the experience that is vital to understanding the experience? 2). Is it possible to abstract and label?

Through a thorough review of the transcripts of the interviews, the researcher was able to identify words and phrases that contributed to the phenomenon. An initial review was completed

in order to identify the significant statements. Additional reviews were utilized in order to organize those statements into themes.

Clusters of Meaning

After significant statements were identified, the researcher took the disparate number of statements and organized them into themes. These themes emerged following multiple hearings of the digital recordings and multiple readings of the interview transcripts. Following the example of Milacci (2003), the researcher kept a memo log to help identify thoughts, ideas and questions that arose while listening to the audio recording and reading through the transcript. While the interviews provided a wealth of information, not all of it was relevant to the experience of persistence among first-generation college students from Appalachian distressed communities. Milacci (2003) suggested that while completing data analysis and identifying clusters of meaning that it is important to keep the original research questions in mind while listening to the digital audio recordings and reading the transcripts. If the information does not answer one of those basic questions, it is not likely to be helpful or fall into one of the clusters of meaning that have been identified.

The researcher employed NVivo Qualitative Research software as a tool to help organize these statements into themes, or nodes as NVivo calls them. By utilizing the software, the researcher was able to identify words and phrases and then search for all instances of those words or phrases within the transcripts of the interviews. This provided a more thorough attempt at coding the information that if the researcher relied strictly on hand-coding all of the material and organizing statements into themes.

Textural Description

Utilizing the significant statements and the clusters of meaning, the researcher developed a textural description of what was experienced by the participants in relationship to the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). This description shares the story of the participants and how they were affected by the phenomenon. Textural description is an important component of the phenomenological process as it is where the themes emerge to tell the story of the participants (Creswell, Hanson, Piano, & Morales, 2007).

<div align="center">Trustworthiness</div>

A key component of any research study is determining its trustworthiness. In order to try to establish trustworthiness, a number of techniques were employed. Among these methods are clarifying researcher bias, triangulation, peer reviews, and member checks. Creswell (2007) identified these methods as important steps to take in order to insure the trustworthiness of the research manuscript.

Clarifying Researcher Bias

Through the process of bracketing, the researcher worked to eliminate any bias or at least set that bias aside in order to fully understand what the information is saying. Through the use of journaling and through the use of a researcher interview, the researcher identified the areas where bias may be present before, during and after this process. Identifying these areas contributed to the trustworthiness of the research. Through this journaling process, the researcher made notations of potential bias. Because of his work with first-generation college students, the researcher worked to clarify any potential biases that arose before, during and following the interview process. Prior to the interviews, the researcher would arrive early, making notes about the local surroundings of the location where the interview was being held. This helped to set

aside any pre-conceived notions that the researcher may have had about the area where these interviews took place. The researcher was able to journal those thoughts and ideas before the interview and set them aside before the actual interview occurred. During the interviews, the researcher sought to limit follow up questions to those that were a part of the interview protocol, unless the participant brought up something that needed further discussion. Following the completion of the interviews, the researcher again made notations of statements or ideas brought up by the participants that may have led to researcher bias. This process of journaling and notation allowed the researcher to understand and set aside any potential bias. An excerpt from these journals is provided in Appendix 5.

Peer Review

Through the process of peer reviews, the researcher gained an understanding of whether or not the information provided is clear and concise and understandable to the reader. Peers who work with the researcher were asked to review the manuscript for clarity. Two peers who work at the same institution as the researcher served as peer reviewers of the manuscript to check for clarity and readability. These peers are familiar with persistence research and the Appalachian area and neither had been involved in any part of the research up until the review of the manuscript. Their feedback provided important information in shaping the manuscript. In addition, all members of the researcher's dissertation committee served as peer reviewers, providing necessary feedback in order to ensure that the researcher provided a clear, concise picture of the essence of the persistence experience of first-generation college students from distressed areas of Appalachia. This is an important component of establishing trustworthiness. Peer review provides a chance for the researcher to solicit a fresh perspective from someone who is not as heavily involved with the research project.

Member Checks

Participants were offered a chance to review their portion of the manuscript and the transcription of their interview to verify that the information provided in the manuscript reflects what their intentions were when the information was provided. Participants were provided with the transcription of their interview shortly after it was completed to verify that it is what they intended to say. Following the analysis of all the data and prior to the defense of the dissertation, participants were provided the opportunity to review the manuscript portions that portrayed their component of the story to ensure accuracy.

<p align="center">**Ethical Considerations**</p>

As nearly all of the information provided to the researcher was personal in nature, the researcher took proper safeguards to ensure that the data remained safe and to ensure anonymity. Participants were advised of their right to withdraw from the study at any point. All participants were assigned random pseudonyms. These pseudonyms are known only to the researcher and to the participant. Any audio recordings, transcriptions or identifying information was kept on a password protected external hard drive that is kept either in a locked desk drawer and all audio recordings will be destroyed after a specified period of time. Following the conclusion and publication of the research, all information will be handled for one year past publication, after which, following the procedures established by the IRB, the raw data will be destroyed.

As the director of a program that serves first-generation college students and as an adjunct faculty member at that same college, efforts were made to ensure that no participant of that program or no student whom the researcher had served as an advisor for or as an instructor for were included in the research. In addition, no member of the researcher's immediate family was considered for participation in the research. Finally, no employee that reports to the

researcher was allowed to participate in the research. The purpose of this was to eliminate the potential for participant or researcher bias that could have clouded the information received during the interview process.

The findings of this study will be used to help develop programs and interventions that will seek to keep more first-generation college students from this area in school and persisting to graduation. In any dissemination of this material, pseudonyms will be used to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Summary

The researcher utilized the qualitative research method of phenomenology to identify the essence of the persistence experience of first-generation college students from distressed areas in Appalachian Kentucky, Virginia and Tennessee. Various methods were used in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the research and the research design allowed participants to provide clear, meaningful statements about their persistence experience so that the researcher could better understand the essence of the phenomenon of persistence among the studied population.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of the study was to understand the persistence experience of first-generation college students from distressed counties in Appalachia. The method for how this study was conducted and how the data was analyzed was identified in the previous chapter. This chapter will detail the findings from the research and provide answers to the research questions stated earlier.

A review of the salient literature suggested that several factors may play a role in the persistence of college students to graduation. Familial experiences, cultural heritage, educational background and social factors all play some role in this process (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Cooper, Knotts & Elders, 2011; Davis-Kean, 2005; and Gore, Wilburn, Treadway & Plaut, 2001). During the comprehensive review of the literature, while many studies were found that dealt with the concept of college student retention, there was in fact very little research in the area of student persistence or endurance, or why students remain in school, even when facing challenging odds. In addition, the Appalachian area is also not very well represented in the research concerning college retention and persistence. This study contributes to the fields of retention, endurance and, persistence research by addressing the issues, challenges and triumphs of an under-represented group and builds upon the theoretical framework identified in Chapter Two. Understanding the persistence experience of underserved populations continues to further enhance the work of Tinto (1975) in the field of retention and persistence.

Participants

Following is a brief description of each of the participants who were interviewed for this research. Each participant has been assigned a pseudonym in order to maintain anonymity. In

addition, other details that may disclose the identity of the individual may have been changed as well.

Figure 1. Participant Overview

Name	Degree	Home State	College Type	Age Range	Commuter or Residential Student	Traditional or Non Traditional Student
Bruce	Bachelors	Kentucky	Private	20-25	Both	Traditional
Patricia	Masters	Kentucky	Private	26-30	Commuter	Traditional
Robert	Bachelors	Kentucky	Private	26-30	Commuter	Traditional
Joseph	Bachelors	Kentucky	Public	36-40	Both	Traditional
Polly	Masters	Kentucky	Private	51-55	Commuter	Non-Traditional
Mary	Masters	Tennessee	Public	46-50	Residential	Traditional
Hayley	Ed. S.	Tennessee	Public	46-50	Residential	Traditional
Marcus	Masters	Kentucky	Private	41-45	Commuter	Traditional
Lily	Bachelors	Kentucky	Public	55-60	Commuter	Non-Traditional
Carl	Bachelors	Kentucky	Public	36-40	Commuter	Traditional
Steven	Masters	Virginia	Public	51-55	Commuter	Non-Traditional
Elizabeth	Masters	Kentucky	Private	51-55	Commuter	Non-Traditional

Participant Profiles

Bruce

Bruce is in his mid-twenties and works as a security guard at a small liberal arts school in south-central Kentucky. He is a divorced, single father, who graduated from the same small liberal arts college where he now works with a degree in History and Christian Ministries. Originally from eastern Kentucky, Bruce described his family circumstances growing up as "normal", indicating his family wasn't "rich", but that they also weren't "poverty stricken". Bruce states: "I always had plenty to eat, you know, plenty of clothes. It was normal. I had just a good, normal childhood."

Bruce indicated the reason he chose the college he did, was because he was following a girl. He had never thought college was attainable until this girl and her family showed him that it was. Bruce added: "She came from a family completely different from mine…her parents were college educated, so it was important that she be college educated."

Bruce realized that the only way that he was going to be to attend college was through scholarships, as his parents were not going to be able to help him pay for it. He was a good student in high school, making good grades which afforded him the opportunity to attend college for free.

As a child, Bruce, his parents and his brother lived on a farm. His father worked as a mechanic and his mother stayed at home to raise the children. All of the people who lived around him were extended family: grandparents or aunts and uncles. The farm that they grew up on was mostly mountainous, with little farmland to raise food or livestock. Bruce's brother was six years older than he was and most of his friends growing up were his brother's friends or his cousins.

Patricia

At the time of our interview, Patricia had just begun work on her Ph.D. in Communications at a large state university in Kentucky. She received her Bachelor's degree from a small-liberal arts college in south-central Kentucky and obtained her Master's degree from a large, regional university. She has worked in academic advising for the past 7 years and has served as an adjunct instructor for the past five years.

Patricia was born and raised in south-central Kentucky by two blue-collar parents, both of whom worked hard to provide for her and her brother. When she was 14 years old, her parents divorced. Patricia stayed with her mother and older brother, while her father moved out. During her teenage years, she worked to pay her own bills, such as car insurance and occasionally contributed to the household bills. Patricia stated:

> Mom…she struggled. I mean she struggled financially. And there were times that I did contribute some things to the house. It wasn't ever always expected. I remember being like 17-18 and like, paying the water bill.

Patricia excelled in high school, often while working multiple jobs, babysitting and working at a local video rental store. When she went to college, she got an administrative support position at the college and was able to attend college while she worked. Through scholarships and financial aid, and because her father had worked at the college, she was able to complete her undergraduate degree without taking out student loans.

Patricia married her high school sweetheart during her senior year of college. He was also a student off and on during this time, leaving when job opportunities presented themselves in order to help the finances of his young family. Her husband comes from a first-generation

background as well, and he also completed his Bachelor's degree. He now serves as a teacher at a local elementary school. Patricia and her husband have a young son.

Robert

Robert is unmarried and is in his late twenties. He currently lives at home with his mother and father, both of whom are in involved in law enforcement careers and his high school aged brother. Robert graduated from a small liberal arts college in south-central Kentucky with a degree in Criminal Justice. He currently works in the manufacturing sector, making parts for automobiles. Robert grew up in a rural community in south-central Kentucky, in which he says "everybody knows everybody".

Robert admitted that he wasn't a strong high school student and that he certainly could have put forth more effort to be successful.

> Looking back to my high school days, I just wish I would have tried a little harder. Just a little bit…I'd just wish I'd taken harder classes my senior year…because it would have helped me when I got to college because my first year at college was probably the toughest year I've ever had.

Robert was a commuter student during his time at college and he was actively involved in multiple campus organizations, including Student Government Association. As a student, he was also involved in mission work, taking trips to New Orleans, Memphis and Atlanta to work with organizations to help those in need.

Joseph

Joseph is originally from southeastern Kentucky and is the son of grocery store owners. He has one sister, who also graduated from college. Joseph started college at the local community college, before transferring to a large regional university in central Kentucky. Now

in his late 30's, Joseph obtained his Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice from a large regional university in Kentucky. He currently works for the State Department of Fish and Wildlife in his hometown as a game warden. He indicated that he could not believe how fortunate he was to be able to have a job that would allow him to run around in the woods, which is something he liked to do in his spare time. Joseph said:

> (The local conservation officer) came in and talked to us and I mean it was kinda like an epiphany I guess you would say. He was talking about what they done during a day's time and how you go ride around on a boat all summer and in the winter time you went and rode around in the woods… I like getting out riding around looking at animals, you know.

Joseph pointed out that he never reached his full academic potential in high school, because like most young men in the area where he grew up, he expected that he was going to end up working in the local coal mines. He "did enough to get by" until he could "get out and find a job". He credits the career day visit from the local conservation officer for putting the idea of college in his head.

Joseph is now nearing retirement from his state position and is starting to think about his next act. He has considered going to law school or to become an HVAC (Heating and Air Conditioning) repairman following his state retirement. Joseph is married to a girl from his hometown and they have two children.

Polly

Polly completed her Bachelor's degree and Master's degree as a non-traditional college student. She is originally from south-central Kentucky and lived on a farm 15 miles from the nearest town. Her family raised dairy cattle, beef cattle and pigs and grew their own garden. She

was raised with four boys, her two brothers and two cousins who lived with them following the deaths of their parents. One of Polly's brothers was born with a disability. Polly shared: "My brother…was born deaf. His inner eardrum was busted when he was born."

Polly originally planned to go to college right after high school on a basketball scholarship and made it one semester before returning home, getting married and having children. Moving from her hometown Polly lived in eastern Kentucky for several years with her young family before her marriage ended. After the divorce, she moved back home and purchased a house with her mother. She started working at a local Head Start and they required their teachers to have a college degree. In her mid-thirties with two small children, Polly went back to school. After completing her Bachelor's degree, a position became available at the college that she attended to work in the program that she graduated from. She took that position and worked on her Master's degree, moving up to become an enrollment coordinator for five satellite campuses of the college.

Polly is in her early fifties now, is remarried and continues to recruit students to the academic program that she completed and has seen her daughter, step-daughter and daughter-in-law follow her as college graduates. Polly lives in her hometown, commuting each day to work on the various college campuses where she recruits students.

Mary

Mary is in her late 40's and at the time of our interview worked as a counselor for a federal Trio program at a large regional university in Tennessee. She has since left that position. Mary obtained her Bachelor's degree from a large state university and then her Master's degree from a regional university in central Tennessee. She is unmarried, and a mother of a young daughter. She lives close to her parents and her sister.

Mary describes her childhood in vivid detail. She shared that both of her parents worked and that she was raised mostly by her older sister. Her father had family in Florida and he would often pick up the family following the night shift at the local factory and drive them to Florida for the weekend to visit family. Mary is one of four children. She has two sisters and a brother. She has a very good relationship with her sister, but her relationship with her brother is strained.

A life-long learner, Mary shared her love of school and indicated that if she were financially able to, she would still be in school. She was a good student who performed well in high school and was able to finish in the top ten percent of her class. Mary shared that she had a good experience in college. Mary said: "Oh my gosh…College was awesome…Being on campus was awesome. There was that tradition. At the time, (the college) was the number one party school in the southeast."

Mary indicated that she partook in the party scene her freshman year and that led to a less than stellar grade point average. However, she then got hooked up with Campus Crusade for Christ and started regularly attended religious services around the town where the college was located.

Hayley

Hayley is in her late 40's and currently works with first-generation students looking to go to college through the Educational Talent Search program at a large regional university in central Tennessee. She attended the same school that she currently works for and received a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice. She went on to get a Master's degree as well, and has completed an Educational Specialist (Ed. S.) degree. Hayley lives near her hometown and has two children.

Hayley's parents both worked factory jobs. Both of Hayley's parents had to quit school during high school to go to work. When Hayley was in the second grade, the family home burned down and the family basically had to start over financially. Her parents married as teens

and had their two children quickly after that. Hayley and her sister had a very strict upbringing. Hayley shared:

> If my Daddy said no, it didn't happen. Daddy and momma were very overprotective…I knew better than to do something, cause if I got caught doing something, I'd have to answer to mom and daddy.

Hayley's grandfather shaped a lot of the family relationships. She indicated that he was the reason that her father had to quit school and go to work. She also indicated that years later, even after she had went to college, graduated and had been successful in her career, that he would not have let her go to college if it had been up to him. Hayley stated:

> He said 'I guess it's a good thing that you and your sister went down to that school, but if I'd had anything to do with it, you wouldn't have went.' This was after the fact. My sister is a physical therapist and I hold three graduate degrees…He was proud of us…He still wouldn't have let us go if he had a say in it.

Hayley was a good student who did well in college, but she did not really find herself connected to campus until her senior year because of the way that she was raised. She was conditioned to not seek out social interactions with campus organizations by her parents. Hayley felt that her high school did not effectively prepare her for college because the coursework was too easy.

Marcus

Marcus is in his early forties and is married with two daughters. He is a native of southern Kentucky and attended a small, liberal arts college in south-central Kentucky where he received a Bachelor's degree in Communication. Marcus went on to obtain a Master's degree in

communication from a large regional university and now he has returned to the college where he first attended in a fund-raising capacity. Marcus has served in his current position for the past six years. Prior to his position as a fundraiser, Marcus served as an academic advisor.

Marcus was raised by blue collar parents. His father worked as a handyman, completing odd jobs throughout the area, while his mother worked as a babysitter. The family grew up utilizing government assistance to help pay for food through the food stamp program. When Marcus was 10 years old, his mother passed away. Following his mother's death, Marcus moved around a lot, living with an aunt and his older brother. When he was 14, years old, he moved in permanently with his older brother and sister-in-law, who were in their early twenties.

Marcus indicated that he was an excellent student in high school who was a popular kid. Marcus shared:

> Compared to the amount of effort that I put in. I didn't put in very much effort. I was told from as early as I can remember and this would have started during middle school… I was told to do my best and get ready to go to college.

Marcus shared that while he was in college, however, that he started getting into the party scene and did not do as well in college as he wanted. He also indicated that even though he was told he should go to college, no one ever thought to help him decide what he wanted to major in, so he spent much of college wandering aimlessly in search of a major.

Lily

Lily is in her late fifties and graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from a large state university in Kentucky. Lily was a non-traditional student who originally dropped out of high school to get married. She had two kids, was divorced and started school in her late

twenties at the local community college. After obtaining her basic coursework, she went to the large state university where her initial goal was to attend law school.

Lily was born and raised in the heart of the Appalachian mountains of eastern Kentucky. She described the area where she grew up in almost reverential terms. She attended a one room school house as an elementary school student and her teachers would have to walk in two miles each day from the main road, because there was no road in the hollow where she lived. Lily attended the local high school, where she was a good student, who had teachers who encouraged her. However, she met a boy, fell in love, dropped out of high school and got married. That marriage ended in divorce and left Lily with two small children.

Lily works as a life coach and political activist who fights against mountain top removal coal mining. When she talks about her home, she talks about how sad it is to see so many of the mountains blown off in order to mine coal. Lily said:

> I love that area. Well, I don't love what is happening to it now. I don't love the degradation from the mountain top removal coal mining. That started when I was a teenager. I think I was 16 the first time that I saw the actual top of a mountain blown off into the sky and all of the top of the mountain was pushed over into the valleys and then the water started being poisoned and you would sometimes see oil and stuff floating on top of the streams.

Lily works with many local causes and supports politicians who are fighting against mountain top removal and other environmental issues that are prevalent in eastern Kentucky.

Carl

Carl is nearing forty years old and lives in southern Kentucky. He attended a large state university in Kentucky and graduated with a degree in Psychology. He has completed some work

on a Master's degree and he currently serves as the pastor of a Baptist church in his hometown. He is married and has three small children.

Carl is the only son of a father who worked at a package delivery company and a mother who stayed at home. He was raised in a Christian, church-going home. As a child, Carl developed cancer and nearly two years of his early life was spent fighting the disease. When he was not in hospitals, he was resting at home, being home-schooled by his mother.

Carl describes himself as an excellent student who was often ridiculed because of his studiousness and at the time, his large size due to the steroids he had been given after receiving cancer treatments. He described his high school years as a challenging time for him. He indicated that the college lifestyle suited him much better. Carl said:

> (College) opened up a new world to me. I suddenly found myself what I
> considered popular to the circle I was in. We were the cool kids and didn't have to
> associate with anyone else.

Carl has considered returning to school, but shared that in his current position, any additional education would not provide him with a salary increase, so he did not see it as a sound investment to make at this time. He spends his free time with his children and his wife.

Steven

Steven is in his early 50's and is currently working as a college professor at a small, liberal arts college in south central Kentucky. He received his Bachelor's and Master's degrees from a large, regional university in Kentucky. Originally from western Virginia, Steven also has

lived in Appalachian areas of Kentucky and Ohio. Steven is currently working on completing a Ph.D.

Steven describes his childhood as "full of adventure". He shared: "It was full of days spent running around in the woods. Exploring old, abandoned coal mines. Huntin' on the weekends. Fishing. You know it was a fun life." Steven also shared that his childhood also had some rough moments. His father spent many months out of each year unemployed as a carpenter. At one point, his family split so that the children would have a chance to make it. Steven was sent to live with his grandparents. His brother was sent to live with an aunt and uncle and his youngest brother stayed with his parents.

High school was a challenge for Steven, as he was more of a hands-on learner. Once he discovered the vocational school, he was much more successful as he was able to learn by doing. After high school, Steven went on to become an electrician. He worked hard to get certified in all areas that electricians work, so that he was never without a job.

The reason that Steven decided to go to college was to help his fellow electricians negotiate labor contracts. Steven shared:

> I got so tired of losing contracts and then people trying to blow smoke up my butt... I'm gonna go to school so that I can….get us better contracts cause I'm gonna be smart enough to negotiate just like the lawyers we were negotiating with.

Steven ended up getting into an accident that kept him from working full time as an electrician. This is when he found his way into teaching at the local vocational school, teaching others how to be electricians. Steven's focus now is on sustainable forms of energy and he works as the Director of Sustainability at his college in addition to his role as a professor.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is in her mid-fifties and at the time of our interview served in and administrative role at a small, liberal arts college in south-central Kentucky. Elizabeth was a non-traditional college student who completed her Bachelor's degree and Master's degree from the same college that she currently works at. Since our interview, she has taken a new position at the same college. Originally from south-central Kentucky, she currently lives in the same community that she grew up in. She is divorced and is a single mother. Elizabeth's daughter graduated college shortly after she completed her Master's degree.

Elizabeth describes her childhood as "good". She indicates that her parents were loving and they gave her and her brother everything they needed. The area where she grew up was very rural. Elizabeth shared:

> Not a lot goes on. When I was younger and in my teenage years…the thing to do then was to go to town and just sit and wait for your friends and talk to them or…circle the local theatre… There wouldn't a lot you could do.

Elizabeth's dad has been self-employed for most of his life and her mother worked in a factory for most of her life.

Elizabeth did not go to school out of high school and worked two jobs much of the time in order to make ends meet. After being laid off from the factory, she decided to return to school for her Associate's degree. Following this, she continued to work for a while until she found a program that met her needs. She went to a weekend program that allowed her to complete her Bachelor's degree.

Results

The results of the research were organized by thematic elements that answered the three research questions posed earlier. Those research questions were as follows:

1.) How do first-generation college students from distressed areas in Appalachia describe their persistence experience?

2.) How do cultural and familial factors affect this population of students in terms of persistence?

3.) How do social and academic factors affect this population of students in terms of persistence?

In the following pages, these questions will be answered through themes that were developed from the rich descriptions provided by participants interviewed as part of the research. Two main themes emerged from the transcriptions that played major roles in the persistence experience of this population that appeared to have the most impact on the persistence experience of the interviewed participants: 1). The participant's influences and 2). The participant's experiences. As part of these overarching themes, sub-themes developed that were shared by all or nearly all of the participants, thus indicating that these factors play a role in the persistence experience of this population. The following pages discuss the main themes that emerged and also provide detailed descriptions of the subthemes identified.

Theme One: Participant Influences on Persistence

The first main theme to emerge that helped to explain the persistence experience of first-generation college students from Appalachian distressed counties was the participants' influences. Each participants shared how their background in rural Appalachia shaped the people that they became and how their families played a role in influencing their success in college,

either by providing lots of encouragement, or if they weren't supportive, offering the participant

extra motivation to prove doubters wrong. The cultural and family influences identified below

were common amongst all participants.

Cultural Influences

A culture as unique as the Appalachian culture is sure to provide a wealth of influences

that help to shape the individuals from that area. During the interview process, to a person,

participants indicated how growing up in rural Appalachia shaped the person that they became.

Participants shared stories of growing up in a simple, quiet, rural lifestyle, the challenging

financial circumstances that they found themselves in both as children and when they were in

college and of the stereotypes that they face and still face because of their cultural heritage.

Rural Lifestyle and Poverty

To understand the persistence experience of first-generation college students from

distressed Appalachian areas, it is first important to understand where these participants come

from. As mentioned earlier in Chapter 2, during the literature review, Appalachian culture is

unlike any other culture in America. Because of the isolation and rural nature of the area,

students face significant challenges that those in other areas of the country do not. Even with

these challenges, Appalachian students describe the area where they are from in almost

reverential tones. Lily says:

> The lifestyle was so natural and um, everybody lived with the seasons and   the
>
> sun and the moon. We got up at daylight and went to bed not long after dark. We
>
> spent a lot of time in the summertime on the porch and sometimes people would
>
> show up with instruments and play music and in the wintertime, we spent a lot of

time around the fireplace and all the time, everybody worked all the time, 'cause

we had to grow enough food to last the winter.

Lily describes the culture in her area growing up as like living in a storybook. Lily talks about

life being like "growing up in a national park." She describes a life full of family and activities

that incorporated everyone in the hollow where she grew up. Lily added:

Lots of multi-generational activity. If we played baseball, then the 80 year old

would be the umpire. But everybody played, you know, from age 5-80. It was

wonderful.

Mary describes growing up in Appalachia at the time almost as if it were a "Mayberry"

like existence, growing up in an area reminiscent of the fictional town in *The Andy Griffith Show*.

"It was one of those deals where we didn't lock our doors. We left in the morning. We went out

and played all day and we didn't come home 'til suppertime."

Joseph discusses how close knit that many Appalachian communities are and

differentiates how different things are in other parts of the country and even in Appalachian now.

I knew everybody and everybody knew me, so there really wouldn't any

strangers. I had a bunch of family within walking distance. I mean at 10 or 12

years old I would walk down to my cousin's house almost a mile away and they

didn't…not worried about it whatsoever.

Appalachian culture is often considered very family-oriented. Multiple generations of

families live in a single area. Grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins were all in close proximity

to many of the participants that were interviewed. Steven shared:

"My childhood was about being around your family and taking care of your family."

Appalachian culture is still considered "backward" in today's society. With limited access to cellular networks, high speed internet or interstate highways, visiting certain areas of Appalachia can be equated with going back in time 50 years. The area continues to struggle and that was listed as a factor for continuing education for the participants in this research. Steven said: "When I had the opportunity to be independent and help… then that's what education was for."

To a person, growing up in Appalachia was described by the respondents as a simple place during a simpler time. From the oldest participants to the more recent graduates, this story was the same. While everyone has fond memories of the area where they grew up, respondents also did not shy away from discussing the challenges of growing up in a rural area. Steven shared the realization that he was not like some of the other people in the area.

> By the time I got to high school, uh, that's when I found out that I was poor white trash. I didn't have no concept of that. We didn't have much. We knew we didn't have much.

Marcus adds to this discussion the challenges of living poor in Appalachia. His family had to rely on government assistance to make ends meet and his family tried to hide this fact from others in the community.

> I remember going with my mother to the grocery store ten minutes before it closed so she could grocery shop and check out after the store was over so she could pay for our groceries with food stamps, 'cause she was proud and didn't want other people to see her paying for her groceries with food stamps.

Because of the isolation of the area where the respondents lived, nearly all of the people who were interviewed discussed the challenges of growing up poor in Appalachia. Families

handled these situations differently. Steven shares that his parents separated him and his two

brothers as a way to make ends meet, sending him and another brother off to live with relatives

while his youngest brother stayed with his parents.

> They couldn't afford to keep all three of us. They gave me to a set of grandparents
>
> and my brother to an aunt and uncle. That's how we was raised. And they kept the
>
> baby. And they just told us that they hoped we would understand some day that
>
> they couldn't keep the family together because they didn't have enough money.

Participants weren't immune from having to assist their families in making ends meet.

Some, including Patricia, started working as a teenager in order to both take care of her own

needs as well as help with some of the family bills. Following her parent's divorce, Patricia

started working to pay for her own car insurance and other items and occasionally help her

mother out of a tough situation by paying some of the smaller bills.

> My mom struggled majorly after parents divorced. We went from pretty much
>
> what I understand from hardly any debt other than a home debt to you know my
>
> mom had to be…had to go into debt to live.

Older participants shared a different scenario. Because they grew up in the 1950's and

1960's, there was very little connection with the world outside of their hollow. During Lily's

upbringing in rural eastern Kentucky, she indicated that there was very little in the way of

material possessions, so she did not realize that anything was missing.

> I don't think that anybody had that much money then, but we didn't know that.
>
> Why did we need money? We didn't need money 'cause there was nothing to buy.

Rural poverty still grips this region as jobs leave. As noted in the 2010 census, residents

are rapidly moving away from these areas in order to find work. Those that stay are often caught

in a vicious cycle of poverty and have to rely on charity or government handouts to take care of their family.

Appalachian Stereotypes

The Appalachian region is still an area where it is common for others to poke fun. Several cultural stereotypes exist concerning the Appalachian culture. Participants provided several examples of how these stereotypes not only exist, but how widespread they are in other parts of the country. From the perception of many Appalachian residents as toothless, shoeless hillbillies with dogs, guns and trucks, Appalachian residents who do manage to travel outside of the region face ridicule. In some cases, these stereotypes are based on the accents of the individuals. Individuals hear people from the Appalachian area speak using improper English or using cultural vernacular and assume that the individuals that they are speaking to are uneducated, uncultured, and lack intelligence. Bruce states:

> People would say 'You got a real country accent'…I had this friend…he's like yeah you went up there to give a presentation or whatever and I was like 'this big dumb country redneck… and you started giving this presentation and I was like Man, this guy is smart'

Lily adds that going away to the large state university in central Kentucky caused some consternation because of the stereotyping that she received.

> There were people I encountered who, um, when they found out I was from eastern Kentucky, they presumed I was dumb. They would just talk down to me and um or speak loudly as if I was deaf. I mean it was bizarre. Some people still do that from time to time.

In addition to those making fun of the Appalachian accent, more traditional stereotypes were faced by the participants of this study. Some of these traditional stereotypes involved being barefoot, drinking moonshine, working in the coal mines, and being criminals and these were all discussed by participants. However, all of the participants indicated that they take the stereotyping in stride or don't even notice it and worked hard to show while their cultural heritage may be Appalachian, they are more than that. Steven said:

> Even in my Ph.D. program, it's just the typical you know… It always starts out with the coal mining and the moonshining you know. Or someone acts like they are playing the banjo (to the tune of Dueling Banjos). …You know that's an aspect of me that's outside of that and I can embrace that too.

Lily added:

> We went barefoot because we wanted to. Not because we didn't have shoes. The school was right near my house. We didn't have to walk two miles in the snow uphill.

In some cases, participants used the stereotyping that they received as motivation to complete college. Lily, for instance, wanted to show that everyone from Appalachia was not dumb.

> I had to finish that degree to prove that Appalachians weren't dumb. I make a point when people ask me where I'm from; I'm from Appalachian Kentucky instead of just saying the name of my town.

Culture and heritage are important components of who we are as individuals and that is no less true of the participants interviewed for this study. Cultural background, financial circumstances and how one is treated by others can all play a role in shaping the person that we

become. All participants shared stories of how growing up in Appalachia, often in poverty-stricken conditions helped to form the basis for who they became as adults and how that background affected their decision to go to college

Family Influences

Home Related Expectations and Challenges

Several familial factors played a role in either shaping the background of the participant or encouraging them to go to college and to persist to graduation. There appeared to be a common thread among the participants that college was not just a dream for them, but an expectation, even from parents who had not attended college. Many of the participants shared that going to college was not something that was talked about, but not for reasons typically given by those from this area. Instead of college being a pipe dream for these students, it was an expectation from their families. Carl said:

> I decided to go to college long before high school probably. I was just always told that I should be in college and told that if you wanted to have any kind of life at all because otherwise you are going to struggle the rest of it.

Hayley, whose parents both dropped out of high school because of family responsibilities, added:

> I mean school was really important. Mom and Daddy made sure of that…. That decision was made somewhere prior to when I was born. I don't ever remember how or when, but my sister and I were raised on we were going to college…

Marcus, whose mother passed away when he was ten, discussed the expectations placed on him by his family that he had gone to live with following his mother's death.

Like I said, when I was growing up I was just told I was going to college. I was going to get a degree. I think it meant a lot to my family. Specifically my oldest brother and my aunt on my mother's side who was kind of like a grandmother figure who I lived with for a while. Um, I think it really meant a lot to them.

While half of the participants had the expectation that they were supposed to attend college, other participants made the decision on their own. Still, in every interview, participants indicated that their parents were very supportive of the idea, even if others in their family (cousins, grandparents, etc.) were not. Joseph, who decided to go to college after listening to a career day presentation from a conservation officer, shared his parent's joy when he told them that he wanted to go to college. "Oh, they were thrilled that that's what I wanted to do…"

Still other participants, like Polly, made the decision to go to college later in life and found that their family served as a built in support system when it came to things like child-care.

My mom was there when I was working and going to class…I had a child that was nine and one that was 11. I could not have gone back to school and I couldn't even really have worked a second job if she had not been there to help me with those two… She took them to their practices and their games and stuff when I couldn't.

Participants shared that family expectations played a huge role in the decision to go to college. Many of the participants' parents saw the type of life that they had lived and understood the type of life that their children could have if they went to college. Even though they themselves had not gone to college, they were observant enough to realize that they wanted a better life for their children.

While many of the participants interviewed shared that their families were supportive of their decisions to go to college, this was not always the case. In several cases a lack of parental, grandparental, or sibling support was shared by participants. This lack of support often proved to be motivational to the participants to attend college as well. Bruce said:

> A college education…we just thought it was unattainable. My family never pushed college. It was graduate high school, get a job, live your life. So when I brought up the idea (of college)…they just…They flipped out. They were like, we can't afford this. You can't go to college.

Steven shares that his parents and siblings questioned him when he decided to leave a lucrative job as an electrician to go back to school." My brothers, my two younger brothers and my parents wondered what in the world I was doing, you know. Why would you do this?"

Patricia adds that the lack of support does not always manifest itself with just immediate family, but in many cases, it comes from extended family and friends. "I have cousins, who I know very, very blatant about it…showed a lot of jealousy."

Lily described the decision of going back to college as one where she says she felt like she was betraying her family because she wanted to get an education. "I felt like I was…kind of being a traitor to my family. Some of my cousins who didn't go to college, and yeah I think they felt that way too."

Appalachian culture is built upon privacy, hard work, family and sticking together. When someone chooses to buck the traditional system, to go to college, it can be seen as a betrayal not only of the family, but the culture as a whole. This was an experience that several participants described, be it cousins, grandparents, or friends. This cultural shift causes rifts that are not easily fixed and often cause irreparable fissures in the fabric of the student's culture.

Even in homes where parents were supportive, many of the participants interviewed share details of challenging home circumstances that shaped them and their decisions to go to college later in life. Divorce, illness, fire, death of parents and grandparents, and unemployment all played a role in shaping the individuals that each of the participants became.

As a young child, Carl developed Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma and was in and out of schools and hospitals for much of his grade school years. His parents spent hours with him both in the hospital and at home making sure that he was getting better. Carl's mother stepped up to work with him to keep him caught up with his grade by home schooling him.

> I think my childhood was pretty normal until the point I spent two years of my life with cancer. … I was home schooled almost three years by her (mom). … The doctor recommended after going through a traumatic experience not to just throw me back into the ringer (of school).

Because of the tight knit multi-generational family relationships that are prevalent in Appalachia, the death of a relative often leaves family members devastated. Robert shares that the death of his grandmother served as a catalyst for others in his life to point him in the right direction when he had reached rock bottom.

> In November of my senior year, I lost my grandmother to cancer, which was a hard time and I guess that's where I hit rock bottom. Academically I started falling apart and if it hadn't have been for some guidance counselors that knew me… they kinda picked up the pieces and kinda helped me a little bit.

Robert was not the only participant who suffered a death in his family during his formative years. Marcus was 10 years old when his family was changed by the death of his mother.

> After my mother passed away my life was, um, unsettled, I guess for a while. For the next four years, I lived part of the time with my aunt, my mother's older sister who was the grandmother figure in my life and the rest of the time with my oldest brother and his wife… So from the time I was ten 'til the time I was fourteen, uh didn't feel like I had a home necessarily.

Divorce also played a role in shaping some of our participants before they decided to go to college. Whether it was the divorce of their parents or their own divorce, it certainly played a role in shaping the person that the participant became, which helped to shape their persistence experience. Patricia's parents divorced when she was a teenager. That changed their family dynamic and financial circumstances. "Once the divorce happened, I stayed remaining living with my mom. I took over a lot of the home stuff…I didn't see Dad a lot."

Polly indicated that when she got divorced and moved back home is when she made the decision to return to school. With two small children, Polly realized that she needed a college degree in order to make ends meet without having to work two jobs and miss her children growing up. "I worked and then when I went through my divorce and moved back home that's when I decided I needed to go back to school and get my degree."

Divorce wasn't the only thing that caused trouble in the households of participants. Hayley's family had to deal with starting over financially when the house that she grew up burned down.

> Our house burned down when I was in second grade and we had to start over and they had just gotten to the point where it was not so hard on them financially.

As is often the case with families in Appalachia, unemployment provided a huge challenge as well. Steven's family suffered through several periods of unemployment. His father

worked in construction and would spend several months out of the year unemployed because of a lack of skill and knowledge because he had only learned certain aspects of the construction trade and had not sought to further that knowledge.

> My dad would work 3 or 4 months, be off for 3-4 months, work 3-4 months, be off 3-4 months. That's why we was poor. He couldn't keep a job cause he didn't know nothing. He was one kind of carpenter. When his part of the work was done, they didn't have anything for him to do. And instead of my dad becoming a better carpenter and knowing more about the carpentry business so he could stay working year round, he was content with being lazy.

First-Generation Status

Participants shared their reaction and their family's reaction to them becoming the first person in the family to attend and graduate from college. Several respondents had a strong reaction in being the first in their family to graduate from college. Participants also shared that many of their family members also had a strong positive reaction to becoming the first in the family to graduate with a college degree. Patricia speaks with pride of talking to her young son about being the first person in her family to graduate from college and serving as a role model for him.

> It's something that I can tell my child, my future children potentially, that Mom was a first-generation college student. I was the first one in the family to go. You're not gonna be the first one, but Dad and I know what you're gonna go through and we are gonna be able to help you with that.

Elizabeth shares that it means more to her having completed college as a non-traditional student than it may have meant to her if she had went to college following high school.

I think it wouldn't have meant as much if I had completed right out of high school. It would have been more like a have to or an expected thing. This was something I wanted to do.

Bruce talks about his family's reaction to him being the first person in his family to attend college and graduate.

Well, it probably meant more to my family than it did to me. I didn't think a lot about it. It was just something. I really didn't want to go to college, but I knew that I could come and do well.

First-generation college students are the first ones in their family to navigate college, so they do not have the built in college role models that second-generation students and later have. Even the participants who were excellent students in high school expressed some of the struggles of being a first-generation college student and not having that knowledge base from which to build. Steven shared:

Nobody in my family had ever been to college. Nobody could tell me good, bad or anything different. I literally went in there like a wide-eyed deer and I just made up my mind that I was going to enjoy it and treat it like an adventure.

Hayley describes her first few days on campus as a scary time because of her lack of knowledge about campus and college in general.

I had no idea where the first building was. I was coming unglued and I was all in tears.

Completing the tasks that all students have to complete on a college campus such as registering for and dropping classes and paying tuition were a challenge to several participants. Marcus explained:

There was lots of unknown just in terms of how to navigate the experience. Everything from FAFSA's (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) to knowing the importance of really not dropping a class because you might be a little scared of it.

For students from the Appalachian region, family factors often play a huge role in the college going and persistence process. Families often stick together when facing a difficult situation, such as a death of a loved one, illness, divorce or devastating fire. Because of the tight-knit community that many of these students came from, they often have a built in support system that helps them learn to deal with these challenges.

Cultural and family influences emerged as a key component for understanding the persistence experience of first-generation college students from distressed counties in Appalachia. Our influences during childhood help shape the people we become as adults. To a person, participants shared how growing up in Appalachia helped them grow into the people they became. In every case, except one, these participants are still living in areas that are considered Appalachian. Relationships with family certainly contribute to shaping our role as we get older. Participants discussed the importance of their parents in their decisions to go to college and the expectations of their family and how that shaped their persistence experience.

Theme Two: Participant Experiences and Persistence

The second main theme to emerge during the interview process was how the experiences that the participants had shaped their college going and persistence story. These experiences can be broken into two main subthemes: social experiences and academic experiences. As previous retention research suggests (Tinto, 1975; Wang, 2012), the most important factors to college success are social and academic integration into college.

Social Experiences

Besides family, peers are typically the group that does the most to help shape the person we become. That held true for the participants in the study. From their time growing up in Appalachia to their time during college, friends played an integral role in shaping the lives of the participants. Steven describes his friends from his home county in Virginia:

> We was a crew. I had a wide variety of friends. We all had common interests, you know…man we were just a mess. We had fun doing nothing 'cause that was doing everything. We didn't do anything separate. We played football together, we played basketball together. We mowed yards in the summer. We went sled riding in the winter…We fought together, we laughed together. We were a pack.

Elizabeth shared that her and her friends would cruise through their small town waiting for other friends to arrive.

> This is going to sound rather boring. The thing to do then was to go to town and sit and wait for your friends and talk to them. There were things we circled like the (local restaurant) or the theatre or the roller rink…The biggest trouble you could get into in these little small towns was probably a little bit of drinking here or there.

Joseph added: "We just did the usual high school stuff. I mean hunting, fishing and camping out. Drinking, teenage shenanigans."

Just as peer groups shaped the person that our participants were growing up, the same held true as they went on to college. As the participants went to college, however, their peer groups started to change. High school friends who chose not to attend college fell out of favor as

new friends were made during the rigors of college. Hayley shared: "I mean, I ran with my new friends. I made a lot of friends in college."

Robert echoed that statement. "Made a lot of friends. Made a lot of lifetime friends."

Joseph indicated that he has very little to do with this friends from before college. "Without a doubt, the friends I talk to now are the friends that I had in college."

As our participants moved from high school to college, their friends often evolved as they did. They tended to associate less with people that they grew up with in favor of the friends that they made while at college. Even in circumstances where the participants went to college with their high school friends, in many cases, those friendships didn't last. Patricia shared of the people from her hometown that she started college with, she doesn't talk to any of them at this point, even though most were in her wedding. Carl mentions that his high school friends who didn't go on to college are just at different points of life than he is. He indicated that the things that they used to have in common have long since passed and he has more in common with those he went to college with.

Campus Involvement

Participants indicated that when possible that they tried to become involved in various campus clubs or organizations. Tinto (1975) indicates that making a connection to something or someone on campus makes a person more likely to persist to graduation. From involvement in student government (Robert), academic honor societies (Patricia), community services clubs (Robert), theatre (Lily) to involvement in intermural athletics (Steven), participants made an effort to be involved on campus. Steven shared:

I played rugby. I played softball. I did a lot of intramural stuff. Even at my current

job, I still play intramural football, basketball and dodge ball. I think that social

aspect you know is why.

Robert discussed the importance of being involved in campus clubs and organizations
and its importance to him.

I was involved in Student Government, which I'm glad I did, because I learned a

lot….With (the community service club)...you know I done mission trip work

with them and the incoming freshman. I guess the first out of state college trip I

ever took and we went to New Orleans for a week to help rebuild after Hurricane

Katrina.

Lily even found time to be involved in campus organizations while raising two small kids
and going to college full time. She discussed the challenges of being involved and wondered how
she got everything accomplished.

It is crazy to think about it 'cause I had the kids. I was involved with the theatre

and we did dinner theatre and I was involved in the community college civic

chorus which was a lot of fun. …I really enjoyed being involved in all those

things but now I'm wondering how I did that. It makes me tired to think about.

Colleges often have several support programs in place, especially to assist first-
generation college students. The Federal Student Support Services program was founded during
the 1960's to provide extra support for these students to help aid in retention (U.S. Department of
Education, n.d.). Campuses have started to provide free tutoring services and mentoring
programs in order to provide students with the necessary skills and support to be successful in
college. Participants, however, expressed differing stories about the support programs available

on their campuses. Students were both aware of the programs and utilized them, or more often reported was the lack of knowledge of support programs on campus. Elizabeth shared: "There could have been (support programs). But I was not aware of any."

Mary discussed that even though she was aware of support programs such as tutoring, that the college did not work to make the program accessible to all students or to dispel the stigma associated with seeking help.

> I don't know that a lot of people used them. It just was not something that seemed accessible. I think everybody thought if you went that route that you were seriously a failure.

Tinto's retention theory (1987) shares that making connections to campus are a key factor in retention. First-generation college students often tend to not get involved at high levels. Students from Appalachia are often considered fiercely independent and don't get involved in group activities in high rates. However, the participants interviewed for this study seem to buck those trends.

Financial Considerations

First-generation college students tend to work while attending college at higher rates than non-first-generation students do (Reid & Moore, 2008). Participants shared that they were responsible for their own finances once they were in college and that led many of them to work outside jobs in order to pay tuition, books and living expenses. Patricia discussed her situation while in college:

> I worked so I paid everything myself. I had a wedding I was preparing for and saving for. My dad helped me a little bit. The child support he gave my mom when I turned 18 he started giving it to me.

Even with working nearly full time hours and support from her father, Patricia provides an example of just how broke she was in college.

> We had four dollars. We had four dollars left and we needed milk. My husband was working at night so he was not even home and I was like we have this milk we are gonna be fine. I can eat cereal. Ate cereal that night. The next morning I woke up. Milk goes in the refrigerator. The milk was on the counter. So I basically just sat in the floor and cried.

Because these families have always had to live within their means and on a budget, these participants often are more mindful of their spending and saving when it comes to money. Robert discussed his concerns with paying off his student loans, which led him to work two jobs while in college in order to get a head start on paying them off.

> I started preparing my junior year and looking how to cut costs. Started a budget. … You know you gotta pay that money back somehow so you gotta go to work after you graduate.

Some of the non-traditional participants discussed the jobs that they held before they decided to go back to school. In each case, these participants made the decision to go to school in order to better their careers from where they were in their current positions. Elizabeth shares:

> I had worked at the state parks for years and then I left and went to the factory and that was just not for me…I got laid off and it (going to school) seemed like the right thing to do. And at the time in the evening program they offered (an associate's) in a cohort model. Had it all lined out for you for two years every class you were gonna take from start to finish.

Polly shared that she had to go back to school because her job at the Head Start program was requiring all of their teachers to have a degree.

> Head start started a program where they were requiring all of their teachers to get an early education…an early childhood education degree.

Many participants also had to take out student loans in order to pay for college and to make ends meet in college to ensure that they had textbooks and school supplies needed to be successful students. Steven shares:

> I had to borrow money. Not from people. I had to borrow federal student loan money. I didn't borrow from people. I borrowed from federal student loans. I never qualified for any grants or stipends or anything like that. You know I had to work hard to make ends meet. Buy books and pay the bills.

Many students take the student loan money and spend it on other items that have nothing to do with helping them get through school. Joseph talked about the ease of acquiring student loans when he was a student.

> Looking back now that process was too easy because I'm still paying them damn things off. A hundred dollars a month… It was free money, you know…Well I mean they did (explain that you have to pay back loans). But you... Twenty years old. We can give you $7000 extra dollars if you sign here and you can pay it back at 2% interest. Well I'm gonna be making big money when I get out of college. I mean, it's that easy.

Hayley echoed the description of student loans being easy to acquire when she was a student.

Back in the day it was so easy. You walk over to financial aid and say I gotta get

through blah blah blah. Sign here. Even though they would tell you it's a loan and

it had to be paid back. There were none of these exit interviews, entrance

interviews that they do now. It was so easy for the financial people to say here

you go and the money appeared.

Commuter Experience

Nine of the participants interviewed commuted (did not live on campus) for at least part

of their college experience. Research suggests that commuter students often achieve college

success at lower rates than residential students do (Gianoutus & Rosser, 2014). However, with

nearly 85 percent of college students being commuters (Horn & Nevill, 2006), the experience of

the commuter student is important in understanding the persistence experience of this group,

which is more typically disposed to be commuter students because of the cultural and familial

challenges that they face.

Participants spoke of a disconnect that seems to occur between colleges and their

commuter students. Some participants wondered why the college did not do more to engage

commuters and others realized that they were the ones who were limiting their experience with

the college. Bruce shares:

Well, there's definitely a disconnect with campus life with commuters. You don't

know a lot about what's going on. I don't think that's anybody's fault. I just think

that's kind of how it is.

Robert adds:

I was a commuter for all four and a half years. My freshman year I'd come to

class and go home. I mean that's all I did. I didn't socialize. I didn't do a whole

lot. I really truly struggled. It wouldn't that I didn't try because I did. I guess I was a little too scared.

Polly, who was working and raising two small children shared that she felt a disconnect as well, but that it was not the fault of the school.

Not on the fault of (the school). I didn't have time to be connected… as far as you know extracurricular activities. I came, went back home, usually to a job or my kids…I just didn't have time to be (connected).

Still others had a very positive commuting experience where they did feel a connection to campus. After a rough first year, Robert developed a connection to campus that allowed him to thrive.

From my sophomore year…my bed was at my mom and dads but you know I was in and out here more than I was. I mean ballgames, clubs, classes, presentations. I mean the whole nine yards.

Patricia discussed the ease of commuting and how her experience was.

It was really simple because before I got married, I was two miles from campus. After I got married I was half a mile from campus. I didn't have a long distance and you know it was just really easy for me.

In order to persist in college, many first-generation college students from Appalachian distressed communities have to overcome tremendous challenges. Taking out student loans, working while trying to go to school, commuting and the disconnect that seems to come with that experience all provide additional challenges that these students must overcome and that the participants in the research did overcome in order to persist to graduation.

Educational Experiences

No student can succeed and persist to graduation without performing well academically in college. New federal financial aid requirements have toughened academic standards that have to be met if a student received federal financial aid and students now have few semesters to complete their degree while maintaining financial aid eligibility. Colleges offer support programs such as the Federal Trio programs and tutoring centers. Teachers and advisors work to build relationships with students that will keep them engaged in the educational process. The participants that were interviewed also discussed their own academic abilities and motivations for succeeding in college, even in the face of a lack of a traditional college role model that may have helped to guide the way for them to be successful in college.

Academic Self-Efficacy

To understand the persistence experience of first-generation college students from Appalachian distressed counties, you have to understand their academic skills in high school and college. The stories of the participants run the gamut. While many of them were strong students in high school and in college, others struggled academically and had to work exceptionally hard in order to graduate from high school, let alone college. Steven describes his academic ability:

> Horrible. Not because I couldn't… I got bored very, very easily. Um, I needed to be challenged. Not treated like I was stupid so the first two years of high school I was horrible. I probably had a 1.5 GPA.

Elizabeth describes her academic performance in high school.

> Academically, not really at the top of the class, but I was not at the bottom either. I was probably a B average student.

Joseph admitted he had a flippant attitude about his grades in high school because of the career options that were available in his hometown.

> It's sad to say, but I never really reached my potential I would say…I mean it's the old eastern Kentucky mentality. (The coal company) ain't gonna care if I made straight A's or straight C's when I go to apply for a job and make $100,000 a year with a high school diploma. So you just do enough to get by and kinda bide your time until you can get out and get a job.

Not all of the participants struggled academically. Through innate academic ability, strong study skills or hard work, numerous participants shared their successes during high school and college. Bruce shares:

> A lot of people had to work hard for their grades. I didn't. I just got the material.

Carl discusses that his love for school and his success in school started early.

> I was always a bookworm. I always had…for most of high school a 4.0 because I enjoyed studying… I liked to learn and it came easy in some of it.

Patricia attributes her academic success to good attendance and hard work.

> I was always a good student. I did what was expected of me. I did not miss class. I did not stay home…I did my work and I did it well.

Participants who persisted to gradation had one thing in common. Each participant was motivated to graduate by a desire to succeed and provide a better life for themselves and their families. This self-motivation played a role in their academic success and in their persistence even in the face of the challenges discussed earlier in this chapter. Mary shared:

> I was just determined from the get go that no matter what I was not giving up on it.

Carl added:

> Some people just look at the short term and some people look at the long-term. I was focused on the long-term. Not that it turned out the way I thought it would, but I was still focused on the long-term.

Steven details the challenges and provides a succinct answer on how first-generation college students should overcome them.

> You have a choice. You can stay in poverty and whine and cry and talk about it and blame everybody else for it. I could say I'm lazy 'cause my dad was lazy. I could say my dad beat me so I should beat my kids. I was poor growing up so I got to be poor as an adult. Or I can make choices for myself and say you know what, I own this decision. My grandfather taught me to turn my anger and disappointment into motivation to improve.

Relationship with Teachers and Advisors

Tinto (1975) shares that making a connection with someone or something on campus is one of the greatest predictors of success and persistence. Schools work hard to develop programs that seek to foment this connection. Teachers and advisors are an important part of these programs. Participants shared their experiences with teachers and advisors while they were college students. Bruce shared:

> One person that helped me get integrated into the community was (my advisor)…It was his church I ended up going to. And he was just kind of a great catalyst I guess to being more in the community as a whole…He was not just my advisor. He became my friend.

Steven echoed this sentiment about his own advisor.

> This guy was such a good friend to me… He knew he was pushing me. He knew
> he was nudging me, but he did it in a manner that kept me coming back.

Patricia added:

> (My advisor) is one of those people who said those words to me. Like those
> words. She planted a seed…that changed my life.

Participants did not just develop relationships with their advisors. Several participants also discussed specific teachers that gave extra time and attention to them and made them feel that they could succeed. Polly shared:

> My first writing class, I remember the first couple papers back. So much red on
> them…She (my English professor) would always write you notes and she would
> always spend time after class building your self-esteem up.

Lily discussed her experience with the teachers at the community college.

> All of the professors there were incredible. They spent a lot of time with us. It was
> a very small student body at the time so you could spend a lot of time individually
> with the professors and learn from them and they would hang out with us between
> classes.

The experiences of the participants helped to shape their persistence stories. From their financial circumstances in college that made many of them have to work to put themselves through school to the commuter experiences shared by 10 of the participants, these social experiences helped to frame the persistence story of this population. In addition, academic experiences, such as making a connection with a faculty or staff member at college or realizing their own academic self-efficacy helped these students persist to graduation.

Summary

This chapter provides a detailed version of the findings from the participant interviews gathered to understand the persistence experience of first-generation college students from distressed communities in Appalachia. While the experiences of the participants were their own, they shared commonalities in the challenges that they had to overcome and in that their own self-motivation led to their persistence to graduation. Two main themes emerged that seemed to shape the persistence experience of this population: their influences and their experiences. Cultural and familial influences shaped these participants and helped them decide to go to college. What participants experienced in college was shaped by their social and academic experiences. Strong academic self-efficacy was a defining factor that allowed these first-generation college students from distressed communities in Appalachia to persist to graduation.

This purpose of this chapter was to provide the results of the research. Chapter Five will provide an analysis of what all of this information means and how it may lead to both a better understanding of the persistence story of this population and its significance to colleges and universities that serve first-generation college students from Appalachia. In addition, suggestions for future research that may further define the persistence experience for this population are detailed.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

The purpose of this research study was to understand the essence of the college persistence experience for first-generation college students from distressed communities in Appalachia. The previous chapter shared the findings from the interviews broken down by the two themes that emerged during the interview process. The two themes identified were influences and experiences. Among the influences were cultural influences and family influences. The experiences detailed in the previous chapter were social experiences and academic experiences. In this chapter will be a summary of the findings. The findings will be discussed in light of the literature and theoretical framework discussed in Chapter Two. Finally, practical implications, study limitations and recommendations for future research will be addressed.

Summary of Findings

Utilizing interviews with individuals who had experienced the phenomenon being studied, which was the persistence experience of first-generation college students from distressed counties in Appalachia, two main themes emerged that helped to explain the persistence experience of the studied population. These two main themes were identified as the influences on the participants and the experiences that they had leading up to and during college. Four subthemes emerged from the research as well. When discussing influences on the participants, two main influences were discussed most often by the participant: cultural influences and family influences. Cultural influences included the rural setting that they grew up in, poverty, and stereotyping that they received. Familial influences were the first-generation status of their parents, as well as the expectations and challenges faced at home. Two main types of

experiences were also identified that seemed to play a role in the persistence stories of this population. These included social experiences and educational experiences. The social experiences most commonly referred to were the commuting experience, making a connection to campus and dealing with the financial challenges of college. When looking at the academic experiences identified, those include the relationships developed with teachers both in high school and college as well as academic self-efficacy.

Twelve participants provided insight into their backgrounds, family situations, and college experiences through an in-depth, in person interview. These interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher so that the interview would flow more like a conversation allowing the participant to continuously share their story without the need for the researcher to write down information.

The thoughts of the participants provided an understanding of the persistence experience of first-generation college students from distressed areas of Appalachia. The findings in chapter four were outlined to address the questions asked in the research questions. The research specifically sought to determine the role of cultural factors, family factors, social factors and academic factors in contributing the overall persistence experience of this population. The identified common themes were grouped by these factors.

An important factor in understanding the persistence experience of this population is to understand the culture and the area that they call home. Participants described their home area and culture in such idyllic terms as "pristine", "Mayberry-esqe", and "family". Participants were reverential to their home areas, to a person describing their lives as simple, but loving; poverty-stricken, but family oriented. However, participants were not afraid to discuss problems that they faced growing up in Appalachia. From the mountain-top removal coal mining to the cultural

stereotyping that many of the participants received, respondents provided an honest look at life in Appalachia over the past forty years.

Respondents described times of living in poverty. Many of them may not have realized it at the time, but reflecting upon it as adults, they understood they did not have the things that others may have had. Because everyone around them also lived in similar circumstances, many participants did not realize they were in poverty. It took many of the participants until high school or college to understand others had a different experience growing up than they did. Others, however, did realize how poor they were. From watching a proud mother buy groceries after the store closed so others in the community would not realize she was using food stamps, to a young man forced to separate from his parents because they did not have the money to raise him and his two younger brothers, living in poverty shaped the individuals these participants became.

The persistence experience of this population was also shaped by the families they were born into. In all cases, parents and other family members had high expectations of the participants and pushed them to attend college even though they themselves had not gone to college, understanding the importance of a college education in a rapidly changing world. The families of the respondents understood the value of furthering their education, even though in all cases they themselves weren't able to do so.

In other instances, students persisted despite a lack of support from family. Extended relatives often expressed jealousy toward participants who were going to college. In Hayley's case, a grandparent indicated if he would have had anything to do with the decision she would not have went to college. This mindset is not uncommon in Appalachia. Appalachian society is very patriarchal. Often, if a father or a grandfather wants something or does not want something,

then that is what occurs, no matter the feelings of the other individuals involved. These students used this lack of support as a motivating factor to make their life and the lives of their children better than the life that they had.

As with representatives of any population, the particular set of participants interviewed for this research also faced a variety of challenging circumstances at home. House fires, divorce, death of parents and grandparents, unemployment of their parents and cancer helped to shape the persistence experience described by the participants. The challenges of overcoming the obstacles placed into their path and their successful navigation of these challenges made them more likely to persist and become college graduates.

Divorce and single parenthood was a subtheme that emerged when considering the data. Half of the participants experienced their own divorce or spent a significant period of time as a single parent. In addition, divorce shaped the story of another participant, Patricia, whose parents divorced when she was a teenager. Research suggests that students who come from broken homes (i.e. divorce), are less likely to persist than those who come from two-parent homes (Ross & Miller, 2009). However, limited research has been completed to determine the persistence experience of divorced individuals in college.

Peer groups play a role in shaping our mindset and the person we become. That was no different in this group of participants. Friends from home and friends from college helped to shape the individuals the participants became and helped ground them with a connection to campus, which Tinto (1975) shares is an integral part of college persistence. Another way participants were connected to campus was through their participation in campus organizations, such as student government, theatre and intermural athletics.

However, the most important component that played a role in the persistence experience in this population would appear to be a sense of self-determination and self-motivation. All participants discussed the challenges they had overcome, but it always came back to their own self determination and motivation to succeed so that they would have a better life than their parents did and could provide a better life for themselves and their families. Because of their self-motivation, participants took all of the other factors that shaped their experience and used them to fuel their motivation to succeed. Bandura (1986) called this phenomenon self-efficacy.

While each of the themes that were identified during the research provided insight into the persistence experience of first-generation college students from distressed counties in Appalachia, these themes can be ranked in order of those that most likely affected the persistence experience of this population to least likely to have affected the persistence experience. Below is a ranking of the themes in order of their importance in explaining the persistence experience of this population.

1. Family Influences
2. Cultural Influences
3. Social Experiences
4. Academic Experiences

The influence of family ranks as the most important factor in the persistence experience of this population. From the parental expectations that they would go to college to the challenges they faced while at home, including death of family members, poverty and cancer, these influences seem to be the most important factor in determining persistence from this population. Cultural influences, such as their rural lifestyle and growing up in

poverty shaped the individuals that the participants became and was the second most important factor in the persistence experience of this population.

Discussion and Implications

This study was conducted through the theoretical framework of Tinto's (1975) Interactionalist Theory of Student Departure. Tinto's theory is shaped by the idea that students who "interact" with campus in some meaningful are more likely to be retained and to graduate from college. Interviews with participants in this study found that to be the case. While many of the participants developed strong relationships with advisors or teachers, others were involved in campus organizations such as student government and intramurals. Participants indicated these connections to campus did play a role in their persistence experience. Tinto's theory also underlined the prism of the factors that were explored to determine what if any role they played in the persistence experience of this population. A key component of Tinto's (1988) theory is the stage of separation, which is where a student, to some degree, must work to separate themselves from their family and in previous areas where they had relationships. This is evident in many of the participants' stories, where they leave friendships behind in order to start this new life at college. The friends and family who were not as supportive were left in order for the student to become successful.

A second lens this study can be viewed through is the work of Albert Bandura (1986) on self-efficacy. Self-efficacy seemed to play a large role in the success of the participant's interviews as part of this research. From their own innate academic ability to their motivation to succeed despite the obstacles placed in their path, participants interviewed showed they possessed high self-efficacy. Even when facing challenges that would lead many students to quit,

such as divorce, cancer, death of a loved one, or unemployment, participants who persisted to graduation had a high degree of self-efficacy and belief in themselves to succeed.

Cultural Influences

Ali and Saunders (2006) described Appalachia as an area of natural beauty, with limited opportunities for its people. Participants echoed this statement during the interviews. Lily called the area "pristine." Bruce talked of being able to go swimming in the lake with his friends. Mary described her upbringing as if it were like Mayberry from *The Andy Griffith Show*. Participants realized, however, even with such natural beauty and a laid back lifestyle, challenges existed. Marcus, Patricia and Steven all discussed the challenges their families had and how hard it was to live in this area. Nearly all of the participants struggled financially during their childhood and many struggled on through college as well. This persistent poverty has shaped the individuals that they became and served as a motivating factor in completing college.

Participants discussed the stereotyping they have received from others outside of the region, particularly while they were in college. As Elam (2002), pointed out, outsiders often consider Appalachian natives as uneducated, poor and isolated and the participants in this study indicated that those were among the types of stereotyping that they had received while at college. Participants also pointed out other traditional forms of stereotyping of Appalachia, including the common stereotype of having no shoes. Lily said it best when she indicated that often Appalachian natives went without shoes because they wanted to, not because they did not have any.

Respondents were quick to point out that much of the stereotyping they received was because of their accent. Several respondents indicated that because of their accent, the people they came into contact with from college made assumptions they were less intelligent. At least

two respondents indicated they still receive stereotyping even today because of their Appalachian accent. Lily, who has travelled the world performing mediations and serving as a life coach, shares that her accent still makes people question her intelligence. Steven, who holds a master's degree and is seeking a Ph.D. indicated a lot of his classmates still see him as a *redneck* or *hillbilly,* thanks in part to his thick Appalachian accent.

Family Barriers

McCarron and Inkelas (2006) indicated parental involvement in educational decisions was not a strong predictor of college persistence. However, many participants in this study indicated their parents were at least supportive if not involved in the decision making process. Most of the participants indicated their parents had high expectations for their children and expected them to go further in their education than they did. For many of the participants, it wasn't a question of if they were going to go to college, it was where were they going to go and how were they going to be able to afford to go. Even in cases where parent's expectations weren't as high for their child to go to college, there seemed to be little pushback from the parents once the decision was made to go to college. Most of the concerns that parents had were financial, wondering where they would get the money to pay for college.

McCarron and Inkelas (2006) added that the best predictor of first-generation success in college was the student's own belief in the importance of doing well. This self-efficacy bore through in the interviews with participants. Through an innate ability to perform well academically to a high level of self-motivation from the participants, academic self-efficacy was clearly a component of the persistence stories of these participants. Students self-reported that, for most of them, high school was fairly easy and they had few academic challenges. Those that did experience struggles in high school found ways to improve academically or a motivation to

go on to college that helped them bring their grades into alignment with college readiness. Each participant understood that a college degree would help improve their life in ways both measurable and immeasurable. For some, a college degree meant getting their dream job. For others, it was a way out of poverty. This belief in the importance of education was a key component of the persistence stories shared by the participants.

Academic Experiences

Contrary to Schrader and Brown's (2008) finding that nearly two-thirds of students who go to college are academically unprepared, all of the participants in this study self-reported they felt their high schools prepared them for college and that several of them averaged a 3.0 grade point average in high school. These participants discussed their own love of studying and education and understood that, in order to be successful, they would have to complete a college degree. While the students felt academically prepared for college, they did not feel that they were socially prepared to go to college as they had no academic role model to rely on in their own home. Participants, particularly Marcus, shared that they wish they would have had someone who could walk them through the challenging processes that occur on a college campus, from registering for classes to the importance of declaring a major.

As Wang (2012) suggested, finding an on-campus mentor, such as a teacher or advisor played a role in the persistence experience of first-generation college students from Appalachian distressed communities. Because of the first-generation status, these students did not have this academic role model in their own families who could help them successfully navigate the challenges that come along with being a college student. Participants shared that finding an advisor or a teacher that showed interest in them as a person contributed to their persistence experience. Participants expressed they were able to find at least one key mentor on-campus that

helped them successfully navigate the college experience, providing them with advice and serving as a friendly face on campus when challenges arose. Many of the mentors identified by the participants still serve that role in their lives, guiding them as they make professional choices as well.

As participants moved further through their academic experiences, they did not report increasing rifts with family and friends due to their academic success as suggested by Gore, et.al (2011), who indicated that students have a fear of being successful due to that reason. On the contrary, students reported the farther along they made it through college, the support from family seemed to grow. Parents were proud of the achievements of their children. Siblings and children followed them into post-secondary education, working to change the academic legacy of these families from one of uneducated, manual laborers to college graduates, providing that role model for subsequent generations.

Social Experiences

Williams and Luo (2010) indicated students who went to college within fifty miles of home were more likely to persist than those who went farther away. Of the twelve participants in this study, only three students went to schools further away than 50 miles, and two of them began at community colleges within the 50 mile radius. With 11 of 12 participants attending at least some college within 50 miles of home, there appears to be some contributing factor to proximity to home and college persistence.

Research suggests that students who commute to college are less likely to persist than those that were residents (Schudde, 2011). This was not the case with the participants who were interviewed for this study. All of the participants but two spent significant portions of their college careers as commuters. While those who commuted indicated they did not necessarily feel

as connected to campus, it did not seem to have an impact on them ultimately persisting to graduation. It also didn't seem to have an impact on their involvement in campus organizations and activities. Participants were involved in theatre (Lily), Student Government (Robert), community service organizations (Bruce), and intramural athletics (Steven), among other campus activities.

Commuting did not come without its challenges, however. Most of the commuting participants worked at least one full time job while going to school. Several of them had small children at the time they were in school. What the participants shared, however, is that they often had a support system at home to help take care of their kids and who supported them in any way they could. Because of the importance of family to the Appalachian culture, those who were at home helped to take care of children and other responsibilities while the participant completed their education.

Significance of the Findings

With rising tuition costs and changes to federal financial aid, colleges are seeking ways to retain more of the students they already have. With nearly 4/5ths of the population in Appalachia not having a college degree (Pollard & Jacobson, 2013), colleges in Appalachia and the surrounding areas are hoping to find ways to access this population in order to further build enrollments. If colleges are to be successful at recruiting this population, it is vitally important for colleges to understand this population and how to help them not only enroll but persist to graduation.

Programs such as the Federal Trio Programs also have a stake in the findings of this and similar studies. These programs work with over 800,000 students each year (Council for Opportunity in Education, n.d.), and many of those students are first-generation and from

Appalachia. Understanding the persistence experience of this population will help these programs provide targeted services designed to help these students persist to graduation.

While each individual student's persistence experience is going to be different, throughout culture groups, researchers should be able to identify certain factors that are more likely to lead to persistence. This present research is significant as it is an attempt to understand a region and culture that is heavily underrepresented in the research. As more and more research is done in this region on this topic, programs may be developed or implemented at early ages to assist students in preparing for college and in helping families understand the importance of college and how to assist their student in navigating the waters that come along with being a college student. Federal Trio programs such as Educational Talent Search and Upward Bound already do some of this, but those programs are federally funded and not available at all schools that serve this population. Colleges and universities should work to develop programmatic efforts that go into the local middle school and high schools and offer both students and parents workshops on college preparation. Colleges could partner with local school districts to identify students and parents where this early intervention could provide the most benefit.

The findings of this research are also significant as they provide a guide for researchers who are studying other underrepresented populations in the area of persistence. In order to understand the persistence experience during college, it is vital to understand the background of the participants and of the culture where they originated. Someone from a distressed Appalachian community is going to have a different persistence experience than someone from an inner city or an Indian reservation. All may live in poverty, but their experiences shape the people they become and their persistence story.

High academic self-efficacy, overcoming poverty and high parental expectations appear to all play a role in the persistence experience of first-generation college students from Appalachian distressed counties. These findings are significant because previous research indicated that parental expectations had very little to do with academic persistence in college for first-generation college students. Of course, it is possible that the tight knit family background that many Appalachian students come from may have played a role in this finding. In addition, the findings are significant as there is little research on the academic self-efficacy of students from this area.

The findings of the research are also significant as it contradicts previous research on the persistence of commuter students. As Williams and Luo (2010) indicated, students from Appalachia are more likely to attend college closer to their homes. Because of that, Appalachian students are more likely to be commuters. Previous research on the success of commuter students indicated that commuter students are less likely to graduate than non-commuter students (Schudde, 2011). It is important to note the contrast between the persistence of this population compared to what is typically expected of commuter students. This could provide the genesis of a series of other research to determine if location is a factor in the persistence experience of commuter students.

Limitations

The findings of this research represent a sample of the population of individuals from distressed Appalachian communities who persisted to college graduation. With that being said, the applicability of the study could be limited just to areas similar to those in the study area. Interviews took place with individuals from Appalachian Kentucky, Virginia and Tennessee. The findings may not translate to other distressed areas in Appalachia outside of these three states.

With Appalachia spreading from New York to the Mississippi Delta, the region is made up of many different types of areas where the persistence experience may be completely different. Central Appalachia is often considered the most poverty stricken areas in Appalachia with Kentucky home to both the most counties in the Appalachian Region and the most counties considered distressed by the Appalachian Regional Commission.

Data collection for a phenomenology is primarily comprised of in-depth interviews with participants. However, additional information is typically gathered through observation, analyzing of documents or holding focus groups. While participants were asked to provide documentation that would help to corroborate their stories, no documentation was provided to the researcher. Relying on just the interviews with participants would be characterized as a limitation of this study.

Although the population of the targeted counties is pre-dominantly Caucasian, efforts were made to attract minority participation in the study. However, none of the participants who were actually interviewed for the research were from any racial minority group that makes up a small percentage of the population of the targeted counties. These individuals may have had additional insight to add to the phenomenon being studied.

The goal of qualitative studies is to collect enough data to reach data saturation (Creswell, 2007). Because of no set limitations on how many people would need to be interviewed in order to reach this data saturation point, the researcher set an initial early goal of interviewing between 10 and 15 individuals for the research. It was determined by the researcher that data saturation was reached by completing 12 in-depth interviews with participants who experienced the phenomenon of persisting to college graduation as a first-generation college

student from a distressed community in Appalachia. This data saturation occurred when no additional new information or themes emerged from the participants.

Recommendations for Future Research

The results from this study, along with some of the limitations of the study detailed above provide opportunities for future research. The results of this study provide a snapshot of the persistence experience of Appalachian first-generation college students. This study could be replicated to address specific targeted populations within the overall population, such as commuter students, non-traditional students, and non-first-generation Appalachian students to see if they have a similar persistence experience.

As the self-efficacy piece seems to be one of the most important takeaways from this research, a comparison of the self-efficacy of non-persisters and persisters from this population may provide meaningful results that can further explain the self-motivation factor that was present in the participants in this study.

Due to the contradiction in the literature of the persistence success of commuter students, further research should be undertaken to better understand the role of geographic location on the persistence experience of commuter students. Is this something that is just typical of Appalachia, or are there are other geographic or cultural factors in play concerning the persistence experience of commuter students.

A quantitative or mixed-methods approach could also be taken in order to gather information from more individuals to determine if any specific factor identified by the participants is statistically significant to persistence in post-secondary education. An academic self- efficacy measure could be developed or utilized in order to quantify individual perceptions of the persistence experience of this population.

Looking at the experience from the perspective of the family may also provide some insight into the persistence experience. A case study approach might be utilized in order to understand the complete persistence experience and its effects on the parents, siblings, grandparents, cousins, friends and teachers. In-depth interviews could be held with each of the individuals in the family to understand what the experience of sending a student to college is like and how they perceive college completion. An ethnographic approach could also be utilized to understand this population by utilizing observation and interviews with many members of the group to provide a holistic look at this population and their perceptions of the importance of college persistence.

Finally, understanding how colleges serve students from diverse populations may provide useful information as well. A quantitative approach could be employed to better ascertain the types of services that are in place to assist first-generation college students, students from low income or poverty stricken backgrounds and students from Appalachia on college campuses, particularly in the Appalachian region. It would be important to know and understand if the colleges in the region have a true understanding of the population that they are most likely to serve.

Summary

This research was conducted in order to understand the persistence experience of first-generation college students from distressed communities in Appalachia. To understand the reason participants from the target population persisted to graduation, a phenomenological approach was employed. Through the use of in-depth interviews with participants who had experienced the phenomenon, significant statements were identified, organized into specific

themes and from those themes a strong textural description of the essence of the phenomenon was developed.

The study showed that most participants possessed a strong sense of self-motivation to succeed and graduate from college because of the experiences that shaped their worldview as children, high school students and college students. Participants used challenging circumstances as fuel to motivate themselves to succeed. Others had an innate academic ability or sense of hard work that allowed them to battle through the academic rigors that they faced while in college.

As an administrator of a program designed to work with first-generation students, the finding that self-motivation played a huge role in academic persistence was mildly surprising. Even as a native of Appalachia, it was surprising to understand the challenges faced by the participants in this study, challenges that Appalachian students face every day. The other surprising result from this study was that Appalachian students indicated their relationships with teachers and advisors were an integral part of their success in college. Because of the typically isolationist views of many Appalachian residents (Landy & Landy, 1971), this finding provides some hope of future success for programs designed to get first-generation students connected to campus.

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Appendix 1: Link to Map of Appalachian Regional Commission Distressed Counties

http://www.arc.gov/research/MapsofAppalachia.asp?MAP_ID=90

Appendix 2: **Interview Protocol**

Demographics

1. Gender

2. Age Range

3. Education

4. Current Occupation

5. Hometown

Primary Questions:

1. What was your childhood like?

2. What made you decide to go to college?

3. What did it mean to you to be a First-Generation college student?

4. What were your experiences like at college as a first-generation college student?

5. What are some reasons that you stayed in college and graduated?

Primary Questions will be followed up with various other questions depending on the answers provided by the participant

Potential Follow Up Questions

1. Let's talk about family support. What was your family's reaction to your decision to go to college?

2. What role do you think being from Appalachia played in your decision to go to college and in what college you chose to attend?

3. How prepared were you academically for college?

4. What extra-curricular activities were you involved in during college (ex. Clubs, sports?

5. Tell me about your relationship with your advisors/and or instructors?

6. Describe your decision to go to college?

7. What was the biggest obstacle that you faced while you were in college?

8. How did your decision to attend college impact your friends and family?

9. What type of stereotyping did you receive as a first-generation or Appalachian college student?

10. Describe your financial circumstances while you were in college.

11. What advice would you give other first-generation college students from Appalachia looking to attend college?

12. Is there anything that you would like to mention that has not already been discussed?

13. If needed, can we complete a follow up interview?

Appendix 3: CONSENT FORM

Understanding Factors Contributing to the Persistence of First-Generation College Students from
Appalachian Distressed Counties: A Phenomenological Study
Richard D. Hunley
Liberty University
School Of Education

You are invited to be in a research study seeking information concerning the persistence experience (completion of college) of first-generation college students from distressed counties in Appalachia. You were selected as a possible participant because you have completed a bachelor's degree within six years and are either a native or long time resident of a county considered distressed by the Appalachian Regional Commission. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Richard Hunley through the Liberty University School of Education.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is better understand the reasons for academic persistence to graduation and the persistence experience of first-generation college students from Appalachian areas of Kentucky, Tennessee and West Virginia. The study will seek to understand what factors played a role in persistence of this population.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
-Participate in a digitally recorded interview that is expected to last between one and two hours.
-Provide any written documentation that you feel may help explain your persistence experience
-Possibly participate in either a focus group and/or follow-up interview with the researcher

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study

The study has minimal risks. These risks are no more that you would encounter in everyday life. If at any point you wish to terminate your participation in the study, you may do so. Any information provided will be considered private and personal information and will be safeguarded as such in proper ways as defined by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board.

While there are no direct benefits to participation in the study, the information collected may provide a benefit to society through development of programs to address the concerns of the population being studied.

Compensation:

You will receive no payment for participation in this project.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. All digital recordings will be kept in storage on password protected drives/computers. Any transcripts/other educational or personal records will be saved on a password protected computer. Any hard copies will be locked in a filing cabinet. The only individuals with access to the recorded materials will be the researcher, the members of his dissertation committee and/or a professional transcriptionist. The researcher will maintain the records for the required amount of time of Liberty University's Institutional Review Board and will be erased following those guidelines. If you participate in a focus group, the researcher cannot assure that other participants will maintain your confidentiality or privacy.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

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

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Richard Hunley. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at 606-219-0025 or at rhunleyr@liberty.edu. You may also contact Dr. Fred Milacci at fmilacci@liberty.edu.

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, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

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

Statement of Consent:

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

I consent to having our interviews audio recorded?   YES_____   NO_____

Signature: Date:

Signature of Investigator:_____ Date: _____

IRB Code Numbers: 1919

IRB Expiration Date: July 18, 2015

Appendix 4: IRB Approval

 July 18, 2014

Richard Daniel Hunley
IRB Approval 1919.071814: Understanding Factors Contributing to the
Persistence of First-Generation College Students from Appalachian Distressed
Communities: A
Phenomenological Study

Dear Richard,

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

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

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

Sincerely,

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

(434) 592-4054

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Appendix 5: Journal Excerpt

Journal Excerpt 1:

(This excerpt is taken from the journaling done before interviewing Subject 4 in his hometown).

Sitting here, waiting for the interviewee to show up, I want to make notes of my surroundings. It is a chilly October day. We are meeting at the local city park. A river runs nearby. There is a shelter with several picnic tables and a playground. This park is just down the road from one of the two stoplights I encountered in the town. It is a Sunday morning, so no one is here at the park except me. The town is small, with one street running the length of the town. Up the hill from where I sit is the courthouse and across from that is a bank and the newspaper offices. I have seen very little in terms of businesses and restaurants. Mostly just mom and pop type stores. There was a Subway sandwich shop. Leaving the Parkway, there were very few houses until you get to downtown. The mountainous road was dangerous and steep and it ends facing a very large cliff. The area is very rural.

Journal Excerpt 2:

(Taken following the same interview)

The participant showed up in his uniform. He works as a conservation officer. Throughout the interview, his radio would go off. This was somewhat distracting. He seemed to be in a rush.