

Inspired to be the First: Factors that Predispose African American and Mexican American  
First-Generation Students to Pursue Higher Education

by

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## Dissertation Approval

As members of the dissertation committee for Pamela A. Peters, and on behalf of the Doctoral Leadership Studies Department at Cardinal Stritch University, we affirm that this report meets the expectations and academic requirements for the Ph.D. degree in Leadership for the Advancement of Learning and Service.

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Anthea Bojar, Ph.D.

February 18, 2009

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A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Pamela Peters". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial 'P' and 'P'.

Pamela Antoinette Peters



## Abstract

Inspired to be the first: Factors that predispose African American and Mexican American first-generation students to pursue higher education

It is well documented that students whose parents did not attend college are less likely to pursue a college education than their peers. Yet, many find ways to get to college despite the odds that stand against them: poor academic preparation, limited financial resources, a lack of college knowledge, and debilitating cultural norms and minimal moral support. This phenomenological study explored the pre-college experiences of 17 successful African American and Mexican American first-generation college students to develop a greater understanding of their journey to higher education.

Self-determination was an important component contributing to the students' ability to secure moral support, achieve academic success, and acquire practical information needed to matriculate into college. Participants demonstrated a sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, all of which must be fulfilled to maintain a self-determined disposition (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Findings further revealed a set of strategies and characteristics that may collectively increase the odds for disadvantaged high school students who want to pursue a college education. Based on these findings, a college predisposition model is proposed to inform parents, institutions of higher education, secondary schools and pre-college programs in their efforts to increase the college-going rates of potential first-generation students.



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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Study

Two African American boys of the same bloodline are raised in the same household of an urban Detroit neighborhood—a neighborhood rich with drugs and slim with educational opportunities. One shows signs early on that he’s going to go somewhere in life and is even given the nickname “Professor” at an early age. The other, somehow lost in his brother’s shadow, succumbs to the fast money of the streets. Professor wins the spotlight in the neighborhood, is adored by his church community, and captures the hearts of his teachers, yet his brother finds a way to simply get by.

As a teen and young adult, Professor finds himself in a tough predicament after fathering a child out of wedlock, but he is resilient and decides to pursue a college education to better support his son and does not stop until he has earned his PhD. His brother, long lost in the shadows, is convicted of murder and sent to prison for life.

Professor goes on to become who we know today as Dr. Michael Eric Dyson, renowned minister, distinguished Howard University professor, and best-selling author—his heart aching every step of the way over the fate of his beloved brother whom he believes did not receive the nurturing and support needed to seize the right opportunities in life. In his own words, "It pains me deeply -- often, by myself, to tears -- to see him suffering so long for a crime that he did not commit." (Dyson, 2008).

How is it that two boys raised together can take such different life journeys, with one going to college and the other in prison for a life sentence? Dyson addresses this question by saying,

The temptation is to believe that individual choice alone accounts for such

differences in destiny. Successful black family members did their work and played by the rules; suffering family members ran afoul of the law and were justly locked away. Of course, that is true in many cases, but in far too many cases, it's not the entire truth. (Dyson, 2008)

Consider a second scenario: Ontario, California, in the mid 1970s: a rural flatland turned growing suburbia, inhabited by a cultural blend of blue collar families looking to escape the city for a quiet place to raise a family. In an era when a blue collar job could buy a new home in a freshly developed neighborhood on a one-salary income, the children are raised in a safe environment with new schools, close-knit families, extracurricular activities and promising futures. They live the full scope of a suburban life with trick-or-treating in the fall, Christmas lights in December, and fireworks at Westwind Park on the Fourth of July. They attend schools that offer a wide range of athletic teams, arts programs, AP classes, and committed teachers. Yet, two decades later, when the time comes for the first batch of youth to send in their college applications, only one high school senior on Richmond Street has her eyes set on college. Another on Sea Island Place accepts a full ride basketball scholarship to Cal State Northridge, but no one on Colonial drive plans on going to college, nor do any of the high school students on Walnut Avenue. Most of the youth decide to follow in their parents' and their grandparents' footsteps and immediately join the workforce, while others begin having children of their own right away. In spite of the security that an upbringing such as theirs may bring, it does not guarantee the path to a college education.

Who are these few who took the leap to become the first in their families to attend college? What planted the desire, and how did so many others miss it? Much like the

Dyson brothers, the kids who grew up in this neighborhood took dramatically different life paths.

But why? It is known that students whose parents did not attend college are less likely to pursue a college education than their peers. Despite this fact, young people throughout the country continue to beat the odds and go to college, even when those around them go in different directions. This study explored this phenomenon from the perspective of first-generation students who chose to go to college. It asks how such students became focused and resourceful enough to pursue a college education in the midst of a difficult environment. It looks into the lives of 17 students to understand the journey that led them to college to gain a greater understanding of the factors that propel a young person to develop college aspirations. Findings are intended to benefit individuals, organizations, institutions, and initiatives focused on raising the college aspirations of youth who are traditionally underrepresented at the college level.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

African American and Latino students in particular struggle to access the opportunities of higher education in this country due to economic, social, and racial disparities (Nelson Laird, Bridges, Morelon-Quainoo, Williams, & Salinas Holmes, 2007). These disparities are largely attributed to segregated neighborhoods that offer inferior educational resources. These groups are more likely to attend public schools with high concentrations of students of color from low socioeconomic backgrounds and, thus, do not receive the academic preparation needed to advance to college. For those African American and Latino youth who are potentially first-generation college students, access to college is an even greater challenge, particularly when they come from low

socioeconomic backgrounds. “Students from families of modest means and modest educational backgrounds are challenged significantly in gaining access to and graduating from colleges and universities, especially four-year institutions and more selective colleges” (Walpole, 2007, p. 2). With tuition costs rising and the availability of financial aid reduced, many high school students and their parents believe that college is simply not an option for them. This is particularly the case for students whose parents are not college educated: less than one-third of this population make it to college (Horn & Nunez, 2000).

Additional challenges that inhibit a potential first-generation student’s odds of enrolling in college include a lack of academic preparation, a lack of support from family and influential adults, a lack of college-knowledge, and a limited amount of resources to pay for college (Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006). Often, these students do not have the opportunity to attend high schools that make college planning and academic preparation a priority because their schools are so under resourced that they do not even have books to distribute to their students. Therefore, it is difficult for these schools to take the time and money necessary to allocate resources toward college preparation programs and initiatives.

However, it is clear that sending a child to college is not solely the responsibility of the school. Even when potential first-generation students are college-qualified and have academic credentials similar to their peers whose parents are college educated, they are still reported to enroll in college at lower rates (Horn & Nunez, 2000). Of the highly qualified first-generation students in Horn and Nunez’s study, approximately 25% were not enrolled at a four-year institution, and another 13% had not enrolled at any

postsecondary institution. This disparity has been attributed to the lack of support first-generation students receive from their families and influential adults in their lives. In fact, many are discouraged from aspiring to a college education by family, peers, and even teachers and administrators in their schools. In a study of first-generation students from Texas, the students reported the following discouraging statements:

My coach told me if it wasn't for track, I wouldn't make it in college . . . I got hurt so basically he was like "You're done then, you're done, you don't have anything left to do. You probably won't even make it in school."

My grandmother told my mom that I wasn't gonna graduate from high school when I was little. She said I was gonna be a drug dealer, wasn't gonna amount to anything.

In high school, they would say I wasn't gonna make it . . . so I was like, "You know what? Maybe they're right, I shouldn't go."

(Engle et al., 2006, p. 36)

Students who have not been encouraged to go to college know very little about what it means and what it takes to get a college education. Additionally, they have low college aspirations and are poorly prepared academically for college admission and a successful college career (Engle et al., 2006). Even after overcoming the challenges related to academic preparation and securing financial resources, many college-bound first-generation students continue to struggle as they prepare to transition from one phase of life into another. "First-generation students face all the anxieties, dislocations, and difficulties of any college student, but their experiences often involve substantial cultural

as well as social and academic transitions” (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004, p. 250). Because many first-generation students are of color (e.g., Black, Latino, American Indian, etc.), the challenge of emerging into a predominantly White environment for the first time can create tensions between the new world and home. Latino students, for example, are often pressured to choose commitment to family over personal educational pursuits (Nelson Laird et al., 2007; Dayton & Gonzalez-Vasquez, 2004).

In addition, while many students have access to the resources and information needed to pursue a college education, this process is often a struggle for potential first-generation students. They struggle with their limited scope of knowledge of the admissions and financial aid processes; they struggle as they maneuver the process without a strong system of support from family and friends to guide them; and they struggle academically, as they typically are not well prepared for college (Volle & Federico, 1997). These challenges make it less likely that they will complete the college application process or even have aspirations to earn a bachelor’s degree.

### *History of the Problem*

The face of higher education is evolving as the demographics of American society continue to change. As an institution that was established to primarily serve the elite, higher education is being challenged to respond to an increasing demand for greater access for a broad spectrum of people from a variety of economic, cultural, religious, and racial backgrounds. In the early 1900s, the ability to pursue a college education was a great privilege enjoyed by a select few. The student body largely consisted of White males whose fathers were well-educated and held high-profile jobs in medicine, law, or

business. Many groups of people, including women and African Americans, were underrepresented in the major institutions of higher education (London, 1992; Marsden, 1994). In some cases, unmarried women were allowed to attend in order to pursue a career in teaching. However, if these women chose to marry, they were expected to drop out of school (London). The few African Americans who were admitted into prestigious universities were subjected to racism from their peers, as well as from university faculty and administrators. For example, in the 1920s at Harvard University, African Americans were not allowed to share dorm rooms with their White peers. They had to choose between footing the cost of rooming alone or finding another Black student with whom to room. Until World War II, Princeton University did not admit Black students into their undergraduate programs, allowing them only to attend Princeton's Theological Seminary (Marsden, 1994).

A number of movements and initiatives have challenged classic universities to become more inclusive and accessible. Only a few decades after the abolition of slavery, African Americans who desired to pursue a college education began opening their own institutions, as they were not allowed to attend most of the predominantly White colleges in the country (Marsden, 1994 ). These institutions, known as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), were established to educate African Americans in an era and a society that offered them few other higher education opportunities. Today, HBCUs are highly successful in retaining and graduating African Americans who go on to pursue graduate and doctoral degrees (Nelson Laird et al., 2007). In fact, African Americans who attend these institutions tend to have greater academic success than African Americans who attend predominantly White institutions.

Women also began to establish all-female colleges across the country, providing educational opportunities to this underrepresented group. As a result of the establishment and growth of these institutions after World War I, the number of African Americans and women who took advantage of the opportunity to pursue a college education increased sharply (London, 1992; Marsden, 1994).

The story of Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) is a bit different. Recent years have brought the development and increase of HSIs, largely due to demographic shifts taking place at predominantly White institutions located in the southern United States, where strong Latino populations exist. Although these institutions were not established as the result of specific legislation or initiatives, local Latino community organizations and governments worked together to establish that an institution will be considered an HSI if its enrollment is at least 25% Latino. Unfortunately, because these institutions are fairly new in their mission to serve this population, they are not yet as successful as the HBCUs, but they are working to improve success rates by offering resources to aid in academic achievement, by implementing programs to raise college aspirations, and by sustaining a commitment to the success of Hispanic students and culture (Nelson Laird et al., 2007).

In addition to the grassroots initiatives to create educational opportunities for underrepresented groups, federal and state governments also took responsibility for improving access to college. This effort materialized in mandates such as the development of 19th century land grant colleges, open admissions policies, and low-cost community colleges (Seidman, 2005). Additionally, the GI Bill was established to extend educational opportunities to soldiers returning from war, and in the 1950s, federally



supported need-based aid was introduced to assist those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds with tuition and college-related expenses (Walpole, 2007). These initiatives, along with the efforts to establish institutions of higher education for marginalized populations, were crucial keys to opening the door of access to new segments of the population.

Due to these efforts, an increasing number of first-generation students understand their options and are choosing to attend private, predominantly White universities. In a society that celebrates advances in science and technology, grapples with the challenges of immigration, and is becoming increasingly urban, a great diversity of people is becoming visible on college campuses. The population of working-class and underrepresented students has dramatically increased, and consequently, the typical college student can no longer be solely classified as upper middle class, young, or male. In this day and age, there are more women than men in college, and unlike any other era in our history, older students and single parents are taking their seats in college classrooms (London, 1992). It is, therefore, essential to develop a greater understanding of these unique experiences as educators continue to seek out ways to increase college access and success for students who come from marginalized populations.

#### *Current Status of the Problem*

In recent years, colleges and universities have experienced an increase in college attendance by students who are the first in their families to go to college, and in the vast majority of cases, these students are from low-income families. For these students, the transition into the world of higher education has the added anxiety of trying to find a place in an environment not traditionally designed to serve underrepresented populations.

Today, the college-going disparity between the privileged and the underprivileged still exists. High school students who come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds attend college at a rate 30% higher than their peers who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Walpole, 2007). In 2001, Choy reported that only 34% of the entering student population at four-year institutions were first-generation students, which means that approximately 60% of first-generation students did not enroll in a four-year institution. This figure is in comparison to 23% of their peers whose parents are college educated (Berkner & Chavez, 1997). In most cases, first-generation students attend community colleges, as access to four-year institutions remains a challenge (London, 1992). However, the greatest problem rests in the fact that a significant portion of first-generation students still choose not to attend college at all. “Students whose parents have not attended college and/or have not earned a college degree are much less likely to go to college than their peers, particularly in the four-year sector” (Engle et al., 2006, p. 13).

First-generation students who make it to college are significantly different than their peers in a number of ways. Engle et al. (2006) found that first-generation students are more likely to delay entry into postsecondary education, to begin college at two-year institutions, to commute to campus, to take classes part-time while working full-time, to stop in and out of college, and to need remedial coursework upon college entry. Another point of concern is the persistence of first-generation students once they have enrolled in college, as they are much less likely than their peers to earn a bachelor’s degree (Curtin, Ingels, Wu, & Heuer, 2002).

### *Theory and Action Related to the Problem*

A number of challenges inhibit a first-generation student's odds of enrolling in college. These include adapting culturally to college, having a low level of academic preparation, lacking strong support from family and influential adults, not having knowledge about the college admissions process, and having a limited amount of financial resources (Engle et al., 2006). For first-generation students and their parents, the overall lack of exposure to postsecondary education options results in a lack of awareness of the social and economic benefits of attending college (Volle & Federico, 1997).

In an effort to address the disparity of college access, pre-college programs across the nation have been established to provide first-generation students and other underprivileged populations with the information and resources needed to successfully pursue a college education (Engle et al., 2006). Program services typically include academic preparation, college information resources, and assistance defining personal goals and aspirations (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). They are also effective in acclimating students to the college environment, making the transition into college less stressful (Engle et al.).

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) identified a three-stage framework for preparing students for college: (a) *predisposition* (the decision about whether or not to attend college), (b) *search* (the acquisition of information about specific institutions), and (c) *choice* (the selection of and enrollment at a particular institution). This framework is designed to set a standard for pre-college programs that increases the odds of students aspiring to and preparing for a college education. According to Perna (2002), who evaluated a number of pre-college programs based on Hossler and Gallagher's

framework, many of these programs are not doing enough to prepare students academically and are not giving priority to providing financial aid information, which is a well-known barrier to college access for first-generation students.

The current study employed a three-tier college predisposition framework designed to encapsulate the experiences of first-generation students of color and to acquire a greater understanding of the characteristics possessed and strategies used by first-generation students to pursue college enrollment. It was created to frame this study in response to the limited scope of academic research that describes the pre-college characteristics and strategies of potential first-generation students who go on to successfully enroll into college. Elements of this model were derived from Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory and from a body of research that describes the characteristics and strategies of academically successful students. The framework pulls together the qualities of self-determination, academic achievement, and ingenuity as three foundational characteristics that may result in first-generation students' college enrollment.

#### *Need for Further Study of the Problem*

Researchers project that the presence of first-generation students at institutions of higher education across the nation will grow over the next decade (Terenzini et al., 1996). However, the problem of college access has yet to be resolved. Even with the services that pre-college programs provide to potential first-generation students, a great number of college-qualified youth still miss out on the opportunity to go to college (Horn & Nunez, 2000). In order to grasp a full understanding of the barriers that limit students' opportunities to pursue a college education, further study is needed.

To take one step further, it is important to not only understand the barriers but also to understand the ways in which students have overcome them. Such information can provide the basis for a model that outlines what potential first-generation students may need in order to successfully enroll in and graduate from college. Additionally, Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) asserted that future studies on successful students of color should take race and the interrelationship between social and academic integration into account. The current study took these factors into account by focusing on the experiences of African American and Latino students. It examines strategies for negotiating cultural background while in an academic environment and places significant emphasis on social and academic integration within the college predisposition framework created to frame this study.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify and explore the factors that African American and Mexican American first-generation students attribute to the decision to pursue a college education. Much of the research on underrepresented student populations emphasizes their challenges in the college environment and the effects of these challenges on persistence (Griffin, 2006; Harper, 2005). This study, however, examined the ways in which life before college predisposes students to enroll in college, despite the barriers that often threaten educational aspirations. Thus, the research question guiding this study was as follows: What set of factors predisposes African American and Mexican American first-generation students to pursue a college education? The related research questions were as follows:

1. To what degree were the three innate psychological needs that cultivate determination met for these students?
2. What skills and assets do these students possess that enabled them to be academically successful enough to qualify for college?
3. What strategies did these students employ to successfully enroll into college?

#### Approach of the Study

Given the purpose of exploring the nature of a first-generation college student's decision to attend college, the research approach was phenomenological and employed the method of interviewing. The site for this study was "Private University," the pseudonym for a private, religiously affiliated, four-year university in the midwestern segment of the United States. This university reported a total undergraduate population of 8,048 students during the 2006-2007 academic year. According to the statistical data provided by five different college information websites, the university maintains the following average enrollment percentages: 82% Caucasian, 4.6% African American, 4.5% Asian, 4.1% Latino, and 0.3% American Indian.

The sample was developed by contacting members of the Black and Latino student organizations at the participating university by email to invite them to participate in the study (see Appendix A). The email specified the requirement that participants must be the first in the family to attend college. Student affairs administrators were also contacted by email and asked to refer students whom they believed met the qualifications.

Because the study used a small sample of students, the researcher used purposive selection to choose participants (Weiss, 1994). Students were selected from culturally based student organizations at the university participating in the study. The targeted

organizations were the Black Student Council and the Latin American Student Organization. These two groups were targeted in response to research indicating that first-generation students are more likely to be African American and Latino than their peers whose parents did attend college (Chen & Carroll, 2005). To filter out students who do not meet the qualifications of the study, each respondent was asked to complete a short questionnaire that would help determine if the student was in fact, first in the family to pursue a college education (see Appendix B). Those students whose questionnaires indicated that their parents had never enrolled in college were invited to participate in one-on-one interviews. When more participants were needed, the researcher used snowball sampling (Weiss, 1994) by asking participants to refer other students who might qualify to participate in the study.

To establish dependability, a pilot study was conducted to test the interview questions and process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The pilot study allowed the researcher to illicit both positive and negative feedback on the initial questions as well as on the actual interview process. The pilot involved a group of 10 first-generation students whose parents' educational levels ranged from no college experience to no more than two years experience. After the pilot interview, the wording and order of questions were slightly revised, and the participant pool was redefined to include only those first-generation students whose parents had no college experience. Additionally, a preliminary questionnaire was added to ensure that all participants were truly first-generation. Finally, the researcher asked for additional feedback from the subjects to further establish the dependability of the interview questions and process.

The researcher employed the interview technique known as the semi-structured interview. The interviews consisted of a series of open-ended questions designed to allow respondents to describe their pre-college educational experiences. The sample consisted of 17 first-generation college students enrolled at the participating university. Having parents with no college experience was used as the characteristic that defined students as “first-generation” because of the lack of knowledge and resources parents would likely have to help prepare their children for college. Of the sample, eight students were African American, eight were Mexican American, and one was of mixed race (African American and Mexican American). Additionally, 10 were female, and seven were male. The average participant age was 20.2, with ages ranging from 18 to 24. Two subjects were freshmen, five were sophomores, four were juniors, and five were seniors. All participants were full time students who were actively involved in student organizations.

#### Significance of the Study

This study was significant for two reasons: it brings forth the strengths that first-generation students possess and it explores why they made the decision to go to college. Clifton and Anderson (2002) proposed that educators, particularly those in higher education, move away from deficit models, which focus primarily on problems, concerns and defects and that an increased focus be placed on success and achievement. As stated by the authors, “To produce excellence, you must study excellence” (Clifton and Anderson, pg. ix). This study’s intent was to study excellence.

Anderson offered this reflection of his transition from the deficit model approach to studying student success:



In my efforts to help students persist and achieve, I had been studying dropouts. I should have been studying excellence. But back then, it seemed reasonable that to increase student persistence, I needed to study why students were leaving school and flunking out. Likewise, it seemed reasonable that to improve student achievement, I needed to study why people didn't achieve. Therefore, I spent endless hours interviewing dropouts and students who were underachieving. It never occurred to me that I might be studying the wrong students to produce the best insights on how to help students achieve to levels of excellence... I began reading and trying to understand what made top achievers tick. Time and time again, I found that I had made inaccurate assumptions about the differences between top achievers and low achievers. (Clifton and Anderson, 2002, pg. ix)

This study is also significant because it explores how and why first-generation students choose to pursue higher education. Much of the research on first-generation students emphasize the challenges and negative experiences the students face while in college and the ways in which these experiences and challenges affect persistence. Little emphasis is placed on how these students develop high educational aspirations or the strategies they employ to meet those aspirations. While the study of attrition and persistence are important components to understanding success in higher education, it is equally essential to explore the strength and perseverance that brought these students to the college campus in the first place. Thus, the current study focused on how life *before* college may have resulted in the decision to pursue higher education. More specifically, the researcher wanted to gain a greater understanding of the life experiences and personal characteristics that resulted in the desire to go to college and the strategies used to

overcome any barriers that could have made college inaccessible. Results from this study are intended to inform the practices of pre-college programs and initiatives of other institutions that aim to serve students who are statistically at-risk of not attending or completing college.

#### *Uniqueness and Compatibility of the Research*

This study was unique because it analyzes the experiences of African American and Mexican American students who have been successful. It was intended to inform educators and other influential adults who have the ability to influence the decision to attend college with strategies that have worked for successful first-generation students. Additionally, findings will be useful to higher education administrators and faculty for providing a greater understanding of the strengths and assets that first-generation students bring with them to college.

#### *Contribution to Knowledge, Theory, and Practice*

The outcomes of this study will add to the existing knowledge base in the area of college access for first-generation students of color. Given the number of studies conducted and methodologies used to examine the struggles and failures of first-generation students, the current study presents a methodology and findings which can be used by others in the field to expand this area of research. Additionally, practitioners may find the study useful in their own efforts to increase college access for underprivileged students. Acquiring an understanding of the successes of African American and Mexican American first-generation students, including their strategies for overcoming potential challenges and the resources they used to access a college education, can lead to more effective college preparation initiatives and services within secondary and postsecondary

institutions of education, as well as in government-funded and privately owned pre-college programs.

#### Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

Because this study was phenomenological and explored the lives of 17 students, it cannot be used to generalize an entire population of first-generation college students. It is specifically designed to further the scope of knowledge about this population: first-generation African American or Mexican American college students. It is also important to recognize that, as a limitation, interview data include the researcher's assumptions, biases, and questions. Although many measures were taken to reduce the influence of assumptions and biases, it is not possible in a qualitative study to completely eliminate these filters. Another possible limitation is that it is not possible to extrapolate every factor from the participants' lives that may have contributed to their decision to attend college, however the researcher triangulated the data to verify that the information gathered and interpretations of that information truly represented the participants' experiences. Findings focused primarily on themes that resonated with the experiences of a number of participants, while taking into account any unique, significant circumstances that might lead to important implications.

#### *Assumptions*

This study assumes that the participants were truthful in their account of their secondary educational experiences and their pre-college activities. The study also assumes that each participant's story was representative of that individual and not of the entire first-generation population.

### *Parameters*

Parameters in this study were that each participant is the first member of his or her immediate family to attend college, that he or she is of African-American or Latino descent, and that he or she is currently enrolled in a moderately selective, four-year institution of higher education.

### Vocabulary of the Study

For consistency of interpretation, the following terms are defined:

#### *Areas of Specialized Vocabulary*

*African American:* An American whose ancestors were born in Africa (WordNet, 2006).

*College Knowledge:* The amount of information one has with regard to preparing for, applying to, and paying for college (Engle et al., 2006).

*Culture:* Commonly shared norms of a particular group to which one belongs, which may include language, rituals, clothing, food, grooming, hairstyles, and ways that the group perceives and interacts with those who are not a part of the group (London, 1992).

*First-Generation College Student:* May fall under one of the following two scenarios: (a) Neither parent has completed a college degree, or (b) the student is the first member of the family to attend college (Walpole, 2007). In this study, this group is also referred to as “first-generation students.”

*Self-Determination:* A natural propensity toward the pursuit of growth and integration, made possible by the continued fulfillment of three intrinsic psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

*Social and Academic Integration:* Pertains to immersing oneself into the many dynamics of the educational process, both inside and outside of the classroom (Tinto, 1975).

*Socioeconomic Status:* Defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (2008) as follows:

“A measure of an individual or family’s relative economic and social ranking.”

This is determined by parental education level, occupation, and family income.

High, low and middle socioeconomic status refers to “the upper, middle two, and lower quartiles of the composite index score distribution.”

*Stereotype Threat:* The threat of being “negatively stereotyped, with being judged or treated stereotypically, or with the prospect of conforming to the stereotype” (Steele, 1997, p. 614).

*Underrepresented:* Refers to those populations that are inadequately represented in higher education. In the case of this study, underrepresented populations are those that rarely appear in the higher education arena. Note that this definition does not specify any particular group due to the acknowledgement of changing demographics (Association of American Medical Colleges, 2003).

### *Operational Definitions*

*Academic Achievement:* A collective term that embodies both in-class and out-of-class success (Harper, 2005) and that is made up of four assets in this study: classroom performance, a sense of responsibility, stereotype resistance, and academic and social integration.

*Cultural Transitioning:* The gradual removal of oneself from of one group of commonly shared norms and simultaneous entrance into another group of commonly shared norms.

*Resourceful:* Reflects being able to deal skillfully and promptly with new and difficult situations. It is the ability to be creative and effective in solving problems. (Dictionary.com, 2008). For the current study, the term is used specifically to refer to first-generation college students.

*Potential First-Generation Students:* Students who have not graduated from high school or have not enrolled into college and fall under one of the following two scenarios: (a) Neither parent has completed a college degree, or (b) the student is the first member of the family to attend college (Walpole, 2007).

#### Summary and Forecast

First-generation students typically have greater challenges with cultural transitioning, academic preparation, family support, financial resources, and college knowledge than their peers whose parents are college educated. For many, especially African Americans and Mexican Americans, these challenges complicate the ability to envision and strive for a college education. The first-generation students who participated in the current study shared their stories of success and shed light on the strategies that made the dream of a college education possible for them. It is hoped that these stories will help inform the work of educators, pre-college program staff, and policy makers in an effort to increase opportunities for students who are statistically at risk of not pursuing a college education.

This introductory chapter presented an overview of the study through description of the background, purpose, approach, significance, delimitations and limitations, and vocabulary of the research. Chapter Two constructs the theoretical framework of the study through a review of literature related to the research questions. Chapter Three describes the research design employed to conduct the study, with particular attention to methodology and techniques applied to data collection and analysis. Chapter Four presents the study results in the form of data generated and analyzed through application of the research design. Chapter Five presents a discussion of study findings related to the research questions and reviewed literature. This concluding chapter also addresses the implications of the findings for practice and research.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify and explore the factors that African American and Mexican American first-generation students attribute to the decision to pursue a college education. The research question guiding this study was as follows: What set of factors predisposes African American and Mexican American first-generation students to pursue a college education? The related research questions were as follows:

1. To what degree were the three innate psychological needs that cultivate determination met for these students?
2. What skills and assets do these students possess that enabled them to be academically successful enough to qualify for college?
3. What strategies did these students employ to successfully gain acceptance into college?

This chapter reviews literature addressing research and theory related to the study of first-generation college students and pre-college programs and to this study's theoretical framework, which is based in Self-Determination Theory.

#### Review of Research and Theory about First-Generation Students

Students whose parents did not go to college are less likely to attend college after high school (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Since 1971, the number of full-time first-generation students attending four-year institutions has steadily declined. Saenz, Hurtado, Wolf, and Yeung (2007) attributed this decline to findings which indicate that high school graduates are more likely to have college educated parents than the generations that preceded them.



Despite this trend, the fact remains that a large portion of the high school population consists of students whose parents never attended college and are unaware of the options that exist for their children to pursue a college education. If these first-generation students do make it to college, they face strong disadvantages because they are often not armed with the information and resources needed to navigate the college preparation and admissions processes.

Equally disturbing is that many also lack the academic skills and strategies needed to successfully complete college. According to Terenzini et al. (1996), “First generation students differ in many educationally important ways from the students higher education has traditionally served” (p. 20). These students tend to be less prepared for and more intimidated during the college admissions process than their peers (Perna 2002). With the increased attention that educators and non-profit organizations are giving to first-generation students in order to increase opportunities for this population, researchers project that the presence of first-generation students at institutions of higher education across the nation will grow over the next decade. With this looming possibility, there is much concern over the fact that these students tend to be at a significant risk of not enrolling in college or persisting through graduation if they do enroll (Terenzini et al.).

Among the research that exists regarding first-generation students, much emphasis is placed on two areas: (a) preparing for college and (b) adjusting to college. Preparing for college involves the environment, experiences, attitudes, and behaviors students take on as they are engaging in the college admissions process prior to enrolling in college. Adjusting refers to the environment, experiences, attitudes, and behaviors students take on after they enroll into college and are attempting to academically and

socially adapt (Attinasi, 1989). Additionally, much of the research on first-generation students places great emphasis on the negative experiences and challenges in the college environment that affect persistence, with little attention given to their successes and resilience. Understanding first-generation students' capacity for resilience and their strategies for success will provide secondary educators with the tools needed to help other youth make it to college. Additionally, this sort of understanding will give university administrators a clearer picture of the assets and strengths that first-generation students may bring to their campuses.

With consideration of these important benefits, this study focused on exploring the factors that contributed to creating a desire in first-generation students to pursue a college education, the strategies employed to maneuver through the application process, and the ways in which they prepared for the transition from high school to college.

#### *Defining First-Generation Status*

A number of definitions have been used to describe *first-generation* status. In general, it refers to the level of education obtained by a student's parents; however, when defining the specific level of education parents have received, researchers have had differing views. Pike and Kuh (2005), for example, stated that a student could be considered first-generation if his or her parent or guardian never earned a bachelor's degree, meaning that the parent may have had *some* college experience and may have possibly completed an associate's degree or certificate program. Other researchers (Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996) have defined *first-generation* status as having parents who did not earn more than a high school diploma, leaving open the possibility of some college experience, short of any sort of

certification or degree. A host of other researchers have defined *first-generation students* as those whose parents never attended college at all (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle et al., 2006; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Volle & Federico, 1997). Brooks (1998) articulated a definition that combines the three into what can be considered a summarization of the most common understanding of first-generation status among educational researchers. First-generation students may fall under one of the following two scenarios: (a) Neither parent has completed a college degree, or (b) the student is the first member of the family to attend college. In other words, the parents either did not attend or did not complete college (Walpole, 2007). The current study used this as its operational definition.

What most researchers seem to agree on is that these students are often at a disadvantage because, as the first in their immediate family to enroll in college, they are unable to draw anything from their parents' college experience to apply to their own. For their peers whose parents are college educated, parental experiences are helpful because college attendance is usually instilled at an early age, they often have inside knowledge about how to prepare for and apply to college, and they are usually armed with the resources and academic backgrounds necessary to be successful in college (Horn & Nunez, 2000).

#### *Describing the First-Generation Student Population*

Acknowledging that no population of people is monolithic, a number of similarities among first-generation students are worth exploring. The most common is their choice to attend college (Engle et al., 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). Choy and MPR Associates (2001) reported that only 34% of the entering student population at four-year institutions were first-generation students. In

other words, approximately 60% of first-generation students did not enroll in a four-year institution, compared to 23% of their peers whose parents are college educated (Berkner & Chavez, 1997).

First-generation students who make it to college are also significantly different from their peers in a number of ways. Engle et al. (2006) found that first-generation college students are more likely to (a) delay entry into postsecondary education, (b) begin college at two-year institutions, (c) commute to campus, (d) take classes part-time while working full-time, (e) stop in and out of college, and (f) need remedial coursework. These differences have been explained by the poor academic preparation they receive prior to college; the lack of financial resources needed to pay for tuition, books and other essentials; a lack of family support; and low aspirations for college that result in late preparation (Chen & Carroll, 2005).

A number of racial trends have also been identified among the first-generation population. First-generation students are more likely to be Black or Latino (Chen & Carroll, 2005), are typically older Latina females, and are often working mothers (Engle et al., 2006; Inman & Mayes, 1999; McConnell, 2000). McCarron and Inkelas (2006) found a difference in college graduation rates among first-generation students of different racial backgrounds. In their study, 42% of Asian American students earned a bachelor's degree, compared to 31% of White students, 21% of African American students, and 19% of Latino students. Of greatest concern is the African American population because the number of African American first-generation college students has experienced a dramatic decline, dropping from 62.9% in 1971 to 22.6% in 2005 (Saenz et al., 2007). In this case,

the decline is not due to African Americans completing college and sending their children but because fewer are enrolling.

Despite a tendency for first-generation students to be older, many are of traditional college age, ranging from 18 to 23 years old, and enroll in college immediately after graduating from high school (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Gender also plays an important role, as women outnumber men by almost 30% among the first-generation population. In Inman and Mayes' sample of first-generation students at a community college, 64.3% were women, and 35.7% were men.

Walpole (2007) posited that the experiences of first-generation students are similar to those of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In fact, in many cases, first-generation students come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, have more dependent children, and work more hours off campus than their peers whose parents are college educated. In Inman and Mayes' (1999) study, first-generation college students reported a greater number of people who depend upon them financially than their non-first-generation peers. Some federal policies, such as welfare reform, have had adverse affects on first-generation students who receive welfare, particularly those who have dependent children. One stipulation of this reform limits educational attainment to no more than 12 months, meaning that these students will not receive support if they choose to pursue a bachelor's or even an associate's degree. This stipulation has severely affected the rates at which recipients pursue a college education, nearly cutting enrollment of welfare recipients in half (Volle & Federico, 1997).

Overall, first-generation students are less likely to have aspirations to pursue a college education (Saenz et al., 2007; Terenzini et al., 2001). In 1996, only 26% of first-

generation students applied to a four-year institution, whereas 71% of their peers whose parents are college educated applied to a four-year institution. Even when first-generation students are able to successfully enroll, they are more likely to delay their enrollment, taking some time in between high school and college to work. In comparison, 73% of non-first-generation students enrolled in college immediately after high school, whereas only 29% of first-generation students enrolled immediately after high school (Saenz et al., 2007).

Another area for concern for first-generation students is the rate of persistence once they have enrolled in college. They are much less likely than their peers to complete college with a bachelor's degree. Between 1992 and 2000, 43% of the first-generation students who enrolled in college left their institutions prior to earning a degree. This is not to say, however, that the entire remaining 57% graduated. In fact, only 24% successfully completed a degree in this timeframe (Curtin et al., 2002). Chen and Carroll (2005) attributed these low retention rates to the family background and challenges of first-generation students, including financial limitations, insufficient academic preparation, and a lack of college knowledge. Each of these challenges will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Another common characteristic among first-generation students is their tendency to choose to attend public two-year institutions and other less selective universities. Volle and Federico (1997) reported that 53% of first-generation students chose to enroll in a two-year institution. The problem with this tendency is that community colleges may actually have a negative impact on persistence and attainment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Terenzini et al., 2001). These institutions have lower graduation rates and lower

rates of graduate school attendance than more selective colleges (Terenzini et al.). Students who attend two-year colleges are at a disadvantage due to curriculum designs, disciplinary procedures, and systems of management that work together to reinforce movement into lower levels of the occupational hierarchy. This structure, unfortunately, limits student achievement levels (Brint & Karabel, 1989).

Students who attend private, well-funded institutions, on the other hand, are more likely to graduate due to the emphasis on persistence and graduation (Titus, 2006). Karabel (2005) attributed this disparity to a system of privilege that funnels first-generation students into two-year colleges due to admissions policies at more selective universities that are structured to serve the interests of the privileged. Unfortunately, low-income students, many of whom are first-generation students, comprise only a tiny percentage of students attending the nation's most selective institutions, "in part because the admissions systems at these institutions work to privilege high-income students" (Walpole, 2007, p. 75). Some of these privileges include policies that favor students who have access to a rigorous curriculum in high school, early admission systems, and legacy admits (Karabel, 2005). Despite the disparities, more first-generation students are choosing to enroll in private institutions. The demographics for these students are quite different than the demographics for first-generation students who attend public institutions. First-generation students who attend private, selective institutions are more likely to have graduated from either a religious or non-religious private high school, come from families with annual incomes of at least \$40,000, and have high grade point averages (Saenz et al., 2007).

### *Typical Challenges of First-Generation Students*

A number of challenges inhibit a first-generation student's odds of enrolling in college. These include adapting culturally to college, having a low level of academic preparation, lacking strong support from family and influential adults, not having knowledge about the college admissions process, and having limited financial resources. These challenges have an adverse effect on the decision of first-generation students to enroll in college (Engle et al., 2006). "First-generation students face all of the anxieties, dislocations, and difficulties of any college student, but their experiences often involve cultural as well as social and academic transitions" (Nora et al., 1996).

Even those students who are sufficiently prepared academically do not always attend college. Horn and Nunez (2000) found that "even highly-qualified first-generation students with academic credentials similar to students whose parents were college graduates enrolled in four-year colleges at lower rates than their counterparts" (p. 26). Specifically, of the "highly qualified" first-generation students, approximately 25% were not enrolled at a four-year institution, and another 13% had not enrolled at any post-secondary institution.

An in-depth look at some of the specific challenges first-generation students face is presented in the following sections. Challenges to be highlighted include cultural transitioning, academic preparation, family support, financial resources, and college knowledge.

#### *Cultural Transitioning*

*Culture* refers to commonly shared social norms of the particular group to which one belongs. These norms may include language, rituals, clothing, food, grooming,



hairstyles, and ways that the group perceives and interacts with those who are not a part of the group. Studies of first-generation students' college experiences indicate that they face cultural challenges as they make the transition from life at home to life on a college campus (London, 1992; Pascarella et al., 2004). For students of color, in particular, a common challenge is transitioning into a predominantly White environment, which can create tensions between their new world and their home. In addition, many first-generation students are products of grandparents who did not finish high school and of parents who may have finished high school and worked hard in blue-collar or entry level white-collar positions. Some are the products of immigrant families and are, thus, first-generation Americans. For students who come from such backgrounds, embarking on a college education is a great step into a world vastly unknown to them and those who surround them (London, 1992).

London (1992) related first-generation students' pursuit of higher education to an act of upward mobility—a step toward exceeding the educational level of their parents. Some first-generation students pursue upward mobility with great enthusiasm, while others take on the pursuit with much fear and skepticism. For some, it is neither. The idea of earning a college degree is simply a means to an end: a necessary task to accomplish in order to secure a job. Undoubtedly, the pursuit of upward mobility is life-changing and requires, as London stated, “the shedding of one social identity and the acquisition of another” (p. 8). In order to cross into the world of higher education, first-generation students must navigate through a new set of norms, values, and expectations while balancing (and sometimes rejecting) the norms, values, and expectations of their families and communities.

Real consequences and challenges are associated with the pressures of shifting from one cultural community to another. The very fear of such changes can result in a sense of displeasure from family and friends as first-generation students prepare to leave the culture in which they grew up to join an unfamiliar culture on a college campus. This experience of dislocating from one culture and relocating into another can be traumatic because the academic world is often very different from first-generation students' home communities (Rendón, 1992). The process includes renegotiating old relationships with family and friends as they may question new habits, interests, and peers (London, 1992). For first-generation students, these challenges may come as a shock as they are often not prepared to pay the costs of the personal and social dislocations that take place through this pursuit of upward mobility. According to Inman and Mayes (1999), "First-generation students often feel they have to make an all-or-nothing decision about maintaining their parents' way of life or rejecting their family's culture to pursue an academic goal" (p. 4).

As London (1992) stated, these students are living "on the margin of two cultures" (p. 6). Compounding the trauma is the navigation of the very different worlds and not being fully accepted in either (Rendón, 1992). On one hand, first-generation students do not want to break from their past, and on the other hand, they want to fit into the new culture and struggle for acceptance (London). Relationships with family and friends become more difficult, and often, students are accused of changing and separating from them (Rendón; Terenzini et al., 1994). Additionally, these students find themselves "straddling two cultures" in a sense, as they may be torn between the achievement of their personal goals and devotion to their families (Pascarella et. al., 2004). "Parents, siblings, and friends who have no experience of college or its rewards may be non-

supportive or even obstructionist, and the student may be criticized for devoting time to school rather than family responsibilities” (Hsiao, 1992). First-generation college students may also feel an uncomfortable separation from the culture in which they grew up as they begin to adopt characteristics of the college culture in terms of style of dress, taste in music, or difference in vocabulary (Hsiao, 1992; Rendón, 1996). Having the ability to navigate through these cultural challenges is crucial because it indicates the students’ ability to be successful in college (Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1993).

#### *Academic Preparation*

Another common challenge that first-generation students face is the poor level of preparation for succeeding academically in the college environment (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Coursework that lacks rigor, teachers with low expectations, and sub par resources (i.e., not enough textbooks or certified teachers) are major contributors to a lack of academic preparation in first-generation students, particularly those who attend schools in low socioeconomic communities. Students who are products of these academic experiences tend to lack the expected level of content knowledge and study skills needed to successfully pursue a college degree (Engle et al., 2006). First-generation students often do not participate in academic programs that set them on the path to enrolling in college. For example, most are removed from the college preparation track as early as the eighth grade, a time when they are less likely than their non-first-generation peers to have taken important courses, such as Algebra 1 (Adelman, 2006). As a result, their academic skills tend to be weaker than that of their peers (Horn & Nunez, 2000). This is evident in their traditionally lower standardized test scores and GPAs and lack of honors classes in their high school transcripts (Terenzini et al., 1996).

These students are also less likely than their peers to attend high schools that focus on preparing them for college. Rather, they attend schools that are more likely to have fewer college counseling resources and no access to the rigorous coursework that will prepare them for college, such as honors and Advanced Placement courses (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Terenzini et al., 2001). First-generation students tend to have lower scores on senior achievement and college entrance tests, which illustrates that they are not as academically prepared for college as their peers (Chen & Carroll, 2005). The consequence of not receiving adequate preparation for college is a lack of confidence in academic abilities, leading students to believe that they are not “college material.” Consequently, they dismiss the prospect of going to college altogether (Engle et al., 2006).

A number of studies have indicated that the level of math students take in junior high and high school is a strong indicator of how academically prepared they will be for college and, thus, the likelihood that they will pursue a college education (Horn & Nunez, 2000). Horn and Nunez found that students who took advanced mathematics courses in high school more than doubled their chances of enrolling in a four-year college. However, first-generation students “were less likely to take algebra in the eighth grade and less likely to complete advanced high school mathematics courses” (Horn & Nunez, p. 26). In many cases, these courses are not even available to them due to a lack of advanced level courses in their schools, as well as a lack of encouragement from parents to take these classes if they are available (Engle et al., 2006). Among first-generation college students, 64% of those who completed advanced courses enrolled into a four-year

college, whereas only 34% of those who completed courses through Algebra 2 enrolled (Horn & Nunez).

If first-generation students do go to college in spite of poor academic preparation, many of them must take remedial courses once they get to college in order to bring them to an academic level that will foster success (Chen & Carroll, 2005). To illustrate this disparity, Curtin et al. (2002) reported that 55% of first-generation students took remedial courses in college, compared to only 27% of their peers. According to Engle et al., high schools and pre-college programs should supplement academic preparation with opportunities to take advanced classes, rather than simply offering remedial courses.

Although an important indicator of college enrollment, academic preparation alone is not enough to ensure that a first-generation student will enroll in and graduate from college. Even when students are academically prepared, they are still more likely than their peers to leave college before earning a bachelor's degree (Chen & Carroll, 2005), indicating that other challenges also have a strong affect on the ability and will to complete a college education.

### *Family Support*

The most significant factor affecting students' decision to aspire to and enroll in college is the encouragement and support they receive from parents (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). According to Choy & MPR Associates (2001), "The likelihood of enrolling in postsecondary education is strongly related to parents' education even when other factors are taken into account" (p. 7). Parent educational level is also positively related to how far students persist in college. Unlike their second and third-generation peers, first-generation college students lack the support needed from their parents to

foster a successful college experience, from the admissions process through graduation (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Parents who are college educated, on the other hand, are more likely to be involved in their children's education. When parents are more involved, their children are more likely to take a rigorous high school curriculum and enroll in college (Horn & Nunez, 2000). Findings in a study of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds indicated that combining parental involvement with a school curriculum that prepares students for college were critical components leading to graduation and college enrollment (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000).

Not only do first-generation students lack encouragement and support from their parents, but in many cases, they are also discouraged by their parents from attending college (Horn & Nunez, 2000; Terenzini et al., 1996; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Because these parents are more likely to come from a low socioeconomic background, they face a number of challenges that make it difficult to provide the level of support needed to successfully guide their children through the college admissions process. These challenges include not having a computer and/or Internet access, having language barriers that prevent them from communicating with school personnel, and not being able to afford to take time off from work to attend parent-teacher conferences and college information nights (Choy, 2001; Vargas, 2004).

In a study that focused on socioeconomic status, Lareau (1987) found that parental educational expectations for their children differed based on socioeconomic status. Parents who come from a low socioeconomic background perceive earning a high school diploma to be the norm, whereas parents from a high socioeconomic background consider earning a bachelor's degree to be the norm. Vargas (2004) posited that parents'

misconceptions and lack of pertinent information about the college-going process, as well as a lack of awareness of financial options to cover the costs of college, can result in this sort of discouragement. The pressure from friends and family to encourage these students not to go to college is often intense as well (Inman & Mayes, 1999). In many cases, this lack of support is not intentional. Parents of first-generation students often want their children to go to college but lack the experience needed to guide and support them through the process of searching for and applying to college (Horn & Nunez, 2000; Perna, 2002).

Students whose parents are college educated expressed that they had more support from their families than did first-generation students. According to York-Anderson and Bowman (1991).

Parents who have experienced the educational process are in much better positions to pass information about their college experiences on to their children, whereas parents of first-generation students simply do not have similarly supportive information to pass on to their children. (p. 120)

Parents who have a higher level of education are more likely to encourage their students to take rigorous academic courses in middle school that will prepare them for college. This was reflected in the 31% of first-generation students who received this sort of encouragement from parents, versus the 53% of their peers whose parents are college educated. In high school, first-generation students are far less likely to choose their classes with their parents, teachers, or counselors, indicating that they often choose classes with little or no guidance. Even in cases when first-generation students do receive

guidance from their parents, this is done with no direct experience in maneuvering the college admissions process (Horn & Nunez, 2000).

First-generation students who do receive support from inexperienced parents still reap valuable benefits if they perceive that they are being supported. In York-Anderson and Bowman's (1991) study on the difference between first-generation students and their peers whose parents are college educated, the greatest difference was found in their perceived family support for college. Additionally, when parents take an active role in participating in their child's college preparation activities, their chances of enrolling in college increases. Unfortunately, many parents who did not attend college are not aware of the importance of participating in college preparation activities and often are not aware that pre-college programs and resources exist (Horn & Nunez, 2000).

While most studies posit that the families of first-generation students provide the least amount of support, Saenz et al. (2007) identified a new trend in a recent study. First-generation students actually placed equal importance on their parental support to attend college when compared to their non-first-generation peers. In 2005, almost 50% of first-generation students reported that the fact that their parents wanted them to go to college was a key reason they pursued higher education. According to Saenz et al., "This trend has reversed for the two groups—first-generation students are now more likely to report parental encouragement as a very important reason for going to college" (p. 2). For some students, the very fact that their parents lack a college education served as a motivator to pursue one for themselves. In these cases, students recognized the hardships endured by their parents to give them the opportunity to attend college and make a better life for themselves. In this sense, they were able to show appreciation to their parents for their



hard work (Engle et al., 2006). According to Engle et al., “First-generation students do not view going to college primarily as a personal pursuit, but rather as the culmination of generations of effort and progress in their families and communities” (p. 22).

### *Financial Resources*

First-generation students, who often come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, are adversely affected by financial constraints. First-generation students and even non-first-generation students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have been found to have lower educational aspirations, persistence rates, and rates of educational attainment than their peers from higher socioeconomic levels (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In a longitudinal study of graduates of the class of 1992, just over half of the first-generation students were from families of low socioeconomic background. Comparatively, less than one-third of the students whose parents were college educated could be classified as low-income (Horn & Nunez, 2000). These factors present a real challenge to student success and college access, as lower incomes are associated with lower high school graduation rates and lower rates of college success (Volle & Federico, 1997).

The socioeconomic background from which first-generation students come is not the only factor that influences their desire and ability to enroll in college. For example, Connor’s (2001) study of high school students from various socioeconomic backgrounds inquired about their interests in enrolling in college. Those who chose not to enroll were influenced by a fear of student loans and a desire to work and earn money right away.

More first-generation students than their peers considered financial factors very important to their choice of specific colleges, and at college entry, they are twice

more likely than their peers to report having a major concern about financing college. (Saenz et al., 2007, p. 2)

This line of reasoning resonates with human capital theory, which states that students' decisions about pursuing a college education are based upon the economic feasibility and benefits of doing so. Specifically, students consider tuition, fees, books, housing, lost wages, and even emotional costs to determine whether or not these costs will reap greater benefits in the end (Walpole, 2007). These considerations affect the type of college they choose, the geographical location of the college, and the decisions about employment. In most cases, first-generation students choose to take on a job to pay for college expenses. This decision often leads them to delay their enrollment so that they can work and to choose more affordable two-year institutions (Chen & Carroll, 2005).

Another common sentiment among first-generation students is feeling limited to a particular geographical location so that they can stay close to home to help support their families. According to a study done by Saenz et al. (2007), in 2005, almost half of all first-generation students chose to attend a college that was no more than 50 miles from home, compared to approximately one-third of their peers. The effort first-generation students take to continue working and to stay close to home while pursuing a college education often takes a toll on their class schedules and study time (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Saenz et al.; Chen & Carroll, 2005).

Institutional structures and the economy can add to financial concerns in a number of ways. Making ends meet is a rising challenge as students struggle with consistent increases in tuition, grant aid that does not increase to match the rise in tuition costs, expensive textbooks (often not covered by grants), and costs of transportation,

particularly for those students who do not live on campus (Engle et al., 2006).

Independent students who receive welfare face additional hurdles as the result of a welfare reform policy that limits educational attainment to 12 months, making it difficult to pursue a bachelor's or even an associate's degree. At City University of New York, for example, welfare student enrollment dropped from 27,000 to 14,000 after the 1996 reforms were passed and implemented (Volle & Federico, 1997).

Despite the need to make ends meet, working long hours while attending college is risky business for first-generation students in that it negatively affects their ability to persist through graduation (Pascarella et al., 2004; Engel et al., 2006; Chen & Carroll, 2005). Ironically, these financial struggles can serve as the catalyst for pursuing a college education for many first-generation students. An overwhelming 76.4% of first-generation students from low socioeconomic backgrounds reported that they pursued a college education as a means for earning a better income in the future (Saenz et al., 2007).

### *College Knowledge*

A marked difference between first-generation students and their peers whose parents are college educated is the amount of information they have with regards to preparing for, applying to, and paying for college. This arsenal of information is referred to as *college knowledge* (Engle et al., 2006). Students who are armed with college knowledge often receive this information from supportive parents, guidance counselors, teachers, or other influential adults. York-Anderson and Bowman (1991) found that the amount of college knowledge students have is strongly related to how much support they perceive they are receiving. Their findings indicated that those students who perceived

that they had more family support “had more factual information about college than did those students who perceived less support” (p. 120).

This lack of college knowledge affects awareness on three levels: (a) college benefits awareness, (b) college resources awareness, and (c) college planning awareness. On the college benefits level, students and their parents lack the awareness of the social and economic benefits of attending college (Volle & Federico, 1997). Non-first-generation usually have the advantage of receiving direction and having expectations set by parents who know the benefits of attaining a college degree, have experienced the demands of college, and can pass this knowledge on to them (Volle & Federico, 1997). As a result, they are more likely to be aware of and employ a number of effective strategies, such as hiring a private consultant to assist with the application requirements, paying to take test preparation courses, and applying to a large number of colleges to increase their odds of acceptance. It is not surprising that this group of students is typically from high socioeconomic backgrounds and tends to have higher rates of attendance at elite and selective universities (McDonough, 1994).

Conversely, first-generation students generally have fewer resources, less understanding of the benefits of a college degree, and less knowledge about different types of colleges and the college admissions process. This lack of college knowledge strongly affects the likelihood that they will attend college at all (Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Choy et al., 2000; Terenzini et al., 2001). Most of these students do not have people in their families or social circles who can help them with the college admissions process (Engle et al., 2006). Consequently, they are more

likely than their peers whose parents are college educated to perceive the prospect of college as stressful and the application process intimidating.

On the college resource level, many students whose parents are college educated attend high schools that deliberately prepare students for college; however, first-generation students more commonly attend high schools that do not offer college preparation courses, information, or resources about important issues like financial aid options. Thus, they are less likely to receive assistance from teachers and administrators in high school. First-generation students have reported that they believe that the teachers and guidance counselors in their schools are ill-informed about pre-college programs, information, and resources and are, therefore, unable to pass this information on to their students. Compounding this problem is the high student-counselor ratios (sometimes consisting of 300 students per counselor) that result in a logistical inability to provide students with the assistance they need (Engle et al., 2006). “Many students were not receiving much help from overburdened high school counselors who could not talk with them about college until their senior year, which is late in the game” (Engle et al., p. 6).

Finally, on the college planning level, students are less likely to have received the guidance necessary to choose a college and a major that “fits” them and often enroll in college without choosing a major (Curtin et al., 2002). Curtin et al. found that 33% of the first-generation students in their study had not chosen a major after enrolling in college, compared to 13% of their peers whose parents are college educated.

Collectively, the challenges first-generation students face as they relate to cultural transitioning, academic preparation, family support, financial status, and college

knowledge result in low aspirations for college attendance, which are evident as early as eighth grade (Choy & MPR Associates, 2001). By twelfth grade, only 53% of first-generation students aspire to earn a bachelor's degree, whereas nearly 90% of their peers whose parents are college educated have such aspirations (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Choy & MPR Associates).

#### Review of Research and Theory about Pre-College Program Initiatives

A nationwide initiative that strongly contributes to the success of first-generation students by addressing the aforementioned challenges is pre-college programs. This section will provide an overview of the success of these programs.

Pre-college programs provide services to first-generation students that are typically unavailable through their high school teachers and administrators. Many of these programs, such as Upward Bound, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), and Talent Search, are federally funded and can provide first-generation students with the information and resources needed to successfully pursue a college education (Engle et al., 2006). Educators on high school and college campuses have recognized the lack of preparation and college knowledge among first-generation students and are working to bridge the gap through outreach and pre-college academic programs.

Perhaps the most important role of pre-college programs is to build trust and form relationships with students. When students experience positive, affirming encounters with teachers, administrators, and peers, they are more likely to hear the message that they are capable of success. In a large sampling of students who participated in Texas-based pre-

college programs, trust was the first barrier to cross before students were willing to receive the message to attend college (Engle et al., 2006).

Summer bridge programs are a specific type of pre-college program established to help prepare academically challenged students for the transition into college (Walpole, 2007). Colleges and university typically host these programs over the summer for newly admitted students before fall classes begin. They are designed to provide services related to academic preparation, college preparation, and the defining of personal goals and aspirations (Terenzini et al., 1996). They are also effective in acclimating students to the college environment after they receive their acceptance letters, making the transition into college less stressful (Engle et al., 2006). According to Walpole, “Students who benefit from bridge programs stay in college longer, take more credits, and graduate at higher rates than [other] students who do not attend bridge programs” (p. 79). The more students experience academic achievement, the greater their self-esteem, and the more they begin to consider themselves “college material,” resulting in raised aspirations for college (Engle et al.).

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) proposed a three-stage framework to describe the important elements that should be included as practice within pre-college programs:

1. *Predisposition*. Students decide whether or not to go to college.
2. *Search*. Students acquire information about specific institutions and decide to apply.
3. *Choice*. Students select one institution and attend.

These elements are discussed in the paragraphs that follow.

### *Predisposition*

Many outreach programs engage in predisposition activities and focus on increasing college attendance, awareness, and exposure. This is often accomplished by establishing relationships with specific junior high and high schools to enable students and their parents to become familiar with the programs offered. Researchers have found that it is most important to develop students' aspirations to earn a bachelor's degree by the tenth grade, and in pre-college programs, this is often done through role modeling. Eighty percent of the programs in Perna's study provided role models to youths as a way of raising their educational aspirations (Perna, 2002). Some specific strategies that pre-college programs use to raise aspirations include (a) raising awareness about students' educational and career interests, postsecondary choices, and options for financing college; (b) helping students improve their academic achievement as well as increase their academic self-confidence, thereby allowing them to see themselves as "college material"; and (c) demonstrating to students the potential to improve their lives and the lives of others through the attainment of a college education. Engle et al. (2006) highlighted similar strategies but added that pre-college programs should aid students in the understanding that college is possible and that they should be persistent about the endeavor to enroll.

Aspirations are also developed through peer interaction. Researchers have found that students who have peers who plan to enroll are more likely to make plans to attend college themselves (Hossler et al., 1999) and that having peers who expect to attend college is the strongest predictor of four-year college enrollment among high school graduates who were at risk of dropping out of high school (Choy et al., 2000). When students do not trust those in authority, they look to their peers. In a study conducted by



Terenzini et al. (1996), first-generation students did not perceive their teachers as a strong source of support; rather, they cited peers as their primary source of encouragement. In fact, a longitudinal study determined that being a part of a peer group that was planning on attending college was even more important than parental support (Engle et al., 2006). Therefore, students are more likely to participate in pre-college programs when their peers are also involved, and they are more likely to stay in these programs if they believe that they can trust the program staff.

### *Search*

Services commonly offered by pre-college programs that assist students in the search stage include campus visits and tours, meetings with college faculty members and students, and college fairs. However, despite the financial constraints that first-generation students face, Perna (2002) pointed out that many programs place little emphasis on addressing financial issues. Financial planning, in fact, ranked thirteenth out of fifteen possible goals for outreach and pre-college academic programs (Perna), showing a deficit in most programs.

### *Choice*

The last stage, choice, is strongly influenced by two factors: (a) how academically prepared the student is for college and (b) how much parental encouragement and involvement are taking place (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001). Perna (2002) suggested that outreach and pre-college academic programs include these as important factors in helping students choose an institution.

Students who have poor academic backgrounds typically have fewer options and lower expectations of themselves than students who have stronger academic backgrounds

(Cabrera, Deil-Amen, Prabhu, & Terenzini, 2006; McConnell, 2000), and first-generation students credited pre-college programs with preparing them academically and with helping them to balance their social and academic lives (Engle et al., 2006). However, according to Perna, many of these programs are not doing enough. Even with the understanding that a rigorous curriculum is a strong indicator of academic preparation, the majority of outreach and pre-college academic programs in Perna's study placed little emphasis on encouraging students to take rigorous courses. Students in pre-college programs tend to have higher academic achievement than their peers with similar socioeconomic backgrounds, but their levels are lower than that of students who come from more advantaged backgrounds (Myers, Olsen, Seftor, Young, & Tuttle, 2004).

Parental involvement is also an important factor in the choice stage. "Parental support and encouragement for higher education influence both the predisposition to enroll and actual postsecondary enrollment behavior particularly among students at risk of dropping out of high school" (Choy et al., 2000). Studies have shown that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to pursue the college application process and eventually enroll in a four-year institution if they and their parents receive guidance on the college admissions process and financial aid options (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Vargas, 2004). Because the levels of parental involvement tend to be lower for first-generation college students and students from families of low socioeconomic status, Perna (2002) recommended that pre-college academic programs place high priority on parental encouragement and involvement. Additionally, Engle et al. (2006) pointed out the importance of getting the family involved with the process as an essential strategy for increasing the family's emotional support and "buy-in" into the college endeavor. For

these students and their families, a great deal of anxiety surrounds the decision to go to college, especially if the college in question would not allow the student to remain close to home. Family involvement is also an essential way to equip parents with the tools needed to effectively help their children through the application process.

Similarly, first-generation students who participated in a study of Texas pre-college programs identified three similar critical areas with which they needed the most help through their transition from high school to college: (a) raising aspirations for college (predisposition), (b) navigating the college admissions process (search), and (c) easing the initial transition to college (choice). These areas only differed slightly from those identified by Hossler and Gallagher (1987), placing greater emphasis on the transition into college.

A weakness that Perna (2002) identified with pre-college programs is that they do not always start early enough in the “educational pipeline” to ensure that students are adequately prepared for college. Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) suggested that programs targeted at low-income students, historically underrepresented minorities, and potential first-generation college students should enroll students before the eighth grade, if not earlier. Students in the Texas study echoed this sentiment by recommending that pre-college preparation be made available to all students as early as possible. The other weakness highlighted was related to the need to enhance accountability due to poor retention rates, poorly administered self-evaluations, and low student progress (Perna, 2002).

The reviewed literature strongly indicates that first-generation students typically have greater challenges with cultural transitioning, academic preparation, family support,

financial resources, and college knowledge than their peers whose parents are college educated. These challenges complicate the ability to envision and strive for a college education. With some intervention to help increase family support, academic preparation, and college knowledge, more potential first-generation college students will not only aspire to go to college, but may also experience fewer challenges in their educational pursuits.

The section to follow proposes a theoretical framework of the experiences and characteristics of first-generation students who successfully enroll in college.

#### Theoretical Framework

The current study explored how African American and Mexican American first-generation students became predisposed to pursue higher education. *Predisposition* refers to a condition or quality that is based on natural and environmental factors (Dictionary.com, 2008). Based upon this definition, a student who has a predisposition to pursue higher education does so in response to a natural or innate desire. In other words, such individuals are more inclined than others to have college aspirations, due to a combination of natural and environmental factors. Naturally, they may possess a hunger and desire to learn. Environmentally, they may have received the support, validation, and information needed to nurture that hunger and desire. The following theoretical framework was designed to explore both the natural and environmental factors that may have contributed to the predisposition to pursue higher education.

The theoretical framework was developed in response to the limited scope of academic research that describes the strengths of first-generation students. Its purpose was to help the researcher identify the characteristics and background experiences that

predispose many first-generation students to pursue higher education. Furthermore, this framework aided in the exploration of strategies employed and decisions made that enabled college enrollment. The framework was constructed using elements of Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, as well as a body of research on academic success (Astin, 1975; Griffin, 2006; Harper, 2005; Tinto, 1975; Yazedjian, Toews, Sevin, & Purswell, 2008) and first-generation students (Horn & Nunez, 2000; London, 1992; Rendón, 1992; Hsaio, 1992; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle, Bermeo & O'Brien, 2006; Adelman, 2006).

The theoretical framework, as shown in Figure 1, consists of three components, each contributing to the path of enrollment for first-generation students of color. Self-Determination Theory was used to develop the foundational category to explore the students' internal drive for educational enhancement. The literature on high-achieving students formulated the second component to explore the academic strategies students possess to ensure that they qualify for college acceptance. The final component was derived from research indicating the typical challenges of first-generation students, described earlier in this chapter, with the assumption that first-generation students who make it to college must employ a set of resourceful strategies to overcome these challenges. This third component is designed to identify those strategies.

The section to follow describes the theoretical framework, its categories, and its subcategories in greater depth.

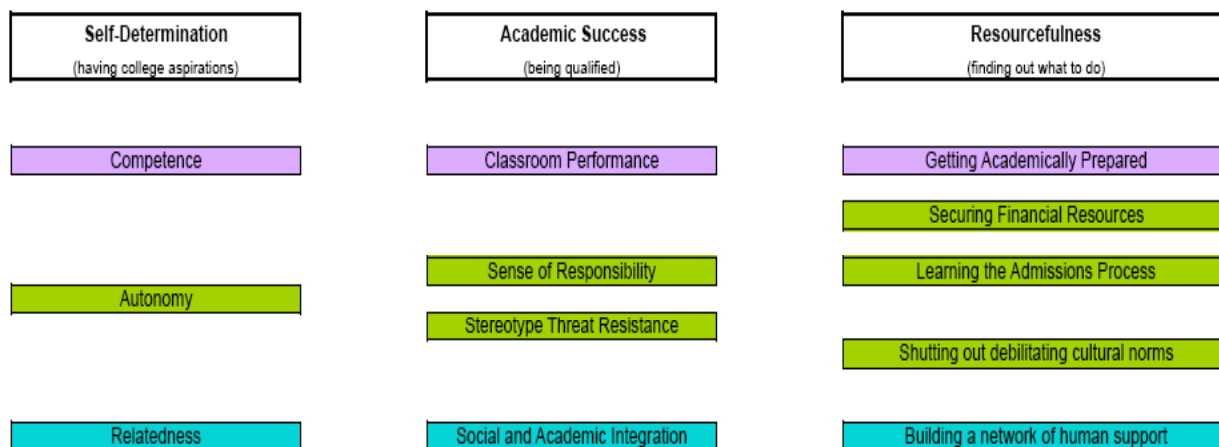


Figure 1. Theoretical framework.

### *Self-Determination*

The first component of the framework is self-determination. As was indicated in the research, first-generation students face a number of challenges that make it difficult to pursue higher education, including lacking financial resources, family support, academic preparation, college knowledge, and a cultural environment that accepts the pursuit of a college education. Thus, if first-generation students who face these challenges have college aspirations and follow through on those aspirations, they must choose to take these challenges on, rather than conform to the pressure to not go to college. Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) was used to explore the extent to which self-determination played a role in the decision-making process.

Self-Determination Theory posits that all human beings have a natural propensity to pursue growth and integration. The authors explained that even as infants, humans are self-motivated to learn and progress and will continue in this motivation as long as the three psychological needs—competence, autonomy, and relatedness—continue to be met. *Motivation* (a term which has been used interchangeably with *self-determination*) is

interrupted only when at least one of these needs is unfulfilled. According to Ryan and Deci (2000),

Despite the fact that humans are liberally endowed with intrinsic motivational tendencies, the evidence is now clear that the maintenance and enhancement of this inherent propensity requires supportive conditions, as it can be fairly readily disrupted by various unsupportive conditions. (p. 70)

The first psychological need, *competence*, refers to believing that one is capable of accomplishing a goal. This term resonates with Nasim, Roberts, Harnell, and Young's (2005) characterization of positive self-concept as possessing qualities such as strength of character, motivation, independence, confidence, and a strong feeling of self. Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) described the relationship between competence and academic achievement in this way:

The task of achievement requires that you and others believe that the intellectual work that you engage in affirms you as a social being and is compatible with who you are. (p. 6)

According to Goode and Watson (1992), it is essential that educators help students develop a strong sense of self-esteem and self-worth as a precursor to academic excellence.

*Autonomy*, the second psychological need, does not refer solely to individualism; rather, Ryan and Deci (2000) described it in terms of having a sense of personal control, freedom, and choice. In their words, it is "the feeling of volition that can accompany any act, whether dependent or independent, collectivist or individualist" (Deci & Ryan, p. 74). A group of high-achieving African American students in one study described the

sense of autonomy they felt through the ability to be “agents of their own success” and to rely on their own “will, effort and resourcefulness” (Griffin, 2005, p. 11). In Yazedjian et al.’s (2008) study of high-achieving college students, they interpreted success in terms of the ability to demonstrate responsibility and independence in an academic environment.

The final psychological need, *relatedness*, refers to having social support or strong connections to other people. Schlossberg’s transition theory identifies five types of social support, including intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, institutions, and communities (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). It has been noted that students who are successful in college have found ways to connect themselves with the community through service and extracurricular activities (Harper, 2005). When students interact with others and feel accepted within the environment, the likelihood of achieving academic success increases (Astin, 1984; Harper; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1984; White & Sedlacek, 1986).

Self-determination theory also explains with great depth the varying levels of motivation, which can fall on a continuum ranging from amotivated to self-determined. The levels that fall in between can be identified as either extrinsic, in which the source of motivation is driven by external or material benefits, or intrinsic, in which the source of motivation is internally driven by a passion or desire to complete the task for personal satisfaction. The differences are important to note because although extrinsic motivation has not been as favorably perceived in the research as intrinsic motivation, Ryan and Deci (2000) asserted that extrinsic motivation can materialize into self-determination if individual integrate the benefits of the task into their own personal ideology, thus transforming it “into their own so that, subsequently, it will emanate from their sense of



self” (p. 71). However, lower levels of extrinsic motivation that are, for example, consequence-driven or include results that are not connected to an individual’s personal ideologies are not considered forms of self-determination. A first-generation student who does not enjoy learning but is extrinsically driven to pursue a college education due to the clear benefits that can be reaped is an example of high-level extrinsic motivation that materializes into self-determination. Most college students, in fact, attend college due to the extrinsic benefit of financial stability (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). In Griffin’s (2005) study, for example, she found that although the students believed they were intrinsically motivated, they were, in fact, extrinsically motivated. The students cited externally inspired outcomes, such as reaching their career goals, making their families proud, and being positive representatives of their communities, as opposed to crediting their motivation to the excitement of learning new topics or the anticipation of the academic challenges that college-level courses present.

To consider how the psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness affect the college aspirations of first-generation students, Self-Determination Theory asserts that it is necessary for these key supportive conditions to exist to enable them to aspire to a college education. Without these supportive conditions, students may feel incompetent, restricted, and disconnected, making it is unlikely that they will have the self-motivation needed to pursue a college education. However, while this theory may describe the internal drive that a first-generation student may possess, it cannot stand alone in explaining the assets and strategies with which these students are armed and which enable them to progress from having college-going aspirations to actually setting foot on a college campus. Hence, it is necessary to also examine how these students

might ensure that they are qualified for college and how they might go about securing the resources necessary to make a college education possible.

### *Academic Success*

As a standard, universities have set academic expectations as requirements for admission. Therefore, the second component of the framework is academic success. It explores how first-generation students become academically successful enough to gain college acceptance, as acceptance precedes enrollment. Applicants who do not meet the academic requirements for admission to an institution cannot be admitted, thus, exploring strategies for ensuring academic success was an important step in understanding how first-generation students pursue higher education.

The second component of the theoretical framework essentially addresses the strategies students employed to gain acceptance into a four-year university. *Academic success* is a collective term that embodies both in-class and out-of-class success (Harper, 2005). In this framework, academic success includes four specific assets that enable students to navigate the wide range of experiences they have in the academic environment. Four assets students possess to achieve academic success were used to craft the framework: (a) successful classroom performance (an extension of competence), (b) a sense of responsibility (an extension of autonomy), (c) an ability to resist stereotypes (also an extension of autonomy), and (d) social and academic integration (an extension of relatedness). This section bases these four assets on the experiences of successful college students due to the vast amount of literature that examines their success strategies and characteristics. The underlying rationale for using these data to develop the second category of the theoretical framework is that successful college students may possess

these qualities before they arrive on the college campus. In other words, college-bound high school students may also possess these characteristics in order to be successful enough to gain acceptance into the institution of their choice.

### *Classroom Performance*

In terms of ensuring that one is qualified for college acceptance, classroom performance is an essential component that includes maintaining a strong grade point average and having the ability to score well on tests and writing assignments. Strategies that aid in classroom success include attending class regularly, taking classes with friends, sharing notes with classmates, studying in groups, reading before class, and meeting with instructors (Harper, 2005). Many researchers support the notion that classroom performance is strengthened through students' active involvement in the educational process. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, et al. (2005) stated that "the time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities is the single best predictor of their learning and personal development" (p. 8).

### *Resisting Stereotype Threat*

In addition to the typical challenges students face in academia, students of color are burdened with the additional challenge of negotiating the dynamics of race in the classroom. Regarding the experience of African American students in this regard, Perry et al. (2003) stated the following:

In order for African American children to achieve in school, they have to be able to negotiate their social identities: their identity as members of a caste-like group, their identity as members of mainstream society, and as

members of a cultural group in opposition to which Whiteness historically and contemporarily continues to be defined. (p. 104)

Students of color are often challenged by their White teachers and peers to defend themselves against negative stereotypes that bring their academic abilities into question (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Griffin, 2006). The students' ability to effectively resist these stereotypes directly impacts academic performance (Steele, 1997).

According to Steele's theory of stereotype threat, African American students are aware of the negative stereotypes that exist about their racial group and fear that any failure on their part will validate those stereotypes. The threat is that of being "negatively stereotyped, with being judged or treated stereotypically, or with the prospect of conforming to the stereotype" (Steele, p. 614). Competent and high-achieving students who are confident in their abilities are most affected by stereotype threat because they tend to have a strong desire not to be seen through the lens of a stereotype (Steele). The African American high-achieving students in Griffin's (2006) study experienced a double dose of stereotype threat as they straddled two peer cultures: White students and African American students. White students questioned their academic abilities, and African American students assumed that the high-achievers deemed themselves better than everyone else.

The burden of stereotype threat and that of negotiating one's race in the academic environment was a theme that resounded strongly in the literature, specifically regarding the experiences of students of color.

But since learning is fundamentally contextual, I would argue that there are extra social, emotional, cognitive, and political competencies required of African American youth, precisely because they are African American, if they are to commit themselves over time to perform at high levels in high school. (Perry et al., 2003, p. 4)

Resisting stereotypes is a daunting task. It takes a substantial amount of energy to first acknowledge, then process, and finally respond to the threats as they come (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2005, 2007; Steele, 1997; Solorzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Perhaps most disturbing about the effect of resisting stereotype threat in an academic setting is that it has a negative impact on both the students' academic performance and well-being (Griffin, 2005; Steele, 1997).

Students have demonstrated a variety of strategies for resisting stereotypes that have both positive and negative results. These include working hard to excel academically as proof to their peers and professors that they belong (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Solorzano et al., 2002), focusing on setting a good example as a member of their race (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Harper, 2006), finding refuge among a community of other students who share the same racial background, and avoiding activities and behaviors that seem to validate the stereotypes (Fries-Britt & Griffin). While it has been made clear that this sort of active resistance takes a toll on academic performance, not responding to the threat also has its consequences. Steele (1997) asserted that not overcoming the threat can bring down students' intellectual performance and, if left unchecked over time, can cause students to seriously question their abilities. Fries-Britt and Griffin suggested, "There is a tenuous balance between resistance as motivation and

resistance that is detrimental to students' academic and psychological well-being. Students need support as they encounter these experiences" (p. 521).

Astin (1975) stated that maintaining a confident attitude about academic ability is an important precursor to reaching academic goals. Students who face unrelenting doubts about their level of academic competence run the risk of eventually questioning their own academic ability. Collectively, the pressures of stereotype threat can negatively affect academic success, and students of color in particular must have the ability to work through these issues, as they simultaneously work to maintain a strong academic record.

#### *Sense of Responsibility*

Another asset contributing to academic achievement is the development of a sense of responsibility. Stemming from the psychological need of autonomy, *responsibility* refers to one's ability to take on greater levels of independence through the academic process (Yazedjian et al., 2008). In a number of studies that examined the success strategies of high-achieving college students, the students expressed satisfaction from balancing a number of responsibilities (Griffin, 2005; Harper, 2005; Kuh, 2005; Yazedjian et al., 2008). In Yazedjian et al.'s study of high-achieving students, the students reported "the sense of accomplishment they felt by completing tasks on time, crossing things off their to-do lists, and giving their best efforts to the tasks they needed to accomplish" (p. 147). In Griffin's study of African American high-achieving students, respondents perceived that they were "agents of their own success" (p. 398).

#### *Social and Academic Integration*

The fourth asset that falls under the academic achievement category is social and academic integration, which pertains to becoming immersed in the many dynamics of the

educational process (Tinto, 1975). This concept reaches beyond maintaining a high grade point average and includes establishing close relationships with faculty and peers and actively engaging in student activities (Yazedjian et al., 2008). Students who are both socially and academically integrated into campus life are more likely to stay in school (Cabrera, Castañeda, Nora & Hengstler, 1992; Kuh, 1995), to experience greater moral and cognitive development, and to have clearer vocational aspirations (Astin, 1984; Moore, Lovell, McGann, & Wyrick, 1998) than those who are not socially and academically integrated into campus life. Additionally, for African American students, Flowers (2004) found that “student involvement experiences impact student developmental gains in understanding arts and humanities, personal and social development, understanding science and technology [and], thinking and writing skills” (p. 648).

Social and academic integration has its foundations in Tinto’s (1975) theory of persistence, which emphasizes that both academic and social integration are key to fostering student success, and Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement, which explores the physical and psychological energy one expends on the academic experience. When students engage in activities outside of the classroom, they have a greater chance of experiencing an enhanced sense of social integration (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Harper, 2006; Yazedjian, Purswell, Sevin & Toews, 2007). Many African American and Latino students nurture their engagement and personal development by connecting with subcultures that are responsive to their specific needs (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Nelson et al., 2007). In Harper’s (2005) study of high-achieving African American male college students, the following competencies resulted from the students’ engagement in campus

life: (a) learning to work with people from different backgrounds; (b) effectively managing time and juggling multiple tasks simultaneously; (c) functioning productively on teams; (d) comfortably communicating with individuals, in small groups, and with large audiences; (e) delegating tasks to others; and (f) successfully navigating complex political environments (p. 11).

### *Resourcefulness*

The final component is resourcefulness. This component enabled the researcher to explore the decisions students made and the strategies employed that enabled them to overcome educational barriers. Resourcefulness must also precede college enrollment. Students who have college aspirations and the grades to qualify for college admission may not make it to college if they are not resourceful enough to overcome barriers (i.e., not having the funding to pay tuition or not knowing the college admissions process). Therefore, overcoming barriers must precede college enrollment.

Resourcefulness is an action-oriented term and relates to college preparation strategies. Thus, the first component of self-determination relates to core psychological needs, the second component focuses on strategies for academic success, and the third component illuminates the actions taken to address possible barriers to college. As described at the beginning of this chapter, first-generation students face a number of challenges that prevent many from pursuing a college education. It is important to understand how the students who make it to college navigate these challenges. For example, if a resourceful first-generation student were challenged by insufficient academic preparation, the student would likely address the challenge by finding ways to get academically prepared, possibly by joining a pre-college program or by taking an



SAT preparation course. If faced with the challenge of not having the financial resources to attend college, the student might address the problem by seeking out ways to pay for college. It is important to note that not all first-generation students face every challenge described, but as the literature indicates, many face at least some of the challenges. The following are strategies first-generation students have used to address the five challenges and the ways these challenges are connected to the academic success assets that precede them.

#### *Getting Academically Prepared*

This strategy is an extension of classroom performance within the theoretical framework. It addresses the challenge of lacking academic preparation, which may come as a result of not knowing the requirements of getting into a college or lacking the preparation necessary to score well on standardized tests such as the SAT or ACT. In order to ensure that they are academically prepared, first-generation students may identify a strong support person to help guide them along the way (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1989). Students who are academically motivated are not easily deterred by challenges. They use the obstacles encountered along the way as sources of motivation to keep plugging along until the goal is accomplished (Griffin, 2005). In Griffin's study, "participants felt that they had agency and control over their difficulties . . . They described relying on resilience, effort and hard work to overcome these academic challenges" (p. 394).

#### *Securing Financial Resources*

An extension of responsibility, this strategy addresses the challenge of not having the money to pay for college. Securing financial resources may involve scouring the

Internet for information, going to the guidance counselor for advice, applying for scholarships, or attending financial aid programs and workshops (Cushman, 2005). The following is an example of one first-generation student's experience:

My mom was working, my step-dad was working, raising a family, they didn't have time to do all the paperwork for me, so senior year I worked with a program called CollegeWorks. They had a financial aid counselor who told me what forms I needed to get done, gave me the paperwork, the worksheets. Based on his advice, I filled out all my forms to get my aid for freshman year. Right now the time is coming up again for me to do financial aid, so I called my mom: "Send me your tax papers, so I can fill out all these forms, I'm handling this on my own." (Cushman, 2005, p. 57)

#### *Learning the Admissions Process*

This challenge, also an extension of responsibility, is similar to learning about financial aid. However, it is listed separately because, while some students may struggle with learning the admissions process, financial aid may not be an issue for them. The reverse is also applicable, as students who struggle to secure financial resources to pay for college may not have a problem maneuvering the admissions process. After conducting interviews with first-generation students about their strategies for getting into college, Cushman (2005) outlined seven strategies they used to learn the admissions process and find the college that best suited their goals and interests:

1. Visiting colleges that are nearby.
2. Getting a good idea of what educational opportunities exist by doing the research.

3. Consistently visiting the guidance office and asking others if no counselor is available.
4. Asking students who are already in college to share important information.
5. Creating a list of interests and connecting them to college.
6. Keeping family in the loop.

### *Shutting Out Debilitating Cultural Norms*

This strategy is an extension of resisting stereotypes; however, in this case, it does not refer to those outside of the group who perpetuate the stereotypes but to the pressure that comes from those within the group and that causes many first-generation students of color to feel caught between two worlds (London, 1992; Rendón, 1992). The difference is that the stereotypes discussed in the academic success tier primarily affect academic performance and the sense of competence. The cultural challenges discussed in this tier affect the drive to follow through with the actual admissions process, whether or not the student is academically qualified for acceptance. Dayton and Gonzalez-Vazquez (2004), for example, described *familismo* as a cultural barrier that many Latino first-generation students face, which asserts that the family is the primary concern and is to be placed above all personal pursuits. The result is that the family has low expectations for the aspiring college student and pressures him or her to stay close to home or to not leave home at all. These culturally significant messages can be difficult to manage and may cause tensions between the decision to go to college or to take care of the family (Dayton & Gonzalez-Vasquez, 2004; Ortiz, 2004).

First-generation students who overcome obstacles such as these have learned how to “stand up” for their education by speaking out when someone doubts their abilities and

by choosing not to be negatively influenced by apathetic learning environments (Cushman, 2005). One student in Cushman's study who attended a low-performing high school described what it meant to stick to his guns and stay focused in an environment where the norm was to be disruptive and uninterested in education:

Kids were playing around in a lot of classes, throwing paper balls and whatnot, and the teacher's just standing there. I was like, "If I'm sitting here and I got my book open, you're a teacher, you can talk to me, I don't care what they do. Put them out if you have to; if you're going to teach, I'm here. I'm taking notes, I'm reading, I've done my homework, I'll pay attention." I was like, "I'm not going to focus on what other people think of me. I won't be defined by what they want me to be. I define myself."

(p. 34)

#### *Building a Network of Human Support*

The final strategy of ingenuity is an extension of social and academic integration, but it reaches beyond securing support within the school environment. As articulated within Schlossberg's transition theory, social support refers to intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, institutions, and communities (Evans et al., 1998). Griffin (2005) found that many of the students in her study credited their parents with the internal drive to be academically successful. Specifically, the students in Griffin's study reported that their parents (a) encouraged them to put forth their best effort, (b) supported them through academic challenges, (c) encouraged them to explore numerous opportunities, and (d) exposed them to experiences that were educationally enriching. Other sources of support first-generation students turn to are teachers, coaches, and pre-

college program staff. A student in Cushman's (2005) study joined a nonprofit organization that provided leadership training for young people in the community. The support of this organization's staff first planted the seed to pursue a college education:

So John sat down and he talked to me. He was like, "I want you to think about it, go and research Wake Forest, and see if that would be a place you would be interested in." So the program director from [the organization] brought me here for a campus visit to check it out, and I liked what I saw. John was like, "Okay, now. If we could just turn the key and open the door, would you go through it?"

I was like, "It sounds like it's going to be really hard." But I looked at these two men who had pushed me so much to do all the things I've done, sitting there saying, "We know this is a good fit for you." When you're presented with that type of confidence, it's hard to say no. I said, "I think I can do it." He was like, "That's all I need to know." (Cushman, p. 28-29)

The theoretical framework used for the current study is multidimensional in nature because, as described above, the college enrollment puzzle has many pieces. As Griffin (2005) put it, "A multidimensional framework best explains these students' motivation patterns" (p. 391). A student cannot make it to college on self-determination alone if he or she is not academically prepared. Likewise, a student cannot make it on academic achievement alone if he or she does not have the ingenuity needed to figure out how to get to college. The three categories work together to illustrate what a first-generation student who can successfully make it to college might look like. This framework, of course, does not presume to represent the experiences and characteristics

of every first-generation student of color but serves as a starting point from which researchers, educators, pre-college program staff, and policymakers can gain a greater understanding of the strategies used and strengths possessed by first-generation students who go to college.

## CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter presents methodology for a phenomenological approach to research employing the method of interviewing. Sections include a rationale, research plan, research sites, participants, data sources, data analysis, limitations, and summary.

### Research Rationale

While much is known about the struggles that first-generation students face in the pursuit of a college education, little is known about why some potential first-generation students have high educational aspirations and others do not. Much of the research on first-generation students emphasizes the challenges the students face while in college and the effects of these challenges on their persistence. While the study of attrition and persistence is an important key to resolving problems related to collegiate success, it is equally essential to explore the qualities of strength and perseverance that brought these students to the college campus in the first place. Thus, the current study focuses on how life *before* college may affect a student's decision to pursue a degree. The purpose is to gain a greater understanding of the characteristics that predispose first-generation students to college and the strategies used to overcome any barriers that may make college inaccessible. Results from this study will inform the practices of pre-college programs and initiatives across the country that aim to serve students who are statistically at-risk of not attending or completing college.

Researchers have found that first-generation students face challenges that are different from those faced by their peers whose parents are college educated (Rendón, 1996). These challenges present themselves through transitioning culturally, having low levels of academic preparation, lacking strong support from family and influential adults,

not having knowledge about the college admissions process, and having limited financial resources (Engle et al., 2006; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). These discrepancies dominate the literature about first-generation students. The missing pieces of the puzzle consist of the strengths and successes of first-generation students, leaving other equally important areas unexplored. These provide a more complete picture of this population and enable practitioners to employ strategies that have been successful for students who push forward against the odds.

### *Research Purpose*

The purpose of this study was to identify and explore the factors that first-generation students attribute to the decision to pursue a college education. Much of the research on underrepresented student populations emphasizes their challenges in the college environment and the effects of these challenges on persistence (Griffin, 2006; Harper, 2005). This study, however, examined the ways in which life *before* college predisposed the students to enroll in college, despite the barriers that often threaten the educational aspirations of these student populations. Thus, the research question guiding this study was as follows: What set of factors predisposes African American and Mexican American first-generation students to pursue a college education? The related research questions were as follows:

1. To what degree were the three innate psychological needs that cultivate self-determination met for these students?
2. What skills and assets do these students possess that enabled them to be academically successful enough to qualify for college?
3. What strategies did the students employ to successfully enroll into college?



### *Research Approach*

Given the purpose of exploring the nature of a first-generation college student's decision to attend college, the research approach was phenomenological and employed the method of interviewing. Blair (2006) identified a number of reasons a researcher may choose to engage in a qualitative research study. Of the reasons identified, the current study was motivated by the following: the nature of the research questions (in qualitative studies, questions often ask *how* or *what*); the need to explore the topic at hand (in this case, variables cannot be easily identified, and theories are not available to explain why first generation students choose to attend college, thus, these theories need to be developed); the need to present a detailed view of the topic; the need to study individuals in their natural settings; the need to emphasize the researcher's role as an active learner who can tell the story from the participants' points of view.

#### *Nature of Phenomenological Research*

Phenomenology is a research method designed to make meaning of a concept (or phenomenon) through the lived experiences of a set of individuals. Data for this type of research are gathered primarily through the method of interviewing (Creswell, 1998). For the current study, the researcher sought to understand the phenomenon of being predisposed to becoming the first in the family to attend college and, therefore, examined first-generation students' personal experiences.

An approach often used in the field of education and other social sciences such as sociology and psychology, phenomenology links human thought and consciousness with human experience (Creswell, 1998). It explores the interplay between mental thought processes and the action that one chooses as a result. In essence, its purpose is to

determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and to provide a comprehensive description of it. The current study took the psychological approach, which emphasizes the individual experiences of the participants. In this approach, the researcher narrows in on what particular experiences mean to the participants. Central to this approach are not group experiences but individual experiences. This study also implemented elements of transcendental phenomenology, requiring that the researcher place emphasis on “bracketing out preconceptions and developing universal structures based on what people experience and how” (Creswell, p. 54). This approach was a critical means of making recommendations for the development and enhancement of effective pre-college models, as they were directly derived from the experiences of the first-generation students who participated in the current study.

The researcher followed five main steps to conduct the current phenomenological study, as outlined by Creswell (1998). The first was to acknowledge biases, opinions, experiences, and ideas and consciously set them aside to allow greater openness to new concepts. This is referred to as *epoche* and literally means to bracket out preconceptions. Next, the researcher wrote research questions that attempted to uncover the subjects’ everyday lived experiences. In the case of the current study, the researcher emphasized gaining a sound understanding of the students’ past collegiate experiences, including their engagement in the college application process, as well as specific interactions they may have had with family, friends, and school staff through the process. The questions helped to provide a general picture that touched upon childhood and adolescent educational experiences. Following the writing of research questions, the researcher collected data by

interviewing between 10 and 30 first generation students. Data were then analyzed, and the report was written (Creswell, 1998).

As an interpreter of the information, the researcher has the ability to examine personal biases and acknowledge the ways they can affect how a story is ultimately told. When reporting interview data, it is important to identify which story, slant, or angle is most effective for the writing of the research. Making this decision requires the ability to see beneath the surface of the story to explain the multilayered context of a life. The final report should provide readers with the essence of how the students in the study were attracted to a college education and the strategies they used to attain one. The goal was to uncover an underlying structure or set of reasons why these students were able to succeed when, in fact, many students of similar status do not (Creswell, 1998).

As with any research, several challenges may arise when engaging in a phenomenological study. The first challenge is that the researcher must have a thorough understanding of the “philosophical precepts” (Creswell, 1998, p. 55) of this methodology. In other words, the researcher must understand that a phenomenological study is designed to explain why a phenomenon is happening. Second, it is essential that participants in the study be carefully chosen. For this study, it was essential that they fit the criteria requiring participants to be of African American or Latino descent and the first in the family to attend college, despite statistics indicating that they likely would not. The third step relates to the ability to bracket out personal experiences. The current researcher remained conscious of this important challenge due to her personal experience as a first-generation student. Finally, it is important that the researcher decide how personal experiences will be introduced into the study (Creswell, 1998).

### *Appropriateness of Phenomenological Research to the Study*

According to Creswell (1998), “The reality of an object is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of an individual” (p. 53). The “object” in this case is the phenomenon of a first-generation student’s decision to pursue a college education and to follow through with enrollment. A phenomenological approach is appropriate because it seeks to understand an issue from the perspective and experience of the participants. In other words, this approach enabled the researcher to examine how the students in this study experienced being the first in their families to acquire a college education. The goal of this approach was to provide readers with a better understanding of what first-generation students experience as they take the steps necessary to pursue a college education (Creswell). Subsequent findings can be beneficial to pre-college programs and initiatives across the country that aim to serve students who are statistically at-risk of not attending or completing college.

### Research Plan

This section details how resources and procedures were organized into a coherent plan for collecting and interpreting data that respond to the research questions. The study’s theoretical framework was instrumental in helping the researcher engage in deep inquiry to explore the three research questions. This framework was designed to address whether or not participants met the criteria for being self-determined, to identify strategies participants employed to ensure academic success, and to recognize the decisions participants made to overcome educational barriers. The open-ended design of the protocol allowed the researcher to gather data that addressed the three interview questions without leading participants toward a particular answer or theory. The

framework represents three overarching categories, but it was the participants who provided the details of their family backgrounds, dispositions, strategies and decisions. This study is phenomenological in nature because it openly explores how first-generation students pursued higher education.

### *Site and Sample*

#### *Selection and Description of Site*

The site for this study was “Private University,” the pseudonym for a private, religiously affiliated, four-year university in the midwestern United States. This university reported a total undergraduate population of 8,048 students during the 2006-2007 academic year. According to the statistical data provided by five different college information websites, the university maintains the following average enrollment percentages: 82% Caucasian, 4.6% African American, 4.5% Asian, 4.1% Latino, and 0.3% American Indian. The university is moderately selective, with an estimated acceptance rate of 75% (College ToolKit.com, 2008; EdRef, 2008; The Princeton Review, 2008; U.S. College Search, 2008; U.S. University Directory, 2008; Yahoo, 2008).

#### *Communication with Site*

The members of two student organizations at the participating university were contacted by email and invited to participate in the study (see Appendix A). The email specified the requirement that participants must be the first in their family to attend college. Student affairs administrators were also contacted by email and asked to refer students whom they believed met the qualifications.

### *Selection and Description of Sample*

Because the study used a small sample of students, the researcher used purposive selection to choose participants (Weiss, 1994). Students were selected from culturally based student organizations at the university participating in the study. The targeted organizations were the Black Student Council and the Latin American Student Organization. These two groups were targeted in response to research indicating that first-generation students are more likely to be African American and Latino than their peers whose parents did attend college (Chen & Carroll, 2005). In order to identify participants, the researcher invited members of these organizations to participate in the study by sending out an email through each group's distribution list. Next, to filter out students who do not meet the qualifications of the study, each respondent was asked to complete a short questionnaire that would help the researcher determine if the student was, in fact, first in the family to pursue a college education (see Appendix B).

Because the definition of *first-generation student* ranges from having parents who never enrolled in college to having parents who enrolled but never completed college, the researcher chose to limit participants to only those whose parents had never enrolled in college. The rationale for this decision was based on the assumption that students whose parents have no college experience may be at a greater disadvantage than those whose parents have some college experience. Previous research has found that students whose parents at least attempted college are more likely to attend college than those whose parents never attended, even if those who attempted college never acquired a degree. According to Choy (2001), "As parents' education increases, so does students' likelihood of enrolling in postsecondary education" (p. 7). This distinction is important because by

the definitions of some researchers (Choy et al., 2000; Engle et al., 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996; Volle & Federico, 1997), students whose parents completed a two-year degree or trade certification are not considered first-generation. However, other research shows that these students are still less likely to attend college when compared to their non-first-generation peers (Choy, 2001; Engle et al.; Terenzini et al.; Volle & Federico). By focusing on the subpopulation with the greatest disadvantage, the researcher was able to examine the experiences of the students who are statistically most unlikely to attend college. It is, therefore, assumed that any possible implications derived from the study may be applicable to a wide range of first-generation students, despite parental level of education.

Those students whose questionnaires indicated that their parents had never enrolled in college were invited to participate in one-on-one interviews. When more participants were needed, the researcher used snowball sampling (Weiss, 1994) by asking participants to refer other students who might qualify to participate in the study.

The sample consisted of 17 first-generation college students enrolled at the participating university. Of the sample, eight students were African American, eight were Mexican American, and one was of mixed race (African American and Mexican American). Having parents with no college experience was used as the characteristic that defined students as “first-generation” because of the lack of knowledge and resources parents would likely have to help prepare their children for college. Of the study participants, 10 were female, and seven were male. The average participant age was 20.2, with ages ranging from 18 to 24. Two subjects were freshmen, five were sophomores,

four were juniors, and five were seniors. All participants were full time students who were actively involved in student organizations.

### *Cultural Background*

Of the study participants, eight were African Americans whose parents were born and raised in the United States. Another eight were Mexican Americans whose parents were born in Mexico and immigrated to the United States; one of these eight participants was actually born in Mexico and immigrated with his parents as a very young child. One participant was of mixed race: her mother is Mexican American, and her father is African American. In this case, the student more strongly identified with her Mexican culture, as she was more surrounded by relatives on her mother's side than her father's side.

### *High School Background*

Of the participants, 10 attended public high schools before attending Private University, six attended private high schools, and one attended both private and public high schools before graduating. The racial makeup of the students' high schools ranged tremendously. Six reported attending predominantly White high schools, two attended predominantly Latino high schools, three attended a predominantly African American high school, and the remaining six attended racially diverse high schools. The average cumulative high school grade point average was 3.45. Only three of the students reported involvement with a pre-college program in high school or middle school.

### *Family Structure and Background*

There were significant differences between the African American and Mexican American students with regard to family structure. Of the participants, 11 were raised by both parents, and of that 11, nine were Mexican American. Six of the students (all of



which were African American) were raised by one parent. Ten of the students had mothers who completed up to a high school diploma, and seven had mothers who had less than a high school diploma. Seven reported that their fathers had earned a high school diploma, eight had fathers who had less than a high school diploma, and two did not know their fathers' educational status. Some variation in family income was evident: nine of the students reported a family income of less than \$35,000 per year, five reported an income within the \$35,000-\$49,000 range, two reported \$75,000-\$99,000, and one reported \$150,000-\$199,000. Table 1 shows the profiles of all participants in the study.

Table 1  
*Study Participant Profiles*

Participant	Race	Gender	School	Parent	GPA	Pre-College Program?
Nicole	African American	Female	Predominantly White Public School	Mom	3.2	No
Elena	Mexican American	Female	Predominantly Latino Private School	Both	3.3	No
Daslyn	African American	Male	Predominantly African American Private School	Both	3.4	No
Jerell	African American	Male	Predominantly White Public School	Grand-mother	3.4	No
Lila	Mexican American	Female	Predominantly Latino Private School	Both	3.4	No
Monica	Mexican American	Female	Diverse Public School	Both	3.7	No
Leticia	Mexican American	Female	Predominantly White Public School	Both	4.4	No
Enrique	Mexican American	Male	Diverse Private School	Both	3.2	No
Antonio	Mexican American	Male	Diverse Private School	Both	3.3	No
Nia	African American	Female	Predominantly Black Private School	Mom	3.8	Yes
Alejandra	Mexican American & African American	Female	Predominantly White Public School	Both	3.25	Yes

Table 1 (continued)

Participant	Race	Gender	School	Parent	GPA	Pre-College Program?
Juan	Mexican American	Male	Predominantly White Public School	Both	3.5	No
Shawna	African American	Female	Predominantly African American Public School	Dad	3.1	No
Elijah	African American	Male	Diverse Public School	Mom	3.1	No
Ariana	Mexican American	Female	Diverse Public School	Both	3.0	No
Lamar	African American	Male	Predominantly White Private School	Both	3.7	No
Cherise	African American	Female	Diverse Public School	Mom	3.9	Yes

### *Communication with Sample*

The students were initially contacted by means of email to inquire of their interest in participating in the study. Subsequent communications took place primarily by telephone and email. All interviews took place in person at the university library and were audiotaped with permission.

### *Data Collection*

The current study employed the technique of interviewing to generate data relevant to the research questions.

### *Nature of Interviewing*

By definition, an *interview* is a highly connected conversation between at least two people. Interview research often unearths a clear picture of a subject that a researcher can easily present in a study. When interviewing is at its best, the participant will divulge information never before shared with anyone else. Interviewing can stand alone in a

qualitative study or be used to strengthen a quantitative study. The central purpose of conducting interviews in research is to find out what is in and on an individual's mind. This technique requires that the researcher be highly skilled at questioning and active interpretation. The process is lengthy and requires a great deal of rigor but allows the researcher to incorporate the experiences, thoughts, and words of human beings into a study (Griffiee, 2005).

For the current study, the researcher employed the interview technique known as the semi-structured interview. When using this technique, the researcher asks questions in a manner similar to that of the structured interview but with more flexibility. As each interview progresses, the researcher adjusts the questions according to the participants' responses by probing to delve more deeply into an issue when necessary. This method enables the researcher to gather a significant amount of information from the participants (Blair, 2006).

#### *Appropriateness of the Technique*

The most effective and engaging method for data collection in a qualitative study is the interview. This process enables the researcher to study individuals in their natural settings, create a literary account of the participants' experiences, and be an active participant in the study. Additionally, conducting an interview can be more convenient than other methods of collecting data, particularly when subjects are easily accessible and eager to talk (Griffiee, 2005). Some of the most important research studies conducted in the social sciences have used the qualitative interviewing technique. These studies have laid the groundwork for understanding society and the interaction between human thought and behavior (Weiss, 1994).

The interviewing technique was appropriate for the current study because it was the most direct approach to learning respondents' perspective about particular life path taken. Interviewing allowed respondents to freely answer questions without having to choose from pre-selected answers. Thus, their answers were more likely to be their own, which significantly reduced the influence of the researcher's biases (Weiss, 1994).

#### *Development of a Trustworthy Instrument*

The interviews consisted of a series of open-ended questions designed to allow respondents to describe their pre-college educational experiences. Questions were based on the study's theoretical framework, which was developed to frame the strengths and experiences of first-generation students on their journeys to college. Questions were categorized into three sections, per the categorization of the framework: being self-determined, being college-qualified through academic success, and knowing how to overcome barriers. The researcher prepared a short list of interview questions as a guide and adjusted them as necessary throughout the course of the interview (see Appendix C). It was essential that the researcher remain flexible during the interview to ensure that subjects felt free to tell their stories and to enable any new themes to emerge (Weiss, 1994).

To establish dependability, a pilot study was conducted to test the interview questions and process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability takes into account the stability of the research design and addresses the issue of whether the method of data collection will answer the research question. Dependability is to a qualitative researcher what construct validity is to a quantitative researcher. The pilot study allowed the researcher to illicit both positive and negative feedback on the questions as well as on the

actual interview process. The pilot involved a group of 10 first-generation students whose parents' educational levels ranged from no college experience to no more than two years experience. After the pilot interview, the wording and order of questions were slightly revised, and the participant pool was redefined to include only those first-generation students whose parents had no college experience. Additionally, a preliminary questionnaire was added to ensure that all participants were truly first-generation. Finally, the researcher asked for additional feedback from the subjects to further establish the dependability of the interview questions and process.

### *Procedure*

The researcher considered the following five issues and decisions, as outlined by Griffie (2005), in preparation for the interview process:

1. The researcher decided whom to interview. Each participant had a strong history of the situation (e.g., experience as the first in the family to pursue a college education), was in the situation at the time of the interview, and was willing to commit time to being interviewed.
2. The researcher determined that enough information would be gathered when saturation was reached, which in this case was after 17 interviews were completed. The interview process was discontinued at that point.
3. The researcher selected a location for the interviews and described the location in enough detail so that readers of the final report could understand the interview context.
4. The researcher took the time to decide which questions would be asked, how they would be worded, and in which order they would be asked.

5. The researcher recorded data by listening to the interviews and recording them in audio format.

### *Data Analysis*

Data generated by the techniques previously described were subsequently interpreted through the process of transcribing the interviews and coding the themes.

### *Application to the Data*

Analyzing the interview data involved moving from the large amount of information contained in interview transcripts and notes and narrowing it all down to the essence of what had been said. Because interviews typically evolve collaboratively between the researcher and the subject, it was essential that the content be carefully analyzed to interpret meanings behind the stories. Unlike the raw data that result from quantitative research, the raw data of qualitative research, particularly interviews, consist of words. The raw data were evaluated and interpreted to uncover meanings behind participant responses. The interpretation process involved reviewing the data thoroughly, becoming familiar with the data, going over notes, listening to tapes, and reading interview transcripts repeatedly. It was through this tedious process that the researcher began to recognize themes and categorize the information (Griffiee, 2005).

The researcher employed the following process to analyze the interview data, as outlined by Griffiee (2005):

1. Listening to the audio recordings and hiring an assistant to transcribe the data.
2. Reading the transcripts repeatedly over a period of time until becoming familiar with what was said.

3. Coding the interview data by analyzing the transcript data and identifying themes with a short word or phrase.
4. Writing a summary of the coded data by first categorizing the data by code and then listing to exactly what the participant said.
5. Summarizing and tying together the themes and identifying significant meanings.

#### *Verification/Trustworthiness/Triangulation*

Standards of quality for this study were established by adopting the concept of verification, as argued by Creswell (1998) and Lincoln and Guba (1985). For qualitative studies, Creswell recommended using the term *verification* as opposed to *validity*. In his view, “verification underscores qualitative research as a distinct approach, a legitimate mode of inquiry in its own right” (Creswell, p. 201). Creswell, along with other researchers, argued that the standards of validity are appropriate for quantitative research but do not fit well with qualitative research (Eisner, 1991; Lather, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Wolcott, 1990). Thus, the current study used the verification standards set by Lincoln and Guba and Creswell to be outlined in the sections to follow.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) established four terms as standards for verification: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Additionally, Creswell (1998) recommended that qualitative scholars engage in at least two of eight verification techniques to maintain a standard of quality in their research. The current study employed the following six verification techniques: peer debriefing, triangulation, member checks, rich description of the data, external inquiry audits, and clarification of researcher bias.



### *Verification Standards*

*Credibility.* Credibility is a verification standard specific to qualitative studies that ensures internal validity. It verifies that the findings and the results of the interviews can confidently be believed as true. The current study enhanced credibility by employing three strategies: peer debriefing, triangulation, and member checks. To achieve peer debriefing, three colleagues with experience in qualitative research studies were invited to review the transcripts. The debriefing helped the researcher identify common themes surrounding the participants' responses. These colleagues were asked to trace a line from the data to the interpretation to determine whether the interpretations and conclusions were plausible and to determine if any other logical interpretation based on the same evidence could be reached. In cases in which no other interpretation could be reached, the argument was considered to be strong. In cases where it became evident that other interpretations could be found, the researcher reexamined the data and conducted additional interviews, when necessary, to develop further understanding (Griffiee, 2005).

Triangulation is a technique that verifies the integrity of the information drawn from the data. It requires the use of multiple sources to examine a social theory or phenomenon. In the current study, triangulation was achieved by including the personal experiences of multiple participants through the method of interviewing and by consulting with an expert panel to help interpret the data. The panel consisted of three scholars who specialize in postsecondary academic success and marginalized student populations. The panelists reviewed the transcripts and met with the researcher on three different occasions to extract potential themes.

Member checks were conducted to verify that the researcher's interpretations and reconstructions were recognizable to participants as realistic representations of their own experiences. To achieve member checks, the researcher completed a summary and initial interpretation of the first round of interviews and asked participants if they perceived that the interpretation was accurate. In cases in which the participants agreed, the researcher considered the interpretations to be verifiable. When participants disagreed, the researcher asked for clarification and reanalyzed the data to ensure that the final interpretation accurately represented the participants' experiences and perspectives (Griffee, 2005).

*Transferability.* This study does not attempt to make generalizations to all African American and Latino students who are the first in their families to attend college, as the participants of this study each described unique experiences relating to geographical upbringing, socioeconomic status, cultural background, and a variety of other variables. However, it is reasonable to expect similar experiences and behaviors from other first-generation students who share the same dynamics and personal characteristics as the students who participated in this study. While the sample is not a representative one, the researcher argues that the theories, results, and implications extracted from this study may be applied to other first-generation students not included in this study (Weiss, 1994). To enhance transferability, the researcher provided a rich description of the data to bring depth and context to the experience of being a first-generation student.

*Dependability.* An inquiry audit was used to simultaneously determine dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dr. Nancy Blair served as the

auditor by reviewing the report and all of the materials provided to analyze how reported conclusions were reached.

*Confirmability.* In addition to the inquiry audit, confirmability was achieved through the process of journaling. The researcher kept a written journal to track all decisions, rationales, and notations of personal reflections related to the study (Weiss, 1994)

### *Role of the Researcher*

#### *Qualifications*

The researcher is a doctoral level student who has completed coursework requirements for a degree in the Advancement of Learning and Service, including courses in research, research methodology, and statistics. The researcher is employed as an assistant dean for intercultural programs at a mid-sized private university in the Midwest, placing her in a position to work professionally with the first-generation college student population. She holds a master's degree in College Student Affairs and has seven years of experience working in the field of higher education. She is a member of several professional organizations, including the National Association for Student Personnel Administrators, the Association for College Personnel Administrators, the National Association of College Admissions Counselors, and the Higher Education Consultants Association. In addition to college student affairs experience, she owns a college preparation consultant company that targets potential first-generation college students as well as students whose parents are college educated.

### *Biases*

Potential for bias exists in any research study; however, by approaching each interview with the same set of questions and by following the standards outlined in this document to conduct scholarly interviews, bias was reduced. It is worth noting that the researcher was the first member of her family to graduate from college. While her personal experiences may be different from those of the study participants, it can be easy to draw correlations if precautions against bias are not taken. For this reason, rigorous data analysis with an expert panel, member checks, peer reviews, and the auditing process were important for reducing the risk of bias.

### *Responsibilities*

The researcher was responsible for facilitating all phases of this study. She contacted all participants and administrators who provided referral lists. The researcher also conducted all interviews, developed and piloted the study, and was solely responsible for analyzing and reporting the data collected from the interviews and questionnaires.

### Coherence of Design

#### *Validity/Trustworthiness*

This design is valid because this was a phenomenological study and the interviewing technique is most recommended for this methodology.

#### *Limitations*

This results of this study cannot be generalized to an entire population of first-generation students, although it was designed to further the scope of knowledge about this population. It is important to recognize that, as a limitation, interview data may

include the researcher's assumptions, biases, and questions. Although many measures were taken to reduce the influence of assumptions and biases, it is not possible in a qualitative study to completely eliminate these filters.

Another limitation is the impossibility of extrapolating every factor from participants' lives that may have contributed to their decision to attend college within the limited time frame of this study. Findings focused primarily on themes that resonated with the experiences of a number of participants, while taking into account any unique, significant circumstances that might lead to important implications. Finally, this was a retrospective study that required participants to rely upon memory and past experiences to identify strategies employed and characteristics possessed during adolescence.

#### Summary of Design

The technique of interviewing is a highly appropriate method for gaining a greater understanding of how first-generation students go about pursuing a college education. It allows participants to share personal thoughts, feelings, and pre-college experiences that may not be recorded or analyzed otherwise. This study is an important step toward understanding student success, particularly that of underrepresented populations.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to identify and explore the factors that African American and Mexican American first-generation students attributed to the decision to pursue a college education. Much of the research on underrepresented student populations emphasizes the challenges they encounter in the college environment and how this affects persistence (Griffin, 2006; Harper, 2005). This study, however, examined the ways in which life before college predisposed the students to move forward and enroll in college, despite the barriers that are often said to threaten education aspirations. To that end, the research question guiding this study was: What set of factors predispose African American and Mexican American first-generation students to pursue a college education? The related research questions were as follows:

1. To what degree were the three innate psychological needs that cultivate self-determination met for these students?
2. What skills and assets do these students possess that enable them to be academically successful enough to qualify for college?
3. What strategies did the students employ to successfully gain acceptance into college?

This phenomenological study employed the method of interviewing 17 African American and Mexican American college students who are currently enrolled in a private four-year university in the Midwest and whose parents had no post-secondary experience. The literature review included related research in the areas of first-generation students, Self-Determination Theory, student success, and pre-college programs. This chapter presents the findings from the interviews. A finding was considered a theme if it reflected

the experiences of at least half the sample, which would be nine of the 17 students. The first section includes a narrative description of each of the participants. Pseudonyms were used for participant names, cities, schools and the name of the university the participants attend. The sections to follow provide overviews of each research question and major components, as well as the themes that were relevant to each section. The chapter concludes with a brief summary of the findings.

### Narrative Descriptions

#### *Nicole: African American Female*

##### *“Ouch and that’s it!”*

She was a vibrant, confident, self-proclaimed resilient young woman. Nicole and her brother were raised to be resilient people. Her parents instilled early on the importance of self-sufficiency – that they were to get up and keep moving forward if something were to knock them down. As young children, if Nicole or her brother fell and hurt themselves, for example, her mother would simply say, “ouch and that’s it” to encourage them not to dwell on the fall and to move on. This stuck with Nicole and is a phrase that she continues to use as a young adult to get through many of the challenges that crop up in her life.

Growing up in northern Illinois, Nicole’s household consisted of four people: her mother, father, younger brother, and herself. Her mother believed that it was important to keep the children active, so she and her brother were involved in the community through their participation in church and Bible study, as well as recreational sports. Both parents believed that keeping the kids involved was an important way to help them develop into well-rounded people. Nicole describes her family as a close knit one that depended on

one another. Her parents often lived from paycheck to paycheck and struggled to keep up with the bills. It was for this reason that Nicole made the decision to get a job in high school so that she could help out with the bills as needed, and so that she would not have to ask anyone for anything that she may have needed.

Nicole was considered to be the smart one in the family. As the only one who was computer literate, she was often designated to type up letters or search the Internet for other members of the family. Nicole attended a public predominantly Black and Latino high school. However, she was enrolled in an academy within the school, which primarily consisted of White students, making her the clear minority in all of her classes. She always stood out as a determined learner at school and at work, and was highly involved in sports and academic clubs.

Nicole's desire to go to college was rooted in her love for learning and doing well, but it was also driven by a desire not to want to struggle as her parents did. Each time she heard that a representative from Private University was scheduled to visit her school, she made it a point to attend the information session and to personally introduce herself to the recruiter. She had her heart set on attending this university, so if a representative came to her city, Nicole was always there. She graduated from high school with a 3.2 grade point average and managed to pay for most of her education through the many scholarships that she applied for through internet searches.

*Elena: Mexican American Female*

*"If I didn't have the grades, I'd just be average"*

Although Elena had three brothers and a sister, she grew up primarily as an only child. Because her siblings were so much older than she was, she was truly the well-



cherished baby of the family. Her parents were fully uneducated, having never gone to school, even as children. They grew up working on a small farm in Mexico. Because Elena's mom was the second eldest of twelve children, she had the additional responsibilities of caring for her younger siblings. For both families, survival came first. The daily struggle to put food on the table overshadowed any thought of going to school.

After immigrating to the United States, Elena's parents eventually settled into a rough Chicago neighborhood to raise her older siblings. By the time Elena was born, her dad earned enough money to move the family to a safe neighborhood, providing Elena with the stability that her brothers and sister never had. They perceived their little sister as "the different one," and looked to her as the one who would "make it" in life.

Although she was raised alone, the family was close, and this strength and unity brought Elena great confidence and security. Her greatest inspiration was her mother and the desire to fulfill her mother's dream of a college education.

Elena attended a predominantly Latino private Catholic high school in the Chicago area. The school is designed to prepare Spanish-speaking youth for college and a lifetime of service to their communities. It incorporates an internship program into the curriculum, which gave Elena the opportunity to spend four years of her teenage life exploring the field of law. This strongly impacted her desire to go to law school, as she was able to develop relationships with people at the law firm who admired her and willingly mentored her. At school, she was highly involved in sports as a member of the soccer, cross country and basketball teams. She also participated in the drama club and served as an ambassador to represent her high school during recruitment events. Within her community, Elena took part in a youth group that planned college fairs for other

youth in the local neighborhoods. Her decision to attend Private was largely due to the influence of a female lawyer who mentored her as an intern and the full tuition scholarship she was awarded through the connection that the university had with her high school.

*Daslyn: African American Male*

*“Since I was born, I was destined to go to college.”*

Known as the quiet “good boy” in the family, Daslyn was the clear favorite among his aunts and uncles. He is a tall husky-built kid who might seem intimidating to those who would quickly stereotype a Black male, but just one glimpse of his smile reveals his calm disposition. Daslyn was raised in the inner city area, not far from the university he currently attends. While he was still very young, his parents instilled the importance of an education. They took measures to ensure that he would receive a quality education, such as placing him in the best schools possible and reading to him every night to foster a strong academic background and a love for learning. Daslyn recalls being placed into a preschool at age three that emphasized learning the alphabet and reading. His parents were both high school graduates and remained married, providing him with a home that he considered to be stable and positive.

Among his relatives, Daslyn was considered to be the “smart one” in the family and was the child that the family knew would stay out of trouble. His greatest challenge was resisting the negative influence of peers who lived in his neighborhood, who criticized him for being academically focused. Daslyn attended a predominantly African American private Catholic high school and played on the football team. He was

encouraged and guided by several teachers along the way. He graduated with a 3.4 grade point average and received much support from his family as he transitioned on to college.

*Jerell: African American Male*

*“Once I knew I was coming here, there was no turning back.”*

Jerell, a quiet senior at Private University, was raised by his fragile grandmother, whose health was unpredictable and kept him on edge. With no parents for support and an older brother who had long checked out of taking responsibility for their grandmother, Jerell was left to care for the woman who was once his caregiver. Throughout the course of his high school career, Jerell moved with his grandmother to three different cities and had to acclimate himself to three very different high schools. His commitment to care for his grandmother left little time for extracurricular activities, making it rather difficult to develop close friendships.

Each of Jerell’s high schools was quite different. Mission High School was an inner-city school that struggled with painfully low graduation rates. He attended this school as a freshman and did not feel any sense of connection to teachers, staff or even his peers. At Mission High, he kept to himself and focused on his studies. His second high school, All Saints High was a well-respected, predominantly Black Catholic high school. While he also did not become actively involved at this school, he made some connections with teachers and his counselor, and described his experience there to be more positive than at Mission High. His third high school, Regis High, was a high-achieving predominantly White school in the suburbs. It was this school that he credited with preparing him for college. He attended Regis High during his sophomore and senior years because he and his grandmother moved to the area twice. During the two years that

he was there, he played on the basketball team and had the support of his coach and his guidance counselor. At Regis, college preparation was a part of the curriculum and Jerell took that preparation seriously.

Jerell was no typical student. On his most difficult days, he would get up at 6:00 am to go to school until 3:00 pm, do the grocery shopping, prepare meals, go to work, arrive home at 11:00 pm, and sit with his grandmother who was afraid to fall asleep alone until 2:00 am. Despite how difficult his life was, Jerell always had a love for learning that others could see in him, and he had his heart set on college. He graduated with a 3.4 grade point average. With the encouragement of his basketball coach and the academic preparation that he received from Regis High School, he had the support and resources needed to pursue a college education. When Jerell graduated, he was determined to attend a local university to remain close to his grandmother, and chose Private University after he was offered a full-ride scholarship.

*Lila: Mexican American Female*

*“There was a few people who didn’t think I could do it all.”*

As a child, Lila’s family did not have much, but they were a close unit and valued the time they spent together. For Lila, it was the picture perfect family—mom, dad, a younger sister and two dogs. Her mother stayed at home to raise the girls, and her father was a forklift driver. As Mexican immigrants, neither parent had the opportunity to finish high school, so the value of education was strongly emphasized in the home. The girls were expected to take their studies seriously.

Lila attended Guadalupe High School, a predominantly Latino private Catholic high school in the Chicago area that required students to speak Spanish as a prerequisite

for acceptance. Because of their similar faith-based missions, Guadalupe High school and Private University had developed a partnership that would serve two purposes: to help diversify the university's student population and to provide academic support and college preparation to Guadalupe's students. The school was structured to prepare its students for a college education and a life committed to the greater good of society. It included internship programs built into the curriculum, community service requirements to fulfill, counselors to keep the students on track, and strong partnerships with colleges and universities. As a student, Lila was a tutor and participated in sports. Her father was highly supportive and made it a point to attend as many of her games as possible. Lila was also well supported by teachers and school counselors, and was well-prepared to pursue a college education. She graduated with a 3.4 grade point average. It was Private University's strong connection with her high school that piqued her interest in the school, which ultimately resulted in her decision to attend.

*Monica: Mexican American Female*

*"I am living my mother's dream."*

As the oldest child and the only daughter in the family, Monica had a great deal of responsibility in her household. She was raised by two immigrant parents who spoke very little English. Monica's parents immigrated to California from Mexico in the late 1980s, where her father was a migrant farm worker and her mother cleaned houses and worked at the swap meet. Monica's role was to help her parents as they interacted in an English-speaking society by serving as a translator at banks, grocery stores, on the telephone, and with teachers at her school. She became the voice and ear of her parents. Neither of Monica's parents was educated beyond middle school. This was most devastating to her

mother, who desperately wanted to attend school, but could not because the family could not afford it. Monica's parents eventually left California and moved to the Midwest where they could settle down and start a family.

Monica was always encouraged to achieve to her greatest ability, and was driven by her love for learning. As a child, she was recognized as highly intelligent in class and was often chosen to help tutor the other kids. In second grade, she was invited to enroll into the Gifted and Talented program, but her parents, who did not understand its purpose or benefits, opted to keep her in the traditional academic program. Despite any lack of understanding with America's educational system, her parents wanted to provide the best opportunities possible for their children. When the time came to select a high school, Monica wanted to follow her friends to Halldale High, but her parents insisted that she attend Montgomery, for fear that Halldale's negative reputation would pull her into drugs or teen pregnancy. So, Monica attended a public high school located on the outskirts of town that offered special academic programs for students who wanted to go to college. Although Montgomery was located in an urban school district, it was in a predominantly White section of town, and Monica's family considered this to be a suburb.

Monica was enrolled through the school's business program. She was highly involved as a competitor on several different academic teams and as a member of several student organizations. She graduated with a 3.7 grade point average. Monica credits the administrators and teachers at Montgomery High School who served as her mentors and were instrumental in helping her to develop her strengths and stay on track for college.

*Leticia: Mexican American Female*

*“No one noticed or pushed me to do anything.”*

Leticia’s drive to excel was undoubtedly passed on to her from her parents, who immigrated to the United States from Mexico with only a middle school education. As they worked to establish stability, Leticia’s parents worked minimum wage jobs and rented a room for the family in a small communal house until they were able to purchase a home of their own. Her father’s diligence paid off and he eventually landed a stock job at a grocery store, where he worked his way up to management. Her mother was equally resilient and earned her General Education Diploma (GED). She took a mailroom job and also worked her way up to management.

Leticia spoke of the great level of respect and gratitude she has for her parents. She has never taken her parents’ hard work for granted and committed herself to her studies so that the opportunities that they worked to provide her with would not have been done in vain. Leticia’s parents strongly encouraged to do her best in school and gave her all of the support possible to ensure that she had what she needed to be successful. After Leticia’s sister attempted college and did not finish, her parents looked to their youngest daughter as “the last hope” to complete a college education, and Leticia took this responsibility quite seriously.

She attended North Hills High, a culturally diverse high school that offered an array of advanced prep and honors courses. As a high school student, Leticia was a high achiever, but her hard work went virtually unnoticed by her teachers and school administrators. Despite the fact that she was the only Latina student in her honors courses

and graduated a semester early with a 4.4 grade point average,<sup>1</sup> no one reached out to help her prepare for college. All information that Leticia received about financial aid, college options, and the admissions process came as a result of engaging in her own research and by asking a cousin who had enrolled in college a year before she did. Though she spent little energy expressing this frustration, Leticia resented the fact that her White peers were receiving this type of assistance and could take advantage of scholarship opportunities that were never shared with her. She felt utterly disconnected from the life of North Hills High and did not develop relationships with the teachers or staff members. As the only student of color in all of her classes, Leticia could not find her place among her classmates and as an academically focused Mexican American. She also could not find her place among the Latino population of students, who in her school, engaged in activities that were counter-productive to her academic success such as gang violence, teenage pregnancy and drug use. She longed to identify with her “Latino sisters and brothers,” but believed that it would be more important for her to stay focused. The only source of connection she felt to her school was through her role on the soccer team, where she developed some friendships. Unfortunately, this was not enough to make her experience at North Hills High a Valuable one. She did not play soccer during her senior year because she graduated a semester early in an effort to leave the unsupportive environment she knew as North Hills High as early as possible.

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<sup>1</sup>This grade point average was configured on the standard 4.0 scale, but because honors courses are worth more points than average high school courses, Leticia’s grade point average exceeded a 4.0.



*Enrique: Mexican American Male*

*“My parents wanted us to have a better education than they did. I owe it to them.”*

Enrique’s household consisted of his parents and two sisters. He was the middle child, considering himself his older sister’s protégé and his younger sister’s role model. Both of his parents, who had the unique privilege of obtaining an education through high school, immigrated to the United States and settled in the state of Illinois. His mother, who finished high school after immigrating to the United States, worked as a secretary, and his father worked in the church as a catechism coordinator. Their greatest aspiration for the children was to have a better life than they did and to pursue a college education.

Enrique’s parents decided early on that he and his siblings would not attend the local high school due to the influence of gangs, drugs and violence, so as they searched for the most appropriate high school for Enrique, his uncle recommended the school that he attended years ago. Enrique was intrigued and ultimately decided to enroll. St. Matthews Prep was a private Catholic all-boys boarding school located in a rural region of Wisconsin. This setting was drastically different from the energy and intensity of the life he knew in Chicago. St. Matthews was a highly structured and rigorous school, committed to providing a diverse population of boys with a quality education, despite socioeconomic status. The school has a strong college preparatory focus and provides a competitive academic curriculum, leadership development opportunities, and a solid system for guiding students through the college application process. As a student, Enrique was highly involved with sports and social organizations, including his role as captain of the school’s soccer team and competing member of the wrestling team.

He graduated with a 3.2 grade point average and learned about Private University through the strong connection that the university has with his school. He eventually decided to attend based on the funding he received.

*Antonio: Mexican American Male*

*“I have everyone I’ve always needed with me.”*

Antonio, the baby boy of the family, has two older sisters, both of which attended college. For his parents, who immigrated from Mexico, education was highly important. They stayed on top of what Antonio and his sisters were studying and gave them a hard time when their grades were down. His parents were committed to maintaining family unity and ensuring that the children had what they needed to succeed.

Antonio attended St. Matthews Prep with Enrique and had similar experiences as a student. He described his time at the boarding school as “the best four years” of his life, as he had the opportunity to build upon his foundation of faith and develop leadership skills. It was his older sister who told him about this school. As a high school student, Antonio was highly involved in sports and social organizations, including competing on the wrestling and track teams. He was also involved with the communications club, was junior class president, and student council president in his senior year. He graduated with a 3.3 grade point average.

*Nia: African American Female*

*“Anything you think a mother would do, I would do for myself.”*

Nia’s mother was a seventeen year-old high school senior when she was born. Her boyfriend (Nia’s father) had left the two of them to fend for themselves, so as a child, Nia never knew her father – or any other consistent father figure, for that matter. Nia could

never seem to find her place growing up, unless she was in the classroom. She described herself as someone who has always been different from the people in her environment – her classmates, the other kids in the neighborhood, and especially the members of her family. Growing up in an urban, lower socioeconomic section of Chicago, Nia never quite felt that she fit in with the community, largely due to the contrast between her love for school and lack of emphasis others placed on education.

The household consisted of Nia's mom, her younger brother, and a younger cousin. With her mom working during the day and into the night, Nia had great responsibility as the oldest child in the house. She described having to fill in as the mom, taking care of tasks such as grocery shopping, cooking, helping with homework, even taking on a job to help pay the bills. Despite Nia's contributions to the home, the relationship with her mother was strained, and she grew up yearning for her mother's love and acceptance. Her mother, somewhat resentful of her daughter's academic interests and success paid little attention to Nia's school matters. It seemed to Nia that she could never do enough to earn her mother's respect, so her source of strength and support came primarily from her maternal grandmother.

As a student who was highly motivated to excel, Nia took it upon herself to make sure she attended a high school that would prepare her for college. With the help of an older cousin, she researched her options and ultimately landed at Connors Academy, a well-ranked, predominantly Black charter school in what she described as a good neighborhood in Chicago. The admissions process was not an easy one and required students to be pre-selected to enroll. This academy was located near a university and provided opportunities for the students to interact on the campus in a number of ways.

Each student was assigned to a post-secondary coach, who would provide personal assistance for their college preparatory needs.

Despite the heavy load of responsibilities at home and working 30 hours per week at a retail store, Nia was heavily involved as a student and was committed to excelling in her studies. She remained diligent about completing homework before leaving school so that her home life would not jeopardize the quality of her schoolwork. A hungry learner, Nia always sought after opportunities for extra credit and practice with teachers. Nia played on the volleyball and soccer teams, was a college preparation ambassador, and was a member of the National Honor Society, the student council, the drama club, and the fitness club. In spite of the busy schedule, Nia was academically ranked fifth out of 363 students upon graduation. Through her involvement with a pre-college program through her church and the extensive college preparation provided through Connors Academy, Nia experienced a small taste of college life and felt prepared for this next step in her academic career. After earning a full ride scholarship and encouragement from her pre-college coach, she decided to attend Private University. While the members of her extended family did not fully understand her educational path, they were nonetheless fully supportive and expected her to be successful. She still hopes, however, that she will eventually be able to get her mother on board as a member of her support team.

*Alejandra: African American & Mexican American Female*

*“The more you know, the more you don’t know.”*

Although Alejandra is both African American and Mexican American, it was clear that her strongest connection is to her Mexican roots. Her parents remained married throughout her childhood, but it was her mother’s strong Mexican culture that had the

greatest influence on the family. Alejandra's African American father was as highly committed and involved as her mother, but his side of the family did not play an equally prominent role in their lives. Education was an important value that her parents instilled very early on. As Alejandra spoke about how important education was to the family, she described how her father used to read stories to her in Spanish as a child.

The household consisted of Alejandra, her parents, and her older brother and sister. As the baby of the family, she followed in her siblings' footsteps as first-generation college students. Her sister completed two years of college and her brother was a senior at a different university at the time of the interview. Alejandra's mother made it only to the sixth grade as a child growing up in Mexico. Her father, who was raised in the United States, graduated from high school and secured a stable job in management, where he worked until his health began to decline. When Alejandra was 16 years old, he continued to suffer with dementia, and the family had to place him into a nursing home. In the years leading to her father's gradual decline in health, Alejandra, who was the only child still living at home, took on the responsibility of caring for him and helping out around the house as much as possible. She also took on the responsibility of helping to care for her nephew while her sister when through a party phase. With her father falling ill and her siblings having moved out of the house, Alejandra had a heavy workload for a young teen.

Throughout Alejandra's life, her parents were careful to place her and her siblings in schools that would best prepare them for college. She attended St. Sebastian School, an all-girl private school for middle school and went Dawson High, a private high school located in the suburbs. In high school, Alejandra was highly involved as a member of the

basketball and soccer teams, the National Honors Society, the Latino student organization, prom committee, and her role as senior class president. Her parents insisted that she and her brother take part in the pre-college program, Upward Bound, beginning in middle school so that by the time they were ready to graduate from high school, they would be well equipped with the knowledge and preparation needed to pursue a college education. Alejandra graduated high school with a 3.25 grade point average.

*Juan, also known as "John:" Mexican American Male*

*"I didn't want to be that brown boy."*

Juan, who preferred to be called "John", was the only participant who was not born in the United States, and ironically was the only Mexican American participant who did not want to be identified as Mexican or even Latino. His parents immigrated to the United States when he was just two years old and settled in a small town in eastern Wisconsin. His only sibling was his brother who was five years younger. Because John's parents worked third shift for a canning company, he was responsible for caring for his younger brother while they were away. This responsibility, coupled with their absence seemed to be the source of his deep resentment towards his parents. He described his parents as not being "involved as much" (despite the fact that they closely monitored his grades) and he considered them to be very religious "and not in a subtle way." During the course of the interview, it became clear that John was not at all interested in religion and that his parents' interests were very different from his own. His parents, for example wanted their children to embrace their Mexican heritage, while John was more interested in fully embracing American culture, to the exclusion of anything Mexican.

John's rejection of his Mexican heritage is rooted in a situation he encountered in pre-school. As the only child in the class whose skin was not White, he stood out as the Mexican kid. On a day that he would never forget, another little girl pointed directly at him and asked why "that brown kid" was there, and he felt the humiliation that has forever stuck with him. John subsequently spent the rest of his life trying not to be that "brown kid." This disassociation was further perpetuated by his negative perception of other Latinos whom he considered to be "the stereotype." He described the Latinos in his community as those who choose not to learn English and do not work hard to improve their lives. John has always taken great measures to not be seen as one of "those people" by avoiding other Latinos altogether. In fact, he was so fully embraced by his White peers in high school that they bought him a t-shirt that he proudly wears bearing the words, "Stunningly Caucasian."

John attended Rock Lake High School, a local public school, which has a reputation for being competitive and academically sound. Rock Lake is a large, predominantly White with an approximate population of 1700 students that represent middle-to-upper-middle class households. John was highly involved with cross country, the track team, cheerleading, drama and forensics. His goal was to become as well-rounded as possible so that he could get into college without relying on anyone for assistance. He graduated with a 3.4 grade point average and was enrolled with a full ride scholarship into Private University's Navy ROTC program.

*Shawna: African American Female*

*“My role is to make things happen.”*

Shawna spent her high school years on edge, not sure of whether or not her only parent would live long enough to see her graduate. Her mother had spent most of Shawna’s childhood in and out of prison for crimes that she preferred not to disclose. She desperately depended on her father for the love, stability and encouragement he had always provided. Shawna was clearly her father’s favorite and became even more so after her younger sister became pregnant as a junior in high school. He looked to Shawna as “his only hope” and she began to understand that her role in the family was to “make things happen” in a way that no one else has managed to do. Generations of Shawna’s family have been plagued by cycles of poverty, unwanted pregnancies, incarceration, and high school dropouts. She believed that her role was to be the first to break those cycles.

Shawna was always highly motivated. Early on, her father instilled the importance of an education by reading to her and teaching her how to read at a young age. The two were an inseparable pair as Shawna deeply admired her father and he continued to encourage her. However, by the time Shawna turned 12, her strong sense of security was ripped from under her. This was the year that her father became ill and it became necessary for Shawna to take on the motherly role of looking after her younger sister, caring for her father, and managing the household. At minimum, this required that she learn how to drive, cook, and do the grocery shopping. In the true spirit of rising to the call of duty, Shawna managed to maintain her grades and her passion for learning during this difficult time.



Much to Shawna's frustration, she had to attend Mission High. This high school (also attended by Jerell) that was located in her neighborhood, and was infamous for being "one of the worst schools in the city" due to excessive violence, teenage pregnancies and apathy from the teachers. Because it was necessary for her to stay close to home, Shawna did not have the option to attend a high school outside of her neighborhood. However, despite the environment, Shawna was determined to do well. She was actively involved in sports and student organizations and was well-connected with her teachers. Her grade point average was strong and she was on track for a successful high school career – that is, until her father's health took a drastic turn for the worse during her sophomore year. After a frightening visit to the emergency room, doctors told Shawna that her father only had a short time to live. This was more than she could take and she fell into a depression. Shawna's grades quickly plummeted and she found herself on the verge of dropping out of school. Her English teacher, Ms. Ryan and former fifth grade teacher, Mr. Ortiz, both stepped in out of concern to provide Shawna with the support and encouragement she needed to continue pushing forward in her studies. She believes that had they not stepped in, she would have indeed dropped out of school. As she reflected upon the impact that these two teachers had on her life, she said,

They were very helpful and supportive, especially when I wanted to be done and go away . . . There are times that I just wanted to sleep my day away, but I would think about the result.

Shawna's father survived and she managed to bounce back as a thriving student. Throughout her four years in high school, she remained involved on the volleyball, softball and debate teams, and she participated in yearbook, the National Honor Society,

and student council. Shawna graduated high school with a 3.1 grade point average and managed to secure a full ride scholarship to Private University, enabling her to stay in town to be near her father.

*Elijah: African American Male*

*“Each experience is a learning experience.”*

Elijah was raised as the only child to a mother who experienced a rollercoaster journey of successes and challenges. Before he was born and in his early years, his mother was an innovative woman who owned a few of her own businesses and carried herself with the confidence of a highly educated woman. She had the ability to capture an audience and the fortitude to gain the respect of a high profile executive. Yet, after Elijah was born, she confronted unforeseen challenges, and his mother found it difficult to maintain the successful life she had built for herself. Gradually, Elijah’s mother lost everything she had worked for, and could not seem to get back to that prosperous life she had once enjoyed. In an effort to regain her footing, she picked up and moved Elijah from Indiana to Wisconsin, where she migrated from job to job to support her son. She began to become involved in illegal activities to put food on the table. She was always very honest with Elijah and did not sugar coat her involvement with drugs or the family’s involvement with gangs and prostitution. She was clear about the negative consequences of such activities, and he received that message loudly and clearly. Elijah decided early on that he did not want to struggle the way that his mother did, but he never wavered in the love and respect that he had for her.

As a child, Elijah was highly self-sufficient and responsible. With his mother working nights, he was often left to oversee the household and get himself to and from

school. During the interview, he shared a situation in which his mother was arrested, and even as a young child, he knew what to do. He remembered that she had drugs hiding in the house and went to hide them before they were discovered. Despite these difficult times, the relationship between Elijah and his mother was a good one, and she remained supportive of him in each of his endeavors.

Elijah attended South East High School, a culturally diverse college preparatory public high school located in an urban neighborhood. Realizing that it was not normal or healthy to live without light and electricity, Elijah knew that he needed to go to college. Thus, when he was in high school, he surrounded himself with like-minded peers who kept each other focused on their educational goals. He played on the basketball team, was a member of the National Honor Society and served on the student council. Within the local community, Elijah joined a nonprofit organization and had the responsibility of maintaining a greenhouse for a small stipend. He graduated high school with a 3.1 grade point average, and through the guidance and support of his mentors, Elijah was able to attend Private University tuition-free through the university's Educational Opportunity Program.

*Ariana: Mexican American Female*

*“It was never really asked of me if I wanted to go to college;  
it was just something that I did.”*

Ariana's childhood began in the Los Angeles area where she resided until she was nine years old. In Los Angeles, where her two older brothers were primarily raised, Ariana was surrounded by a large Mexican community. Their culture was deeply rooted in the schools, the churches, the grocery stores and especially her neighborhood. After

her parents relocated the family to Missouri, life was much different. Her family was the only family of color in the neighborhood, and for the first time it became crucial for Ariana to learn English. As the youngest in the family, this transition was easiest for Ariana, and her brothers affectionately considered the most “Americanized” of them all. Both of Ariana’s parents received no more than a sixth grade education in Mexico, but they were nonetheless, highly resilient people – at the time of the interview, Ariana’s mother was working on earning her GED. Only one of Ariana’s older brothers graduated from high school, and neither pursued a college education, thus, Ariana was considered “the smart one” in the family.

Learning English was not an easy task, but she Ariana determined not only learn it, but to excel at it so that she would not be perceived as less intelligent by her teachers and peers. Through her plight to learn English, Ariana developed a love for language and different cultures, which is evidenced by the activities that she participated in as a high school student. She attended, Grand Terrace High School, a racially diverse public high school in Kansas City, well known for its International Baccalaureate program. She did not participate in sports because her parents feared that she would injure herself, but she made up for that by staying involved in as many other extracurricular activities as possible. She participated in a theatre group, the science Olympiad, the debate team, student council and the color guard. She also took a trip to Australia to learn about different cultures, and another to the Mississippi gulf regions to help with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Ariana maintained a 3.0 grade point average and discovered Private University by chance while attending a cousin’s out of state wedding that took place just down the street from the university’s campus.

*Lamar: African American Male*

*“Those negative influences—*

*they are important because it helped me to see what I did and did not want to be.”*

Lamar epitomizes confidence. He firmly believes that he is capable of accomplishing anything that he sets his mind to. Growing up as an only child, his parents firmly expected that he would pursue a college education—and he took this expectation to heart. He took it so seriously, in fact, that being the first in the family to go to college became his personal mantra. Lamar was an extremely bright, intelligent and focused child. His father graduated from high school and worked as a printer at a paper machinery corporation. His mother, who did not graduate from high school, but completed her GED, worked as a general manager for a sandwich chain. Lamar gives much credit to his father for teaching him the importance of a college education, and for being his greatest source of support.

As a child growing up in the inner city, Lamar’s parents wanted him to attend the best schools possible, so they chose to enroll him in school outside of his neighborhood. So, in middle school, he attended W.E.B. DuBois Leadership Academy, an urban predominantly Black private school, where Lamar excelled and graduated as valedictorian. He was then accepted into the prestigious Private University High School, and had a rude awakening. It quickly became clear that his middle school did not academically prepare him for the type of rigor that was offered in his high school.

Private University High School is a private, Catholic all-boys school where the majority of the students come from high socioeconomic backgrounds. Lamar’s transition was difficult and he struggled with a devastating 1.8 grade point average during his first

year. Determined to excel at Private University High School, he worked with teachers who saw his great potential. He remained focused strictly on his academics over the next couple of years until he brought his grade point average up. It was not until his junior year that Lamar decided to get involved in extracurricular activities, which for him was simply a strategy to increase his attractiveness to the universities he would apply to. Through the advice of his guidance counselor, he became involved with the liturgical choir, the gospel choir, the student council, and the Black student council. Additionally, he performed in a musical, was a freshmen retreat leader, and participated in community service activities.

Despite that difficult first year in high school, Lamar managed to graduate as salutatorian with a 3.7 grade point average. He credits his own hard work to his success. When it was time to decide which college to attend, he chose Private University after winning a scholarship competition through the university's nursing program. He turned down an opportunity to attend another university that was high on his list because he was offended that the admissions office required him to participate in a summer bridge program before enrolling. This sealed the deal that he would attend Private University.

*Cherise: African American Female*

*“What made me different was that I was persistent.”*

Cherise believes that her academic drive made her the “black sheep” of the family, and is the cause of the tension between she and her mother. Cherise's mom was only 16 years old when she was born, and this was only two years after her own mother had passed away. The father of the child quickly stepped out of the picture, leaving the

young mother to raise Cherise at a young age without the guidance of her own mother or the support of the child's father.

For many years, it was just the two of them, and her mother struggled to provide the bare necessities with a minimum wage job and welfare, thus, education was not a priority to Cherise's mom, and she never pushed her daughter to value her studies—but Cherise took it upon herself to find value in her studies. As a child, she loved school. Her persistence was evident to her teachers, as she always reached out for help so that she could do better than the average student. By the time Cherise was 10 years old, her mother married her step-father and had two more children. Life became more financially stable, as he had a steady forklift job and her mother managed to secure a job as a supervisor at a marketing firm. Shortly after, her parents adopted a younger cousin, and the small family of two quickly grew to a family of six.

Cherise was perceived by her immediate family as “Miss Goody Two Shoes,” while extended family was always more supportive and had high hopes for her. To her mother, Cherise's decision to go to college meant that she believed herself to be better than the rest of the family. Her response was to resent her daughter's success. With very little to say about her step-father, it seemed clear that this relationship was also strained. Cherise was frustrated by the fact that her mother and step-father did not push her younger siblings to do well in school, so she voluntarily took on that role and decided to push them to maintain good grades and develop college aspirations. Cherise's mother considers these expectations to be “over the top,” yet, although her siblings complain, it is clear that they appreciate Cherise's encouragement because they have brought their grades up significantly and often ask their older sister about college.

The relationship with her mother was so strained that Cherise immersed herself deeply into her academics and kept her focus on getting to college as an escape from her stressful life at home. Cherise was introduced to the pre-college program Upward Bound in the eighth grade and knew immediately that this was a program that she needed to connect with. She considers it to be one of the best decisions she has ever made because this became her saving grace in preparing her for college. Through her involvement with this pre-college program, Cherise learned about which courses were important to take in high school, received tutoring services, and learned about financial aid and the admissions process. By the time she was a senior in high school, she felt more than prepared to take on a college education.

Cherise attended Renaissance Academy, a culturally diverse public high school in the inner city that specialized in the arts. Although she was not wildly active with extracurricular activities in high school, she did seize the opportunity to participate in the school choir, which traveled internationally to perform. Her other source of connection was Upward Bound, of which she remained active throughout her high school years. As a student who knew that her weakness was standardized tests, Cherise was deliberate about graduating with a strong grade point average to make up for her poor ACT scores. This was a successful endeavor, as she graduated high school with a 3.9 grade point average and was accepted into Private University, which was at the top of her list.

#### Findings Related to Research Question One

Research question one asked, “To what degree were the three innate psychological needs that cultivate self-determination met for these students?” Self-Determination Theory posits that all human beings have a natural propensity to pursue



growth and integration. Humans are self-motivated to learn and progress and will continue in this motivation as long as three psychological needs continue to be met; competence, autonomy and relatedness. Self-determination is interrupted only when at least one of these needs are unfulfilled (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Based upon this understanding of Self-Determination Theory, it appears that the participants in this study were indeed self-determined, as all three psychological needs were fulfilled in their lives. Most participants were intrinsically motivated to do well, meaning that they were more driven by an internal passion or desire. Only two talked about achieving academic success as simply a means to an end, an example of extrinsic motivation. The rest simply loved to learn. This love for learning was highly reinforced by important adults in their lives, such as parents and teachers, which further nurtured a natural love for learning. Parents (and in some cases, other influential adults) played a critical role in meeting the three psychological needs that promote self-determination by providing (a) the encouraging environment needed to feel competent; (b) the empowerment needed to feel autonomous; and (c) the inclusiveness needed to feel a sense of relatedness to others.

### *Competence*

Competence refers to believing that one is capable of accomplishing a goal. It includes possessing qualities such as strength of character, motivation, independence, confidence and a strong sense of self (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The participants exhibited a strong sense of competence which seemed to manifest itself in five ways, which include having (a) strengths that were validated by others, (b) spiritual assurance, (c) distinction as “the smart one” in the family, (d) and a desire to pave the way for others.

*Theme One: Strengths that were Validated by Others*

Most of the participants demonstrated a strong love for learning at a very early age, and this was recognized and validated by the people who surrounded them. There were no participants in the sample whose love for learning went fully unrecognized or invalidated. The ways in which the students demonstrated a love for learning varied, with some describing a strong interest in reading books, and others highly attached to educational television programs, such as the history channel. Alejandra was particularly interested in history and always had her head in a book. She described her love for learning in this way:

I guess the best way would be to describe me as a hungry learner. I love learning and reading and taking classes; such as philosophy. I like the quote, “The more you know, the more you don’t know.”

John had a similar love for learning. He spent much of his time in the library and became well known among the librarians. His intelligence became a part of his identity and his peers respected his interests. He described his love for reading and how his peers viewed him in middle school:

I think I checked out every book in our little school library. I was friends with the librarian . . . In the 8th grade when we graduated from middle school, I was voted most likely to write a book. I was voted most likely to be president, which isn’t possible because I wasn’t born here [laughter]. I was known as a bookworm. And, my group of friends was pretty popular and I was never classified as geeky or a nerd. But, people did always depend on me to help them out.

For Elena, it was her writing skills that revealed her academic strength. She received had a great deal of support from her parents but was also encouraged by a teacher who admired her work She said,

There's always those teachers that only bring things to your attention when you do things wrong, but she told me when I did things right, too. She would tell me after class, "Elena, I really like what you did with your paper, I liked when you wrote this, and it was really good." She would tell me to keep writing. She always encouraged me.

For most of the participants, this validation came from family. In Ariana's case her parents could not always monetarily support her love for learning, but would encourage her in the way they best knew how:

I remember my mom and dad telling me I would throw tantrums in the bookstore when they wouldn't buy me a certain book. They took a picture of me where I am standing by the books that I want; but they couldn't buy them for me.

In the few cases where family was not a source of nurturing and support, the participants found affirmation from teachers or other important adults in their lives. While this was not ideal, this support was enough to instill a sense of competence in their academic abilities. John was the only Mexican American student who felt disconnected from his family. He describes the pivotal role that his high school science teacher played in his affirming his strengths:

My science teacher totally showed me that I was good at science. I really didn't pursue it, but he was one of the teachers that along the way showed me that I

could be something, could do something with my life. I've always known I was going to do something, but he was one of those that showed me that I really could.

Nia had a difficult relationship with her mother, so she was deliberate about seeking approval from her teachers and the pre-college coach she was assigned to in high school. Her home environment and hectic schedule was so counterproductive to her desire to do well in school, that she avoided allowing the two worlds to cross altogether. Here's what she said:

I was always different; I loved to do my homework before I left school. And, plus, I never really had anyone I could run home to and have help with my homework or have someone check on what I am doing. I was thought to be a teacher's pet. I was always very hungry for attention, so I put that into my homework. "Can I have extra homework? Extra credit?" I was never satisfied with my grades or my GPA . . . I've always wanted myself to learn as much as possible.

For most of the participants, competence was well developed during childhood, and was reinforced by adults who spoke highly of them or exhibited high expectations for them.

### *Theme Two: Spiritual Assurance*

Although the question of spirituality was not included in the protocol, seven students specifically mentioned God or their faith as a driving force in their lives, and an additional four attended Catholic high schools. This indicates that spirituality may have played an instrumental role in the lives of at least 11 of the 17 students in the sample. After Cherise's interview, she talked about how important her spiritual life was to her, and credited her faith in God to her ability to overcome the challenges she faced.

However, she did not mention her faith during the interview because she was not sure if that information would be relevant to the study.

Despite the prevalence of drug abuse and prostitution in Elijah's family, his mother never strayed from her spiritual roots, and planted these seeds in her son. For Elijah, his faith is the source of his strength. When asked what he credits for his successes, he said,

First and foremost, is faith. My faith in God; I am not a saint or anything, but my mom and my family express that that is our foundation. Even if we didn't go [to church], we would always pray. She never really lost that faith aspect and that's what has always given me a fearless approach to things.

Nicole was the most explicit about her faith. Growing up, she was always actively involved in the church and expressed the importance of this connection:

I feel like I am nothing without God. Lately I've been saying to myself, "God is not going to put you in a place where He's not going to protect you . . ." I just feel that He is going to be there, and He will guide me. He wants me to do better and I will be nothing without him and I will always believe that. He made me who I am.

Faith was the centerpiece of Ariana's Los Angeles area community. When the family moved to the Midwest, her parents continued to instill the importance of faith.

Growing up in L.A. we went to a Catholic church, as well as in Kansas City. I've never had any faith crisis. I've heard my friends ask themselves if they really believe in God. I've never really had that doubt. I stood strong with my faith and mostly just the Catholic views . . . My parents taught me to pray; we did rosaries

on Mondays. I was really glad that I had that growing up, and that really helped me keep my faith life now that I am here.

*Theme Three: Distinction as “The Smart One”*

Most of the participants described themselves as being the coveted child in the family that would open new doors for the family. They described themselves as their parents’ “last hope” or the child that would live out the dream that the parents were never able to fulfill for themselves. It was clear that they were perceived differently from their siblings. The relationship between Shawna and her younger sister is a prime example. While Shawna and her father had a very close relationship, the same was not the case between her father and younger sister. He strongly admired Shawna and had all but given up on her sister, who ended up getting pregnant when she was 16 years old. Here is how Shawna described the relationship between her younger sister and her father, and the way he perceives his two daughters differently:

When she was pregnant they argued a lot. When she had the baby, she moved out for a couple of months. That made it really hard on their already distressed relationship, which was a result of my mother’s manipulation. She’s a good student, she has a good GPA, but he thinks she isn’t going to make it . . . With my father, he looks at me and says I am his last hope. It’s a lot of pressure.

Shawna’s mother was imprisoned throughout most of her childhood. As a result, she never got to know her mother and had very little regard for her. As the only young woman in the family with the ambition to succeed, she described the burden of taking the family out of the cycle of poverty:

My role is to make things happen. That's how I feel. There are a lot of people that look at me that I need to show how things should be done. There's this circle of mistakes in our family; and not just my own, but they all get pregnant young, fall out of high school, and so forth. Out of all my brothers and sisters, I am the only one so far to graduate from high school.

Because Monica was the first in the family to learn English before Spanish, her parents depended on her to translate for them and interpreted her ability to do this as an indicator of her intelligence. Within the classroom, however, teachers recognized that she was indeed different from her classmates, and made an effort to encourage this academic strength:

I guess I was always labeled as the smart one. When I was in elementary school, I was in bilingual classes all the way to 6th grade. My first language was English, instead of Spanish. I was always moved up to the next grade. You could tell that I was the smart one. I'd always end up in the "smart" groups for classroom discussions . . . I also was actually asked to go into the gifted and talented program, and my parents didn't understand what that meant and stuff. They didn't want to change schools and all that. In math, my teachers would ask me to stay after class to help and tutor.

Although Jerell was not as connected to his extended family as many of the other participants, he was still considered to be the smartest in the family. He described the way his family perceived him: "To be honest, I was praised a lot for being the smart one. Not even just my immediate family . . . I was expected to do well." There was a stark

contrast between him and his older brother, who was essentially not expected to be ambitious or to succeed in life.

For Ariana, Elena and Monica, their successes go well beyond fulfilling a personal dream. Their educational endeavors also fulfilled the deeply held dreams of their mothers. Elena's mother, for example was heartbroken as a child when she learned that she would not be able to attend elementary school. This inspired her to take her studies seriously. In Elena's words:

My mom was from a small farm and was the second oldest of 12. She worked in the field with my grandfather and survival came first, so school wasn't really an option. My father also worked and didn't have time for school. Education wasn't really enforced. Family and having food on the table was what came first. My mother tells me she remembers how excited she was when she thought she was going to school. She even remembers the happiness that owning a pencil gave her, but she was only enrolled a few days before she had to leave again to work.

Knowing her mother's story inspired Elena to take her studies seriously so as to not take the opportunity to go to school for granted. Ariana, whose mother was only able to attend school through the sixth grade, said, "I feel like I am the one that has fulfilled my mom's dream, since she didn't get to go to high school and study." Regarding Monica's mother's aspirations, she said,

It's something my mom has always wanted. She's told me she cried when she couldn't go to class because my grandmother didn't have the money. She emphasizes just going. Not being the best, not being on top, not getting a 4.0



because they don't understand that, but just simply going and graduating. That's all that matters.

*Theme Four: Desire to Pave the Way for Others*

The fourth way in which the participants demonstrated a sense of competence was by expressing a greater purpose for their abilities. Many discussed how others would benefit from their successes and the responsibility they have as role models to ensure that their younger siblings follow through in accomplishing their own dreams. For Nicole, this greater purpose was also rooted in her faith. She believed that God had given her the gifts that she possessed so that she can use them to benefit others:

I always felt like [God] has got big plans for me. And, in my life, if I make some type of difference, I know what it is. But, I am meant to make a difference for somebody. A difference, whether in school or at work, friends, anything . . . I just had a revelation one day. It was my junior year in high school. He has a purpose for me and ever since then, I've felt that way. I've just always felt that there is a bigger purpose than I can see. But, yeah, he wants me to do something. I don't know what it is, and I can't figure it out, but I've just always felt that way.

Elijah felt a strong sense of responsibility for the younger generation in his family. As their self-appointed mentor, he maintained a commitment to set a positive example and encourage them to make positive strides in life:

I just would like to make the future path for my siblings easier when their time comes. My role is to be a resource for them . . . I try to look after my youngest siblings [sister, cousins, nephews]. I try to help out with them and to be a mentor to them, especially my nephew and youngest cousin. I use all of them for

motivation for doing my best because I'm the only person they see. It doesn't really seem possible unless you can find a concrete object or person who had done this, for you to feel like you can do this. I feel that if my sister can see that her brother graduated from Private, she can do it too.

While Elijah's role might be appreciated by his family members, Cherise is committed to encouraging her younger siblings to strive for success despite her parents' criticism and perception that her expectations for them are unrealistic:

My mom is not tough on my brother and sister about grades and I am like, "Look if you don't have a 3.0, we have nothing to speak about." And my mom says that they aren't like me, that they can't be like me. I was valedictorian of my middle school. I've always gotten good grades. Now, when I am hard on them because my mother doesn't understand the importance because she didn't finish, I have to pick up that role and they get mad at me. I think that deep down they are grateful for it; my little sister watches and she was doing badly and now she is excelling. Initially, I think I am probably annoying, but afterwards, I think they see the benefit.

### *Summary of Competence*

The participants knew that they were capable of achieving academic success, and this knowing was validated by important people in their lives who affirmed their strengths and abilities. They were also validated through past successes. When they accomplished goals or maintained good grades, this reinforced a sense of competence. The participants' academic abilities, along with the passion and drive to do well, made them stand out among their peers and siblings. As indicated by the research, competence

is characterized by a strong feeling of self, confidence, independence, motivation and strength of character (Nasim et al., 2005). The participants embodied these characteristics through their schoolwork, their spiritual connections, as the “smart” child in the family, and through the desire to use their strengths to benefit others.

Table 2

*Competence: Frequency of Theme*

Theme	# of Participants who related to theme
Strengths that are validated by others	17
Spiritual Assurance	11
Distinguished as the “smart one”	12
Desire to pave the way for others	10

*Autonomy*

Autonomy refers to having a sense of personal control, freedom and choice. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), it is “the feeling of volition that can accompany any act, whether dependent or independent, collectivist or individualist” (p. 74). The participants’ description of autonomy was largely related to the relationships they had with their parents. Their parents’ lives were the lens through which many students used to experience their own autonomy. They expressed having a sense of autonomy in four ways, which included having (a) parents who encouraged independence, (b) a sense of responsibility, (c) a preference for self-reliance, and (d) a desire to exceed their parents’ financial status.

*Theme One: Parents who Encouraged Independence*

The interesting thing about autonomy is that much of the research on the Millennial generation paints a picture of a generation of youth who are not only less autonomous, but actually desire more structure and regulation. They are the children of “helicopter” parents, who manage their lives for them. This was clearly not the case for the first-generation students in this study. While their parents were highly supportive and wanted them to do well, they did not attempt to dictate every moment of their children’s lives. In most cases, the parents would lay the foundation by instilling values and having high expectations for their children, but they did not step in to live their lives for them. This was largely because parents were simply unable to. They needed to commit a great deal of time to their jobs to maintain the stability of the home. Instilling a sense of autonomy was also a parenting strategy driven by cultural norms that value autonomy.

Jerell’s grandmother taught him independence as an essential strategy for his survival, should she become unable to care for him:

She taught me to take care of myself if something ever happened to her. She was always sick and in case something did ever happen to her and we had to go to a foster home, we could take care of ourselves—iron clothes, cook, whatever.

Similarly, Elijah’s mother wanted her son to be self-sufficient because of the uncertainty of her risky lifestyle. Elijah said this about his mother’s child rearing philosophy:

My mother gave me a lot of freedom . . . I don’t know if that was her strategy or just the way it happened; maybe it was a little of both. However, I could have really strayed, but she had faith in me that I would do right, so I had a lot for respect for her for that.

While the circumstances in Nicole's household were much more stable, her mother nonetheless instilled a sense of resilience in her children. She wanted them to have the type of strength that allowed Nicole and her brother to overcome challenges and setbacks:

My mom has always been a tough person. She has this phrase, "Ouch and that's it" [laughter], so when we were kids, we used to fall and we'd say, "Ouch and that's it! I'm not whining!"

Nia's mother was not deliberate about teaching independence, but the very fact that she was not often around and expected Nia to maintain the household prompted her to become independent and motivate herself:

I never got pressure to do anything; maybe my own pressures. Nobody could really help me and that was really frustrating. I had to study until I got it all the time. Since then, I've always made sure that I am self-motivated. My mom is sleeping when I get home and that was it. I'm on my own.

Cherise, whose mother also could not spend much time at home, had to learn to become independent in order to get the things that she wanted. She said,

To get the things I wanted, I had to get a job. My mother couldn't or wouldn't provide them for me. She instilled in me that I had to be independent. But I could remember wanting a cell phone and I had to work for it. And, I started saving up for college. I opened up a CD.

Many of the participants credit their parents for laying a solid foundation for them, but allowing them to create their own destiny. Most were not pushed to go to college, as most parents simply wanted them to graduate from high school. Parents

ultimately allowed them to decide what they wanted to do, as long as they were successful in that endeavor.

Monica's parents were very explicit about this: "They never emphasized being the best; I did that for myself. As long as you graduate and get a diploma and are in school, that's the basics for them." Cherise also decided for herself that she would go to college. She was very clear about her determining her own destiny,

It was never really asked of me if I wanted to go to college; it was something that I just did . . . I see myself as the one kind of doing my own thing.

Alejandra also said that she wasn't pushed toward any of her accomplishments:

I think I am driven. I know what I want and what I have to do get what I want . . .

If it is something that I want to do, I do well. No one pushes me, it's all myself.

#### *Theme Two: Sense of Responsibility*

Responsibility refers to one's ability to take on greater levels of independence. All participants felt a sense of responsibility, but the level of responsibility that the students were expected to take on varied. Three different levels of responsibility were identified: (a) being responsible for academics and chores, (b) being responsible for academics, chores and a job, and (c) being responsible for academics, chores, a job, and holding the family together. Across these three levels, whether they were simply expected to maintain their chores or take on multiple jobs to help pay the bills, all participants maintained that they were highly responsible individuals.

At the most basic level the students were simply responsible for their academics and household chores. This was particularly the case for students who grew up in two-

parent homes, where parents were able to assume shared responsibility for household needs. When asked about responsibilities, Lila's responses were all academically related:

I like to be all over the place. I like to manage my time. I guess they could see that because I do my homework at a certain time; if I want to have fun, I do that homework first.

When asked specifically whether or not she held a job while in high school, she referenced an internship that was required of all students in her school.

Well, in that high school, we had to work once a week. So that took a lot of time. Then sports every day; practice games. I didn't have enough time to get a job outside of school. But, when I'd come home, I'd have chores.

The internships program was a part of her high school's curriculum. The students' schedules were designed in such a way that on the days when the students had their internships, they did not have any scheduled classes.

Leticia was very much focused on her academics. Her parents actually discouraged her from working so that she could focus on her commitment to school. When Leticia was asked about whether or not she is responsible, she said, "Yes. I think a lot of people see getting good grades as responsible. Financially, I am pretty responsible; I've never been in any problems. I know how to prioritize." When asked whether or not she held any jobs, she responded in this way:

Just school. I used to want to work, and I'd always ask to work at a clothing store, but my parents said no, that school is work for now. Getting good grades was my job in my parents' eyes.

Ariana, who was highly involved in school, described why she believed she was a responsible high school student:

Because I take good care of things; also because I have so many responsibilities. In high school, yes, because looking back at my activities, I was historian of the debate team, so I was responsible for taking pictures and showing a power point presentation. In my household, I had assigned chores.

Daslyn's responsibilities were also primarily academic:

My only responsibilities were chores and helping around the house . . . When it comes to someone else or for someone else; I'm pretty responsible. I make sure I am there whenever they need me. For me, it's a different story. In high school my responsibility was going to class, looking out for friends or family. I didn't even have a job in high school. I mean I was a deejay, and I got paid for it, but no other job. Senior year, I had football, but beyond that, just getting into college was my responsibility.

The fact that these students did not take on a job or some of the larger responsibilities that other students in the sample had is not to say that their responsibilities were any less important for their journey's to college. In fact, not having more taxing responsibilities allowed them to further immerse themselves in school, which fostered their academic and social integration. Leticia, for example, had the highest grade point average, possibly because she had the least amount of non-academic responsibilities.

At the next level, the students were responsible for academics and chores, but also held jobs. When asked about having to take on responsibilities, Antonio's response was, "Just being there for family and friends," and upon further questioning, he said, "Well, at



times I would work with my dad with his landscaping business.” The boarding school he attended had a structured schedule, and required that the students perform chores before classes in the morning.

Lamar was an active student and held a job, but his academics were clearly his primary responsibility. He said, “I put school before everything. I’m a social person, but I took care of school first.” In terms of other responsibilities, he said, “I had a couple jobs, and I did retreats where I was a leader a few times and I was in student council and I took care of those responsibilities.” In comparison to the other participants, these responsibilities were relatively light, but both men firmly believed that they were responsible, and could draw a sense of autonomy from this self-perception.

At the greatest level of responsibility, the participants indicated that they were the child that the family depended on to hold things together—to translate for parents as they interacted with the public (bank tellers, grocery store clerks, etc.), to raise younger siblings while parents worked, to do the grocery shopping and the cooking, to take on a job to help pay bills, and in some cases, to care for their own caregiver.

When Jerell’s grandmother became ill, the roles in the household immediately reversed. Aside from having to take on a full time job, he also had to care for his grandmother:

You know, my grandmother was sick and all . . . her body had shut down and was in the hospital for two months . . . When she came home, it was just me and her and the roles completely reversed and I was the provider and I was working . . . I’d get up, go to school, come home, eat and do some homework. Work from 4-11, come home, go to sleep. Grandma would wake me up at 2 am because she

didn't feel well and wanted me to sit with her. Literally sit with her until 3 and then go to sleep and get up to get ready to go back to school.

Monica's situation was not nearly as intense, but she was still heavily depended upon to keep the family in tact. As the oldest daughter, Monica had the responsibility of maintaining her role a caregiver to her younger siblings and translator for her parents.

She described her responsibilities in this way:

Since I am the oldest, there is a lot of pressure or stress on me, than my other two younger brothers . . . simply at the age of six or seven at the bank or the doctor's office translating for them. I wouldn't even know what I was saying. Even today, they don't speak English. They never have. Every job they had there were Mexicans with them. Like, I still have to call for them, schedule their doctor appointments, calling the insurance company . . . . It's very stressful. I come home from school and then my mom is asking me to do this and that and the other thing. And, my parents don't understand a lot of what they are doing, and my two younger brothers rely a whole lot on me as well. I've always done it, so it is mainly making sure everything is correct and runs smoothly.

Nicole, who grew up in a two-parent home, took on a great deal of responsibilities. However, in her case, these were primarily self-imposed:

I worked a full time job . . . I had this friend in high school and she had a baby and she couldn't or didn't know how to take care of it. I just fell in love with this baby and me and my mom used to get the baby on Thursdays. Every Thursday turned into every weekend. Next thing you know, she was staying with us and I would take her to her mom before I went to school. My mom would pick her up

after work; there was a lot of that. We basically raised her; she still stays with us actually. And, I think that is a huge responsibility, just taking in somebody's child in itself and working! Really . . . working really wasn't a responsibility because my mom didn't want me to work, but I knew that's what I had to do. I was like, "Okay, I know she needs help, so I should step it up."

Nia's household responsibilities, on the other hand, were not self-imposed:

I was like the mother in the house in terms of support, making sure things were running along. I really didn't have a role model, so I was like a spare hand of getting things done. Anything that you think a mother would do, I would do for myself. I was able to take that place for my brother of my mother . . . It is just a part of who I was when I was young; being in an adult role even though I was a child. We had an addition to our family when I was in high school. My mom's sister's children got divided within the family and one came to us. She is 15 now, but was 10 at the time. I had to make sure everyone got fed and did homework and stuff. Having that responsibility and trying to maintain mine was nuts.

When Alejandra's family faced challenges, they depended on her to help out as much as possible. She said,

When I was in middle school, I was 13, a lot of weekends my sister would leave me with her newborn baby. She was kind of a wild child. I think that is a big responsibility for a 13-year-old. Also, my mom had a restaurant when I was growing up, so I had to help out around the house when she wasn't home. And, as my dad got older, he developed dementia, so I had to help out where needed then, as well.

Similarly, Shawna suddenly had to take on more responsibility after her father became ill:

When I was 12, I had started to take on a little bit more of a motherly role—I learned to cook, drive, etc. A lot of things that happened to my sister, I feel responsible for. We have other sisters, but we were the only ones that stayed in contact with each other. So, I was the only woman role model in her life.

As the only child of a struggling mother, Elijah was often left to take care of himself:

She always held like two jobs, and a lot of times, there was a lot of responsibility on me because of that . . . She put a lot of trust on me. There were times that I would come home and she was already in bed because she had already had a full day. There were times I woke up she'd be gone and I wouldn't have to go to school that particular day and she would trust me to do these things.

Cherise had to take responsibility as caregiver to her mother at times:

I kind of had to be the mom and kind of take care of my mom because of her alcoholism and drug use. I really didn't have the childhood many others had because I had to look after my brother and sister, and that started around the age of 10. I had to be grown and independent before it was due.

Although these students had more intense responsibilities than the others in the sample, they were able to maintain strong grade point averages and remained active in school. For some, such as Cherise and Nia, academics and extracurricular activities were an escape from the difficulties at home. The Mexican American students were more likely to have responsibilities that were part of a collective family effort, whereas, many

of the African American students were left with responsibilities that fell solely upon them. This difference is likely more as a result of the two-parent versus the single-parent household structure. The commonality here is that all participants felt a strong sense of responsibility, despite their differences in responsibility level. Because they perceived themselves as responsible, they were able to draw a sense of autonomy from their experiences.

*Theme Three: Preference for Self-reliance*

While the participants appreciated the support and stability that their parents provided, they preferred not to depend on anyone to help them accomplish their goals. They were confident in their own abilities and wanted to believe that they were the catalysts for their own success. Daslyn credited his parents for providing a stable household for him, appreciating the fact that they remained married and instilled strong educational values early on. However, he did not lean on them to solve problems for him. In his words:

I feel so bad coming to people with my troubles, even though that's what they are there for and they might really want to help. I guess I just don't want to put people in harms way, you know? I just didn't really look towards anyone but myself.

This reflected the sentiments of many of the male participants. The reluctance to ask for help was much more evident in the males than it was for the females. Although the female participants were also highly autonomous, the males were certainly more vocal about their reluctance to ask for help. With regards to going to his mother when he faced challenges, Elijah said, "I am really stubborn . . . I don't like to really worry her because she already has enough on her plate." John was equally adamant about not wanting to

depend on people, “I can pretty confidently say I never really leaned on anyone for support . . . I am really independent and don’t ask for help from anyone.”

*Theme Four: Desire to Exceed Parents’ Financial Status*

Most of the participants grew up in lower socioeconomic situations and were driven not to struggle the way that their parents did. Even those students who reported middle to upper middle class family incomes watched their parents struggle before achieving financial stability. The participants talked about how grateful they were for having parents who reminded them of their struggle.

Enrique was grateful for the sacrifices his parents made and believed it was his responsibility to take those sacrifices and turn them into opportunities for himself:

My parents . . . had their difficulties, and when they came to the United States, I think their hopes were that they wanted to have kids one day and they wanted us to have a better education than they had. Thanks to them for coming to the States, I am here. I owe it to them.

Ariana was also grateful for the opportunities her parents provided for her, but she was especially driven by her mother who inspired her to make the most out of her life. She had this to say about her mom:

My inspiration has been my mom. I know how she struggled when she was younger; and, even now that she is 40, she is still working towards that GED. That is just amazing to me . . . that at 40, she is still trying. She doesn’t think her life is over at all.

Monica was similarly inspired by her mom:

Like some people just wanted to get out [of high school]. I was different. I never emphasized, "I just want to graduate." I don't think the other students really even asked about college. I always asked, "What do I need to do?" And that is when they would suggest the AP classes and whatnot. Their view was they just needed to graduate and go to work. I always thought about what my parents said and that was if I just quit at school, I am going to be doing what they are doing for 20 years. I didn't want to do that. I want to do something more.

Elijah often considered how his life could be different: "Life was so rough; there has to be something else, I would think."

Shawna credits both of her parents for inspiring her to desire success but for different reasons:

I thank my father for me liking school because he started teaching me at a young age. When you excel at something you want to do it more often. Also, my mother, and not because she was there for me, but because she was not there for me.

Because she was a failure, and I know that isn't nice to say, but I didn't want to end up like her.

### *Summary of Autonomy*

The participants were highly autonomous and demonstrated this through the ways in which they handled and perceived responsibilities and their desire to rely upon themselves before depending on others. Parents played a critical role the participants' sense of autonomy by allowing their children to explore their own interests and to make decisions on their own. Although most of them were actively engaged and led close-knit family units, the parents did not attempt to control every aspect of their children's lives.

The structure and lower socioeconomic status of the family also affected the level of responsibility the students took on. The fact that parents had to work long hours to provide for the family meant that the participants were expected to contribute by taking on some roles that may have typically been the parents' responsibility. These responsibilities, as well as the encouragement their parents provided to live independently were key components that resulted in the participants' sense of autonomy.

Table 3

*Autonomy: Frequency of Theme*

Theme	# of Participants who related to theme
Parents who encourage independence	17
Sense of responsibility	17
Preference for self-reliance	14
Desire to exceed parents' financial status	17

*Relatedness*

Relatedness refers to having social support or strong connections to other people. Schlossberg's transition theory identifies five types of social support: intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, institutions and communities (Evans et al., 1998). All participants felt a strong sense of belonging or connection to an individual or particular group of people. For many, this meant being well-connected to family; for others, it was a church group, an athletic team, an academic group, or a group of friends; for a select few, it meant being connected to extended family members when the immediate household was not stable.



There were three dominant themes that reflected the students' experience with relatedness: (a) assurance of love from significant others, (b) healthy and satisfying relationships, and (c) a sense of acceptance by others within their peer groups.

*Theme One: Assurance of Love from Significant Others*

Many participants drew security from the assurance that they were loved by significant people in their lives, including members of their immediate or extended families and in some cases, friends of family members. Most of the participants had this assurance and spoke frequently of security they felt throughout the course of their lives. Lila grew up in a very close-knit family and depended on their support to keep her moving toward her goals:

. . . the support of my family helped a lot because the year I graduated school, they helped me get my confidence in going to college. I was involved in sports, so my dad would always go to the games. That really helped.

Cristina's family was similarly close and supportive:

My family was really supportive growing up and they constantly reminded me that they wanted the best for me. They were a huge part of my life and their presence in my life made all the difference.

Nicole's statement was simple, but telling:

My family's support is extremely important. I feel my drive and determination helps me along the way, but their support helps me go further. They are always there to put things into perspective for me.

Elena was the most detailed about her family's level of support:

As a little girl, my sister was the greatest person in the world and everything about her was perfect in my eyes. My brothers took care of me and I always knew I was their little sister. My dad worked hard and was stern but a great man. My mother was my entire world and she taught me to love and to make everything I did a piece of art. She was strong, always sick, always singing and always there. She gave herself unconditionally to her family and never asked for anything in return.

Similarly, Ariana's close-knit family provided her with the security of being loved:

My brothers, they were always there for me. My brothers always talk about how I am the studious one and look at me differently because I am doing something different. My parents are really proud of me. My dad really misses me. They see me as a smart girl; so they aren't worried about me."

In Antonio's family, maintaining strong connections was highly valued: "We valued family togetherness and education; also, unity and being there for each other, making sure that everyone has what they need to succeed."

Nia, who struggled to receive acceptance from her mother, drew her love from other sources:

My grandmother who passed two years ago—I was my grandmother's baby.

That's probably the reason I am the person I am versus the way typical people are in my area. I would also include one of my ex-boyfriends, which helped in terms of maturity.

### *Theme Two: Healthy and Satisfying Relationships*

Many of the participants described relationships in which they were able to engage with others genuinely and interpersonally. These relationships were healthy

because the people students spoke of always wanted the best for them and took measures to support them when possible. Daslyn was grateful for the stability his parents provided in his life through their healthy and stable relationship:

My parents instilled those important educational values when I was really young. That was pretty much a big impact on my life. Additionally, the fact that they were still together the whole time I was growing up—I'm pretty much one of the few people I know my age whose parents are still together. Them being married has been a huge part of it and the reason I'm still alive.

He also talked about the important role that his friends played in his life:

I actually had a nice large group of people that I could turn to. Like brothers and sisters to me. Anytime I had a problem, I could turn to that group of people because they were either dealing with that same problem or understood what was going on.

Elena described the healthy nature of the relationship she had with her family: My family was really supportive growing up and they constantly reminded me that they wanted the best for me. They were a huge part of my life and their presence in my life made all the difference.

She went on to describe their support and how this impacted her life:

I've always had a lot of support from my family, especially. I am the first generation to go to college . . . My pretty much gave us all the support and were behind us . . . It really helps when you have a lot of people that believe in you. I was raised to be a huge family person. Even right now, it's what keeps me going. I think that the relationships in life make you who you are. And even if you don't

think you do, you pick up other people's traits. I see my mom in the things I do all the time. They are important because they form a part of who you are.

Although Leticia did not establish strong relationships at her school, she described the relationships she valued within her family:

One of my cousins that I am closest with and my same age, her parents weren't very college oriented. She brought it upon herself and she wants to be a lawyer. She and I really helped each other out a lot through the process. My other cousin, who is a college graduate, would be in the picture. We always get together each summer and talk about things, where our life is going and things of that nature.

Enrique described the respect he had for his uncle:

When my mom's older brother was little, he worked at the young age of 10, and he just made me think of the things that I take for granted. He was kind of a role model for me. Right now, he is a probation officer . . . and if he can do it through those hard times, I can do it, too.

Shawna, who was very close to her father, spoke of several relationships that she valued:

My father, my sister, my best friend and her mother. My boyfriend—he was my best friend before my boyfriend. He's probably the one that knows all . . . he's my go to guy. And, my English teacher. I turn to them different, but on different levels. Like if I turn to my father, it would be for something education related or world related. When I encountered racism for the first time . . . I would talk to my father about things like that. I would turn to my female role models for things that I couldn't understand as a female, such as my first period, boys—I had no one to go to and I couldn't go to my dad or my little sister. The rest, I would go to talk

about how I felt about pressures of my life, I would turn to my friends and complain and stuff.

Cherise was not close to her mother, but developed a relationship with her mother's best friend, who filled in to support her in ways that her mother did not:

My consistent person was a close friend of my mom's that I met when I was 14, but beyond that, I can't think of anyone. During my high school years, she helped me out when she could.

*Theme Three: Sense of Acceptance by Others Within Peer Group*

Most of the participants felt that they were generally accepted by their peers, especially those who were highly involved with extracurricular activities. Nicole described the acceptance she felt at both school and work:

In high school, I kind of always stood out. I always stood out at work as one of the top employees. I was the captain of the basketball team, honors, and all that stuff, and I think everyone would say the same about me.

She also described her core group of friends, who seemed to reinforce the resilience and strength that her mother instilled in her:

I've got some really good friends and they are always there to tell me exactly what's what. They don't sugar coat anything. They were always calling me the motherly one. I was always saying, "Did you do this yet?" or "Did you fill out that application?" Then sometimes I'd think to myself, "I'm all over them about this, I need to get mine in, too!" But we all tried to do things together. If I didn't know something, I could ask them.

Elena also had a reliable set of friends who accepted and supported her:

They were pretty supportive. I tend to try and surround myself by people who cared about the same things I did. My friends and I are kind of a support network for each other.

Ariana, who also had the strong support of her family, talked about the influence of two of her best friends:

Ryan was involved in my high school activities with me . . . My best friend during high school, Mai, she is Vietnamese—we did everything together outside of school, hanging out and things like that.

Although Monica's friends had different future aspirations, they still supported her in her educational goals:

There was a group of five girls I was in a business program with, and they all have kids now—like two years old—and they would be there. I have my girlfriends . . . I would say it is hard for me to turn to friends now because they all have kids and it's difficult for them, but they do support me in finishing college.

### *Summary of Relatedness*

Most of the participants had a strong sense of relatedness through their connections to family. The Mexican American students had families that were highly interdependent and supportive of one another. There were a few cases in which the students did not feel strongly connected to their parents or other close members of their households. In these cases, the students drew their support from other relationships with teachers, staff, members of the extended family, or friends. Thus, all students were able to maintain relationships that were healthy and satisfying and found a context within which they could feel accepted by others.

Table 4

*Relatedness: Frequency of Theme*

Theme	# of Participants who related to theme
Assurance of love from significant others	13
Relationships that are healthy and satisfying	17
Sense of acceptance by others within peer group	15

*Summary of Findings for Research Question One*

Essentially, this question asked to what degree the students had the three innate psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness met to foster self-determination. As was indicated in the data, all three needs appeared to have been met for the students. While there was some evidence of variation in how these needs were met, it was quite clear that based upon the criteria for self-determination set forth by Deci and Ryan, these students were fully provided with the provisions necessary to become self-determined individuals. They all felt a sense of competence, for example, but some of them drew their competence more heavily through the assurance they received through their spiritual lives, whereas others drew most of a sense of competence from the teachers who validated their strengths. Most students, however, drew a sense of competence from a combination of different sources, as was also the case for autonomy and relatedness. Of greatest importance is the finding that the students did indeed have each of the innate psychological needs met, and became highly self-determined individuals as a result (see

Figure 2).

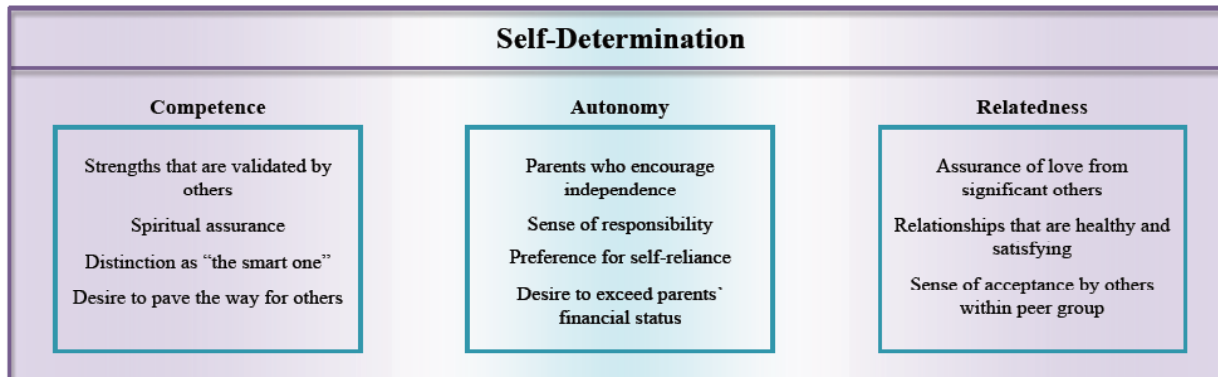


Figure 2. Self-determination themes.

### Findings Related to Research Question Two

The second research question asked, “What skills and assets do these students possess that enable them to be academically successful enough to qualify for college?” Academic success is a collective term that embodies both in-class and out-of-class experiences (Harper, 2005). This includes (a) successful classroom performance, (b) the ability to resist stereotype threat, and (c) social and academic integration. Based upon this understanding of academic success, the participants demonstrated that they were highly successful.

#### *Successful Classroom Performance*

Successful classroom performance is an essential component that includes maintaining a strong grade point average and having the ability to score well on tests and writing assignments. Classroom performance is generally strengthened through the students’ active involvement in the educational process. The participants demonstrated successful classroom performance in the following three ways: (a) earning good grades, (b) having high expectations, and (c) and nurturing strengths while managing weaknesses.



*Theme One: Earning Good Grades*

Good grades were defined as those that qualified for recognition on the honor roll. Generally speaking, the minimum requirement for the honor roll is a “B” average, or a 3.0 grade point average. All participants earned a cumulative grade point average of 3.0 in high school. The average GPA was 3.45 and the highest was 4.4. Leticia, the student whose grade point average was 4.4, also earned nearly a perfect score on her ACT took her studies very seriously:

. . . just being an over-achiever in and of itself. I feel like if I don’t do my homework right, and I don’t really study well for a test, that it wasn’t worth my time. My parents stressed school so much, that I felt it was my way to make them proud of me.

Alejandra had a strong track record for academic success. She talked about how she had to step it up a notch once she entered high school and realized that the competition was much more intense:

In elementary and middle school, I was always in accelerated classes. When I got to high school, it was more of a shock because I expected to be at the top of my game and there were people that were actually smarter than me. So it was a challenge to be able to get the good grades. I was smart, but it definitely was a wake up call. It gave me a chance to grow.

Elijah surrounded himself with like-minded friends who shared the goal of keeping their grades up in school:

I had smart friends and I could turn to them. I understood the information. And, although my group of friends and I had a lot of fun, we still all got our assignments done.

Lamar, who graduated from his middle school as valedictorian, struggled in his first year of high school because of its rigorous curriculum. He had to be quite deliberate about getting his grades back up:

I think it was an issue of applying myself and I think the teachers just kind of helped me. I don't think they necessarily saw me as stupid, but they saw me as someone who needed help transitioning between schools and maybe a little extra guidance . . . They helped me and didn't give up on me. I needed the extra time to understand the extra material. The teachers really helped in that aspect . . . A lot of my friends were smart but they wouldn't do the homework. When you don't do the assignments, you don't make the grade—you lose points. When you don't do the work you are not prepared for tests. I always made sure that I got what I needed from the teacher in order to best do the assignment so I understand. I didn't just let something pass by.

While John was purposeful about creating a strong academic record, he did not do it to satisfy anyone—not even himself (a prime example of extrinsic motivation). He saw his academics as a necessary step to take in order to make it the next level in life:

I don't feel like I got good grades for my parents. I was never really striving for acceptance from them, but I don't know. I didn't do it for myself, either. I did it for money, I guess? You need good grades to get money. It was kind of a means to an end . . . I like to learn, but it seems to me that all the things I like to learn are

entirely useless in the realm of academia. So, I really don't like school because it is forced learning. I do love learning, but now, it hasn't become learning for learning's sake, it's just so that one day I can succeed in life.

*Theme Two: Having High Expectations*

In spite of the strong academic record, many participants were constructively dissatisfied with their academic performance and were determined to do better. They always hungered for more. All of the participants were intentional about getting good grades, as they were mindful of how this would affect how colleges would perceive them. They did well, simply because it felt good to do so. The accomplishment was a reward in and of itself, but they also were very much aware of how a strong academic record would help them get into college. John was undoubtedly the most critical of his own achievements. He said,

I've always doubted my successes; wondering if they are really that much of an accomplishment. I felt like I haven't achieved really anything great with my life. My life is a succession of minor goals that I have attained for myself . . . I am pretty determined and really lucky I think. I've managed to procrastinate my way into a good school and get good grades. I really think it is just luck. There are a lot of times where I was in a situation where I should have not made it, but I did.

John's story is particularly interesting because he frequently stated that no one helped him along the way, that he accomplished his goals by himself. Yet, as indicated in his statement above, he also does not give himself very much credit.

The other participants were highly confident about their ability to achieve and this translated into having high personal expectations. Nia knew that she was capable of high

achievement and consistently challenged herself to do better. She never wanted to be so satisfied with herself that she became complacent:

To tell you the truth, I don't think I have any successes, because I look at something that I did well, and I say that I can always do better. Oh, I graduated from high school, big deal. And, it is a big deal, but I never want to get content with myself. So, I try not to put a plaque on everything I do.

Lamar's strong sense of confidence was instilled by his father. He said,

I honestly feel that there is nothing at all that I can fail at. My father always says that if you do your best, that's all that matters and I remember that.

Elena was not willing to settle for mediocre grades. She said, "Grades matter to me. I kind of know that if I didn't have the grades, I'd just be average."

For Lamar, Cherise, and Jerell, these high expectations were the driving force in the decision to attend a private university. They all expressed a low regard for public universities and schools that offer less than a four-year degree. This sentiment was most strongly articulated by Cherise:

I dreaded the thought of going to a trade school or a 2-year school. I wanted a four-year, so I did what I had to do . . . If I didn't go to college, I didn't know what I was going to do.

She also described how different she felt from her friends when asked whether or not she had friends who were as college-minded as she was:

Yes—they went to college but not to the degree as here [Private University]. More of a trade-based school. Not something that you work for to get your masters or something. That sets me apart.

The males said that they applied to UWM as a back-up school, but would be upset if they had to go there because it was not up to their standards. The participants were not willing to be the average student and wanted to succeed in ways that exceeded others in their peer groups.

*Theme Three: Nurturing Strengths and Managing Weaknesses*

The students knew where their weaknesses were, and were able to minimize the effect of their weaknesses while focusing on their strengths. Some were very confident in their test-taking skills, and others were not. Some were more confident about classroom tests than they were with standardized tests. For those who did not score well on the standardized tests, they relied heavily upon their grade point averages to become college qualified. This was a clear strategy for Cherise:

Every extra credit assignment, I'd ask for because my ACT scores weren't great, so I was trying to find all that I could do to get to college. And then coming from and MPS school, I never had any AP courses. So I felt like the contending part was my GPA.

Nicole made up for her poor ACT scores in a similar manner:

The ACT, I didn't do so well. I got a 21 the first time. The second time, it was homecoming and I forgot I had to take it. I remember I was at a party Friday night and at the party, I realized, "Ah! I have to take the ACT test tomorrow!" I got a 20 the second time. But from the classroom discussion and taking good notes, I should be fine.

*Summary of Classroom Performance*

The participants took the work that they accomplished in the classroom seriously. They were intentional about establishing a strong academic record and consistently looked for ways to keep their grades up. Many were not willing to be comparable to the average student and took measures to ensure that they stood out among their peers. The expectations they held for themselves were high, from the work they completed for their classes to the type of colleges that they anticipated attending. The participants were also highly in tune with their strengths and weaknesses, and used this to their advantage in order to effectively market themselves as desirable candidates for college. In many cases, when participants did not feel confident about their ability to score well on standardized tests, the students put additional effort into enhancing their grade point averages. Every student was aware of the importance of maintaining good grades and made this a priority, specifically so that they would meet and exceed college admissions requirements.

Table 5

*Classroom Performance: Frequency of Theme*

Theme	# of Participants who related to theme
Earning Good Grades	17
Having High Expectations	15
Nurturing strengths and managing weaknesses	12

### *Resistance to Stereotype Threat*

Resisting stereotype threat is a task that takes a substantial amount of energy to acknowledge, process, and respond to (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Griffin, 2005; Solorzano et al., 2002; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1998). Generally, resisting stereotype threat within an academic setting has a negative impact on academic performance and well-being (Griffin). Steele asserted that not overcoming the threat can bring down intellectual performance and, if left unchecked over time, can cause a student to seriously question his or her own abilities. This was not the case for the participants in the current study. Not only did they not suffer academically from the stereotypes they encountered, but many of them were not interested in giving much attention to the idea of being stereotyped or discriminated against. It is worth noting that all of the students had darker phenotypes and were visibly non-White. Most attended either racially diverse or predominantly White schools. The participants who did encounter stereotype threat resisted the threat in three ways: (a) disproving negative stereotypes, (b) ignoring the threat, and (c) avoiding “stereotypical” peers.

#### *Theme One: Disproving Negative Stereotypes*

Just over half of the participants described experiences in which they were stereotyped or discriminated against by others within the academic setting. They spoke about how they desired to disprove these stereotypes and the approaches they took to disprove them. Nicole explained that she was always aware of the assumption by others in school that she was the “typical Black girl,” which she described as being “bad” or a product of a dangerous urban environment:

I had this teacher. He was also a basketball coach and he was giving me a ride home. He says to me, “I know you’ve probably seen people get shot and killed,” and I was kind of like, “Okaaaay” [laughter]. I’d get the pity look, you know. The “I feel sorry for you” look.

Situations like these created a drive in her to prove the stereotypes wrong. This is the approach that she often took:

I always try to make myself known. I am going to talk to you. Shake your hand. Let you know what I am all about. I am always the type where I want you to get to know me. It’s typical, I mean, I’ve been known to do it . . . I just feel like it’s my job to let them know who I am to prove them wrong.

Elena, who was a bit hesitant to discuss being stereotyped, admitted that she does get some satisfaction from proving people wrong,

I’m not going to lie; it feels good to prove people wrong. But when people underestimate you, it feels good to know that you are worth a lot more than they think you are. But I would never go out of my way to prove.

John’s case is perhaps the most interesting, and the most unique to the rest of the sample, as he spent his entire life trying to disprove a stereotype that affected him as a child—to the point where he completely rejected his culture:

We now live in Sheboygan. Before we lived in a little town about 20 minutes from Sheboygan. We were the only Mexican family in half of that town. I am used to getting weird looks walking into the grocery store. A lot of my friends are a little more affluent too, and definitely getting weird looks when going to nice restaurants and such. I’ve definitely been profiled by the police.



He went on to describe the pivotal incidences that he experienced as a child:

When I was 7 1/2, I could speak English fluently. Well, they tried to put me in the ESL program. I insisted that they listen to the way I talk. They tried four different times to get me in the ESL program, and I do think it was just the way I looked.

The requirement is not knowing English to be in the ESL program. I clearly knew it.

The second incident took place in kindergarten:

My mom put me in the AM kindergarten class in the private school . . . I can remember this little six year old's face, and I remember her saying, "What is that brown boy doing here?" . . . At that moment, I realized I am really not like anyone else here. As much as I try, I won't be . . . I don't want to be that little brown boy she saw. That's been the undertone of my entire life.

When asked about his experience with race in middle school and high school, he said,

There might have been jokes, but I don't care. That was all in jest. By high school, I was identified as culturally Caucasian. One of my friends got me a shirt that says, "Stunningly Caucasian."

John was also very mindful about his desire to disprove negative stereotypes:

I felt like I had to prove myself in anything I do; and not necessarily because I am Hispanic. Part of it is because I don't want to be that brown guy I mentioned earlier. I never took a test without thinking I need to do my best to prove my racial status . . . .

Ariana's response to being stereotyped was very different from John's. These situations caused her to raise her aspirations and her performance so that no one could have cause to question her ability:

In high school I can definitely say that it was something that people acknowledged and was something I wasn't used to because in California, EVERYONE was Hispanic. And, also because I was younger, I guess I was kind of sheltered from that when I was younger.

Just before Ariana started middle school, her family moved to a predominantly White city in Missouri.

I know in middle school, people knew that I didn't know English very well. It was something that I felt like I was looked down upon. In high school, it never really bothered me. I had a very diverse group of friends, but I know being Mexican is attached to my identity. And, I am totally cool with that because, well, I am Mexican. I'm not ashamed of it. But, I guess it is something that everyone has to go through.

She went on to discuss her challenges with language and others' resulting perceptions of her:

I always sense the language problem, even when we go to the store and my dad is trying to ask a question, I can see other people are . . . I feel like some people are racist because we don't speak correct English. There was one time where I said something wrong and my teacher said, "Oh, that's right, English isn't your first language," and I was a little stunned. She probably didn't mean it, but it was

something that bothered me because I was stressing that it was showing in my schoolwork.

As a result, Ariana has responded by aspiring to excel at language, as a way to prove herself to those who doubted her and to motivate those who have struggled the way that she has. She was also driven to conquer her challenges:

I've kind of made it a mission; language. I wish that everyone knew all languages. I am very passionate about it . . . It definitely made me work harder. I know that there are stereotypes within my family, particularly girls my age, either they didn't continue to go on to school after high school, and it made me work harder for myself. It kind of showed that even though my cultural identity shows that this is what happens to people my age, I am going to show that anything can happen and anyone can reach anything.

None of the participants indicated that being stereotyped had a negative affect on their academic performance, and like in Ariana's case, the marginalization they experienced became their motivation to succeed. Many of them put more energy into doing well as a tactic to disprove stereotypes, so they also saw this as a motivating factor for achieving their goals. Leticia said,

I was always proud that I was in those classes and that I was the only one. I felt that I was showing people that it can be done. If nothing else, it was a motivating factor.

She also shared her feelings about what she believed was preferential treatment towards her White peers by teachers, particularly with regards to scholarship opportunities:

This may sound bad, but I think maybe some of the White students might have been getting signed up for all these things. I kind of felt like, “What about me?” Shawna and her peers who attended the same high school were stereotyped by teachers who did not believe in their students:

I’ve had a lot of teachers comment that they don’t think most of the students are going to make it. If you feel that something isn’t going to happen, then YOU won’t even work hard to make it happen. So, what are they working for, then? You should have a passion to reach out to the students and teach them.

Shawna went on to explain how the teachers’ low expectations only drove her to want to succeed:

I don’t know if it’s a personal thing, but I felt that because where I was at in high school, that people viewed us as those that aren’t going to do well. We talked about this process in my sociology class, and if you have people telling you that you aren’t going to make it, you will not. I think it’s a great cycle of frustration. They are fulfilling the prophecy. I responded in a way that if that’s how someone feels about me, that’s going to drive me to do better and prove them wrong.

### *Theme Two: Ignoring the Threat*

The participants were visibly uninterested in discussing topics of discrimination and stereotyping. Seven of the 17 students stated that they never experienced being stereotyped or faced discrimination while in secondary school, however their interviews revealed experiences that indicated that some did, in fact, face possible discrimination. Daslyn, for example, stated that he did not experience being stereotyped or discriminated against when asked the question, however during a different point in the interview while

sharing how he felt people perceived him, he described how a teacher responded to him in middle school:

People would say that I would be dead by the age of 18 anyway, friends in the neighborhood, students, teachers in middle school, parents who lived in the neighborhood . . . It shocked me . . . I had a teacher say once in the 5th grade, that I wasn't going to graduate . . . I just really didn't care, but he told me I wasn't going to graduate, even though I did with a B average. I guess he was trying to motivate me or something. I guess it worked.

Some were very adamant that racism was something that did not affect their performance, that they received no special favors or treatment, and that they were academically successful on their own merit. To admit to the presence of racism would be to admit victimization, and all of the participants preferred not to be perceived as victims. They wanted to be seen as strong, self-sufficient individuals. Elena was especially hesitant about sharing her thoughts about being stereotyped. She talked about how teachers would initially underestimate her academic abilities:

I was never offended, but I do know that sometimes people were surprised that I did well in school, if that makes any sense? If you met me somewhere, you might not think I pay attention as well as I do. I think teachers see my standardized test scores and start to look at me differently. But, I think that I have been very lucky that I've not felt discriminated against, and if I did, I was too young to tell the difference . . . It wasn't really that bad. I don't want to say that I was traumatized or anything.

It was much easier for Elena to brush it off and keep moving than to give the situation enough thought to let it affect her.

Alejandra, who attended a predominantly White private high school, believed that racism was not a problem for the current generation. She had this to say about her encounters with stereotypes and racism: “I never really noticed, I guess. Not really. Maybe jokingly, and even then it doesn’t bother me.” Lamar, who also attended a predominantly White private high school, had this to say about his encounters with stereotypes and racism:

I think our generation is a step above racism, but there were a lot of sheltered people that got to me because they didn’t understand our culture. They’d ask stupid questions or act out. Most of the kids came from the [Brook Hills] area and suburbs to Private High and just didn’t understand. Not flat out racism as in “I don’t like you because you are Black,” but a lot of ignorance.

Lamar said that he did not feel personally threatened by stereotypes or the “ignorant” comments that his peers would make. He also said that he was not driven to disprove any stereotypes, but talked about his deliberate approach to educate his peers:

First it was just frustrating and annoying and depending on the comment, I might have been mad. I would have to understand where they are coming from and I’d try to educate the person, but it was still frustrating . . . all so that it doesn’t happen again and they understand. It’s not that they try to personally attack me.

When asked about the racial makeup of his high school at the beginning of the interview, he very quickly made it clear that the racial makeup of the school did not have an effect

on him, despite its drastic demographic difference from his predominantly Black middle school:

It is predominantly White and that didn't have an effect on anything. I mean, I don't know how to say this nicely, but I wasn't used to being around that many White people. At first it was a shock, but it didn't affect my academics.

Interestingly, Leticia also initially denied any experience she had with feeling stereotyped:

I honestly can't say that I did have any one moment in my life where I was singled out because I was Mexican. I guess things were just generalized, and I felt out of place myself. There were a lot of teen pregnancies in high school and I often felt that people thought this is all we were there for. But, I don't feel that I was ever a direct victim of racism.

Yet, when asked whether or not she ever felt as if she needed to prove herself, her answer clearly indicated that she was aware of stereotypes that others possibly held against her:

Yes, all the time. And that is only because there were a lot of people that didn't give us a good name. There were all these rules that were put in place because of a direct cause of what the Latino students were doing.

During a different part of the interview that addressed preparing for college, she stated,

This may sound bad, but I think maybe some of the White students might have been getting signed up for all these things. I kind of felt like, "What about me?"

Recall that Leticia was one of the only non-White students in many of her honors classes.

In each of these examples, the notion of discrimination or being stereotyped is both minimized and rationalized by the participant. Undoubtedly, the face of racism has

changed since the Civil Rights Era, but with much of the research indicating that discrimination in the academic setting continues to take place, these perspectives are quite interesting. While these students admit that they have encountered discrimination or stereotyping, they did not want to label these incidents as such. The general response was to simply brush it off.

*Theme Three: Avoiding “Stereotypical” Peers*

Students also responded to stereotype threat by proactively avoiding those peers whom they believed embodied the stereotype. John was the most explicit about this approach:

A lot of my Mexican peers growing up were THE stereotype. They were illiterate, couldn't speak English, uneducated. My mom would always tell me to be nice to them; that they are US. That's who we are. And I would insist that NO, that's not who WE are. My mom is trying to learn English; my dad is working his way up at work. I do well in school, we are not those people; and it is frustrating to hear that. I never hung out with the Mexican people in school. When I came to college it was shocking to see that there were people of my color who were intelligent.

Leticia was not as willing to fully disassociate with other Latinos, but she found it difficult to connect with them on an academic level. She felt caught between two cultures and described that experience this way:

[Northtown] is 75-80% Hispanic or Black and we were in the middle and were sent to the [neighboring] school district. The violence that was brought into the towns was brought into the high schools. I sometimes felt in the middle, because while I didn't hang out with the kids that were in gangs, I did occasionally talk



with them in school. I considered them friends, but because my of my classes and me being the only Hispanic and my friends were White, it was constantly, do I side with the Whites or the Mexicans? I just didn't know where I fit in. I just kind of stood alone. Today I still side with the Latinos and kids of color, but I still more often than not, stand alone.

### *Summary of Stereotype Resistance*

Having the ability to resist stereotype threat is an important skill to possess in the academic setting. This enables students to address the threat without suffering adverse affects to academic performance. Many of the participants reported that they did not experience being stereotyped by peers or teachers, and attributed this to the fact that they attended highly diverse schools or schools that had student populations largely reflective of the participant's racial background. However, even in such cases, while these students easily dismissed the idea that they may have experienced stereotype threat, their stories painted a different picture, indicating that some may have indeed experienced the threat. For those students who did identify situations in which they felt stereotyped, they described two ways in which they actively responded. They would either take measures to prove that the stereotype was not true, or they would avoid peers who seemed to embody the stereotype so that they would not be associated with the behaviors of that group. In every case, however, the students insisted these negative experiences were not powerful enough to negatively impact their grades.

Table 6

*Resistance to Stereotype Threat: Frequency of Theme*

Theme	# of Participants who related to theme
Disproving Negative Stereotypes	8
Ignoring the threat	9
Avoiding “stereotypical” peers	11

*Academic & Social Integration*

Academic and social integration pertains to becoming immersed into the many dynamics of the educational environment. Its concept reaches beyond maintaining a high grade point average and into developing close relationships with faculty and peers, as well as actively engaging in school-related activities. Students who are both socially and academically integrated are more likely to stay in school (Cabrera et al., 1992), experience greater moral and cognitive development, and have clearer vocational aspirations (Astin, 1984). All of the participants were academically and socially integrated and expressed this in two ways: (a) by getting involved through extracurricular activities and (b) by developing relationships with teachers and staff members.

*Theme One: Getting Involved Through Extracurricular Activities*

All participants connected with peers through their participation in extracurricular activities at school. Most were involved in academically based organizations, and many played competitive sports, and a few performed in the arts. Even Leticia and Cherise, who were the most minimally involved in school and did not feel connected to the school community, joined the soccer team and the choir, respectively. Leticia felt completely

disconnected from teachers and influential adults at her school and struggled to find her place among the student population. However, when she spoke about her involvement on the soccer team (her only extracurricular activity), she said,

I was in soccer. I actually graduated a semester early from high school, so I didn't get to play the fourth year, the spring semester. I was pretty good. I played the varsity the last two years. I was one of the younger ones and it was just me and one other Latina that stuck together. I had a lot of friends through soccer. I can say that was the one place that was social place for me.

Cherise did not feel connected to her school community and could only name one teacher that she was somewhat connected to. She said,

Socially, I wasn't a social butterfly, but I had friends, but I was focused on something else and focused on a bigger picture which was college, filling out applications my freshman year, taking the ACT three times by my sophomore year, working two jobs . . . High school was okay; I wish I could have enjoyed it more.

Although she participated in her high school's choir and performed internationally, Cherise had little to say about any personal connections she made with the choir director. When asked specifically about how well she connected with the director, her response was,

I didn't stay in contact, but he was a character. He'd come into class with all these statistics about teenage pregnancy, dropout rates, and it was encouraging me to stay on track and not be a statistic.

Cherise's greatest connections came from her involvement in Upward Bound. When asked about the type of extracurricular activities and clubs that she was involved in, she did not initially mention the choir. She spoke only about Upward Bound:

I didn't have many except Upward Bound, and that took the majority of my time, which included tutoring maybe four hours a day, then I worked after that. I really wasn't involved in anything . . . We had field trips and college preps and Saturday classes. Upward Bound was my backbone.

Although Leticia and Cherise were not as heavily involved or connected with peers, they still managed to find their place and pursue personal interests. For Leticia it was soccer, for Cherise it was choir, and for both it was their academics. It is worth mentioning that these two students had the highest grade point averages of the entire sample with a 4.4 and a 3.9, respectively.

The rest of the students were highly involved and were well connected with their peers. Ariana spoke often of a friend who was as college-minded as she was:

My friend Ryan helped me—everyone was so wrapped in high school drama. We kind of stood back and thought about real life issues, like our family, college, who we want to be as a person. We sometimes made jokes about how we were the weird people. We actually went on a retreat to Biloxi, Mississippi to help out after Hurricane Katrina.

Most students, however, talked less about the influence of their peers and more about their own successes as well-known figures in school. These students took on leadership roles within student government, athletic teams, and even competitive academic teams.

John, who participated in student government, cross-country, track, cheerleading, drama, forensics, and weight training, described his reasons for staying involved:

I tried to get involved in one organization under every aspect that was presented to me by my senior year. I want to be as well rounded as possible. I was involved in a lot of academics and athletics groups. Oh, I was class president my freshman year. I just really can't stand not doing stuff and just sitting around. I believe that there is no way to know what your limit is until you bite off more than you can chew. You can prophesize or conjecture what you think you can do, but until you reach the point of saying you really can't handle this, then you know.

Shawna, who was involved in volleyball, softball, debate team, poetry, acting, yearbook, national honor society, and student council said,

I tried to be busy. That was my father's philosophy . . . My volleyball coach, he was really helpful. I talk to him a lot about college. He basically kept it real to me as a minority student going to a college. He was really encouraging.

Monica hated sports but was highly involved with academically focused extracurricular activities. She was heavily involved in a competitive marketing club that placed 6<sup>th</sup> in the state finals. She also joined Young Entrepreneurial Scholars, the National Association of Black Accountants (yes, she is Mexican American), and took on a number of internships and co-ops related to the field of finance.

Nicole was involved in basketball, the prom committee, Key Club, and the Young Women Leadership Organization. However, she did not simply join organizations. She was also a mover and shaker on campus. She described an initiative that she and a friend started while in high school:

I started a movement with a friend called INAG. It's an acronym for It's Not A Game. We had dress up Thursdays. It started with four people and turned out to be a whole school thing. But, I just couldn't dedicate the time. But I'd like to make it an official thing for the school.

*Theme Two: Developing Relationships with Teachers and Staff Members*

The participants also recognized the importance of establishing academic connections with teachers and administrators. Most built these relationships purely through their drive to do well in school. In some cases, that motivation was recognized by the teacher, who reached out to them. Daslyn was highly engaged in the classroom. As a result, key people, such as his French teacher and his guidance counselor believed in him and pushed him to take care of the necessary steps for college acceptance:

Most of my teachers loved me. One of my teachers said that she wished she had a whole class of me. I was really loving education. I was never seen as the bad kid in class; maybe only got detention once. But it was few and far between. But, I was always engaged in the classroom and most of my teachers would say I was a good student.

Jerell talked about the connection between he and his basketball coach, which was stronger than the connection that he had with his peers on the team:

He was kind of like a big brother sort of figure. During the summer when I was in Racine, he was also my barber and stuff like that. So, he got to know me and stuff . . . Knowing he was there was helpful. He was a motivator and he would have motivated me both on the court and off the court. He was the type to make sure I was as good on the court as off.

He also recalled a middle school teacher who recognized his challenges and reached out to help:

In middle school—I don't know how I came about this . . . Mrs. Keen, I tried to look her up but I couldn't find her. Like, we were on a fixed income and like at picture time we never had money for pictures. Somehow she would know this and she would send money home; and on more than one occasion.

His high school counselor was also instrumental in helping him prepare for college because of the way that Jerell stood out as a motivated student in his high school.

That's who actually got me to Private University. He came to me about here. I think it was more coming to me on a personal level. He is African American like me, and the only African American who excelled in his school.

Monica, who was highly involved with leadership and academic organizations, described how she connected with people who saw her as a student with a lot of potential:

Mrs. Vincent . . . When the application was due for Private, I had let the deadline pass and she sent me down to the office and had me fill it out right away. She pushed me and knew I could do it. She told me the stories that would happen to her when she went to college. She would take me to these women's conferences that Delta's would do for younger girls. I remember this one time I met Ms. USA and I remember going to this room of all these girls. Mrs. Vincent would always take me under her wing and I just remember seeing all these girls that had money and education. Anything that they held, she would take me with her.

When asked about teachers or administrators she may have connected with, Ariana spoke at length about her French teacher who helped her with schoolwork and frequently checked in to ensure that she was on track for college:

My French teacher, we are still connected today. I think what really connected us is that he went to UCLA . . . He would let me know that my study habits were not so good in French. He just really helped me with everything . . . But, I can say it was mostly with students who were passionate about school. He loved motivated students. He would stand over me and ask me if I have applied for college yet and now and again. He helped me with my recommendation letters and the application process and recommending good schools, tracking down scholarships and stuff. He would also recommend me visiting different campuses.

John discussed the connections he made with teachers and school administrators by being actively involved and serious about his studies:

In middle school, I made friends with the librarians and the science teacher. In high school, my weight training teacher and my calculus teachers were pretty involved in my life. My weight training teacher taught me I could exceed the limits that I impose on myself. If it wasn't for him, I probably wouldn't be here. He helped me apply and qualify for the NROTC program. I might have never been in enough shape to qualify for that scholarship program.

Elena received help and support from her math teacher because he recognized her drive to succeed:

One of my teachers was always there for me because I was determined to get an A in that class. I would stay after school or on Saturday mornings and he would be



there for me to help me study. That meant a lot to me because it showed me his dedication.

She also talked about the connection she made with her American Literature teacher:

I got to see her outside of class; it was very different because I got to see her during the weekends. My poetry class was only like five people, so she got to see who I was with my writing because a lot of who you are comes out when you write. And then my American Literature class, there were weekly journals and free writes. She pretty much knew a whole lot about me. She made it easy and interesting to get to know her students.

Other participants made connections strictly through their involvement in extracurricular activities. Elijah talked about the advisor of the student council and how that connection was strengthened after he became involved:

In high school, there was my student council advisor . . . He was the person that made me understand what college was. He asked me what I am doing after high school, even though I never really understood what I had to do to get to college. He kind of pushed me into getting involved in school because that will help me pay for college. Doing nothing and working at McDonald's isn't going to cut it. And, that's how I became involved in National Honor Society and Student Council . . . In my junior and senior year, I met some of my closest friends. We all went to different schools, but our situations were very similar. We all decided to follow the path of college.

Lamar's experience was quite similar. His guidance counselor also encouraged him to get involved, and through this involvement with the Black Student Council, their relationship was strengthened:

My guidance counselor, he was like a father figure for many students and friends. He would hang out with all of us for hours—we'd do some recreational type of activity and then do our homework together. We spent a lot of time with that one individual person. I would also stay after school a lot just to get some extra help. He is the main person who jumps out in my mind. He was African American and he wanted to see us succeed as much as anyone else and we were like his kids and he was just a good friend and he could relate to us as well. He was the one who got us motivated to get into a better position to get into college. He recruited me for things and told me to get into the student council and things like that. He was a great encourager.

Others deliberately connected with school counselors and people who would help them prepare for college. Nia's strategy for making connections was to be among the school's strongest students:

They would say that I just have this essence about myself that I am all business-y and every time they see me I would be doing something "nerdy." In terms of my teachers, they would see it first hand. I'm always asking for additional things to do. I am always looking for something more, or start ahead in class.

While most participants were involved because they were genuinely interested, two students were involved as a strategy to make themselves more attractive to colleges and universities. Most of the students knew that their involvement would benefit them

and planned to use this to their advantage, but for these students in particular, involvement was simply a means to an end. John, who also viewed his academic success as a means to an end, perceived connections he made with teachers and administrators in a similar fashion.

I tried to rack up as many good references as I could, even if that meant being polite to one teacher that wasn't nice to me, or being really super involved . . .

When I first started volunteering at the library in the eighth grade, one of the coordinators seemed like she would be useful to me in the future, and she did help me out. She actually helped me to get a job there; she wrote me a couple of references. I kind of view a lot of things as tools as how to get places. I know that sounds cold.

This section's findings underscore the importance of making connections. This is one of the most prominent strategies the students used to get to college. The importance of making these connections can be best demonstrated with the students who did not have strong home environments. For the students who did not have strong connections or supportive home environments, these were crucial. It is clear that all of the students needed encouragement in order to be academically successful and to move forward with their goals

#### *Summary of Academic and Social Integration*

Becoming an integral part of the campus community was an important strategy for fostering the participants' academic success. Fifteen of the 17 students were highly involved with extracurricular activities and developed strong relationships with teachers and school staff. The two students who were not heavily involved managed to participate

in at least one extracurricular activity that reflected a personal interest or talent. In both cases, however, interactions with teachers and staff were minimal. Campus involvement allowed the participants to take on leadership roles, test out their strengths and weaknesses, and develop an even stronger sense of self. In the relationships they developed with teachers, the students received affirmation of their strengths and were extended opportunities that other students would not necessarily have. In Monica's case for example, it was the relationship she developed with her teacher that afforded her the opportunity to attend empowerment conferences and become exposed to the highly educated and motivating women that made a significant impression on her educational goals. The participants' social and academic integration on campus was pivotal to their academic growth and development.

Table 7

*Social and Academic Integration: Frequency of Theme*

Theme	# of Participants who related to theme
Getting involved through extracurricular activities	17
Developing relationships with teachers and staff	15

*Summary of Findings for Research Question Two*

The central focus of the second research question to explore the strategies the students employed to be academically successful enough to qualify for college. The participants expended most of their energy on their classroom performance and their social and academic integration. They were highly committed to getting the most out of

their high school careers as a strategy position themselves as strong college candidates. The participants were self-aware enough to understand their strengths and weaknesses and tailored their academic and extracurricular decisions accordingly. For example, most knew that they had a strong academic record and decided to use this strength to participate in the National Honor Society to further boost the extracurricular resume. Similarly, the students who struggled in a particular subject were intentional about taking the extra time needed with a teacher until they fully understood the concept. Ariana's struggle to learn English, for example, turned into her personal mission to learn as many languages as possible.

Many participants experienced stereotype threat or were aware of the threat; however they were sure that these experiences did not affect academic performance. They each had strategies that they employed to address stereotype threat, including disproving, ignoring or avoiding. In some cases, the threat seemed to effectively motivate them to maintain a strong academic record. The racial makeup of the participants' schools and the highly diverse set of activities that they became involved with likely reduced the extent to which stereotype threat affected them. Thus, the combination of extracurricular involvement, the ability to develop relationships with teachers and staff, and the ability to maintain a strong academic record seemed to work together as a buffer against stereotype threat, and as a means for academic achievement (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Academic achievement themes.

### Findings Related to Research Question Three

The third research question asked, “What strategies did the students employ to successfully gain acceptance into college?” It addressed how the participant navigated the challenges that prevent many potential first-generation students from pursuing a college education. These challenges include poor academic preparation, limited financial resources, a lack of college knowledge, debilitating cultural norms and minimal, if any, emotional support. Essentially, the students addressed these challenges by ensuring that they (a) were academically prepared for college, (b) had acquired the college knowledge necessary to navigate the admissions and funding processes, and (c) had the support system necessary to help them achieve their academic goals.

#### *Academic Preparation*

This strategy addresses the challenge of having poor academic preparation for college. The participants identified two ways in which they went about ensuring that they would be prepared for college: (a) selecting the right high school and (b) enrolling in competitive courses.

#### *Theme One: Selecting the Right High School*

The “right” high school is the high school that best fits the students’ interests and needs, and offers resources that will open doors of opportunity for its student body. Most of the participants and their parents chose high schools that would best position the students for college acceptance. These schools have sound academic programs, strong college preparation support, and a myriad of extracurricular activities. The participants who attended schools with a college preparatory focus received the most help in the college planning process. The students who received the least amount of assistance were those who attended the public, urban schools.

With the help of an older cousin, Nia enrolled into Conners Academy, a competitive college preparatory school on the opposite end of town. When it was time to choose a high school, she was sure that she did not want to attend the high school in her neighborhood because of its negative reputation:

I went to an academy near the University of Chicago. It was a public school in a good neighborhood. It was a well ranked school. You had to be pre-selected into the program because they instilled the No Child Left Behind program my junior year. If you didn’t pass or get selected, you had to go to your districts school.

They were horrible. I was so excited that I got selected . . . I was in honors classes . . . it was challenging. My high school kind of helped, as well, because I was in honors courses and the grades are different than regular courses. It was a reality check.

Enrique initiated the decision to go out of state to attend St. Matthews Prep, an all-male boarding school and was supported by his parents in this decision: “When I was in fifth

grade, my uncle had gone to that school and I was interested. I tried it and I like it.”

Antonio attended the same high school and had this to say about his decision to attend:

My sister actually knew someone who had attended there, they are actually from Private University. One of the recruiters went to my church in Chicago, and we had a sit down with the students that were interested. I did a weekend visit. I didn't plan on going, it was my last resort. The school that I really wanted to go to didn't accept me, and the other schools' deadlines had passed. I was going to try it for a year, and it turned out really well! It was the best four years of my life. I learned a lot about myself, interacting with others . . . I got a good education. I also learned a lot faith-wise, it was a Catholic seminary. I learned leadership skills that help me to this day.

When asked why he did not attend the school in his neighborhood he said, “That was a really bad school and my parents didn't want me going there.”

Monica's parents were also instrumental in the decision-making process when it was time to choose a school. She attended Montgomery High, an urban public school located in a predominantly White section of town. While the school did offer the students more resources than the other schools in that district, Monica's parents were most concerned about their daughter's safety.:

The reason I went there is my parents wanted me to go there. My first decision would have been [the south side school], but there was a lot of gangs and teenage pregnancy. My parents thought a suburban school would benefit me better.



Alejandra also lived in the city, but she attended St. Sebastian School, a private all-girl middle school in the suburbs. After graduating, she continued on to Dawson High School, a private high school in the suburbs.

They [my parents] made sure I went to a private high school. It was mostly all White students. I didn't think anybody would want to be my friend, but I started being social and playing sports and stuff.

*Theme Two: Enrolling in Competitive Courses*

Not only were the participants strategic about the high schools they chose to attend, but upon entering those high schools, many of them chose rigorous courses to further enhance their academic records. All were confident by their senior year in high school that they had done what was necessary to get themselves academically prepared for college. Most of the students were intentional about taking the competitive academic track by selecting Advanced Prep courses, honors courses, or signing up for a special diploma.

Ariana's high school offered three different academic programs that produced a different type of diploma, depending on which track the students chose. Here is how she described the programs:

I went to [Grand Terrace High School], which was public. The thing about [Grand Terrace], they had a national Baccalaureate program. I wasn't in that program, but I was in Gold Medallion which is a step below that . . . they offered a bunch of AP classes as well. I really liked it . . . I really think it prepared me for college.

Ariana was intentional about selecting this program and described why:

There are four diploma options at our high school. The options are International Baccalaureate Diploma, Gold Medallion, College Prep and then your standard diploma. Freshman year is when you choose; it is kind of like choosing your major. I did that because I knew that if I graduated with that type of diploma, it would help me get into college. One of the requirements for the Gold Medallion was to do a senior thesis type of thing, and that was an eye opener. It was a lot of work.

Nicole's high school offered a special academy, and she was enrolled in that program:

They had an academy and basically all the White people went to the academy . . . If you went to the academy, as I took some classes at the academy, you are a minority for real.

Monica's school also offered special academic programs:

I went to [Montgomery] High School, which is part of the [urban school district] . . . The only way I could get in there is I had to take a business program because there were no more seats left. The school was very good with the curriculum, and I really enjoyed it and really liked it . . . I had a great guidance counselor who actually really encouraged me to take part in the AP programs. I had two great teachers that really pushed me and encouraged me.

John's school offered honors students the opportunity to earn an honor's diploma. Although he was enrolled in the program and exceeded the numbers of credits required to earn the diploma, it remains a mystery to him things did not go exactly as he had planned:

The one thing that irked me was that I had been taking honors classes since I was a sophomore, and I didn't get an honors diploma. You needed 22 honors credits; I graduated with 31. I still didn't get my honors diploma. I think there was a minimum grade point requirement. I never took a study hall in my life. I've never failed anything.

Another strategy for building a strong academic record was to take college courses. With a university located so close to her high school, Nia was easily able to get to the campus to take courses. This proved to be invaluable to her academic preparation: "I tried to take honors calculus and pre-calc and stuff. I took classes through Illinois University. That small exposure to college courses really helped." Cherise's involvement in Upward Bound and Private University's Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) afforded her the chance to take college courses.

We had field trips and college preps and Saturday classes . . . EOP gave us a summer class to get a taste of what college would be like and maybe one college class taken in high school.

Shawna expressed frustration over the lack of advanced courses offered through her high school and opted to take courses at the local college to boost her transcript and enhance her grade point average:

It was kind of depressing to see the types of courses that Whites were offered throughout the cities here, versus what I was offered. I already knew when I got to college that I was going to be behind because my school didn't offer particular courses. It was a source of frustration for me. I didn't know if it was just the MPS school district, or if it was because my school was predominantly Black.

Shawna decided to take the extra college courses when she wasn't accepted into Private University the first time she applied. "At first I didn't get accepted and I changed my major and then I was accepted. I switched it to psychology. I took extra courses to get here."

### *Summary of Academic Preparation*

Being academically qualified for college was one thing, but being academically competitive was entirely different for the participants. They believed that earning good grades was important, but if they earned good grades in a non-competitive high school or by taking average courses, the grades would not carry as much weight. Therefore, the participants and their families were intentional about the type of schools they attended and the course load they took on. For the parents, it was important that the schools were safe, and for the students, it was important that the schools had the resources necessary to adequately prepare them for college. Many of the schools that the participants chose to attend made it a priority to help students through the college application process and provided them with a wide scope of information to aid them in the decision making process. Shawna's case was the exception because she did not have the option to attend a high school out of her neighborhood. She took measures in her own hands and enrolled in college courses to enhance her course load and contacted the university directly to receive help with the application process. Her actions certainly qualify as resourceful, as she worked within her means to become academically prepared for college.

Table 8

*Academic Preparation: Frequency of Theme*

Theme	# of Participants who related to theme
Selecting the right high school	15
Enrolling in competitive courses	17

*College Knowledge*

Having college knowledge entails possessing the information necessary to successfully enroll into college and to fund the education. This strategy addresses two challenges: the challenge of not having the money to pay for college and the challenge of not having an understanding of the college admissions process. The participants described acquiring college knowledge by employing four different strategies: (a) refusing to be intimidated, (b) following the money trail, (c) searching independently, and (d) accepting help from others.

*Theme One: Not Being Intimidated*

Because most participants were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, they needed to find ways to secure funding. Most of the participants did not have a plan, but they were not preoccupied with worry regarding how college would be paid for. Most stated that a lack of money simply would not be a barrier to their college education, and that they would take out loans as a last resort. Although the participants did not have a game plan for how college would be paid for, all were confident that the money would come somehow. Nicole did not know how she would pay for school, but she did believe

that by applying for as many grants and scholarships as possible, her hard work would pay off:

When I applied for school, getting scholarships was the whole thing, but I really didn't have a plan. I really did not. It was like, "We'll find some type of way to pay it," and that's kind of how it has been this whole time. "We'll find some type of way." I didn't have any game plan going into this.

Elena echoed that sentiment with a similar statement, "I knew I was going to college, even if I had to take out loans." Jerell, who had no parental support, assumed that he would ask his uncle to help pay for college and rely on student loans as back-up. "Once I knew I was coming here, there was no turning back. It was very important." He was ultimately able to secure funding:

Once I knew I was coming, I got hooked up with the EOP program. I didn't need to take out any additional loans other than government loans. Everything was pretty much taken care of, so that was a load off my back.

In a few cases, the parents' promise to provide financial support though college brought great comfort. Leticia was the least concerned about paying for college because her parents were so supportive. Since her childhood, they assured her that they would pay for her college education if she agreed to remain committed to making good grades.

They always told me that I didn't have to worry about a thing. They told me to worry about my grades. They saved a bunch of money. They learned from my sister how much college really costs. My mom took a second job at a grocery store just to help pay for college. We didn't spend extra money on luxuries and stuff. There were times we would live paycheck to paycheck and if we would

come home and say, 'my friend has this or that' they would always remind us that that is nothing compared to the value of an education. They would press the importance of learning and they would say that throughout my lifetime they would never give us any gift other than the opportunity to go to school. When we graduated, they didn't buy us a car or pay for us to live on our own. Their gift was to pay for school and graduate. It's quite a gift. I am very glad they were willing to pay \$30,000 here, rather than on a car that I could crash. It's a great opportunity, and I am really glad they did that . . . I am glad that I am taking the time to enjoy school and do what I want and work hard now, for a career that I want later.

Lamar was also unconcerned because of his father's promise to pay for his college education:

My father and I worked out that I would look and apply for scholarships and he is paying for my tuition. We didn't take out any loans or anything. He is using his pension/savings money; I guess it's his 401k. I get a little financial aid and a scholarship, too. I got a notice about a scholarship competition and I took that opportunity to go for it and I ended up getting an award.

Shawna's father also encouraged her not to worry about college.

My dad told me not to worry about it and focus on my grades. I always thought I would take out a loan. My dad always said if you get a degree from Private, you'll get a good job and you'll be able to pay your loans back.

Nia did not know how she would pay for school but employed her own strategies to make it happen:

I never really knew the steps in terms of paying for college. For me, all I knew was scholarships and grants. I definitely went straight to all the ones that nobody really knew about. Everyone always went to the Tylenol and Coca-Cola scholarships; I went to those ones that didn't have a whole lot of exposure. I had no idea how I was going to pay for Private. I thought that scholarships would be sufficient and the first year comes and you realize it's not enough. But I did get a four-year scholarship funded through [Urban] Public Schools. It is \$7,500 a year, and that helped me as well.

*Theme Two: Following the Money Trail*

The vast majority of the participants chose to attend Private University because of the funding the school provided. Many received full-ride scholarships. In such cases, their college choice was easy: They simply followed the money. This was a strategy that most of the students employed to fund their education. Many students credited the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) housed at Private University with providing the funding necessary to attend (see Figure 4). Enrique is one of the students who managed to secure funding through EOP:

I looked online to see what would offer what. Both colleges I wanted had my majors and I took up to April to decide, so I really didn't know what to do. I went to my counselor for help. He helped me find scholarships, finding them online and such. I had told my parents that I would work and go to college. I got into a program instead called EOP, which helped a lot and told my parents about it and they were very happy. Plus we took out two loans.



Educational Opportunity Programs at Private University	
Program	Description
<b>Upward Bound</b>	Federally funded TRIO program. Mission is to assist and educate low-income and first-generation high school freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors in their goal of becoming a college graduate.
<b>Upward Bound Math &amp; Science</b>	The UBMS program is for students with a strong interest in the math, science, or technology field. We recruit students who live in the city.
<b>Student Support Services</b>	Student Support Services enrolls eligible students who show potential for success. It offers a network of supportive services, financial aid assistance, a pre-enrollment summer program, academic counseling, specialized courses, seminars and tutoring, as well as personal, educational, graduate and career counseling.
<b>Ronald E. McNair Scholars</b>	McNair Scholars prepares eligible students for graduate school. During the academic year, students attend monthly seminars, meet visiting scholars, and participate in student and professional conferences. During the summer, McNair students may apply to participate in a paid research internship, which provides an in-depth research experience, working one-on-one with a faculty mentor, and the opportunity to network with other undergraduates from across the nation.

Figure 4. Educational Opportunity Program at Private University.

Cherise was initially not sure how college would be paid for, but made her decision regarding which university to go to after the funding came through:

I was very oblivious to what it was going to cost and entail. My mom was like, “Yeah, it’s going to be free.” I’ve got good grades. And then reality set in and then the panic set in. It was whoever offered me the best deal. I applied for three or four scholarships. I didn’t get any of my scholarships. Private [University] offered me EOP and assistance, so we took that route.

Antonio, who attended the same high school as Enrique, also knew that EOP through Private University was an option and followed that road:

I knew I was going to have to take out loans. And I knew about EOP; my school and EOP had a good relationship. I knew that I was going to be able to afford it and make it work.

Elena did not enroll through EOP, but she also chose to attend Private University based on the type of funding the school offered:

When I started applying, everyone was rooting for me to do to a specific college. My parents wanted me to stay in Chicago; they really wanted me to go to the University of Chicago. But there, I would have to pay \$28,000 a year, and my dad wishes he could have said we could, but we couldn't. My brother didn't go to college, and he always had this dream of being an architect and so when he would think about me going to college he wanted me to go to Brown. He kept saying, "You don't understand! It's an Ivy League school. People will look at you differently!" But I would have had to pay \$28,000 as well. And it was further away, so I would have to move to the east coast, and that would have been difficult. Once again, it was my high school counselor who told me that Private [University] gives three students in my high school a full tuition scholarship. So, I applied for it but I didn't know if I was going to come to Private [University]. At first I really didn't like the feel of it. We came on a really foggy day, there was nothing going on, and I was like, "Oh, I don't want to come here." And, I ended up getting the scholarship and came here. And, I want to go to law school too. The lawyer at the law firm I went to came to Private [University] and then went to law school at Harvard. He says, "You know, Elena, if you really want to go to law

school, you don't want to take a lot of undergrad loans, and you want to be smart about it. Private [University]'s a good school."

Leticia's decision to attend Private University was also a result of the funding she received to cover tuition.

My final decision to attend Private [University] was based around me winning a scholarship competition here through the College of Nursing. And, I got a good financial aid package here as well.

### *Theme Three: Searching Independently*

The participants were highly proactive about seeking out ways to pay for college. They initiated this search by using online resources such as FastWeb, or by filling out financial aid forms on their own because the parents were unable assist. Lila described how she went about filling out the paperwork on her own because she could not get help from her non-English speaking parents:

I had to go through my parents' income statements and stuff to see how much money they would let me borrow. I applied for scholarships before my freshman year so I could see how much I needed to get out of my pocket . . . They really didn't know much about it. They didn't know about FAFSA and stuff. They helped as they learned, like me.

Despite, her parents' promise to pay for school, Leticia was determined to secure outside funding and describes how she went about this process:

I applied for about 50 scholarships when I was a senior. I did the FastWeb searches. I just did it all on the Internet. I never talked to my counselor, it was just me finding my way around and going online and researching.

Shawna had a number of different strategies to secure the funding needed for school:

I tried to get good grades so I could get scholarships, took a financial aid course through school, I researched a lot and emailed the EOP counselors [at Private University]. I didn't go out of state, so that I could take part in that grant that the State of Wisconsin offers for in-state tuition. I researched a lot of loans that wouldn't need a co-signer. I applied for two scholarships through my high school and EOP and that's it. I made sure I did my financial aid early.

She was ultimately able to get all of the funding necessary to pay for school.

John, who generally did not accept help from others, opted to pursue the process on his own:

There were some 'transition to college' classes, but I never took those. No one really showed me how, I just kind of went and did it myself. I went to the website to get the app and do it . . . A lot of my friend's parents actually applied for them. Also, there were some sessions at night where you could go and sit at the school and apply for colleges, work on essays, but I never had time to go to them.

Some students came up with more creative strategies to secure funds. Daslyn's story is one example:

The funny thing is my parents told me that I had a college fund, started by my grandpa when I was four or five, and I was relying on that. I was thinking that I had \$5,000-\$6,000 and then when I get ready to go to college, I only have two \$100 bonds. That wasn't enough to cover my books! I was outside of Wal-Mart selling chicken dinners for tuition and I didn't really have a plan. We would be in my kitchen and my aunt would be cooking up a storm. I knew that manager of

Wal-Mart and he was cool with me and all and knew what I was trying to do. So, they were supportive as long as I wasn't disruptive or disrespectful. They were all for it because they knew that not a lot of kids in our area could go to college.

Ultimately, Daslyn was able to secure grants and loans to cover his tuition.

Many of the participants reported figuring out the college admissions process for themselves by going to the Internet or calling the university with questions that they had. Even the students who did receive help through their schools initiated those interactions for the most part, and took many steps on their own to ensure that they were on the right track. Essentially, the people who helped them were similar to consultants who provided advice, but did not make decisions for them. Most of the students did not want to be disempowered and accepted only the help they needed.

Antonio described the importance of taking the initiative at his school.

She would seek us out, but she would only help us out as much as we would help ourselves out. If we didn't turn something in, she would tell us about it once or twice, but then no more mention . . . she'd call on us to make sure we were up to date, and to discuss our plans and our majors . . . she did because it was rolled into our curriculum. It was a requirement once we got to senior year.

Elijah's school counseling system required the students to take even more initiative:

When I was in school, I didn't have resources to go to college. I always said I wanted to go, but I never knew what that meant until my junior year. I had a conversation with one of my advisors who lead me to a resource planning course. That helped prepare me for financial aid, loans, college prep and applications and

the like, simply because my mother did not know. I think that the students had to initiate and go to the counselors. I believe that was just because there were so many students. I think the counselors could have done a better job of marketing college.

*Theme Four: Accepting Help*

Most participants were able to get assistance during the college application process. They cited high school counselors, teachers and pre-college programs as their greatest sources of help. Most of the help participants received were through the relationships they had already developed with teachers or school counselors. Monica received a great deal of assistance:

I had a great guidance counselor . . . I did not know anything. I was completely guided the whole way by counselors and advisors. They even encouraged me when I was afraid of the price. My counselor even gave me all the paper applications, set up visits for me and stuff. I was not really considering Private [University] because of the cost. I remember, we were coming back from winter break and she pulled me out of class. She had all my reference letters, transcripts and had me fill out the Private [University] application right in front of her. She even had me personally deliver my application to Private [University]. She called the admissions counselor here at Private [University] that same day and told me that I was coming to drop off the application that day. Any scholarships that focused on business majors, she would locate those for me as well. I got the GE Minority scholarship as well. She was the main driver on this. I had no idea what FAFSA was or anything.

Nia was also well assisted through the process. Aside from having a post secondary coach assigned to her through the high school she attended, she also received college information in other ways:

At school they had a general applying for college application. They basically told us what we need to do with letters and personal statements. They had a whole seminar type thing to help us out. There were also college fairs where the schools would come to my high school.

Similarly, Lamar was able to get assistance through his school.

Our high school has college prep that has guidance counselors that are on you about deadlines and everything. They were amazing and made sure you were on top of things and deadlines.

He was also the only student who identified a parent as a source of help through the college admissions process:

My father said that he didn't have the same opportunities. He said that he didn't have a person like HIM; you know as HE is to ME, to encourage him and support him.

When asked to whom he could turn consistently for support while applying for college with questions about filling out applications, he said, "My father, without a doubt." Much of Alejandra and Cherise's support came from Upward Bound, the pre-college program they were a part of.

Valencia followed in her older brother's footsteps and became involved with Upward Bound in middle school. Her parents enrolled the two of them into the program because they knew that it would help to prepare them for college:

I was in Upward Bound, so they paved the way. It allowed me to take the ACT prep course, financial planning and time management courses. My brother signed up for it when he was in middle school, so I had to go too, and since I was in Upward Bound, it [college] was kind of engraved in our head pretty early. They gave us enormous amounts of lists and introduced us to FastWeb. There is a lot of money out there. I didn't even have to take out loans.

She believed that her involvement with Upward Bound with more instrumental in getting her to college than the assistance she received from her high school counselor:

I would go to my counselor to get my transcripts and things like that. He was great, but I didn't feel like I needed his help. He did offer his help and we'd have counseling sessions once a semester, but he didn't go out of his way to help.

Upward Bound was better than anyone else, including my guidance counselor.

Cherise also became involved with Upward Bound in middle school but not due to her parents' prompting. Representatives of the program came to her seventh grade class and left an unforgettable impression on her. She knew that this was a program that she needed and signed up that day. Cherise remained actively involved with Upward Bound throughout high school and through her transition into college:

I was naïve to the whole process and they informed me. My ignorance was evident when I went to do applications. So, it was all upward bound. I knew of scholarships my freshman year and I had a resume by my freshman year. I was working hard to get ready. And there were counselors, but I was always five steps ahead of the counselors in school because of Upward Bound.



Aside from a program offered through Nia's church, Alejandra and Cherise were the only two participants who were involved in pre-college programs, thus Upward Bound was the only pre-college program mentioned by the students in this study.

Leticia's experience was quite different. Despite her 4.4 GPA, she did not receive help or encouragement from her high school to pursue a college education. Surprisingly teachers did not connect with her or seem to even notice her academic ability. She described the loneliness she experienced:

I always felt kind of alone. However, my friends that went to more diverse schools and private schools that were Latino, they had really good advisors. I never really felt any of my counselors connect with me or reach out to me . . . I always felt like no one noticed. And, that is kind of why I didn't like my high school. I just felt like no one noticed or pushed me to do anything. Like my SAT's, I didn't know there was that merit scholarship. I didn't even know when to take the SAT's. I was pretty much on my own and felt like that there was zero support for college prep. This may sound bad, but I think maybe some of the White students might have been getting signed up for all these things. I kind of felt like, "What about me?" My whole college application process was just me. I was really independent. I would ask my parents questions and stuff, what they thought about things, but they would really leave it up to me.

### *Summary of College Knowledge*

Acquiring the information necessary to search for, apply to, and pay for the colleges of their choice did not seem to be a difficult task for the participants, as they had surrounded themselves with a set of teachers, mentors and counselors who were

committed to helping them with the college application process. Additionally, they were highly ambitious and primarily pursued this process independently by searching the internet for information about different colleges and how to fund their education. The participants approached the process confidently, and would not allow themselves to become discouraged with the cost of tuition or the competitive nature of the universities they desired to attend. They remained focused, and if faced with a challenge that had the potential of jeopardizing their educational futures, the participants would simply continue to move forward until they found a solution. Many, for example, did not know how college would be paid for, but instead of stagnating in their uncertainty, they moved forward and explored options until the problem was resolved.

Table 9

*College Knowledge: Frequency of Theme*

Theme	# of Participants who related to theme
Not being intimidated	17
Following the money trail	14

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Searching independently	12
Accepting help	15

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### *Support System*

This section addresses the strategies participants employed to identify and connect with a group of people who would morally support them in their college aspirations or serve as resources to help achieve goals. The three strategies that participants used to create a support system included (a) overcoming negative cultural norms, (b) seeking encouragement, and (c) seeking resourceful individuals.

#### *Theme One: Overcoming Negative Cultural Norms*

Many of the participants had a supportive group of people standing behind them as they transitioned between high school and college. However, many of them also had a barrage of negative feedback from neighbors, family members and friends to overcome. This feedback came from people who were sure that the student would not make it in college—be it due the cost, the competitive academic environment, or having to be totally self-reliant for the first time. Some of the doubt was borne out of genuine concern, but much of it was driven by negative dispositions that included jealousy, a lack of understanding, or simply being satisfied with a lesser level of achievement.

The relationship between Cherise and her mother had always been unstable. Cherise described the struggle to earn her mother's support and the heartbreaking reality that the jealousy her mother harbored against her superseded any degree of support:

It's like me and my mom grew up together and I sometimes feel she feels I am trying to be better than her because I had an opportunity to be exposed to things

she has not. She didn't have an opportunity to really have a mother or graduate from high school or go to college. I have to escape that relationship that isn't really there anyway and that negativity. She just doesn't understand—not understanding why I am studying, working so hard. I was kind of the mom in some of the situations—my mom sometimes did drugs and stuff, so I had to step up. That's why I knew I wanted to go to college, regardless of these negative situations in my life. I had to escape that and my escape was school.

Nia, who also had a difficult relationship with her mother, experienced a similar lack of enthusiasm for her achievements:

My mother was supportive, but I could see it in her eyes she was apprehensive. She wasn't excited; even now. It was not easy for me. She didn't want to help me move; you know, the little things. The reaction behind it; the motivation behind it and the feedback, wasn't genuine. I was looking for that pep talk, but I never really got it.

For the Mexican American females, the family was supportive of the pursuit of a college education, but leaving home and moving away from the family conflicted with cultural norms that require young women to remain close to home. The female participants' immediate family (parents and siblings) was highly supportive, but it was the extended family that usually raised the concerns.

Elena was a trailblazer in terms of women leaving home, but her immediate family's support kept her secure in her decision to go away from college:

No one has ever left my parents house unless they got married. And I remember particularly one aunt, and I guess she took me leaving home to go to college the

wrong way. I got a lot of support from my immediate family, but others weren't as supportive. I guess it was because they thought I was going to go and come back and not finish . . . So I knew I was going to go to college, even if I had to take out loans.

Leticia described her family dynamics and their perceptions of a pursuing a college education:

Some of them grew up in the same mentality of my grandmother that education is for the rich people. You are a “man” because you work hard and you make whatever you need for yourself. Some of my aunts and uncles, that is their same view. They are focused on “go to high school, graduate, get a job and you are done.” Out of all of my cousins (there were 14 brothers and sisters between my mom and dad), only two have graduated from college. There are a few that value education, but for the most part, they don't go.

Elena also expressed her frustration over the lack of emphasis on education that she sees among Latinos and those who tried to discourage her because of that perspective:

Sometimes the Latino community, I don't think they put enough emphasis on school, if that makes any sense. The people that do go to college [in the Latino community], not that there is anything wrong with it, but they go to community college. But I think that they think that is the best they can do. I think there are a lot of people I know who would have done great, great things with their lives, but, it's that conformity that you don't have to do great. And it's really, really sad that a lot of my friends just kind of gave up. It's frustrating, but at the same time, I went to a private high school. It wasn't expensive, because the work study

program paid for most; I paid \$2000 a year. And, some people were like, “Why pay for high school when you can get it for free?”

Shawna’s high school festered with negative cultural norms, from her peers who engaged in risky behaviors to the teachers and staff members who told the students that they would not be successful in life:

It was actually one of the worst schools in [the city]. It was a lot of violence, teenage pregnancies, apathy from the teachers. When you are in that school, you really have to want it to get out... It was you were either pregnant or you played sports or you are in between. And the in betweenies like me were on our own.”

When asked how teachers responded to the news that she was attending Private University, she said, “They felt I wasn’t going to make it. This is disappointing because I’m trying to help put [Mission High] on the map. They don’t produce a lot of college students.”

Another negative cultural norm participants identified was the notion of being a “sell-out” for pursuing a college education. This was mostly the case among the African American participants. Daslyn was the only one in his neighborhood who had decided to go to college. He was frequently harassed by his peers:

For whatever reason, people might have been jealous because they didn’t have this opportunity to go. Those are the people who wanted to be in my shoes, or thought I was a sell out because I wanted to get out. I’d get the same flack, being told the same thing that I’m going to the suburbs with all the White people. After a while I got tired of hearing it. One time I did get into a fist fight over it, but after that I realized it wasn’t worth it. If they can’t see that I’m going to college to help

out the area that I am from, and have more people from where I am from get to where I am at, I figured it wasn't worth my time and tried to ignore it.

In Jerell's case, it was his brother who took issue with his interest in academics.

My brother and I were pretty much opposites . . . I was expected to do well, and whatever he got was just enough . . . We really don't get along right now, and mainly that's due to different paths that have been taken. He thinks I think that I am better than him.

Nia, who prided herself on her business-like demeanor, was often accused of "talking White" by family members and friends:

They might mean well, but behind their minds it might be a little jealousy or competition where they sometimes wish that they could have gone to college. I don't even think I talk White, but people think I'm becoming White because of how I am academically.

Elijah described how he identified the negative cultural norms within his family, observed the consequences, and turned the other way:

The environment I grew up in; drug dealers, prostitutes, drug addicts, it is a collection of these types of people in my family structure. People that are raising me and my cousins . . . but they had the attitude of do what I say, not as I do. I usually saw them do it, but I would see a consequence. That really helped me; and made it easier for my mom. They would keep me on the right path.

He went on to describe his mother's strategy to keep him on the right path:

It was weird because I saw it a lot and most people in my immediate family knew a lot of things that my mom had been through. I remember one particular time she

was arrested and we were in a police car and she was handcuffed; she had a bunch of drugs. She would have been facing a whole lot of time. And a thing about my mom; she is very upfront. She would always tell me things and she was trying to coach me and prepare me for anything. She would tell me things, whether I wanted to know or not. There were just so many things that I saw that I didn't want to get into. Life was so rough; there has to be something else, I would think. I understood that life didn't have to be that way. At one point, I thought it was normal for people to not have lights . . . it was only until I got older that I got to see my perception change.

Lamar separated himself from the negative influence altogether.

I also grew up in an urban neighborhood that had a lot of kids that didn't go to school and I didn't want to become that. I disassociated myself from that type of environment, because I didn't want that for myself. I have so much opportunity and my father is providing it for me, that it wouldn't make sense. I didn't want to be like that. Obviously you have those people in your neighborhood that think that I am too good for them, but I just ignored it because it's ignorant. And I never thought of the need to convince those that acted like that to think otherwise.

Shawna, whose family is caught in a cycle of drugs, teenage pregnancy and incarceration, described being very much ostracized by her cousins:

Some of them don't like me. I tend to stand apart from others. I wanted to be a part of the family, but they were always busy being mean to people. I was set apart from that at a young age. It's hard to go home and call, it's just difficult.



All of the participants responded to the negative pressure by focusing on those who were fully supportive of them. Monica described how difficult it was when her family did not understand her successes:

I would say I think they are proud of me. I also think they have a hard time showing it. An example would be, at my graduation, I had a lot of little cords on me, honors and stuff, and I remember the first thing my mom saying to me afterward, was, “Why were you not sitting with the rest of your class?” [laughter] And they just don’t understand it . . . Another example is when I am involved in things. They don’t understand why I am doing it, without getting any benefit back. I guess to my outside family, they see me as not being in their roots, because I am not following those traditions. I don’t want to just keep myself contained in our culture. I want to explore and do other things. And then my parents get questioned why I am always doing this or that. But at the end of the day, my parents support me and that’s all that matters to me.

Other family concerns were related to doubting the student’s ability to be successful in college or to pay for the education. Lila responded to her family’s doubt by simply focusing on those who believed in her:

There was a few people who didn’t think I could do it all; wouldn’t be able to pay and stuff. But, I had my parents and friends, so that’s all I needed.

Monica summed up this sentiment well by saying:

I think that they were stuck in the mentality that they weren’t going to make it. I didn’t react that way; I just did it no matter what. I was a risk taker.

*Notable differences.* The parents of all of the Mexican American participants were highly supportive and proud of their child's pursuit of a college education. The extended family was more skeptical, and in some cases, wondered why the student (especially the females) would choose to leave home to go to college as opposed to simply getting a job or attending the college in town. They also wondered how the student would pay for college.

For the African American participants, the commitment to their race and culture was called into question. By being academically focused and having a desire to go to college, they were more likely to be considered "sell-outs" by family members, friends or neighbors. This was especially difficult for the students who did not come from nurturing homes because the notion of being a sell-out would either be reinforced or go undisputed by parents and siblings. All participants resisted these negative messages, but had various tactics for doing so. For Daslyn, it resulted in a fist fight; for Cherise, it meant immersing herself more deeply into her academics and busy schedule; and for Nia, it meant staying close to her pre-college coach, who supported her consistently. They all found ways to barrel through the criticism, so that they could stay focused on their goals.

### *Theme Two: Seeking Encouragement*

The participants valued the importance of having people in their lives who encouraged them to pursue their educational dreams. In most cases, this encouragement came from their families, in other cases, it came from other supportive networks. Elena's

parent's planted the seed early on for her to go to college. They often encouraged her to seek out opportunities that they did not have.

My mom and dad really wanted me to go. My dad is a carpenter for the CTA in Chicago for 30 years now. He would always tell me that I'm going to school because "You're not going to kill yourself like I have. I work too hard for you not to go to school."

Similarly, Monica's parents held high hopes that their children would have better lives than they did:

They always pushed me. They always reminded me where we come from. They lived in a garage in California and my dad was picking strawberries for \$3.00 a basket. My mom would literally cry when she couldn't go to school. She was always reminding me of all the opportunities they couldn't do at the beginning. They always reminded me of what they are currently earning. I make more than my mom right now, and she's been working for 20 years. They always pushed me to not be like them. Don't stay stuck. They have always understood that I am doing these things to better myself.

Daslyn's parents knew that their son would go to college and talked about it endlessly, even when he was very young:

It was VERY important. Since I was two or three, college was stressed, even though they didn't go to college themselves, nor did anyone else in my family. Since I was born I was destined to go to college. My mom stressed college so much that when I was four or five years old I would be in a room playing or watching TV and mom would run in the room and yell, "Boy, you goin' to

college!” [laughter] . . . Education has been a big part of me; I’ve technically been in school since I was three years old. It was like an accelerated daycare that I went to. Not like a regular daycare where you played and had snacks; we learned our ABCs and learned how to write and do numbers . . . When it comes to education, when I was younger I loved going to school and reading because my parents read to me so much as a child, that I love doing it. I love to write.

Alejandra’s parents did what they could to encourage her to value education:

My parents just wanted me to get the grades; even though they didn’t know how to help me on my homework, it felt good knowing that they wanted me to do good and I did it for them. I was the more academic in the family. They would buy me encyclopedias and workbooks and they read to me all the time. They really stressed that I was going to learn and do good. My dad would sit with me and do homework. They’d read to me in Spanish.

Similarly, Shawna’s dad was involved and encouraging by teaching her at an early age:

Education, education, education. My dad stressed that very early on. Before I even went to kindergarten, I was excited, because he started with me so young. Reading. Don’t compromise yourself. My father taught me that you can do anything in the world with a good education.

John, who was not close to his parents, described how they expressed the importance of education:

They weren’t involved as much, but in their own way, they were always on top of things. Whenever I brought home a report card they didn’t like, it was a big deal. It was not okay not to do well in school.

Elijah's mother, who struggled with drugs and finances also instilled the importance of a college education:

If you met her, you would think she went to college and finished. She is just one of those people who can work a room so to speak. She is articulate, she can speak; and she understands the value of education, but she never really described it. She just always said go to school and take care of your business. She was very supportive. Her knowledge of the process was lacking, but she made herself available in other ways. She did the best she could.

For Lamar, a college education was the only option:

My father was huge on education. He stressed that you needed it to get anywhere in the world. It taught me the importance of getting good grades and achieving big . . . It was enforced that I would go to college.

*Notable differences.* All of parents of the Mexican American participants immigrated to the United States. Many of them worked hard and made significant sacrifices to provide an abundance of opportunities for their children. Leticia's parents, for example, started a fund to pay for college expenses when she was still very young, and Monica's parents offered to refinance the house they worked hard to own to pay for her education.

Many of the African American families, by contrast, were headed by single mothers who were less focused on education. These children who had to be highly resilient to accomplish their educational goals. While the Mexican American parents were more intentional about paving the way to success for their children, the African American students had to fight (in some cases, their parents) to get to college. Simply

putting food on the table was a challenge because the focus was more on day-to-day survival, as opposed to planning for the future. This was highly reflective of Cherise's experience, especially before her mother got married:

My mom had me when she was 16; my grandmother died probably two years prior to that and she didn't have any guidance at all. I think the only person who graduated directly from high school was my oldest aunt. So, she didn't have any background on this is what you do in life, you go to school and you graduate. And, money, our status is poor. The main thing was having food and lights outside of college. College just wasn't real.

Nia had a similar upbringing:

She had me when she was 17. My father wasn't in her life, and there wasn't any support in her family, no financial support. I believe that she just kind of went with what was available . . . She was so content in her own ways. It was just not having the means, no support and a lot of responsibility. Additionally, I am not sure if my grandmother finished high school, so I think high school was an achievement of my mother's. She probably thought that was a great stopping point for her.

Cherise and Nia both took measures receive encouragement from relationships they developed outside of home. Cherise received much encourage from the Upward Bound staff, and Nia received encouragement from her pre-college coach at school. In comparison to the households headed by single mothers, the African American families that were headed by either two parents or by a father, placed heavy emphasis on

education and the children were expected to pursue a college education, such as in Daslyn's and Lamar's cases.

*Theme Three: Seeking Resourceful Individuals*

The participants understood how important it was to surround themselves with people who could provide them with important information or connect them with people who could aid them in accomplishing their educational goals. They did not hesitate to tug on the coattails of those they believed could help them get where they wanted to be. Nia described the people she intentionally surrounded herself with in order to be successful:

I had friends and mentors I kind of picked up along the way. One of the post secondary coaches that I had in school, I am very close to today. She really pushed me with different scholarships and applying for aid and things. It was all of those little things like that and networking. We actually had our own office at school to go to and fill out the FAFSA and applications and doing personal statements and things like that. There were just great things and being in the right place at the right time. I can say my teachers and friends motivated me.

Cherise took similar measures to ensure that she was surrounded by the people who could help her:

I usually try to seek out and find somebody who will help me and find the most simplistic way of getting things. But, what made me different was I was persistent.

John bluntly described his intentional efforts to seek people out for their resources that they could provide for him:

I know I became really good friends with my principal. I wanted to be able to have a reference or connection. I guess that was intentional, and not because he is going to get me places. It's just having that good standing. I know I tried to make connections with my English teacher, just using him for his resources.

Elena was fortunate to attend a high school that had an internship program built into the curriculum. She described how this connection benefited her:

When I realized I wanted to go to law school, I realized I had to talk to these people and realized the value of working there. You learn how to talk to people, be professional, learn how to ask for help, you learn to make mistakes. One of the attorneys, she was a partner and had a family. Me knowing that I'm such a huge family person, it was good to see that you could balance having a family and being a partner in a law firm. She was always encouraging and we'd go to lunch together. She was very approachable.

Leticia opted not to turn to anyone at her school for resources and support, and sought out family instead:

I really didn't like my counselors and school and since my mind was geared so much on graduating early and getting out, I just wanted to get it done. I went to my sister and my cousin that did finish college if I needed to, but I cannot say or think of anyone who I turned to if I needed it.

Alejandra summed it up by simply stating, "I make good use of my resources. If I can't do it, I'll ask someone I know who has done it."

*Summary of Support System*



It is clear that all participants needed to encouragement to aid in their success. If they already had the encouragement at home, they put less effort into creating a support system. If the encouragement did not exist at home, they were more deliberate about surrounding themselves with people who believed in them and would assist in the achievement of their educational goals. For many of the participants, the value of education was instilled early on, and they received a great amount of encouragement from their families. Most families highly valued education and expected their children to maintain good grades in school. Much of this encouragement was fueled by the parents' desire to have their children take advantage of the opportunities that they did not have.

As was previously noted within the findings related to autonomy, the males were much less likely than the females to ask for help. This was especially the case for African American male participants. None of the males indicated that they would ask for help whereas, all of the females indicated that they would. For example, when asked about seeking encouragement, Jerell said, "I wouldn't say that I really turned to anyone, but more or less they gave me the words of encouragement." The males preferred to work independently over reaching out for help; however, in cases where they already had resourceful individuals in their support networks, they were more than willing to accept the resources offered to them.

Most participants were aware of the importance of networking and used this to their advantage as they employed strategies to achieve their educational and future career goals. With resources ranging from teachers who would write them letters of recommendation to mentors who could provide tips about law school, the participants each recognized these opportunities and used them to their advantage.

Table 10

*Support System: Frequency of Theme*

Theme	# of Participants who related to theme
Overcoming negative cultural norms	17
Seeking encouragement	14
Seeking resourceful individuals	11

*Summary of Findings for Research Question Three*

The participants were highly resourceful in their quest to successfully gain acceptance into college. They knew that they must be academically prepared, that they needed to have an understanding of the college admissions process, and that they needed to secure a network of human support in order to achieve their educational goals. By making important decisions such as selecting a college preparatory high school and enrolling in competitive courses, the participants exposed themselves to environments that encouraged college aspirations and provided college information. Additionally, by immersing themselves into these educationally nurturing environments, the students were more immune to negative cultural norms that threatened to water down the drive to excel in education. Through the connections they made in their schools, the participants were able to experience the benefits of doing well in school and these benefits overshadowed the consequences of the negative activities they witnessed from family members, neighbors and friends.

When participants did not have the tools they needed to accomplish their goals, they sought out what they needed and would not give up until the goal was accomplished.

The culmination of their pre-college educational experiences, including the support they received to pursue their dreams were both the results of and catalysts for the students' resourceful nature (see Figure 5).



*Figure 5.* Resourcefulness themes.

### Chapter Summary

These findings indicated clear connections between self-determination, academic achievement, resourcefulness and a potential first-generation student's ability to successfully pursue a college education. There were a total of 17 strategies that the participants employed through academic achievement and their resourcefulness to ensure that they would make it to college. These strategies were made possible by eleven characteristics that the participants possessed to demonstrate self-determination. Without a sense of competence, it is unlikely that the participants would have had the wherewithal to have strong academic performance or the level of academic preparation needed to be college competitive; if they had no sense of autonomy, it is unlikely that the participants would have taken the measures necessary to learn the college admissions and funding process or to separate themselves from the stereotypes that threaten to underestimate their academic strength; and had they not been resourceful, it is unlikely that the participants would have been skilled enough to surround themselves with the support needed to

continue in their college pursuit. The fact that the participants were self-determined was pivotal to the development of their college aspirations and to their ability to follow through with their goals.

This chapter summarized the themes that were identified within the findings. Chapter Five will provide a discussion of these themes with implications for practice and further research.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

### Review of Study

This study investigated the ways in which self-determination, academic success, and resourcefulness collectively enable first-generation students to pursue a college education. Chapter One introduced the research through the description of the background, purpose, approach, significance, delimitations, assumptions, timeframe, and vocabulary of the study. Chapter Two reviewed literature about theory and research related to the study in the areas of first-generation student challenges and characteristics, the effectiveness of pre-college programs, Self-Determination Theory, and academic success. Chapter Three detailed the design of the study through description of the research approach and methodology, the research sample, data collection, study procedures, data analysis, and limitations. Chapter Four presented and summarized data generated by the study design in alignment to the study research questions. This final chapter will discuss study findings and conclusions related to the research purpose and reviewed literature, recommendations for practice based on the findings and conclusions from the study, and recommendations for further research.

### Findings and Conclusions Related to Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify and explore the factors that African American and Mexican American first-generation students attribute to the decision to pursue a college education. The research question guiding the study was: What set of factors predispose African American and Mexican American first-generation students to pursue a college education? The related research questions were:

1. To what degree were the three innate psychological needs that cultivate self-determination met for these students?
2. What skills and assets do these students possess that enable them to be academically successful enough to qualify for college?
3. What strategies do these students employ to successfully enroll into college?

This chapter presents a discussion of each of the research questions, which includes a summary of the findings and a comparison to the literature. After discussing the research questions, a comparison of the findings between the African American and Mexican American students will be presented. The section to follow will introduce a college predisposition model that delineates the collective role of students, families and institutions in the effort to help first-generation students pursue a college education. Additionally, this chapter will describe recommendations for practice, note limitations of the current study, articulate suggestions for further research, and offer insights into the implications for leadership, learning and service by focusing on the role that parents and institutions play to enable first-generations students to go to college.

#### Discussion of Findings for Research Question One

Research Question one asked, “To what degree were the three innate psychological needs that cultivate self-determination met for these students?” The research of Deci and Ryan (2000) indicates that human beings are born with the natural tendency to be self-determined. It is this very quality that causes us to stand up and walk, to desire to win races on the playground, to seek out a promotion. Our self-determination is fueled by the satisfaction of three innate psychological needs: competence, autonomy

and relatedness. If just one of these needs is not met, our natural drive for self-determination is jeopardized, and we are significantly less likely to pursue initiatives that take a greater level of effort than life's more basic desires. To put this in an educational perspective, for example, students who lack a sense of competence in the classroom are far more unlikely to consider college as an option than the student who believes in their academic ability. Each of the 17 students that participated in this study demonstrated that they possessed a sense of competence, autonomy and relatedness. Parents, school staff and extended family members all played a significant role in meeting these needs for the students.

### *Competence*

The participants took great pride in their academic abilities. They undoubtedly possessed a strong sense of competence, which was reinforced by the parents and teachers who supported them. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), when an individual feels competent, she feels effective in her activities and feels that she can attain or exceed standard expectations in her performance. This study's sample felt highly effective in their academic and co-curricular activities, and in most cases not only attained, but exceeded standard academic and co-curricular performance expectations. The sense of competence these students experienced was developed and reinforced by having important adults in their lives validate their strengths, through the spiritual assurance that God would make it possible for them to accomplish their goals, by being distinguished as "the smart one" in the family, and through the belief that they had a personal calling or responsibility to make opportunities possible for younger ones who come after them. Having a sense of competence was pivotal to the participants' ability to perform well in

the classroom and to take the steps necessary to ensure that they were academically prepared for college.

### *Validation*

It was evident that every student in the sample had other people in their lives who validated their strengths and ability to achieve academic success, both within and outside of the classroom environment. This was a key element in the students' sense of competence. According to Rendón (1994), who demonstrated the value of validating nontraditional college students, even the most vulnerable nontraditional students can be transformed into powerful learners through in- and out-of-class academic and/or interpersonal validation. In a working definition of validation, she included the following six elements, all of which were reflected in the lives of the 17 students included in the sample:

1. Validation is an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development.
2. When validation is present, students feel capable of learning; they experience a feeling of self worth and feel that they, and everything they bring to the college experience, are accepted and recognized as valuable.
3. Like involvement, validation is a prerequisite to student development.
4. Validation can occur both in- and out-of-class.
5. Validation suggests a developmental process. It is not an end in itself. The more students get validated, the richer the academic and interpersonal experience.



6. Validation is most effective when offered early on in the student's college experience, during the first year of college and during the first weeks of class. (Rendón, 1994, p. 45)

Although this application is relevant to the sample's pre-college academic experiences, it is clear that validation is equally important to the academic success of students in K-12 (secondary) learning environments. The African American and Mexican American participants sample experienced validation from a variety of sources, including close family members, teachers, counselors, and peers who took an interest in them. The reader should recall from chapter four that all students did not receive validation from their schools, but were fortunate enough to have people in other settings who validated them. Having another source from which to draw validating agents can "act to suppress the invalidation students may be receiving in class" (Rendón, 1994, p. 45). Because the students had people in their lives who validated their abilities, they benefited by developing and strengthening a sense of competence.

#### *Spiritual Assurance*

Many of the students drew a sense of competence from their belief in God and had the assurance that their gifts were God-given. These God-given gifts and talents are what they largely attributed to the ability to accomplish their educational goals. In a study that evaluated the importance of religiosity in Puerto Rican high school students, Antrop-González, Vélez, and Garrett (2007) found that students who engaged in religious activities and were spiritually connected with God were academically successful and attributed this success to their spiritual life for two primary reasons. First, the connection with the church and other religious groups afforded them access to social capital, which

for these students materialized as financial aid and college admissions information. These institutions were instrumental in providing support for the students by holding high expectations for academic success and helping them achieve their goals. The second reason students attributed success to their spiritual life was due to the church's expectations to maintain moral behavior, which kept students away from negative influences such as sexual promiscuity, drug addiction or gang involvement. Other researchers also found that student engagement in spirituality served to keep them on a positive life path (Cook, 2002; Jeynes, 2003; Muller & Ellison, 2001; Park, 2001). As stated by Antrop-González et al.,

This eternal locus of control was manifested through students expressing that God resided within them and, thus, steered them on a straight path, which resulted in large part to their academic success. (p. 256)

In a study that included African American high school students, Cook also found that these students attributed their academic success to their connection to the church and God. They believed that God was the source of their strengths and that they were protected from negative influences that could jeopardize their academic careers.

The participants' faith also contributed to a strong sense of purpose and mission. This foundation of faith helped students find a greater purpose in their academic pursuits. Clifton and Nelson (1992) articulated the importance of being inspired by mission and purpose, as opposed to personal gain:

Mission gives purpose to life. It adds meaning to what one does. In its purest form, it is so deeply felt that it explains why someone does what one does. A

mission will touch the heart versus the head. A mission must benefit the world. (p. 121)

### *“The Smart One”*

Nearly all of the participants in the sample were considered to be the smart one in the family. They were often told from an early age that they would be the ones to “make it” in life and bring pride to the family. For many of the Mexican American students, being the smart one meant having the ability to speak English and assisting parents with such tasks as filling out paperwork or translating phone conversations. It is important to point out that most of the students in the sample were singled out among their peers as the one who would be successful in life. Shawna, for example, was her father’s undisputed favorite. He spent a great deal of time instilling in her, his love for education, all the while believing that her younger and less disciplined sister would never live up to his expectations. Shawna and several other students including Monica and Leticia were considered to be the family’s “last hope.”

### *Paving the Way*

As a role model to younger cousins and siblings, the participants were driven by the self-imposed responsibility of paving the way to a college education. They described themselves as being the only people their predecessors have seen go to college and they believed that by setting a good example, they too, can aspire to a college education. This role further affirmed their competence as learners, as it placed them in an authoritative role and allowed them to “give back” to a younger generation, using their strengths and abilities. Harper (2005) explored this idea of giving back by paving the way for others in his work with high achieving African American male college students. The Black males

in his study sought out leadership positions that would allow them to give back by “addressing the issues that plagued African Americans and other racial or ethnic minority students” (Harper, p. 10). In Griffin’s (2006) study of high-achieving Black college students, a sense of responsibility to pave the way for others was also apparent. They expressed a desire to address the issue of Black professionals having low levels of representation in this society and to improve services within predominantly Black communities, such as healthcare.

### *Autonomy*

Experiencing autonomy means having a sense of personal control over important aspects of one’s life. As explained by Deci and Ryan (2000), it is having enough self-governance to design one’s own experiences and engage in activities that characterizes that person’s sense of self. The participants in this study were highly autonomous, as was demonstrated in the ability to choose their own extracurricular activities, and in many cases, the high schools that they attended. While most of the parents had instilled the value of education, it was the participants who decided to pursue a college education, as the primary concern of the parents was that their children graduated from high schools. In Griffin’s (2006) study of high achieving African American students, parents played the empowering role of “instilling them with an early desire to be academically successful, always encouraging them to ‘do their best’ and explore what life had to offer them” (p. 392). These students in her study emphasized that their parents did not set goals for them or force them to have high academic aspirations. Similarly, the students in the current study experienced a sense of autonomy by having parents who encouraged independence, as well as having a personal sense of responsibility, a preference for self-reliance and a

desire to exceed their parents' financial status. Having a sense of autonomy was pivotal to the participants' ability to resist stereotype threat and acquire the college information needed to navigate the college admissions process.

### *Parents who Encourage Independence*

The students that participated in this study are all representative of the Millennial generation. A quick Google search of the term *helicopter parent* will yield an endless collection of feature articles describing the parents of the Millennial generation as those who hover over their child's every move by orchestrating extracurricular activities, managing educational decisions, even taking over the college application process. These parents, an eclectic mix of Boomers and Gen Xers, are playing an increasingly prominent role in the planning of their children's college education, even asking their children to choose a college from a list that they have developed for them (Howe & Strauss, 2007). As Taylor (2005) stated, "Parents are more involved and are 'doing for' their children like never before. The 'helicopter parent' makes application, negotiates scholarships, helps with registration, and intervenes throughout the educational process." Although, this perspective is largely representative of the Millennial students represented in Howe and Strauss's research (2000, 2007), the authors do acknowledge the diversity of this generation and their parents. Clearly, these prevailing depictions of Millennial students and "helicopter parents" do not apply to the realities of the students represented in the current study's sample. The Howe and Strauss (2000) acknowledgement of differences was brief and unglamorous, but worth noting:

Yes, there are a whole lot of really rich kids these days. And there are still plenty of poor ones. The gap between the two groups is glaring . . . For Latino families,

recent immigration also plays a major role and explains why they have roughly the same average income as black families though they are much more likely to be intact. Many Latino Millennials are growing up in the poorest two-parent families in America . . . The “tale of two Millennial cities” is largely a contrast between two sets of kids: those with two-income Boomer parents—with highly educated soccer moms, bursting stock portfolios, and gift-giving grandparents—and those with one-income Gen-X parents, many of them never married black moms or recent Latino immigrants. (pp. 107-109)

A major misconception of parental support for first-generation students of color is based on the lack of understanding with regards to what support means for the *student* who does or does not receive it. Researchers often attempt to define parental support based upon the approach taken by middle-to-upper class Caucasian students without considering how different family structures affect the ways in which parents are able to support their children. The parents of the students in the current study were simply unable to spend the time that it would take to manage their children’s lives in the way that a helicopter parent would due to the greater amount of effort needed to maintain financial stability for their families. Research studies that do not acknowledge this dynamic invites imply that the parents’ inability to engage in their child’s education in the same way that a helicopter parent would translates to a lack of support. It is important to note that the students in this study felt extremely supported by their parents, and were expected to take their studies seriously. The difference between these parents and the millennial parents is not in whether or not they supported their children. The difference lies in the ways in which the parents provided the support. While they expected their children to do well in

school, these parents did not attempt to control the way in which they approached their studies. Instead, the parents laid out their expectations, and it was up to the student to figure out how to meet that expectation. For example, if the student struggled in a particular subject area, it was up to them and not their parents to find the help they needed to strengthen their performance in that area. Parents were also widely credited for being the supportive entity that contributed to the students' success. They appreciated the balance of support and independence the parents provided. This idea of independence and support is reminiscent of Chickering's challenge and support philosophy within student development theory (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The theory presents seven vectors that students move through as they develop their identities in college. He asserts that student affairs administrators encourage this process in their interactions with students by challenging and supporting students. This means listening and helping students process through scenarios, but also allowing students to learn from their mistakes and resisting the urge to solve problems for them. The fact that the participants in the current study received this balance of challenge and support at home not only better prepared them for the independence they would need in college, but it also played a powerful role in the students' ability to feel autonomous and encouraged.

#### *Sense of Responsibility*

The participants took on responsibilities that many of their college peers likely had never experienced during their high school years. Because many of the participants were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, requiring parents to work more jobs and longer hours, it was necessary for all members of the family to contribute to the stability and livelihood of the household. This level of responsibility has been termed *accelerated*

*role-taking*, in which the student adopts adult roles during the early years in life. Students who are required take on accelerated role taking are less likely than their peers to graduate from high school (Velez & Saenz, 2001). This idea of accelerated role-taking was most reminiscent for the students who were raised in single-parent homes, all of which were the oldest in the family and were expected to take care of younger siblings and maintain the household. Many of the Mexican American students were the only members of the family who spoke English, and described having to translate for their parents in public, on the telephone or while filling out paperwork. Some students had many more responsibilities than others, of course, but despite the level of responsibility the students were expected to take on, all students felt a strong sense of responsibility.

#### *Preference for Self-Reliance*

Because these participants had parents who encouraged independence, and because they took on such a great deal of responsibility at home, they were highly reluctant to depend on others. Many of the students believed that they accomplished their goals on their own and did not receive help from anyone along the way. This, of course, was evidenced to be untrue because they received help from many people, but there nonetheless existed a clear sense of pride for having achieved their goal on their own. This, again, differs from the research on Millennials, who heavily rely upon their parents to address challenging issues for them (Howe & Strauss, 2007).

#### *Desire to Exceed Parents' Financial Status*

Having witnessed their own parents' struggle to pay the bills and maintain a stable household, a majority of the students expressed a desire to build upon the hard work of their parents to establish an ever better life for themselves. The parents of the



Mexican American participants, in particular, often told their children that they came to the United States so that they would have the opportunity to get an education and have a better life, so this ideal was instilled very early on. This is what London (1992) described as upward mobility - taking steps toward exceeding the educational level of one's parents. Contradictory to the current findings, Inman and Mayes (1999) stated, "First-generation students often feel they have to make an all-or-nothing decision about maintaining their parents' way of life or rejecting their family's culture to pursue an academic goal" (p. 4). Such was not the case for the participants in the current study. This desire to move up the socioeconomic ladder was strongly encouraged and gave the participants a sense of autonomy because it allowed them to separate themselves from the norms of the family's current financial status and aspire toward something greater.

#### *Relatedness*

For most of the participants, the connections they had with their families were pivotal to providing them with a sense of belonging. The few who did not feel a strong connection with their families, such as Cherise or Juan, looked elsewhere to secure a sense of relatedness. These connections were often made within the school environment, thus it was fortunate that they were able to attend schools that had caring teachers. According to Deci and Ryan (2000), relatedness encompasses giving and receiving love and care; it addresses the need to feel linked to other human beings. The students described feeling a sense of relatedness in three ways, which included having an assurance of love from significant others, healthy and satisfying relationships, and a sense of acceptance by others within their peer groups. Having a sense of relatedness was

pivotal to the student's ability to socially and academically integrate within their high schools and build a system of support for their college aspirations.

#### *Assurance of Love from Significant Others*

Children who grow up feeling loved are more likely to experience security and self-assurance, and are more likely to take risks to pursue goals, according to Deci and Ryan (2000). In several studies described by Deci and Ryan, infants engage in exploratory behavior when they feel attached to a primary caregiver who pays attention to them. Similarly, when the participants in the current study received the assurance of love from important people in their lives, they were more willing to engage in exploratory behaviors while at school and through their aspirations to pursue a college education.

#### *Healthy and Satisfying Relationships*

The majority of the sample maintained healthy relationships with members of their families, and those who could not developed relationships with other significant adults, usually in their schools (or in Cherise's case, though Upward Bound). The importance of the students' relationships with their mothers, particularly for the Mexican American students in the current study was highly evident. Many credited the love and loyalty that they had for their mothers to the motivation to pursue a college education. In Hidalgo's (2000) study of Puerto Rican mothers of high-achieving students, healthy and satisfying relationships between mother and child were manifested through the mothers' monitoring strategies, communication strategies, motivational strategies, and protective strategies. While these strategies were a basis for academic motivation for their children, they also served to demonstrate what a healthy and satisfying relationship should entail.

### *Sense of Acceptance by Others within Peer Group*

College aspirations can be strongly influenced by peer interaction. A longitudinal study determined that being a part of a peer group that was planning on attending college was even more important than parental support (Engle et al., 2006). Simply put, students who have friends who plan to enroll in college are more likely to plan to attend college themselves (Hossler et al., 1999). By choosing to interact with others through co-curricular involvement who had similar academic foci and future goals, the students managed to surround themselves with peers who provided acceptance. Not only were these students accepted among their peer groups, but many became leaders among them, which fostered a vein of confidence at school.

### *Conclusions about Self-Determination*

Parents played an integral role in cultivating the participants' self-determination. The love and support they provided through such parenting strategies as validating their children's strengths, encouraging independence, and instilling a desire for upward social mobility were pivotal in meeting the three innate psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness. Students who did not have these foundational met needs at home were fortunate enough to find fulfillment from other adults outside of their homes.

Students from both nurturing and non-nurturing households felt highly competent and credited themselves for their accomplishments. The students who did not grow up in supportive and nurturing homes were grateful for their challenges because they explained that these experiences further emphasized where they did not want to end up in life and prompted them to do all that they could to be successful. They heavily attributed their

success to their own academic abilities, and placed great emphasis on their personal drive as the catalyst for their success.

The participants who grew up in highly supportive and nurturing homes were grateful for the sacrifices their parents made to get them into the right schools and provide them with a stable and secure childhood. These students, however, also attributed successes to their own academic abilities and personal drive. They often emphasized that no one forced them to get good grades or to pursue a college education, and did not consider the possibility that their parents' high academic expectations for them may have contributed to the personal drive to succeed academically.

As is indicated in Deci and Ryan's (2000) research, it was, indeed, necessary for the students to have a sense of competence, autonomy and relatedness to aspire to a college education. Because the participants had a sense of competence, they had the wherewithal to believe that they could succeed in a college environment, and did not fear taking that next step in the educational process. Their competence was planted and reinforced by the important adults in their lives who believed in them and wanted to see them do well. As a result of the participants' sense of autonomy, the students had the freedom to explore their strengths and weaknesses and to take part in important decisions regarding their lives. This level of freedom further developed their aspirations and helped them devise a plan for pursuing a college education. Having a sense of relatedness enabled the participants to share their dreams with others who would support and help them accomplish their goals. It is indisputable that humans are social beings and need one another to accomplish goals. The important connections that the participants were able to

maintain kept them in contact with people who would both encourage and assist them as they took the steps necessary to go to college.

Each of the participants had the three innate psychological needs met, and can thus be considered to be self-determined individuals. For first-generation students, self-determination is a necessary characteristic to possess in order to make it to college, because as the research indicates, this population of students must overcome a number of challenges that their peers often do not face. Overcoming these challenges requires the determination to do so. First-generation students are generally not coerced into pursuing a college education; it takes personal volition – the will to do it, which can only be fueled by self-determination.

Considering these findings about self-determination, a call to implement self-determination initiatives within schools and pre-college programs is in order. Many first-generation students do not have the same level of support from their families that the students in the current student study were privileged to have, and countless others also lack support from their schools. As such support demonstrates the powerful affect it can have on a child's self-perception and educational aspirations, measures must be taken to incorporate similar support structures within the schools in which our children spend much of their childhood. This is not to suggest that parents are off the hook when it comes to ensuring that their children are cared for, but schools also must understand the pivotal role that they play in a child's development.

It is clear that the high stakes testing strategies of No Child Left Behind along with other punitive-based initiatives do little to spark a child's motivation. If a person is to be intrinsically motivated, that motivation must come from within and cannot be

forced. Our schools are currently driven by the wrong outcomes – the best test scores, the most funding, and the highest attendance numbers – yet none of these outcomes truly get at the well-being of the children we seek to teach. By focusing on these external outcomes, we have missed the mark completely. Granted, it would take significantly more time, thoughtful planning, a willingness to explore new approaches, and collaboration to develop self-determination initiatives within schools, but the results would certainly be worthwhile. When schools begin to adopt strategies aimed at achieving internal results – such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness – only then will a difference truly be made for our children’s future.

#### Discussion of Findings for Research Question Two

Research Question two asked, “What skills and assets do these students possess that enable them to be academically successful enough to qualify for college?” This question was important because it explored how the students made themselves marketable candidates for the institutions of higher education that would receive their application materials. This process started long before the students filed any college applications. They entered the ninth grade with the intention of getting the most out of their high school experience and graduating as a top-notch student. These participants knew how to strike a balance between maintaining a strong grade point average and becoming an active part of the school’s social network. According to Tinto’s (1975) research on academic success in college students, students are most successful when they are academically and socially integrated within the school environment. The challenge for many students of color, however, is a phenomenon that Steele (1997) coined as stereotype threat. Steele described this threat as the fear of confirming a negative

stereotype about the group to which one belongs. The experience can negatively affect academic performance in the same way that one may choke under pressure during the last crucial play of an athletic competition. Students who are unable to overcome stereotype threat experience a reduced sense of morale or expend a great deal of energy trying to prove that they do not fit the stereotypes, both of which can be detrimental to one's academic performance.

### *Earning Good Grades*

Each participant was able to maintain a minimum of a 3.0 grade point average, with many whose averages were significantly higher than a 3.0. Despite the strong academic record, many expressed disappointment in their performance and believed that they were capable of better. The participants took their academic performance quite seriously and took measures to ensure that their grades remained competitive. Nia, for example, chose to do as much homework and studying at school as possible because she knew that her academic performance would suffer if she attempted to do schoolwork at home, an environment that was not conducive to academic success. Elena opted to meet with her teacher and other students on Saturdays to grasp a better understanding of the material presented in class during the week.

In her study of high achieving African American students, Griffin (2006) found that the students were motivated by the academic challenges that they encountered. One student in her study stated explicitly that when he was told that a class would be difficult, he would seize the moment as an opportunity to work twice as hard to exceed expectations. As with the students sampled in Griffin's study, the 17 students featured in

the current study felt largely in control of their academic performance and took deliberate measures to ensure that they were successful in their endeavors.

### *Having High Expectations*

The participants were not willing to settle for simply being the average student. This was demonstrated in their desire to be highly involved, in the type of colleges they aspired to attend, and the level of commitment they had to their academic success. As with the students in Griffin's (2006) study, the students emphasized that they were not pushed to do well, that they were "self-motivated, goal-oriented learners" (p. 391). Future aspirations were the impetus for staying focused and motivated. Although the participants did not readily acknowledge this, based upon the interviews, it was evident that in most cases their parents' high expectations were passed on to the students. In both Griffin's (2006) and the current study, students credited their parents with influencing them to become motivated through "social influence" strategies that included urging the students to put forth their best effort, being supportive through academic difficulties, encouraging them to explore a variety of opportunities, and exposing them to experiences that were educationally enriching and that facilitated learning and curiosity.

### *Nurturing Strengths and Managing Weaknesses*

The participants had a clear understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. For some, the weakness was performing well on standardized tests and for others, the weakness was a particular subject area. They spent much more time focusing on developing their strengths than they did worrying about their weaknesses. They simply found ways to manage their weaknesses, which is a strategy that is promoted with strengths theory. This theory posits that each individual has a particular set of strengths,



and that when people focus on developing these strengths, rather than attempting to become adept in their weaknesses, the strengths become powerful enough to make weaknesses irrelevant (Clifton & Nelson, 1992). By managing weaknesses, the authors suggest that “holding on to something that doesn’t work is not an act of strength, it is an act of blocking. It is perpetuating a weakness that stands in the way of strengths” (p. 92). The students who did not feel competent in their test-taking skills made no attempt to become better test-takers. Instead, they placed emphasis on doing what they know they could do well – earning good grades. The students utilized this strategy and were able to stay motivated as their strengths continued to reinforce a sense of competence.

#### *Resisting Stereotype Threat*

Stereotype threat in the academic environment is powerful enough to negatively affect academic performance if the targeted individual internalizes the threat. Most of the students described experiences in which they were stereotyped by teachers or other students, many preferred not to give much attention to these experiences, but all employed one of three strategies to keep the threat of being stereotyped or discriminated against from negatively affecting their academic performance. These strategies included disproving negative stereotypes, ignoring the threat, and avoiding peers who seemed to embody the negative stereotypes.

#### *Disproving Negative Stereotypes*

According to Steele (1997) and Griffin (2006), it is quite common for students to expend energy disproving negative stereotypes. The pressure that comes from taking on this task can cause academic performance to decline. There did not seem to be any evidence that the participants in the current study suffered a declination in performance.

To the contrary, the students used this to their advantage and increased motivation to enhance their grades and achieve their goals. As Griffin indicated in her study, the students were motivated by academically difficulties. Elena for example, used her feeling of inferiority in language as fuel to learn as many languages as possible.

### *Ignoring Stereotypes*

Many participants also took the more passive approach of ignoring or rationalizing any incident in which they were stereotyped or discriminated against. This preference to not address race-related tensions was described in Howe's work on Millennials, as they described a population of students that were very much moved to advocate for issues of injustice, but were hesitant to discuss issue pertaining to race. This researcher questions whether or not this is more indicative of their identity as Millennials or of their stage of racial identity development. It is well known that even college students can be pinpointed at the very early stages of racial and ethnic identity, which are characterized by ideologies such as color blindness or oblivion to racial and cultural differences.

Across models, the concept of racial identity addresses how strongly connected a particular individual perceives that they are to their racial group and the importance that the individual places on his or her racial heritage (Helms, 1990). Three prominent theories and measures of ethnic and racial identity include the Expanded Nigrescence Model (Cross, 1991), the Racial Identity Attitude Scale (Helms), and the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998). Essentially, these models demonstrate phases of racial or ethnic identity that characterize one's development from a state of low racial awareness to a state of high racial

awareness, and ultimately to cross-cultural appreciation. Based upon each of these models, Howe & Strauss' description of Millennial students, and the current sample's hesitancy to discuss race, it is clear that these students are at the early stages of racial identity development, which is to be expected for this age group. In Cross' Nigrescence Model, this disposition can best be described by what she terms the Pre-Encounter Stage and within that stage, assimilation; the students prefer to assimilate into what they deem as mainstream society rather than recognize racial differences. While this may seem to be a common mindset across the Millennial population, it is important to recognize the developmental process and note that a great majority of Millennial students are still in the early stages of identity. Future studies on this population may indicate some progression through the stages.

Perhaps the most reasonable explanation for the participants' choice to ignore the threat can be explained in Wout, Shih, Jackson, and Sellers' (2009) research on how people decipher whether or not they are being negatively stereotyped. In this study, the researchers find that students do not always acknowledge the presence of stereotype threat, and suggest that they only choose to address the threat when they believe that the threat is possible and probable, that is, they are in an environment in which it is reasonably possible that they can be stereotyped and it is probable that the particular people involved will apply the stereotype to them. If either possibility or probability does not exist, it is not necessary to expend the energy that it takes to acknowledge and address the threat. This research resonates well with the experiences of many of the participants. They did not address the threat, simply because they did not perceive that it was both possible and probable that they were being stereotyped (despite whether or not

their perceptions represented what was actually happening). Because many participants attended diverse school settings, or were well-known leaders within less diverse settings, they felt little need to prove themselves to others and were confident that they were well-respected by their teachers and peers. These students did not believe that the students, teachers or staff members in their school environments would apply a stereotype to them, (Wout et al.), thus making it “improbable” that they would be stereotyped. The researchers provided the following argument for considering what is known about the people involved before generalizing the possibility of a threat based upon that majority groups identity:

Given the power of individuating information, we argue that targets should rely on group membership only when they lack individuating information about the people in their social setting. When provided with counter-stereotypical individuating information about the beliefs of the people in the social setting, targets should base their probability judgments on this individuating information instead of social group membership. Thus, although targets are likely to use group membership as a cue in determining they probability of being stereotyped, they should not rely on this cue when they are provided with counter-stereotypical individuating information about their evaluator. (p. 351)

Because the vast majority of the students in the current student were strongly connected to their teachers and peers, they had a great deal of individuating information from which they could draw to conclude that the people who surrounded them in their academic settings would not pose a threat to them. This researcher argues that the students were so comfortable within their academic environments that even when an

implicit threat did present itself from time to time, they were either oblivious to it or chose to ignore it. Wout et al. (2009) posited that when students do not have to contend with being stereotyped, they are able to enjoy the best possible academic performance because their cognitive resources are not expended on addressing the threat. The students in the current study characterized this ideology.

#### *Avoiding “Stereotypical” Peers*

The students who were most deliberate about disproving negative stereotypes were also intentional about not associating with peers who seemed to embody the very stereotypes that they were committed to disprove. John was an extreme, but good example of a student who was so determined to disprove stereotypes that he chose not to associate with other Latino students at all, despite whether or not they characterized the stereotypes. His preoccupation with not being “that brown boy” led him to prefer his adopted “White culture.” For the rest of the students, avoidance of peers who were not academically committed was more of a strategy to keep themselves focused and unassociated with people who would could jeopardize their reputations. This phenomenon is well explained by Flores-González (2002), who studied identity development in Latino students. She described two school identities, which she termed *school kids* and *street kids*. These identities characterized school kids as those students who were academically focused, and street kids as those who did not take school seriously and were known to get into trouble. These students, also referred to as *stayers* are skilled reputation avoiders; that is, they employ specific strategies to ensure that they do not get into trouble and are not associated with those who do. As stated by Flores-González,

. . . stayers take the posture of a reputation avoider, and as such, reject the peer ranking promoted by their street-oriented peers. Rather, they exhibit school-sanctioned behaviors and enact a number of strategies to minimize contact and conflict with street-oriented peers. Their low profile makes it possible for them to be selective in their commitments. Perhaps the most successful strategy for avoiding exposure to non-school-related activities, and street-oriented peers, is involvement in school programs. (p. 105)

As previously stated, participants in the current study were highly active in extracurricular activities, thus surrounding themselves with peers who shared their academic and social interests. By staying involved, they were better able to avoid those peers they believed embodied the very stereotypes that the students preferred not to be associated with.

#### *Social and Academic Integration*

Social and academic integration has its foundations in Tinto's (1975) theory of persistence, which emphasized that both academic and social integration were key components to fostering student success; and Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement, which illuminates the physical and psychological energy one expends on the academic experience. When students engage in activities outside of the classroom, they have a greater chance of experiencing an enhanced sense of social integration (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Harper, 2006; Yazedjian et al., 2007). All 17 participants in the study engaged at some level in social and academic integration on their campuses. This integration was characterized by their participation academically focused clubs and organizations, athletic teams and student government committees, as well as by the

relationships they developed with teachers and counselors. That the participants utilized these strategies to become socially and academically integrated well before arriving to college set them on the right track for future academic success.

### *Getting Involved in Extracurricular Activities*

Students who are involved in extracurricular activities have a far greater chance of achieving academic success than their non-involved peers (Tinto, 1975). The students in the current study were involved through academic clubs and societies, leadership positions and athletic teams. Through this high level of involvement, the students made connections with their advisors, coaches and peers, and were introduced to opportunities such as scholarship competitions, travel and exposure to colleges and universities. Harper (2005) described the important role that involvement played in the academic success of the African American males included in his study. These students benefited in a number of ways that included the following:

Learning to work with people from different cultural backgrounds; effectively managing time and juggling multiple tasks simultaneously; functioning productively on teams; comfortably communicating with individuals, in small groups, and with large audiences; delegating tasks to others; and successfully navigating complex political environments. (Harper, 2005, p. 11)

Like the African American males in Harper's (2006) study, the skills students acquired through involvement in extracurricular activities became translucent, affording them the ability utilize these skills for their benefit in the classroom.

Additionally, getting involved in co-curricular activities was not all fun and games. Institutions of higher education are becoming increasingly competitive and high

school involvement in extracurricular activities is greatly taken into consideration during the application review process. The participants were fully aware of this and believed that maintaining a high level of involvement would better position them for admission to their choice colleges. In this sense, involvement was no accident. It was, in part, a way to build up their academic resumes.

#### *Developing Relationships with Teachers and Staff*

Connecting with teachers and staff members gives students the clear edge over their peers who do not make these connections. Developing such relationships is an important part of immersing oneself into the many dynamics of the educational process (Tinto, 1975). Yazedjian et al. (2008) and Harper (2005) emphasized the importance of establishing close relationships with faculty as a vehicle to academic success. Students who are both socially and academically integrated into campus life are more likely to stay in school (Cabrera et al., 1992; Kuh, 1995), experience greater moral and cognitive development, and have clearer vocational aspirations (Astin, 1984; Moore, Lovell, McGann, & Wyrick, 1998). It was evident that the students in the current study reaped these and other benefits through the connections they made with teachers, counselors, principals and other staff members in their high schools. They were personally encouraged to pursue their goals, they received individually relevant information about higher education and scholarship opportunities, and they were easily able to acquire letters of recommendation during the college admissions process.

#### *Conclusions about Academic Achievement*

The high level of competence the participants possessed was clear in their academic achievement, particularly in the high expectations that they held for



themselves. They were determined to be the best among their peers and were consistently aware of how the activities they engaged in and the grades they achieved would affect their chances of being accepted into a competitive college or university. As they became more academically successful and more involved in their high schools, their competence was more strongly reinforced by teachers, guidance counselors and peers. Experiences that included receiving awards and recognition for academic competitions, being voted class president, and earning high grade point averages fueled them to keep achieving. Lamar said it well when he stated, “My past successes keep me motivated.”

For all of the students, being academically successful meant truly valuing their educational experiences. It meant performance. It meant taking classes seriously and employing strategies that would enable them to produce quality results. By understanding their strengths and weaknesses, the students found ways to use their strengths to their benefit and keep the weaknesses from pulling them down. Academic success also meant being resistant to stereotypes. The participants understood that they would not be successful if they became consumed with or believed that they characterized the stereotypes often held against their race. Thus, they took measures to ensure that they would remain academically focused and could become an integrated part of the school without experiencing the constant threat of being stereotyped or discriminated against. While many researchers (this one included) would argue that the strategies they employed were not necessarily healthy ones, it must be acknowledged that as these students advance in their racial identity development through their college experiences, they will find other ways in which to handle stereotype threat. As high school students at

this developmental stage, the students addressed the threat in the ways that they best know how, and these strategies proved to be successful during this phase in their lives.

Academic success also meant getting involved. It seemed that for this sample, the more students became socially involved and connected with teachers, the more they enjoyed their high school experiences. This did not necessarily result in better grades, but it certainly contributed to a more overall rewarding experience. Cherise and Leticia, the two students who were least involved, had the strongest grade point averages, but least favorable high school memories. Toward the end of Cherise's interview, she expressed regret for not being more involved in school as she said, "High school was okay. I wish I could have enjoyed it more." Leticia also had a minimally enjoyable high school experience and rushed into an early graduation, eager to escape the environment.

Being academically successful is, of course, essential for students who wish to attend college. Due to increasingly competitive admissions requirements, the participants took deliberate measures to ensure that they would be qualified for college by their senior year in high school. Taking these measures required that the students upheld high academic expectations, valued responsibility and desired upward social mobility. These dispositions were made possible by the foundational support they received by family and other critical adults in their lives who helped to shape them into competent, autonomous and relational individuals.

This research question underscores the importance of personal motivation. When students have a strong foundation of support and are self-determined, they rely less upon others and take matters of achievement into their own hands. Once self-determination is in place, little effort is needed to push these kids to set and accomplish their goals.

Parents, schools and pre-college programs can aid in developing academically successful students by teaching them how to address stereotype threat and discrimination, and by ensuring that they are connected with teachers, staff and other students at their schools. Student success is a domino effect that begins with foundational support, is fueled by self-determination, and is propelled from past successes that validate a sense of competence.

It is also important to help students discover and utilize their strengths. When they understand what they are good at doing and can match this with extracurricular and co-curricular activities, the chance that they will be academically successful dramatically increases. This not only provides students with direction as they seek out future aspirations, but it also helps to validate them as competent individuals, and will help to propel them towards the accomplishment of their goals.

#### Discussion of Findings for Research Question Three

Research Question Three asked, “What strategies did the students employ to successfully gain acceptance into college?” Research on first-generation students, particularly students of color, discusses extensively the challenges these students face as they struggle to enroll into and persist within the college environment. This study attempted to gain a greater understanding of the strengths and assets the students possessed, as well as the strategies they employed to ensure that they would make it to college. In order to make it to college, it was necessary for each of the participants to overcome a number of challenges that often prevent first-generation students from going to college. As was indicated in the current study’s framework, the barriers include poor academic preparation, a lack of college knowledge, limited financial resources, difficult

cultural transitioning, and a lack of family support. It is important to note that the participants' high level of self-determination was instrumental in the ability and willingness to do what was necessary to eliminate the barriers.

### *Academic Preparation*

Many first-generation students graduate from high school without having the level of academic preparation necessary to succeed in college. Regardless of intelligence levels or grade point averages, if their schools do not provide the rigorous curriculum necessary to compete at the college level, the student runs the risk of not succeeding in college. Many first-generation students are not academically prepared to compete at the college level (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Most are in fact removed from the college preparation track as early as the eighth grade, which grossly reduces the odds that they will take important courses, such as Algebra 1 (Adelman, 2006). The participants in the current study were deliberate about ensuring that they would be academically prepared for college. The two strategies they employed to gain this academic preparation included selecting the right high school and enrolling in competitive courses.

### *Selecting the Right High School*

Because many of the participants and their parents highly valued education, the decision of which high school to attend was an important one. For parents, the primary concern was safety and positive influences. For the students, the primary concern was finding the school that best positioned them for college. Most of the participants were able to settle on a school that met both party's needs.

These students were right about being selective about the high school they attended. As research has indicated, first-generation students are less likely than their

peers to attend high schools that focus on preparing them for college. Rather, they attend schools that have fewer college counseling resources and no access to the rigorous coursework that will prepare them for college, such as honors and advanced placement options (Terenzini et al., 2001; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000). The participants chose schools that provided students with high stakes information about college and financial aid and placed importance on academically preparing their students for college. Additionally, these schools had teachers and staff members who *expected* the students to do well and who were actively engaged in helping them prepare for and navigate through the college application process.

#### *Enrolling in Competitive Courses*

As admission to colleges and universities become increasingly competitive, having a set of advanced courses in one's academic record can give them an edge over other students. Additionally, these courses can boost a grade point average and can provide the rigor needed to prepare for college-level coursework. Shawna, who did not have the option to select a high school outside of her neighborhood, expressed frustration in her school's lack of high level course offerings. She had to take college courses over the summer to enhance her transcripts with high level courses, such as AP Psychology and Honors English. Horn and Nunez (2000) found that students who took advanced mathematics courses in high school more than doubled their chances of enrolling in a four-year college. In first-generation college students, 64% of those who completed advanced courses enrolled into a four-year college, whereas, only 34% of those who completed courses through Algebra 2 enrolled. The current study's participants understood the importance of these courses and made sure that they were enrolled.

Additionally, many of their high schools offered special diploma programs that involved a more rigorous course load, and in many cases, a thesis or final project as a graduation requirement. These were especially attractive to students because they believed that this would make them stand out over other college applicants.

### *College Knowledge*

College knowledge refers to the amount of information one has with regards to preparing for, applying to and paying for college (Engle et al., 2006). The participants took measures to seek out this information and approached this process with confidence and initiative. Combinations of four different approaches were apparent in the search for information about college admissions requirements, financial aid options, and the types of majors offered at different institutions. These approaches included not being intimidated or discouraged, following the money trail, working independently and accepting help.

### *Not Being Intimidated*

Little concern existed over how college would be paid for. Some participants had a number of different ideas about how the tuition would be covered, and others simply never gave it a thought. Yet none expended energy worrying about what they could not or may not be able to do. The focus was always on the possibilities. Monica, for example, had never considered how she would pay for school, but as that time to apply for college approached, she relied heavily upon her guidance counselor to send her into the direction of funding, and as she seemed to intuitively know, she managed to secure a full ride scholarship through the university's Educational Opportunity Program.

Leticia and Lamar both had parents who promised to cover college tuition for them, so as they approached the college admissions process, money was of little concern. However, both were fortunate enough to secure enough financial aid and scholarships to fully fund their tuition. Even Nicole and Elijah, who both ended up taking out student loans to supplement their scholarships and financial aid, refused to be discouraged by the university's \$30,000 per year tuition.

All believed that the sacrifice would be well worth the value of a college education. In a College Board report outlining the benefits of a college education, Baum and Payea (2004) outlined three primary benefits that individuals receive as a result of acquiring a college education: (a) individuals across all demographic populations who pursue a college education earn more money than those who do not; (b) because the income gap that exists between high school and college graduates continues to increase, college graduates enjoy an earnings benefit high enough to regain the costs of tuition, as well as money not earned during the pursuit of a college education; and (c) while the benefits of earning a four-year degree surpasses the benefits of not finishing college, having any level of college experience is measurably more beneficial than having no experience.

#### *Following the Money Trail*

While some of the students were very much focused on attending Private University, many of them ultimately chose the university that offered the most money. Following the money trail meant applying for as many grants and scholarships as possible and making a decision based upon the opportunities that unfold. The sources of free funding that the participants received from Private University included EOP,

scholarship competitions hosted by academic departments, and standard financial aid packages. These sources were highly successful measures for attracting the students to university. Colleges and universities across the country that seek to diversify their campuses usually offer need-based scholarships in an effort to attract students traditionally underrepresented in higher education. Anyaso (2007) and Michael (2006) both emphasized the importance of offering scholarships to increase campus diversity.

#### *Working Independently*

Given the highly autonomous disposition of this sample, it was almost second nature for the students to approach the college admissions process by gathering the information themselves. This meant spending time on college and university websites, exploring sites such as FastWeb and FAFSA, and even picking up the phone to call admissions offices with questions. This type of initiative was reflected in Cushman's (2005) work with first-generation students. Much like Elena's experience, Cushman described the way in which some students needed to compile and interpret their parents' financial statements as they took on the task of applying for financial aid and scholarships without assistance.

#### *Accepting Help*

Many participants (in most cases, the women) were more than willing to accept the help of their guidance counselors or teachers as they embarked on the college application and financial aid journey. In more cases than not, these students accepted help from people with whom they had already developed relationships. A number of the participants were offered help because they stood out as high achieving students, and their teachers were more than willing to push them and provide the encouragement



needed to pursue a college education. In Cushman's (2005) study, many students sought out help by reaching out to their guidance counselors and attending informational programs and workshops. Fortunately, many of the students in the current study attended high schools with a strong focus on college preparation, thus, they did not have to look far to seek assistance.

### *Support System*

Support was found in a number of places. Primarily, it came from home. The parents placed great importance on the value of an education and set high expectations for their children's academic performance. Another source of support was found in caring teachers and guidance counselors at the schools they attended. This was particularly important to the students whose parents did not communicate the value of education or did not provide them with moral support. In many studies of first-generation students, much is said about the lack of parental support the students receive. York-Anderson and Bowman (1991), for example stated that first-generation college students lack the support needed from their parents to foster a successful college experience from the admissions process through graduation. The current study, however, is supported by Saenz et al. (2007), who found that first-generation students and their peers whose parents were college educated actually attributed equal importance to the parental support they received to attend college. While parents were not always able to provide the information needed to prepare for college, they were helpful in other ways including being selective about the high school the child attended, having high academic expectations, allowing their children the freedom to explore their strengths and interests through extracurricular activities, and by promising to assist in any way possible in their pursuit of a college

education. The students understood the importance of securing a network of support to encourage their college aspirations, and they developed this network by overcoming debilitating cultural norms, seeking out encouragement, and seeking out resourceful individuals.

### *Overcoming Debilitating Cultural Norms*

Debilitating cultural norms are those common behaviors or beliefs held by family members and other members of the community that undermine the students' college aspirations. According to the research, first-generation students face a great deal of pressure to maintain these cultural norms and are torn between the norms of the family and those of higher education (London, 1992). The experience of dislocating from one culture and relocating into another can be traumatic (Rendón, 1992) and requires the ability to renegotiate old relationships with family and friends as they may question new habits, interests and peers (London, 1992). For the student sample, these norms included the idea that college is for "rich people," the belief that valuing academics is "acting White," or that moving away from home is an act synonymous with abandoning the family. The participants in the current study faced these dilemmas but overcame them and made it a point to surround themselves with people who would support them so that the pressure to conform to these negative norms would not be so great.

### *Seeking Encouragement*

Finding people who would provide encouragement for their college aspirations was key to the participants' academic journey. Each participant had people in their lives who encouraged them, even if those people were not their parents. This seemed to be by far the most important strategy that the students employed as they prepared for college.

Even the students who had the support of their parents took measures to surround themselves with supportive people at school, and in Cherise's cases, through Upward Bound. Because Upward Bound was all that Cherise had for support, she clung to that program with dear life. In her study of pre-college programs across the country, Perna (2002) found that 80% of the programs she reviewed provided role models to youths as a way of raising their educational aspirations and providing support. Such positive, affirming encounters with teachers, administrators and peers, in the absence of support from parents are essential, as this increases the likelihood that students will come to believe that they are capable of success (Engle et al., 2006). As Elena said, "It really helps when you have a lot of people that believe in you."

#### *Seeking Resourceful Individuals*

Contrary to the findings of the current study, Engle et al. (2006) found that many first-generation students do not have people in their families or social circles who can help them with the college admissions process. Thus, they are more likely than their peers to perceive the prospect of college to be more stressful and the application process more intimidating than their peers whose parents are college educated. This was not the case for participants of the current study, as they took proactive measures to ensure that they were surrounded with the people who would provide them with recourses they needed to achieve their goals. Networking was an important strategy the participants used to garner support. Beyond the cheerleaders they gathered up to encourage them in their college aspirations, they also needed people who could provide practical support in the form of providing information, serving as references and making that phone call that would open the door to opportunities. Many students received information about college that they

may not have received otherwise from these resourceful individuals. For example, Shawna was able to secure a scholarship after a mentor who knew the head of the scholarship committee made a phone call that resulted in the reconsideration and eventual acceptance of her application.

### *Conclusions about Resourcefulness*

Taking the measures necessary to overcome potential barriers to college enrollment required that the participants were resourceful enough to come up with solutions to any of the problems they faced as they prepared for college. Many first-generation students face challenges including poor academic preparation, limited financial resources, insufficient college information, a lack of emotional support, and negative cultural norms. Most of the participants shared in the struggle for financial resources and battling debilitating cultural norms, and were strategic in their endeavors to overcome those struggles. However, they did not struggle through poor academic preparation, insufficient college information or a lack of emotional support because they took proactive measures to ensure that they were not deficient in these areas. The decision to carefully select a high school proved to be a wise one, as this instantly placed the participants into college-going environments that maintained college-preparatory curriculums, caring and supportive teachers, and a wealth of information about college. This simplified the participants' efforts to gain college knowledge and to develop a support system, as much of this was already built into their schools. For the few who did not have these benefits integrated into their schools were even more deliberate about employing resourceful strategies to ensure that they would matriculate into college.

These students were problem solvers. They did not dwell on challenges, but were driven by them. The people that they were connected to, along with the volition to “make it happen” (as Shawna would say) enabled the students to take the challenges that lay before them and find the solutions that would help them move forward.

Self-determination and experiences with past successes help students to develop the strength of character that refuses to be unmoved by the challenging circumstances they will undoubtedly face. It is essential that schools and pre-college programs are equipped with the resources that students need to accomplish their goals. To many schools, especially urban schools, lack even the basic resources such as textbooks and computers. It is difficult to understand how any child is expected to succeed in such environments, especially when this is compounded with teachers and staff members who are unsupportive and critical of their students. Self-determined students can only be resourceful to a point – they can only utilize the resources that exist for them. Again, the participants in the current study were privileged enough to attend schools that offered important resources, but this, again, demonstrates what works to aid first-generation students in their preparation for college. If more students had the opportunity to attend schools or participate in pre-college programs that provide college information, offer competitive courses, and enable students to explore educational and career options, a significantly greater number of first-generation students would not only enroll, but would graduate from college. So, while it is clear that support is essential to a student’s ability to be self-determined, it is also essential that students have access to the resources they need to make a college education possible.

### Summary of Conclusions

Through an exploration of the factors that contributed to the 17 students' decision to pursue a college education, it is apparent that the fulfillment of the students' three innate psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness helped them to maintain the natural human inclination to be self-determined. The high level of self-determination that the students displayed enabled their success by driving them to desire stellar academic performance and to secure the resources necessary to achieve their goals. While the students were active agents of their own success, it was clear that they did not go the journey alone. All were influenced by important people along the way who provided them with the support and resources they needed to accomplish their goals.

The role of the family was critical in providing foundational support. Despite what much of the research says about first-generation students not having parental support, it is clear that this support was central to setting the college aspirations ball into motion. By providing love, support, and high expectations, and by encouraging independence and upward social mobility, the students were armed with the tools necessary to desire a college education.

The participants were agents of their own success. Because of the foundational support that they received, they had the disposition—or the mindset—necessary to aspire toward a college education. Once this disposition was set into place, complete with a strong sense of competence, autonomy and relatedness, the participants had the volition to act upon their aspirations. They engaged in strategies such as selecting the high school that would best prepare them for college, taking the initiative to research college and financial aid information, and developing relationships with people who would help them

succeed. These actions were played out in a variety of ways, including the spiritual assurance that God had provided them with the skills and tools necessary to accomplish their goals, the desire to avoid the financial challenges that their parents struggled to overcome, and the desire to make a difference in the world.

Most students credited their schools, the pre-college programs they participated in, and even local colleges and universities with providing them with the information they needed to pursue a college education. Nicole, Shawna, and Elena all chose to directly contact the universities they wished to attend for information. It was clear that the high schools (and in some cases, the middle schools) contributed greatly to providing critical information and support. The students who could not attend college-focused schools were fortunate to have parents who strongly supported them; and similarly, the students who did not have strongly supportive parents were fortunate to attend college-preparatory schools. For Cherise, who had neither the support of her family nor the school she attended, Upward Bound became her safety net. Cherise's story is a prime example of how a pre-college program can provide for students what they may not receive from home or at school. These programs can serve as a buffer to these deficiencies when the school or family does not provide moral support or college information. This demonstrates the important role that schools and other institutions can play in providing the foundational support that all students need in order to be academically successful.

Because the participants in the study were self-determined, they believed that anything was possible. They fully believed in themselves, but also drew upon the support of others to ensure that they had what they needed to succeed. Thus, for these students,

having a sense of competence, autonomy and relatedness were important prerequisites to their success.

### Toward a College Predisposition Model

In the spirit of increasing college aspirations in students through solutions grounded in research that explores what works for students (as opposed to following a deficit framework), a College Predisposition Model is proposed. This model suggests that when an individual is exposed to certain environments and elements of support, they develop an inclination to desire and pursue a college education. Essentially, the model identifies the three primary entities that contribute to a first-generation students' successful college enrollment. These entities are: family, which provides foundational support; the individual, who possesses the personal volition to act upon their aspirations; and institutions, which are the bearers of the information and preparation students need to gain college acceptance.

The first entity involves the critical role the family plays in providing foundational support. By providing love, validating strengths, encouraging upward social mobility, racially socializing, and maintaining high academic expectations, families make it possible for children to develop a strong sense of competence, autonomy and relatedness. As the findings of the current study suggest, nurturing the psychological needs that cultivate self-determination are a precursor to desiring a college education. This foundational support of the family is crucial, as it influences the self-determined disposition in students needed to achieve academic success. It should be noted that students who do not receive this foundational support from home can still develop a self-



determined disposition if they receive this validation and support from other significant adults.

The second entity of the College Predisposition Model involves the students themselves. Complete with a strong sense of competence, autonomy and relatedness, the students are have a self-determined disposition, are driven to be academically successful and have the ability to overcome challenges along the way. This disposition includes the following characteristics: having high expectations, having the ability to resist stereotype threat, not being easily discouraged, not being influenced by negative cultural norms, having a sense of spiritual assurance, being driven to pave the way for others, desiring social mobility, having a sense of responsibility, and having a preference for self-reliance. As self-determined beings, they are equipped with the volition to employ strategies that will help them achieve their goals. Volition makes the difference between the student who simply aspires to go to college and the student who actually makes it to college. Aspirations can exist without self-determination, but volition cannot.

The third entity of the model involves institutions. The institutional role includes K-12 schools, pre-college programs and colleges and universities. These institutions are important for two reasons: they are the keepers of the information needed to successfully qualify for and apply to colleges and universities; and they are the safety net for the encouragement and support that all students need, but do not always receive from home. Secondary schools have the greatest opportunity of the three institutions to provide this information and support because they are the buildings of which the students spend most of their childhood. This is accomplished by maintaining caring and supportive staff,

implementing self-determination based learning, providing college information, offering competitive courses, and engaging in effective outreach to parents.

Pre-college programs and institutions of higher education are also instrumental in providing support and information to students who aspire to attend college. The institutions can serve as alternative safety nets to any lack of support or incomplete information students receive from their schools. Colleges and universities are in a position to provide the best information possible about the admissions process and help students prepare for their transition into the college setting through specialized admissions programs and services, effective outreach to parents, offering high school summer course offerings, and connecting potential first-generation high school students to first-generation college students. Additionally, by having an understanding of the strengths and assets that students bring with them to college, these institutions can develop initiative to increase college persistence in first-generation students by helping this population use their abilities to succeed in college. Additionally, pre-college programs are in a position to support students by maintaining caring and supportive staff, developing self-determination based programming, providing college information, offering individualized services, engaging in critical outreach efforts with parents, and providing racial socialization education.

These roles—that of the family, the individual, and the institution—are all integral to a first-generation student’s decision and ability to pursue a college education. Collectively, they have the potential to provide the moral support, resources and opportunities necessary to make a college education possible. The role of the self-determined student is central to achieving college enrollment, however, this role is highly

dependent upon the foundational support of the family and the support and resources that institutions can provide. However, taking into account the existing research on first-generation students that reveals low levels of parental support and attendance at underperforming high schools, there is sufficient evidence that many students do not receive same the level of support and resources as did the students in the current study. Thus, the institutional tier of the model is designed to serve as a safety net for those students whose innate psychological needs are not met at home. If schools, pre-college programs and institutions of higher education were structured in the manner presented, these students in particular would benefit significantly from the support, encouragement and resources that they would receive. With these three entities working together, it is possible to dramatically increase the likelihood that a first-generation student will make it to college.

#### College Predisposition Model

The following College Predisposition Model is proposed to demonstrate the important role of the family, the individual, and institutions to the first-generation students' desire and ability to go to college. This model reflects the roles that the three entities play to make the transition to college possible.

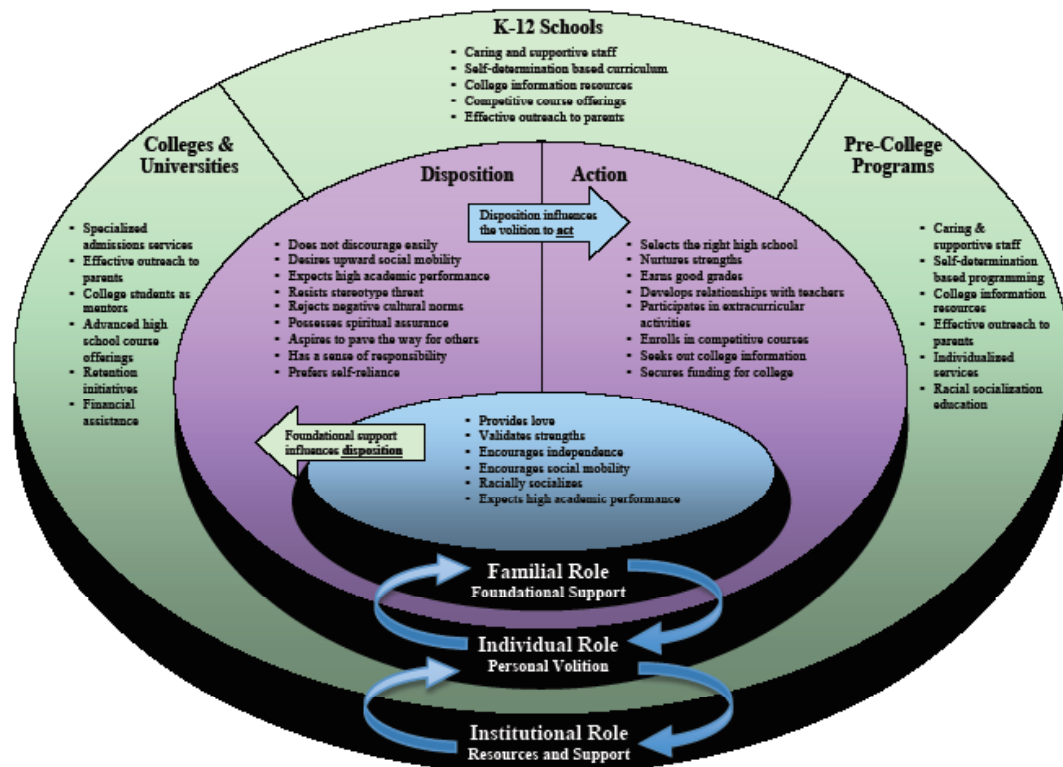


Figure 6. *College Predisposition Model.*

### Summary

By engaging in one-on-one interviews with 17 first-generation African American and Mexican American college students, this study sought to uncover the factors that may have contributed to the participants' desire and ability to attend college. The researcher designed a three tier framework to guide this study based upon research on self-determination, high achieving college students, and challenges faced by first-generation students. It was evident that most of the students received parental support and were actively engaged in their educational pursuits. Despite the research that points to a lack of parental support and susceptibility to common challenges of first-generation students, the participants in the current study were well supported and had the volition to move through common challenges. Additionally, institutions played a critical role in providing the students with the information needed to qualify for and apply to college.

### Implications for Practice

This study offers implications that can help K-12 schools, pre-college programs, institutions of higher education, and family assist first-generation students in the pursuit of a college education. The goal is to help K-12 schools transform into college going environments to, encourage pre-college programs to evaluate their programs and services to ensure that they continue to meet the needs of first-generation students, and to inform families of the important role that their support plays in the formation of their children's future aspirations.

#### *Implications for Secondary Schools*

It is essential that secondary school districts, particularly those with low graduation rates, take measures to transform into college-going environments for the benefit of the students they serve. This change should take place at all levels, including elementary, middle school and high school, to ensure that the students have the foundational support needed to develop college aspirations at an early age. The reader is asked to recall that the current study demonstrated the important role that schools play in providing foundational support for students when that support not available at home. Thus, it is essential that schools integrate components of Self-Determination Theory to ensure that students have the strong sense of competence, autonomy and relatedness that will enable them to become academically successful.

It can be argued that this responsibility should not be placed up on school administrators and staff or that it is not possible to ensure that all children are loved and supported. This researcher argues the contrary. Our history indicates that schools were once a place where children were treated as members of a family, and teachers were very

strongly connected with parents. As this society has moved more toward a hands-off approach to education, it has begun to abandon its children's needs for love and reassurance within the academic environment. Teachers, guidance counselors, and even family members turn their heads away, even with the knowledge that a large percentage of children in urban schools do not receive the love and physical care they need from home, let alone the three innate psychological needs. It is essential that schools reassume the role of back-up caretaker, especially given the amount of time children spend on school grounds. There are five elements that schools must develop in order to transform into college going environments. These include hiring and maintaining caring and supportive staff, incorporating self-determination based curriculum, providing critical college information, offering competitive courses and engaging in effective outreach efforts to parents.

College-going environments are safe schools where students can feel free (or autonomous enough) to dream big without the fear of being told that their dreams are unrealistic, and where teachers believe in students' abilities to succeed. These environments integrate college expectations and college life into the curriculum so that they become the school's cultural norms. The first and most important quality of a school with a college-going environment is a caring and supportive group of teachers and staff members who have the shared vision of helping students realize their dreams. It was clear that the relationships participants of this study developed with teachers from elementary school through high school were critical for developing a sense of competence through emotional support and the encouragement to pursue their dreams. These connections

were often more powerful than the effect of participating in college preparation workshops.

Teachers who are caring and supportive are particularly beneficial to students of color because they are less likely to impose stereotypes upon their students. Teachers have a great opportunity to create “stereotype-free” environments by making it clear to their students that they do not support the stereotype (Wout et al., 2009). This can be taken even further if teachers are intentional about making affirming statements about their students (and to their students) that directly oppose negative the stereotypes that bring their intelligence into question. According to Seibt and Förster’s (2004) regulatory focus theory, when students are threatened with negative stereotypes, they become consumed with proving that these assumptions are not true, and when faced with positive perceptions of themselves, they become more focused on promoting that perspective. Thus, this theory supports findings of the current study that indicate that students are most motivated to do well when teachers not only expect them to do well, but when they also verbalize their belief in the students’ ability to do well.

An environment of caring and supportive teachers inherently creates a culture of validation. This is an especially important aspect of a college going environment because without validation, it is unlikely that students will feel competent enough to aspire to a college education. As Rendón (1994) acknowledged, all students are not fortunate enough to receive validation from home. Thus, it is essential that secondary schools develop validating strategies as a safety net for those students who may not receive it otherwise. Just as students who experience neither in- or out-of-class validation will likely leave college (Rendón, the same fate can be assumed for children and youth who

are not validated in their strengths and abilities—they sit in high risk of dropping out of school.

Such changes in teacher and staff disposition towards students cannot be fully effective unless the school undergoes a cultural change where caring for and supportive their students is expected as the norm. This type of behavior can be developed through training and staffing practices that reflect the importance of hiring people who also value a caring and supportive culture; and this can be reinforced with incentives, raises and bonuses, just as executives in the corporate world are commended when they do extraordinary work. When teachers and counselors are recognized for their efforts, a loud and clear message is sent that indicates what the school as a whole values.

The second element is to incorporate self-determination instruction into the school's curriculum. Several strides are being made by educators across the country who understand the importance of teaching students motivation. A growing number of schools across the country are implementing self-determination instruction as a strategy for motivating their students. The goal of self-determination instruction is to help students accept personal responsibility and to develop strategies that help them identify and meet their own needs (American Psychological Association, 2004). Self-determination instruction aims to address students' needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness through programs such as "Steps to Self-Determination" (Hoffman & Field, 1995) and "The Self-Directed Individualized Education Plan" (Martin, Marshall, Maxson & Jerman, 1998), which help student become more involved with their own educational planning. In addition to these programs, Field and Hoffman (1994) developed a model designed to help educators incorporate self-determination strategies into their curriculums. The model



incorporates instruction that aims to increase the following: self-awareness; improves decision-making, goal-setting and goal-attainment skills; enhances communication and relationship skills; and develops the ability to celebrate success and learn from reflecting on experiences that lead to increased student self-determination (Field & Hoffman). The American Psychological Association strongly supports self-determination instruction and described its benefits to students in this way:

Self-determination instructional programs help students learn how to participate more actively in educational decision-making by helping them become familiar with the educational planning process, assisting them to identify information they would like to share at educational planning meetings, and supporting students to develop skills to effectively communicate their needs and wants . . . Providing contextual supports and opportunities for students, such as coaching for problem-solving and offering opportunities for choice, are also critical elements that lead to meeting needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness and thus, increasing student self-determination. (p. 3)

Students can clearly benefit from these efforts, especially if they are implemented for children during their early educational years. A curriculum that incorporates a motivational focus can be especially beneficial for students who are brought up in unsupportive households because it provides them with the tools they need to secure the human and informational resources needed to accomplish their goals.

Providing important college information is the third element to creating a college-going environment. One clear indicator of the participants' success was their decision to attend a school that focused on preparing its students for college. This immediately

eliminated many of the barriers related to acquiring college information and taking the steps necessary to apply for college. High schools can be most effective in providing all students with information about college by beginning to disseminate the information in the ninth grade, rather than the common approach of setting up meetings with students during the senior year. This information can be incremental and can provide students with a year-by-year progressive to-do list to be sure that they are on track. Schools should also give students the opportunity to explore fields of study, features of different colleges and universities, and careers of interest. While as much one on one contact as possible would be ideal, this information can certainly be disseminated within the context of a class, through special workshops and on printed material.

Schools that seek to prepare their students to be academically competitive enough for college can do so by implementing the fourth element, which is offering a diverse menu of competitive courses. This, of course, includes standard honors and advanced prep courses, but also extends into courses that allow students to fully explore their interests and talents. Such options may include courses in the social sciences such as psychology and sociology, courses in the arts such as African dance and culinary arts, or courses in the medical sciences such as intro to nursing or nutritional science. Not only do such offerings support autonomy, by allowing students to further explore their individuality, but it also gives students a competitive edge over other college applicants.

The final element to creating a college-going environment is engaging in effective outreach efforts to parents. Parents should always be included in the college preparation process when possible, and schools would benefit from exploring different ways in which the parents of first-generation students can be engaged. As was the case for most of the

parents in the current study, it is likely that they will not have the time to be as actively engaged in the process as they would like to be. It is, however, important that schools reach out to parents to keep them informed about where their child is in the process and offer suggestions about how they may assist. Creative approaches are key because the needs, concerns and availability of parents vary greatly. For example, some parents who may not be able to make an evening workshop may welcome a home visit by a teacher on a Saturday afternoon. Parents who are primarily concerned about paying for college may not be interested in hearing about majors and extracurricular activities until their financial concerns are addressed; and parents who do not speak English would not benefit from receiving college information in the mail that is not printed in their primary language. It is important that schools assess the needs of the students and their families so that they can creatively determine how to reach the parents, who can serve as critical partners in ensuring that their children are able to pursue their college aspirations.

#### *Implications for Pre-College Programs*

Although only three participants in the current study utilized a pre-college program to help prepare for college, it was clear that this program was the safety net that at least one of the students needed when she was unable to find support through her family or at school. For many students like Cherise, a local pre-college program may be the only form of support that they have in their lives, which truly underscores the importance of these programs. Pre-college programs have the potential to provide students with the encouragement they need to pursue their dreams, the information they need to devise a plan of action, and the support they need to access resources. In order to accomplish this, pre-college programs are encouraged to adopt five elements into practice

that can serve to address the first-generation students' needs. This includes caring and supportive staff, self-determination based programming, critical college information, individualized services, racial socialization education, and effective outreach efforts to parents. If these elements sound strangely similar to those recommended for K-12 schools, this is because unfortunately, many schools do not contain the elements suggested earlier. Pre-college programs are essentially a safety net to provide services to students that they would not otherwise receive at home or at school, thus it is essential that pre-college programs contain the aforementioned elements to ensure that students' needs are truly being met. Ideally, all schools would provide students with the tools they need to pursue a college education, and should this day arrive, it would then be necessary to revisit the purpose of pre-college programs. However, in the interest of addressing this society's current situation, pre-college programs must continue to function as a safety net entity.

There were two elements mentioned that differed from the implications outlined for K-12 schools—individualized services and racial socialization education. Many college prospects who come from upper- to upper-middle class families enjoy the benefit of hiring educational consultants to assist them through the entire college preparation and application process. These individualized services may include assistance with writing the personal statement, extensive career and major exploration, the drafting of a plan for extracurricular activities that can enhance the college application, and interview coaching. These are services that many pre-college programs are not designed to offer, simply based on the one-to-one attention that they require. Such an initiative would take much creativity to implement, but is a worthwhile strategy that could give first-

generation students a true competitive edge over their peers. Indeed, it is this population of students that could benefit most from such preparation, as they are often not surrounded by others who have attended college and who can give them true insight on what is expected of them through the college application process.

The recommendation to implement racial socialization education primarily applies to programs that serve racial groups that are typically underrepresented within institutions of higher education. Racial socialization is typically a strategy utilized by parents to prepare their children for the challenges that they may face as the member of a marginalized racial group in this society. An African American parent, for example, might teach his son about the protocol to follow for survival if pulled over by police officers, particularly if in a part of town that does not have a large population of African Americans. Nicole discussed how her mother taught her that as an African American and as a woman, she would have to work twice as hard to gain the recognition that many of her peers may receive. This is a form of racial socialization.

Pre-college programs that serve students from populations underrepresented on college campuses can assist in racially socializing the students they serve by connecting them with people of similar backgrounds who can share their personal experiences and the strategies they employed to navigate through the challenges. This would be particularly effective if college students connected with high school students to provide advice and shape expectations. Racially socializing students also includes educating them about the history of their culture and instilling a sense of pride in who they are. This type of preparation may ease the transition from high school to college, particularly for those students who will be attending school in a predominantly Caucasian environment for the

first time. It was clear that the participants in the current study faced varying levels of stereotype threat and discrimination. Fortunately for these students, their grades and academic morale were not adversely affected. This likely would not be the case for all first-generation students.

Included in the benefits of socializing students is the immunizing effect that such education can have over stereotype threat. In a study of stereotype threat experienced by women taking a math class, Johns, Schmader, and Martens (2005) found that the women demonstrated better performance when they were taught about stereotype threat. Thus, racial socialization efforts should include a stereotype threat component that helps students become aware of its presence, as well as find effective ways to respond to the threat. Armed with the knowledge to recognize the threat and the skills to respond effectively, students may benefit by having fewer barriers to their academic success in the classroom.

#### *Implications for Colleges and Universities*

Colleges and universities can implement strategies that benefit first-generation students from an admissions standpoint—while they are at the college preparation stage—and a student affairs standpoint—after they are enrolled as students. These strategies include specialized admissions services tailored to specifically meet the needs of first-generation students before and after they are admitted into the university, effective outreach for parents, providing mentorship through college students, offering advanced high school courses, offering financial assistance, and developing retention initiatives based upon an understanding of the students' strengths.

The first strategy of developing specialized admissions services and can best be accomplished by having an admissions counselor designated to work solely with the first-generation population. This individual should possess a strong understanding of the challenges first-generation students face and should be well-connected to the local community. First-generation students like Shawna, who did not have anyone in her high school to turn to for college information, would benefit from having a person to connect with who is housed at the university she desires to attend. This counselor should also be bilingual to make it possible to communicate with parents who may not speak English. It is important to remember that institutions of higher education are a part of a local community and should take a responsible role as a contributor to the well-being of the members of that community.

Engaging in effective outreach efforts to parents reinforces the importance of each institutional entity keeping parents in the loop with the understanding that their work schedules or limited college knowledge make it difficult to assist their children as much as they may desire to. Thus, it is important that outreach to parents is accommodating and is based upon a general understanding of the needs. One creative strategy employed by several universities is a matriculation ceremony that involves the entire family after the student is admitted into the university. Similar to a rites of passage tradition, the ceremony has the feel of a graduation, but has the purpose of welcoming its new freshman class and their families to the university. Each student is called to the stage individually and is personally welcomed by the university president and faculty members, and family members are recognized as supporters. Employing a variety of creative

strategies designed to keep parents informed and involved help to solidify the support the students receive as they prepare for college.

Colleges and universities have a great opportunity to facilitate relationships between their students and students who seek admission into their campuses. This is the third strategy. Connecting prospective first-generation students with currently enrolled first-generation college students is a powerful way to provide the younger generation with support, resources and success strategies that will aid them in their educational journeys. Such programs can serve as a buffer for any lack of support or resources students receive from home and their schools in the same way that pre-college programs address these discrepancies.

The fourth strategy is to offer advanced high school courses during the summer months. College aspiring students consistently seek out ways to enhance their high school transcripts. For students who attend high schools that have limited resources and average level classes (a frustrating reality for Shawna), having the opportunity to take extra courses through the local college or university—at no cost—would aid first-generation students in their desire to take upper-level courses. By attracting these students to campus during the summer term, opportunities abound for outreach and recruiting initiatives.

When choosing a college, an important determining factor for first-generation students is whether or not funding is available to help with tuition. This leads to the fifth strategy that colleges and universities can employ to help this population make it to college. The vast majority of the students in the current study settled on Private University because of the funding the school provided through its EOP program and other scholarship initiatives. Institutions of higher education can significantly increase



access to underprivileged students by relieving the financial burden that often makes the difference between whether or not a student chooses to pursue a college education.

The sixth strategy places emphasis on helping first-generation students persist through college after enrollment. One approach is to capitalize on the very students' strengths that enabled them to make it to college in an effort that can increase the retention rates of this population. The 17 participants in this study utilized their strengths to fulfill their college aspirations. Student affairs administrators—who are highly focused on student success—can focus in on students' individual strengths and help them use those strengths to succeed in college. Several universities have employed Clifton and Anderson's (2002) educational strengths counseling techniques for entire freshman classes to help students begin the college experience with an understanding of what they do well. Even if the process is not as comprehensive and formal as implementing a strengths counseling program for all college freshman, administrators may find great value in helping students hone in on their strengths to encourage persistence. Even a general understanding of strengths, such as knowing that first-generation students tend to be highly resourceful or that they enter college with a strong sense of competence can be beneficial to programming efforts this population.

#### *Implications for Families*

The role the families play in their children's lives is central to shaping future aspirations, as they are often the primary source of having the three innate psychological needs fulfilled. If these needs are not fulfilled, the natural inclination to be self-determined is hindered and it is unlikely that the child will develop the aspirations or the volition to pursue a college education until those needs are fulfilled. Families can

implement six strategies to ensure that their children develop into self-determined individuals. These strategies include providing love, validating strengths, encouraging independence, encouraging upward social mobility, racially socializing, and having high academic expectations for their children.

Parent can validate their children's strengths by paying attention to what they do well and encouraging them in those areas. This can be as simple as acknowledging the strength verbally or finding ways to get the child involved with that strength on a regular basis. For example, if the child shows a real interest and raw talent for piano, the parent may encourage the child to take piano lessons. When students' strengths are validated, especially by their parents, they are able to develop a strong sense of competence, which gives them the confidence to test out other talents and interests they may have.

Encouraging independence does not imply allowing children to do as they please. It means teaching the child how to take care of certain responsibilities without the assistance of others. Encouraging independence includes allowing the child to envision his own future and take guided steps toward realizing that vision.

Many of the students in the current study were driven by the idea that if they pursued a college education, they would not have to struggle in the same way that their parents did. Their parents often told them about the value of an education and encouraged their children to exceed their own financial status. Encouraging upward social mobility includes encouraging children to go to college and take their plans for the future seriously. This encouragement from their parents and the desire to advance themselves in society was a strong driving force in the participants' pursuit of a college education. As

was described for pre-college programs, parents can play an important role in racially socializing their children to prepare them for life outside of the comforts of home.

Finally, parents must maintain high academic expectations for their children and find ways to get them help where needed. Many of the students in the current study were determined to do well because they did not want to let their parents down. Their parents' high expectations reflected the expectations that they held for themselves.

#### Implications for Research

This study was designed to identify the factors that contributed to the students' decision to attend college. Given the differences that existed within the group based upon racial background, immigration status, and pre-college academic experiences, there are a number of areas that should be explored for future research.

#### *Methodological Implications*

This qualitative study enabled the researcher to explore the question of how first-generation students made it to college. As a result, we learned about the factors these students attributed to their success. This research invites quantitative inquiry into a larger sample of first-generation students to determine whether or not these factors are also salient to other students. A survey, for example, can determine the level of significance these factors have for other first-generation students and whether or not there are differences for various populations. A qualitative study would be an important follow-up to the current study because such a methodology can test the results found in the current study against a larger population.

*Replication of the Current Study with Different Populations of First-Generation Students*

Because this study primarily focused on the experiences of African American and Mexican American students, it would be beneficial to extend this study to other populations to determine experiential differences and similarities. As researchers and educators continue learn more about the diversity that exists within the first-generation student population, they will be equipped to serve students with a greater understanding of their strengths and challenges. Subpopulations of first-generation students may include: students who chose to attend community colleges or public institutions; students whose parents have had some college experience, but did not finish; students whose siblings attended college; students of other racial/cultural backgrounds; potential first-generation students who did not go to college; and adult reentry students over the age of 25.

*Family Dynamics and Parental Support for College Aspirations*

There were clear differences in the experiences between the African American and Mexican American participants, particularly with regards to family structure. Each of the Mexican American students were raised in two-parent households, and only three of eight African Americans were raised by both parents. While not the case for all African Americans in this sample, the students from single parent homes were more likely than the Mexican American and other African American students who were raised in two-parent homes to experience a lack of support from family. Future research efforts should explore this phenomenon more deeply to understand how different family dynamics affect college aspirations and support within these two cultural groups.

*First-Generation College Student and First-Generation American*

All of the Mexican American students in the sample were not only the first in the family to go to college, but they were also the first generation in their family to be American born and raised. Future studies should explore differences between the experiences of Mexican American students who are first-generation Americans and those whose families have resided in the United States over two or more generations. Additionally, future studies should include students of other nationalities such as Puerto Rican, Colombian, or Cuban.

*Comparative Study on First-Generation College Students and their Siblings  
who did not go to College*

The fact that many of the participants in the current study had siblings that did not choose to go to college begs the question of why these individuals ended up going in two very different directions in life. Having grown up in the same household, it would be valuable to compare each of their experiences to see whether or not any dominant factors point to an explanation of this phenomenon. This contrast may help to explain personality differences, varying parent-child relationships and academic experiences that may inspire one child to pursue a college education and cause the other to show little interest in such academic pursuits.

Conclusion

The first-generation students represented in this study were resilient, focused and ingenious in their approaches to accomplish their educational goals. Their self-determined nature, made possible by the foundational support they received, was the greatest indicator of the students' success. They understood that they had to take

responsibility for their own destiny and did so with great persistence. The self-determination and resilience of these students can best be characterized by the following poem, entitled *Invictus*, written by William Ernest Henley:

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the pit from pole to pole  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the horror of the shade  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

It matters not how straight the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate;  
I am the captain of my soul.

This study demonstrated the multidimensional nature of first-generation students and the many pieces to the college enrollment puzzle. Understanding the complex nature of first-generation students and the entities that work together to aid in their success is an important first step toward increasing college enrollment rates for this student population. As Griffin (2005) put it, “A multidimensional framework best explains these students’ motivation patterns” (p. 391).

The multidimensionality of the students’ experiences also underscores the importance of employing a success model to better understand what self-determined students actually do to make a college education possible for themselves. While a deficit model would indeed tell us what they do not receive and what they do not do, understanding what *has* worked for first-generation students places researchers and educators in a much better position to develop solutions to the college access problem. The proposed model is a starting point. It is the researcher’s desire that others will build upon this research to further understand what works for students and how educators can use this knowledge to develop programs that will effectively serve their students. It is important to reemphasize that this study does not attempt to frame the experiences and characteristics of every first-generation student of color, but serves as a foundation from which we can build a greater understanding of the strategies used and strengths possessed by first-generation students who go on to college.

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## Appendix A

## Invitation Letter

September 9, 2008

Dear Student:

As the first person in my family to go to college, I know that many people whose parents did not make it to college never make it there themselves. However, much can be learned about the strategies used and the supportive networks that existed to make a college education possible from those students who made it to college, even though their parents did not. Have you ever thought about the events in your life that led to your pursuit of a college degree?

If you are the first in your family to go to college, you are being invited to participate in a study that will explore the aspects of a person's life that may have contributed to the decision to pursue a college degree. While an overwhelming majority of the literature about students who have the potential to be the first in the family to attend college portrays that they all have the same challenges and experiences, few have explored the perseverance and strengths that exist within students from this population. Additionally, this study explores the possibility that a person's cultural background does not necessarily interpret individual interests, experiences, backgrounds, and challenges.

Your participation in this study will help student affairs practitioners understand the assets that first-generation students bring with them to college. It is our hope that the insight you provide will lead to new ways of understanding and working with students before and after they arrive to college, as well as cause a shift from conventional and stereotypical ways of thinking, particularly in regard to the abilities of underrepresented student populations.

Upon accepting this invitation, you will be asked to fill out a five-minute survey. If accepted as a study participant, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview. If you are selected and complete the study, you will be compensated \$25 for your participation. To accept this invitation, please send me an email or simply visit my Facebook page and send me a message.

Thank you for your time!

Pamela Peters  
Doctoral Candidate  
Cardinal Stritch University

## Appendix B

## Preliminary Questionnaire

1. Class (circle one) Freshman    Sophomore    Junior    Senior
2. Hometown \_\_\_\_\_
3. Gender \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is the highest level of education your mother has completed?  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. What is the highest level of education your father has completed?  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. In what country was your mother born?  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. In what country was your father born?  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. In what country were you born? \_\_\_\_\_
9. Number of members in your household growing up \_\_\_\_\_
10. Number of siblings who attended college before you? \_\_\_\_ After you? \_\_\_\_
11. Family income (of the household you grew up in)
  - a. Less than 20,000
  - b. 20,000 – 34,999
  - c. 35,000 – 49,999
  - d. 50,000 – 74,999
  - e. 75,000 – 99,999
  - f. 100,000 – 149,999
  - g. 150,000 – 199,999
  - h. More than 200,000
12. What is your racial background?

## Appendix C

### Interview Questions

#### **Family Background**

1. *Family Background:* Tell me about your family structure.
  - a. *Possible Probe:* What were your parents' jobs/careers? What were some of the important values your family held?
2. *Parental Education:* How important was education to your parents? Why didn't they go to college?
3. *Family Role:* What was/is your role in this family? What do you think their perception is of you?

#### **Self-Determination**

1. *Competence:* How do you see yourself as a learner? How did others see you as a learner before college?
2. *Autonomy:* To what do you attribute your successes?
3. *Relatedness:* Where do you turn for support? How important are these connections to you?

#### **Academic Success/Qualifying for College**

1. *Classroom Performance:* What was your high school GPA? How did you score on tests? To what do you attribute your success or lack of success to?



2. *Sense of Responsibility*: Would others call you responsible? Why or why not? Would you agree? What responsibilities did you take on before college? What responsibilities were placed upon you?

3. *Stereotype Resistance*: Did you ever experience racism or feel like you were being stereotyped in high school? How did you handle that? Did it impact your academics? If so, how?

4. *Social and Academic Integration*: Tell me about your extracurricular activities in high school. Did you establish any relationships with teachers outside of class?

### **Overcoming Barriers/Resourcefulness**

1. *Getting Academically Prepared*: Did you feel like you were academically ready for college by your senior year in high school? What intentional things did you do to make sure you would be accepted into a college?

2. *Securing Financial Resources*: How did you go about paying for college? Talk about the process you went through to secure funding.

3. *Learning the Admissions Process*: How did you know which steps to take in order to apply and enroll into college?

4. *Shutting out Debilitating Cultural Norms*: How did extended family, neighbors and friends respond to your desire to go to college? Was everyone supportive? Was anyone unsupportive?

5. *Building a Network of Human Support*: Who did you turn to for support throughout your years growing up and during the time you were preparing for college? Did you seek anyone out intentionally for support? If so, who, how and why?

