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Perceptions of First-Generation College Students of Color: The Road Less Traveled

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Perceptions of First-Generation College Students of Color: The Road Less Traveled

Jennifer L. Jackson
University of North Florida

A Dissertation submitted to the
Department of Leadership, School Counseling & Sport Management
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Educational Leadership

November, 2017

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DEDICATION

This scholarly work is dedicated to my mother, Janet Marie Hankins, my father, Arthur Doster, and to first-generation students of color who feel they do not have a voice, yet they continue to strive for excellence in every endeavor.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For I know the plans I have for you, “declares the LORD,” plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Jeremiah 29:11 New International Version (NIV)

I started this journey in 2005 with a plan to complete my degree in 5yrs. However, God had other plans. I often reminded myself that I am exactly where I am supposed to be, and not allow my perception of my “failed” plan to change the course of my life. During this program, I truly learned that this process was indeed a journey, a journey that taught me to embrace challenges and welcome new approaches.

The expression of sincere gratitude is not enough when thanking Dr. Judith Irving. Dr. Irving was not only my graduate professor at Florida State University, she was my champion. I owe my graduate education to Dr. Irving and I am truly thankful for her act of kindness. Thank you to my fur-baby Lacey, who often kept me company and greeted me with excitement during some of the most difficult times on this journey. Thank you to my dear friend, Dr. Tony Johnson. Dr. Johnson’s balance of challenge and support pushed me beyond my comfort zone. His love and words of encouragement were beyond valuable and I am forever grateful.

A heartfelt thank you to my cousin Lakeita Doster and my childhood friend, Kyra Campbell, for believing in me and for holding me accountable. Thank you to my aunts, uncles and other family members who often prayed for me and kept me encouraged. Thank you to my Florida State College at Jacksonville family: Karen Howard, Pamela Walker, Jonita Watson, Vanessa Reid Williams, Terence Wright, Lauren Zanders, and others who cheered me on and kept me honest. I would also like to thank my GFII family. I appreciate each of you for your unique perspectives on the world, the laughter we shared, and your genuine support.
I am so very grateful to Maura Wilson who gave me an opportunity to fall in love with higher education, which shaped the trajectory of my professional life. I owe my many years as professional in high education, in part, to Maura’s willingness to see beyond my limited experience. I would also like to thanks Dr. Bill Davis for giving me the opportunity to extend my professional experience. As a young professional with great responsibilities, I was often challenged, but Dr. Davis supported me and was committed to my professional success.

To the 12 participants who volunteered their time to make this study possible, remember that your voices matter. Thank you for understanding the purpose of this study and for contributing to the field of education. I am beyond thankful to Dr. Elinor Scheirer, my dissertation chair, for her unwavering commitment and support during my educational journey. Dr. Scheirer helped me become a better scholar, she shared my passion for first-generation college students of color, but most of all, she believed in my ability to persist and finish this journey. Dr. Scheirer was more than my dissertation chair, she was family. Thank you to my dissertation committee: Dr. Edgar Newton Jackson, Dr. Jenny Stuber, and Dr. Anne Swanson. I am very appreciative of their support and feedback.

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Last, I would like to thank my beloved grandmother, Rosetta Hankins. I owe everything I am to my grandmother. My grandmother took me into her home and raised me as one of her own. Although she struggled to support a family of four, she took pride in making sure we were
safe and had the necessary resources to survive. I remember at an early age my grandmother reinforcing what I learned in elementary school by helping me with homework and teaching me to spell the word three, a word that for some reason was difficult for me to spell. Thank you, granny, for teaching me life lessons, for teaching me how to be a young lady, for teaching me how to provide for myself, for helping me to understand the value of education, for encouraging me to go to college, for my first Bible, for loving me, and most of all, for the sacrifices you made (known and unknown) to ensure that I had an opportunity to dream big and accomplish my goals.

The completion of my dissertation represents my passion for first-generation college students of color. This body of work will now allow me to develop other areas of my profession and to continue being a champion for first-generation students of color in a larger context. Thank you, Jesus for this moment in time. Thank you for the life that I have, a life that has allowed me to give to others a portion of what has been given to me over the years. I have always prayed that I would be in a position to help others and to make my grandmother proud. As a young Black child raised in the inner city with limited resources, I never imagined that I would be a young successful professional with a terminal degree. But God!
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of first-generation college students of color in a predominantly White institution (PWI) who successfully completed the first two years of college. This qualitative research utilized semi-structured interviews to understand the perceptions of first-generation college students of color and how they viewed their secondary and post-secondary experiences. The conceptual framework was supported through the literature by analyzing the intersectionality of historical factors, socioeconomic status, critical race theory, and educational programs. Although these students of color faced the anxieties, confusion, and difficulties that all college students encounter when they transition to college, their challenges are heightened when coupled with other factors such as lower levels of college readiness, living in high crime communities, a lack of financial resources, a lack of family support, and limited knowledge pertaining to postsecondary education (Brown, 2008; Pascarella, et al. 2003; Strayhorn, 2006). Such factors create unique challenges for first-generation students of color, resulting in disparate academic achievement (Strayhorn).

Participants in this study were selected using a criterion-based selection process. This study aimed to give voice to 12 students who self-identified as first-generation students of color, were classified as juniors attending the University of North Florida, and who were a part of the Jacksonville Commitment program. The Jacksonville Commitment program was selected for further study because the program provided students with wrap-around services that supported first-generation students’ persistence and social and academic development.

Eisner’s (1998) educational criticism was the primary data analysis approach used in this study, supported by Hatch’s (2002) typological and interpretive analysis. Typological analysis divided the overall data set into categories or typologies. The four typologies identified in this
study were: family relationships, socioeconomic status, resilience, and college retention and perseverance. Interpretive analysis was used to extrapolate meaning and attach significance to the data. Thematics was used to identify recurring messages within the data (Eisner, 1998; Patton, 2002). Data analysis of the present study led to the development of three themes: (a) Students perceived that they persisted in college as a result of being exposed to a rigorous K-12 curriculum; (b) Students perceived that they persisted in college due to their support network; (c) Previous academic experiences contributed to the development of student self-efficacy.

Students in this study challenged the deficit model which suggests that students without resources will not achieve. Instead, they were more aligned with the asset model that connects student success with the positive attributes that they possessed. The major implication from this study is that first-generation students of color have a greater chance of academic success if provided focused supports and academic preparation in primary and secondary schools to prepare them for the collegiate culture.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The state of education continues to be one of the most widely discussed topics among scholars, politicians, and the general public. The ongoing discourse about how better to educate students demonstrates a societal problem and a societal concern. These public problems and concerns arose in part from the increased media attention regarding the state of education in America and a wave of school reforms designed to improve the academic achievement of all students. Media outlets such as The Washington Post, The New York Times, and National Public Radio have covered stories regarding the widening income gaps between poor and wealthier populations, school achievement gaps between White students and students of color, America’s declining global competitiveness, and the overall challenges that educators and policymakers face with developing a more educated workforce. More specifically, these challenges include how to meet the needs of under-educated minority students, who may later have a significant impact on social institutions such as schools, public welfare programs, and criminal justice and corrections institutions as a result of their lower academic achievement and fewer job prospects.

Within the complex educational environment, the education of students of color has been in a state of crisis since the end of the Civil War when educating students of color became legal (King, 2005, p. 46). Much public attention focuses on the achievement levels of minority students in K-12 schooling. Students of color continue to be disproportionately represented among those entering K-12 lacking the readiness to learn that, in turn, can lead to their lower achievement levels within the K-12 system (Berliner, 2009; Rothstein, 2004).

The federal government established policies aimed at improving the quality of education in the United States. For example, the current education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act
(ESSA), continues the federal government’s efforts to close the achievement gap and improve rigor at the K-12 level. The ESSA includes provisions that will help to ensure success for students and schools. A number of provisions are included in the ESSA, but one notable provision is that “for the first time—that all students in America be taught to high academic standards that will prepare them to succeed in college and careers” (United States Department of Education, 2010). Access to rigorous curricula is central to the academic success of all students, but specifically for first-generation students of color.

Historically, funded government programs such as those that are under the TRIO umbrella have been instrumental in assisting students in their pursuit of higher education and to provide support services that have helped students transition from high school to postsecondary institutions. TRIO programs, coupled with federally administrative commitments to students in high-poverty communities, signified that the success of students of color was indeed important to society and that being educated would influence their life chances. However, in spite of various federal initiatives, many high-school students of color still graduate at a lower rate than their White peers (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ishitani, 2006; Rothstein, 2004). When these students do graduate from high-school, they continue to face academic challenges in pursuing post-secondary education, and they continue to lag behind their White peers in academic achievement and college completion (Berliner, 2009; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Rothstein, 2004).

If first-generation students are the first in their families to attend college, their challenges are both academic and social (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Rothstein, 2004; Shaw, Valadez, & Rhoads, 1999). First-generation college students of color face unique challenges because they come from households whose parents or guardians have not attended college, and, therefore, they cannot capitalize on the college experiences of their parents or guardians. As a result, many
first-generation college students of color may enter college lacking academic, cultural, and social capital (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Rothstein, 2004; Shaw, Valadez, & Rhoads, 1999). That is, first-generation college students of color may be academically challenged, maybe unfamiliar with the college culture, and may lack the social skills needed to network and to make connections that may aid in their college success (Shaw et al., 1999). Yet, these students are expected to be successful despite their unique challenges that may ultimately influence their collegiate experiences and their ability to be successful.

A review of the literature regarding the academic achievement of students of color underscores the intersection of socioeconomic status, poverty, and education and addresses the complexity regarding the widening of the Black-White achievement gap (Berliner, 2009; Briddle, 2001; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Rothstein, 2004). Additionally, the literature describes factors related to persistence and factors that contribute to the college success of students of color (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; McConnell, 2000; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003. Although the literature provides knowledge about factors related to the success of students of color, the perspective of students themselves can contribute to the repository of knowledge. College students of color can provide an insider’s perspective that will allow school leaders an opportunity to develop programs and services to address their unique needs and foster academic success. However, the literature from the student’s or insider’s point of view is less developed than research examining factors that influence persistence and college success or literature that frames students of color from an academic deficit model. Therefore, the present study sought to understand the schooling experiences of first-generation college students of color from their perspective (van Manen, 1990). The following discussion provides an overview of the research.
problem, presents the research question and its significance, provides definitions of key terms related to the present study, and concludes by introducing the organization of the study.

**Overview of the Research Problem**

The increased accessibility of postsecondary education for women and racial and ethnic minorities has changed the demographic profile of students attending college in the 21st century (Strayhorn, 2006; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Many scholars have viewed educational attainment as the great equalizer. That is, if students, independent of race and family income, are afforded access and equal educational opportunities, their chances for academic and economic success increase. However, despite increased accessibility, not all students are equally as likely to succeed at the postsecondary level (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

Success in college is highly dependent on students’ previous achievement in their K-12 schooling. However, students of color in K-12 disproportionately fall behind for different reasons (Berliner, 2006; Rothstein, 2004). Research has consistently revealed that minority students’ educational achievement does not parallel that of White students (Berliner, 2009; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Rothstein, 2004). The stark difference in the performance of students of color and their White peers raises questions regarding the factors that continue to influence the academic performance of minority students at the K-12 level (Berliner, 2009; Rothstein, 2004).

Compounding inequalities in access to key education resources creates what Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) called the opportunity gap. According to Darling-Hammond (2010), “the opportunity gap is the accumulated differences in access to key education resources such as expert teachers, personalized attention, high-quality curriculum opportunities, good educational materials, and plentiful information resources—that support learning at home and at school”
(p. 28). Based on Darling-Hammond’s argument and extrapolating from other works regarding the performance of students of color (Jackson, 2007; Lee, 2004; Rothstein, 2004), the achievement gap is a product of the opportunity gap, which sparked school reform initiatives such as Goals 2000: Educate America Act, No Child Left Behind Act, and Every Student Succeeds Act. The premise supporting these efforts was to raise academic standards and, as a result, student achievement. Although schooling conditions, teacher qualifications, curricula, and instructional resources have certainly influenced the achievement of minority students, an analysis of their environmental contexts suggests that other factors should not be ignored (Berliner, 2006; Rothstein, 2004). For example, the influence of low socioeconomic status resulting from a deeply rooted racial and discriminatory history also contributes an explanation regarding why minority students’ achievement does not mirror the achievement of their White peers (Berliner, 2006; Rothstein, 2004).

Additionally, the effects of growing up in single-parent households, coupled with socioeconomic challenges and life in high crime communities, shape the experiences of students of color (Berliner, 2006; Rothstein, 2004). Collectively, these factors are strong predictors of how well students of color will perform in K-12 schooling (Berliner, 2006; Rothstein, 2004). Further, unlike their White peers, many minority students come to school with lower levels of readiness in the areas of language development, reading skills, and mathematical concepts (Farkas 2003; Rothstein, 2004). Entering school without the expected foundational knowledge in earlier grades has detrimental effects on students later in their schooling experience. For example, statistics indicate that African American 12th graders read and compute mathematical problems at the same levels as White 8th graders (Lleras, 2008; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003).
Consequently, when students of color transition to postsecondary institutions, they are more likely to enter college less academically prepared (Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Miller, 2007; McConnell, 2000; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003). First-generation students of color may embark on their college journey with adverse family conditions, lower levels academic preparedness, and little basic knowledge of postsecondary admission procedures and availability of financial assistance (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; McConnell, 2000; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003). As a result, these students are less likely to have the collegiate experiences that researchers indicate are positively related to persistence, performance, and learning (Terenzini et al., 1996). Yet, first-generation students of color are expected to be successful despite their little family support, poor academic preparation, and feelings of alienation on college campuses (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; McConnell, 2000; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003).

Scholars have consistently argued that academic and social factors play a major role in preparation for and persistence in higher education (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; McConnell, 2000; Pascarella et al., 2003). Academic programs that prepare students for college while in high-school are positively correlated with college enrollment and persistence rates in the first two years of degree or certificate-seeking programs (Karp, Calcagno, Hughes, Jeong, & Bailey, 2007). Federally funded TRIO programs such as Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Student Support Services (SSS) target students as early as middle school to help enhance their academic preparation for college, as well as to help socialize them to the importance of attaining a college degree (Perna & Swail, 2002). The intent of federally funded TRIO programs is to identify and provide services to low-income students, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities.
The goal of Talent Search is to expose students to the idea of college. The Talent Search program identifies and assists individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds who have the potential to succeed in higher education as early as middle school. The program provides academic, career, and financial counseling to its participants and encourages them to graduate from high school and to complete their postsecondary education. The Talent Search program aims to increase the number of youth from disadvantaged backgrounds who complete high school and enroll in and complete their postsecondary education.

Similar to the Talent Search program, Upward Bound targets low-income and first-generation students. However, Upward Bound targets high school students and provides support to students as they prepare for college entrance (Cahalan, Silva, Humphrey, Thomas, & Cunningham, 2004). The goal of Upward Bound is to increase the rate at which participants complete secondary education and enroll in and graduate from institutions of postsecondary education. Upward Bound programs are designed to not only support students as they prepare for college, but also provide support to students while in college. Upward Bound programs are required to provide academic instruction in math, science, English, literature, and foreign languages at the college level. Other support services include tutoring, counseling, mentoring, and cultural enrichment (Myers, Olsen, Seftor, Young, & Tuttle, 2004).

The Student Support Services (SSS) program also targets low-income students, first-generation students, and students with disabilities, but with a slightly different focus (United States Department of Education, 2012). The purposes of the SSS program are to increase college retention and graduation rates of students, increase the number of students who transfer from two-year to four-year institutions, and foster an institutional climate supportive of success for students who participate in the program. Similar to the Upward Bound program, the SSS
program is required to provide tutoring in the academic areas of math, English, and science, in addition to reading and study skills (Chaney, 2010). Unique to this program is the opportunity to assist homeless students, foster-care students, or students transitioning out of foster care who seek temporary housing (Chaney).

The federally funded TRIO programs endeavor to offer students a range of services designed to foster a college-going culture within the secondary school setting, to assist students in their preparation for college entrance and to provide support to students while in college. Although research has found that supporting students in their college pursuits and socializing students early for the purposes of academic and social integration, such experiences may not be sufficient to support students in their transition to college.

College preparatory programs or being exposed to a rigorous high school curriculum also plays a major role in preparation for and persistence in college (Karp, Calcagno, Hughes, Jeong, & Bailey, 2007). College preparatory programs such as the International Baccalaureate program, Advanced International Certificate of Education program, Advanced Placement courses, and the Early College program are typically designed to foster intellectual stimulation and challenge students to think critically and independently (Haxton et al., 2016). Such programs support the future educational ambitions of students from at-risk backgrounds and can play a critical role in addressing their disproportionately low college-going rates (Haxton et al., 2016; Zhang & Smith, 2011). As a result of college preparation programs, students who participated in this study challenged the deficit model of their anticipated academic achievement in college. Although students were academically prepared for college, they shared characteristics of what Anthony Jack (2016) called the “privileged poor” (p. 2).
Exposure to a rigorous curriculum not only prepares first-generation college students of color academically, exposure also gives students a level of cultural capital they may not have otherwise developed. Such cultural capital extends to college campuses, which yields a smoother transition from high school to college. Based on their exposure to rigorous curricula and available resources, these students experience college differently than other first-generation students of color without those experiences (Jack, 2014).

The privileged poor represent a group of academically talented low-income students (Jack, 2016). The privileged poor attended resource-rich high schools where they learned to be independent, where they developed critical thinking skills, and where they learned to be their own advocates. The privileged poor bring to the college environment experience with how to interact with college professionals, how to navigate institutional policies, and how to think independently (Jack, 2016). Data analysis within the present study indicated that the participants demonstrated characteristics of the privileged poor.

**Research Question and Significance**

The scholarly and research literature describes how the characteristics affecting students’ persistence in college intersect. However, understanding students’ perceptions of the complexity of their academic and social interactions as they transition into college is equally important. Further, understanding the perceptions of students who have successfully completed the first two years of college would provide the knowledge they have regarding their persistence despite their backgrounds. As a result, the voices of first-generation college students of color who have persisted to their junior year can provide knowledge regarding how their background characteristics intersect with lived experiences in the collegiate setting.
Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to gain an understanding of how first-generation college students of color perceived their schooling experiences. Specifically, the research question is: How do first-generation college students of color at the junior level, in a predominantly White institution (PWI), perceive their schooling experiences? Because participants were in a unique scholarship program, study participants were comprised of a criterion-based selection (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Criterion-based selection is a typology of sampling that requires the researcher to establish a set of criteria in advance, and then to find only those who meet the criterion developed for a study (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). This study not only presents the stories of student resilience, but it also honors the voices of students who persisted beyond their sophomore year in college. A deep understanding of how these students themselves perceived their experiences and the factors that supported their persistence may then inform efforts to assist students as they begin their college experience and move towards degree completion. Further, as access increases to post-secondary education, more first-generation students of color will transition to college; therefore, it is imperative that college administrators understand the background of Black and Brown students and positioned themselves to meet their needs as they may see them.

The site for data collection for this study was Jacksonville, Florida. Participants for the present study were chosen from the Jacksonville Commitment program because the students were predominantly students of color, were raised in urban communities, and participated in the free or reduced lunch program during their K-12 school experience (Jacksonville Journey Oversight Committee, 2012). Juniors were selected for the present study for various reasons. By their junior year, these students had navigated the first two most challenging years of college (Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010). Thus, the expectation was that they had enough
collegiate experience to articulate their experiences and perspectives as first-generation students of color and were able to connect their K-12 schooling experiences to their postsecondary experiences. Thus, students from the Jacksonville Commitment program were ideal participants because they had direct lived experiences that shaped and developed their world views and ultimately their postsecondary schooling experience (van Manen, 1990). As a result, these students were able to communicate their knowledge and experiences from their own points of view (Spradley, 1979, p. 25).

Because a unique group of students were invited to participate in this study, its results reflected the perspectives of these students. For example, this study focused only on first-generation college students of color with junior classification attending a comprehensive state university. Focusing on juniors eliminated students at the freshman and sophomore levels who could have contributed to the study. The second limitation was geographical, as the participants for the present study resided in Jacksonville, Florida. The experiences of students who resided and attended college in Jacksonville may not have been the experiences of first-generation college students of color who resided elsewhere and attended other colleges. The only students who participated in this study were highly motivated students, who, overall had positive collegiate experiences. These participants were affiliated with The Jacksonville Commitment program, a scholarship program under the auspices of the Jacksonville Journey. The Jacksonville Journey is a comprehensive community-wide anti-crime initiative in Jacksonville, Florida (Jacksonville Journey Oversight Committee, 2012). The Jacksonville Commitment is a program that has a community of professionals and a support system specifically designed to foster academic success for first-generation college students. Therefore, students who were not
affiliated with a program that was specifically designed to facilitate their academic progress may have had different perceptions about their schooling experiences.

The past two decades have witnessed a steady increase in college enrollment among students belonging to all racial and ethnic populations. Although enrollment rates slowed in the mid-1990s, enrollment for all racial and ethnic populations began to rise again after 2000 (Kim, 2011), and the enrollment gap narrowed drastically. As of 2015, although White students had the highest rate of college enrollment at 70%, the college enrollment rate for Black and Hispanic students were not measurably different, at 63% and 67% respectively (McFarland et al., 2017). Additionally, Hispanic students had the largest gain in college enrollment, increasing from 49% in 2000 to 67% in 2015. In contrast, the college enrollment rate for Black students immediately after high school was not measurably different from the rate in 2000 (McFarland et al., 2017). The immediately college enrollment rate for White students increased from 65% in 2000, to 70% in 2015 (McFarland et al., 2017). Based on this information, Black and Hispanic students are just as likely to attend college as White students immediately following high school.

Although the college enrollment gap has narrowed, there is continued disparity among students of color and White students with regard to academic achievement. As of 2016, data still indicated that the percentage of White students between the ages of 25 to 29 who had earned bachelor’s degrees surpassed that of African American students and Hispanic students in the same age group. With 43% of White students having earned bachelor’s degrees whereas only 23% of African Americans and 19% of Hispanics having earned bachelor degrees (McFarland et al., 2017). These large gaps signal obstacles that students of color are facing disproportionally. If obstacles are not reduced at each transition point in the school experience, student of color will
not successfully move through what some describe as the educational pipeline from kindergarten through post-secondary education.

The educational pipeline is a metaphor to describe the levels through which students pass from one school setting to another. Successful matriculation through the pipeline is contingent upon each level along the pipeline being free of obstacles that could potentially impact the flow (Howard, 2007). For minority students, the pipeline could be obstructed by poor schooling, historical injustices, racial inequalities, and economic challenges (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Howard, 2007). As students of color transition to college, obstructions in the pipeline later lead to challenges in persisting and completing their college degree programs. As a result of the challenges faced by students of color, they are not as likely to succeed at the post-secondary level.

The present study contributes to the field of education by allowing first-generation college students of color in one innovative program to share their perceptions of their schooling experience and the factors that influenced their academic persistence (van Manen, 1990). It is important that first-generation students of color continue to be a topic of discussion because inequalities in education continue to influence their life chances. The challenges that first-generation students face are complex and interrelated, in part because racism is a normal part of the way society operates, influencing the everyday experiences of most people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Therefore, understanding the perceptions of first-generation students of color is key to understanding the experiences that influence their academic success so that the college experience can be more beneficial for students in the future.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achievement Gap</td>
<td>The difference between the average achievement of lower-class students and the average achievement of middle-class students (Rothstein, 2004).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing-Generation College Students</td>
<td>Students who have at least one parent or guardian who completed college (Mehta, Newbold, &amp; O’Rourke, 2011).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical Race Theory</td>
<td>A legal theory designed to uncover or unmask race and racism in law and in society in its various forms (Delgado &amp; Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings &amp; Tate, 1995; Parker &amp; Lynn, 2002).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>A set of values, beliefs, skills, habits, and perspectives that are shared by a group of people (Marger, 1999; Rothstein, 2004).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture of Poverty</td>
<td>A theory that argues that poverty is the result of a set of norms and values—a culture that is characteristic of the poor (Marger, 1999).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-Generation College Students</td>
<td>Students enrolled in college whose parents or guardians have had no college experience (Inman &amp; Mayes, 1999; McConnell, 2000).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersectionality</td>
<td>Experiences of groups holding multiple disadvantage statuses (Cole, 2009).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minority Students</td>
<td>Referring to all persons of African descent or Latin American descent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity Gap</td>
<td>“The accumulated differences in access to key education resources such as expert teachers, personalized attention, high-quality curriculum opportunities, good educational materials, and plentiful information resources—that support learning at home and at school” (Darling-Hammond, 2012, p. 28).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>The desire and action of a student to remain in the college system from the beginning year through to degree completion (Berger &amp; Lyon, 2005; Seidman 2005).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience</td>
<td>The ability to be successful in spite of risk and adversity (Masten, 1994; Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, &amp; Williams, 2007).</td>
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</table>
Self-efficacy  
An individual’s perceived capability in performing necessary tasks to achieve goals (Bandura, 2002).

Social Class  
A collection of characteristics such as race, income, occupations, education, and lifestyles that are shared by a group of people (Lee, 2004a; Marger, 1999; Rothstein, 2004).

Socioeconomic Status  
Commonly conceptualized as the social standing or class of an individual or group—often measured as a combination of education level, level of income, and occupational status (Marger, 1999; Rothstein, 2004).

Students of Color  
Referring to all persons of African descent or Latin American descent.

Chapter Summary

The American K-12 and postsecondary school systems are complex institutions that reflect the larger picture of society. The K-12 educational system has experienced a wave of school reform efforts designed to increase the academic performance of students and to narrow the achievement gap between minority students and their White peers. Although minority students have made academic gains, they still lag behind their White peers. The lack of academic achievement has a lifetime of consequences, which includes limiting opportunities for students of color to succeed in higher education, to gain employment, and to earn an income that will afford them the opportunity to improve their socioeconomic status.

Scholars have offered various explanations for the widening achievement gap in K-12 education. Arguments range from social challenges related to poverty to failing schools. Regardless of the reasons, the overall picture suggests that first-generation college students of color often enter the collegiate environment less prepared than their White peers, which ultimately results in their struggle to have experiences positively related to persistence, performance, and degree completion. Understanding the lived and schooling experiences of first-generation college students of color as they see them can provide educators and
policymakers the knowledge these students have regarding the social and academic challenges that they encounter. This knowledge can then inform efforts to justify and carry out initiatives aimed at addressing the academic needs of students of color. Thus, the focus of the present study was to understand how first-generation college students of color at the junior level, in a predominantly White institution (PWI) perceived their schooling experiences.

**Organization of the Study**

The present study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One outlined the purpose of the study and included the problem statement and research question. Chapter One also identified the significance of the research and its potential contribution to the field of education. Lastly, Chapter One included definitions of terms that are relevant to the study. Chapter Two provides a detailed review of related literature that frames the challenges of first-generation students of color from a historical perspective and presents opportunities to support students in their academic endeavors. Chapter Two closes with a conceptual framework that justified the research question and supported the research design, guided the research methodology, and reflected the data analysis and conclusions of the study. Chapter Three explains the research methodology for the present study and provides justification for a qualitative study using semi-structured in-depth interviews. Chapter Three also presents participation selection, the use of interviews, data collection methods, and protection of participants.

Chapter Four presents a comprehensive outline of the data analysis process and the data analysis approaches used in the present study and the results of such approaches. Eisner’s (1998) educational criticism was the overarching data analysis strategy used, supported by Hatch’s (2002) typological and interpretive analysis approaches. Lastly, Chapter Five summarizes the related literature and methodology for the present study. Chapter Five also presents a discussion
of data analysis, conclusions extrapolated from the data analysis and limitations of the study.

Chapter Five also identifies implications for educational leadership, provides recommendations for further research, and presents final conclusions.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

American society and its educational system are both guilty of perpetuating the social cycle of prejudice and racism (Bynum, 1987). Prejudice, then, becomes a part of the folkways and other norms which are validated for future generations through the human socialization process (Bynum). Similarly, critical race theory suggests that racism is so ingrained in American social institutions that it appears both normal and natural to those who have been raised and conditioned in American culture (Delgado, 1995). Out of normalcy emerged the ideas of institutional and social racism, by which American institutions were built and continue to operate. Although minority students have made progress, scholars have criticized government efforts because the achievement gap continues to widen and schools are becoming more segregated (Minor, 2008; Rothstein, 2004; Saddler, 2005).

The overall goal of this review of the literature is to explore some of the historical foundations that have shaped the schooling experiences of first-generation students of color. Further, critical race theory (CRT) is being used in part to examine race and racism in America as it relates to students of color. Therefore, this review of the literature examines five topics: (a) the historical context that has shaped the educational experiences of minority students; (b) the influence of socioeconomic status on students of color; (c) the characteristics of first-generation college students of color and their postsecondary challenges; (d) the characteristics of resilient college students; and (e) retention strategies designed to improve retention, coupled with retention theories that explain underlying factors that influence a student’s decision to remain or to depart from college.
Historical Context

An historical exploration of American social institutions provides an understanding of how the past has influenced the conditions faced by first-generation students of color within the college setting. Borne out of the need to establish White privilege, the institution of slavery reduced Blacks\(^1\) to property (Cook, 2005). Terms such as *second class*, *subordinate*, and *property* became common descriptors for African Americans. Such descriptors implied that Blacks were not considered members of society, a perspective that continued after the abolition of slavery and supported institutional racism (Rothenberg, 2004).

This ideology was evident in the case of *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857). The Supreme Court reasoned that it was illogical for Blacks to believe they could be considered citizens in a society where they were justly and lawfully reduced to slavery for economic gain. Consequently, the Court ruled that people of African descent imported into the United States and held as slaves could not be citizens of the United States and were never intended to be citizens. Therefore, people of African descent were not protected by the Constitution (60 U.S. 393). Thus, *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857) was one of several noteworthy cases that set precedence for institutionalizing racism, as it specifically addressed the rights of Blacks in the United States.

Pre-Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas

The history of education for African Americans began with laws prohibiting the teaching of Blacks to read and write (Daniel, 2005; Rothenberg, 2004). Although most southern Whites did not receive a formal education, the percentage of uneducated Blacks was significantly higher. Whites believed that educating Blacks was dangerous; therefore, southern states passed laws prohibiting the teaching of slaves to read or write. Whites feared that if slaves learned how to

\(^1\) Blacks and African American were used interchangeably.
read or write, they would become dissatisfied with their social status and would seek freedom (Daniel, 2005; Rippa, 1997). In the North, the law did not require Blacks to attend school with Whites, nor did the law require education for Black students. Consequently, some states enacted laws against African Americans attending school or simply did not build facilities in areas that would serve segregated populations (Daniel).

The end of the Civil War and the subsequent passage of the 13th and 14th Amendments to the United States Constitution marked the beginning of a new era for Blacks. Slaves were freed, and those who were born in the United States were extended citizenship and guaranteed equal protection of the law (Rothenberg, 2004). However, southern states quickly enacted laws to circumvent the rights that the 13th and 14th Amendments had bestowed on African Americans. In southern states where African Americans were heavily concentrated, Jim Crow laws were enforced to prevent the integration of Blacks into mainstream social institutions (Marger, 1999; Minor, 2008; Rothenberg, 2004). Southern states began to legalize the separation of races in all aspects of public and private life.

These efforts resulted in the “separate but equal” doctrine upheld by the 1896 Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (Rothenberg, 2004). The Supreme Court ruled that separate but equal facilities did not violate the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. As a result, the decision legitimated laws requiring that Blacks be educated separately from their White peers. However, although separate facilities were created, the facilities were not equal. Equality was never defined, standards were not established or considered, and a system to monitor equity in separate intuitions was not developed (Cook, 2005; Marger, 1999). Consequently, students often received an inferior education with substandard instruction and instructional materials (Daniel, 2005). Although educational facilities and materials were
substandard, African Americans took advantage of the right to be educated in a segregated environment free of institutional and individual racism. Students were passionate about their education, and teachers were serious about the learning process (Daniel, 2005).

**Progress Toward Equality: Brown v. Board Era**

The separate but equal doctrine reflected the ideology of the judiciary from 1896 to 1954. Several cases were brought before the Supreme Court that challenged the constitutionality of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), but the Court consistently ruled that the separate but equal doctrine was not unconstitutional (Cook, 2005; Rothenberg, 2004). The doctrine governed society until the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954) was brought before the Supreme Court. Access and equity were the fundamental tenets of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling (Cook, 2005; Rothenberg, 2004). The Supreme Court ruled that the “separate but equal” doctrine had no place in American education. The Court argued that

Segregation of White and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law, for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the Negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn.

Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to negatively influence the educational and mental development of Negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racially integrated school system. (347 U.S. 483)

Given that desegregation became a reality in American education with the Brown decision, local school boards were charged by the Supreme Court to desegregate schools and to successfully integrate minority students into the culture of predominantly White schools without prejudice.
The Supreme Court’s decision was fraught with deep and heavy symbolism and significance—moral, social, constitutional, political, and cultural (Cook, 2005). “The decision reflected a new legal era, with fresh ethical and constitutional presuppositions and juristic vision, integrity, and higher possibilities” (Cook, 2005, p. 5). Integrating Blacks into White institutions was challenging because it required Whites to challenge their own racist attitudes that had been acceptable for decades (Cook, 2005). Although African Americans were lawfully acknowledged as members of society with the same rights and privileges as Whites, the Court’s decision did not transform the core beliefs of society (Saddler, 2005).

Critical race theory (CRT) helps to explain the complexities accompanying the challenges of confronting society’s fundamental beliefs. CRT pioneers Derrick Bell and Richard Delgado argued that racism is at the root of American social institutions and American culture, that it cannot simply be eradicated, as it is “ingrained through historical consciousness and ideological choices about race, which in turn [have] directly shaped the U.S. legal system and the ways people think about the law, racial categories, and privilege” (Parker & Lynn, 2002, p. 9). Consequently, critical race theory calls attention to race and racism within the framework of American society rather than to individual acts against persons of color (Parker & Lynn, 2002).

Critical race theory is a legal theory designed to uncover or unmask how race and racism operate in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker & Lynn, 2002). Additionally, critical race theory is a tool by which educational challenges can be defined, exposed, and addressed (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Basic tenets of critical race theory form the foundation of the theory: 1) the normalcy of racism within American society; 2) critique of liberalism; and 3) interest convergence. These basic tenets of critical race theory will be
discussed throughout the remainder of the literature review (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

**Post Brown v. Board**

The 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board* (1954) was the impetus for scholars to evaluate the progress of African Americans in the educational arena. Some education scholars argued that desegregated learning environments had improved cultural understandings, thereby reducing racism, discrimination, and structural segregation (Nieto & Bode, 2008; Tatum, 1997). Although the ideas of desegregation and multiculturalism have gained social value, others raised concerns about the lack of progress (Kozol, 2005; Orfield, 2001).

Some of the discourse on desegregation in public education has assumed that society embraced the movement with optimism. However, given the lack of progress in many states and his evaluation of educational policies and practices, Minor (2008) argued that desegregation as a goal by itself was a flawed notion. Integration and the valuing of diversity in public life were concepts that reflected how the world should be rather than its reality. For example, having lived in separate worlds for over 300 years, African American students and White teachers experienced difficulty in communicating their expectations for each other with each other. The educational experiences of Black students did not mirror the educational experiences of White students. Minority students were treated as inferior students from the moment they entered desegregated institutions, and school curricula continued to systematically devalue the culture of non-White students. As a result, many African American students performed at lower levels than they did before desegregation (Minor, 2008).

Social factors and societal norms have impeded the progress of African American students (Minor, 2008; Tatum, 1997). Further, despite the overall progress of American society,
racism is still embedded in the policies and practices of public education. Racism is a challenging issue in modern society. For example, people tend to avoid racial conversations because they are operating from the perspective that racism no longer exists (Tatum, 1997) or from a colorblind paradigm. As argued by Vue and Allen (2017), colorblind discourse voids the notion that race still matters. “Colorblindness functions as a silencing mechanism; it mutes racialized experiences because there is no space for these ‘lived experiences’ within the framework” (p. 869). To put this idea into context, consider the current state of affairs with police shootings and the actions of president Trump supports. The Black Lives Matters movement has been reframed as all lives matter (Vue & Allen, 2017) and White nationalist have become ever so emboldened. Colorblind policies and practices continue to be woven in the fabric of American society and educational institutions.

Indeed, Blacks and Whites alike have argued that society has evolved to a point at which considering race in order to achieve equity, to seek diversity, or to rectify past injustices is no longer necessary (Allen, 2005; Minor, 2008). Others argue that analyses of enrollment rates, degree completion rates, and graduation data by race clearly point to a lack of equity and the need for programs to assist minorities in achieving greater access to educational opportunities and equality in degree attainment (Minor, 2008).

Institutional racism and ethnic discrimination remain fundamental characteristics of American education. Consequently, Black students’ academic achievement levels may never match the achievement levels of White students. However, the lack of academic achievement at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels has lifetime consequences which include limiting opportunities for students of color to graduate from postsecondary institutions, to seek employment opportunities, and to gain appropriate earnings. Such consequences shape the
Although African Americans have experienced the most egregious acts of racism, other people of color have suffered from inequalities arising from discrimination. The dynamics of such inequalities inform the current conditions that students of color face in school because the impact on educational opportunities is so heavily influenced by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009; Martin, 2005).

The Influence of Socioeconomic Status on Students of Color

Socioeconomic status is commonly conceptualized as the social standing or class of an individual or group. It is often measured as a combination of education level, level of income, and occupational status. Low socioeconomic status is a self-perpetuating category marked by persistent and pervasive inequalities of income, wealth, status, and social power (Marger, 1999; Rothstein, 2004). Such inequalities result in what David Berliner (2009) called out-of-school factors that challenge teachers’ ability to teach and students’ ability to perform at high levels. In his brief, Berliner argued that factors such as health care, nutrition, and violence are out-of-school factors that teachers cannot control but that directly influence student achievement. Furthermore, these out-of-school factors typically reflect socioeconomic status and constitute a form of oppression that is structural and is maintained by practices that constitute the norm (Berliner, 2009; Rothstein, 2004).

Research has consistently found that socioeconomic status plays a major role in the life chances of students. “The resources a person starts with, the opportunities open to that person, the circumstances in which the person lives, and the way others react to that person all depend to a significant extent to the groups of which that person is a member” (Gollnick & Chinn, 1994, p.
Specifically, students of color have historically come from low socioeconomic homes. This historical disadvantage continues to impact the life chances of students of color. They are still more likely than White students to have limited resources and opportunities needed to fully engage in social institutions such as schools and, later, the workforce as they transition to adulthood (Berliner, 2009; Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009; Rothstein, 2004). Students of color from low economic backgrounds tend to enter K-12 schooling less academically prepared than White students, which has long-term consequences as students proceed through high school graduation and then enter post-secondary institutions (Loury, 2005).

Inequalities in access to resources result from a stratified social system that is rooted in institutionalized racism. Institutionalized racism is the extent to which racism is woven into the fabric of dominant organizations and power structures of society (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009). Viewed through a historical lens, the developments of social institutions, influenced by racial ideologies, have led to social inequalities. Over time social injustices were justified as normal practices, which were perpetuated from generation to generation. Although various laws have been passed that acknowledged minorities as members of society, discriminatory practices have been too engrained in American culture to permit real change. Therefore, people of color continue to face opposition as they attempt to navigate social institutions. The socioeconomic divide is characteristic of America’s deeply rooted racial history that continues to challenge American ideals and practices (Martin, 2005). Institutional practices do not mirror the promise of equal access to resources and opportunities (Martin, 2005). This disconnect underscores the need to maintain open dialogue regarding the persistence of the compounding effects of race and socioeconomic status on the educational experiences of students of color.
Another source of inequality lies in the effects of poverty on the educational opportunities at both the K-12 and post-secondary levels. African Americans are far more likely than other groups to have been raised in areas of concentrated poverty (O’Hare & Mather, 2003). Whereas 27% of African American youth and 13% of Latino youth are raised in neighborhoods characterized as “severely distressed,” only about 1% of non-Hispanic White youth are raised in similar conditions (O’Hare & Mather, 2003). Parents are limited in their ability to develop social capital or networks that may contribute to the development and advancement of their children. As a result, students of color struggle to experience similar social benefits as their White peers. Although income and skin color themselves do not influence school achievement, the collection of characteristics that define socioeconomic status differences in education, income, and occupation are likely to influence performance in school and social mobility (Hardaway & Mcloyd, 2009; Rothstein, 2004, p. 2).

Poverty and low levels of education are too often associated with the working-class, a group that is likely to be made up largely of minorities (Hardaway & Mcloyd, 2009). The cycle of limited opportunities for working-class minorities is influenced by the convergence or intersectionality of multiple social groups, particularly being a member of a minority group and having low socioeconomic status. Intersectionality as a conceptual framework can be used to understand the complexities, dynamics, and experiences of individuals with multiple identities such as race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, and disability (Cole, 2009). Critical race theorists define the term as “the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation, and how their combination plays out in various settings” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. 51). Intersectionality of low socioeconomic status, minority status, and first-generation status is of particular interest because of the resulting perceptions, experiences, and life outcomes for
individuals who can identify with multiple forms of social categories (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009). Although scholars have studied the effects of race and socioeconomic status independently, both race and class are interrelated and may compound the effects of each other for those with multiple disadvantage statuses (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009; Rothstein, 2004).

Intersectionality can be attributed to legal scholar and critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw (1993). However, intersectionality as a framework for examining the challenges associated with managing multiple marginalized identities can be traced back to the late 19th century with the writings of a manifesto by a group of Black feminists, as well as the later writings of Anna Julia Cooper and W. E. B. DuBois (Cole, 2009; Hancock, 2005). Feminist, Black scholars, and critical race theorists called for the incorporation of intersectionality in race-based agendas and class-based organizing (Cole, 2009; Hancock, 2005). Scholars argued that a single-axis framework is limiting, as people often experience multiple disadvantage statuses simultaneously such as race and socioeconomic status (Crenshaw, 1993). Considering the intersectionality of multiple social statuses simultaneously such as low social class, race, and first-generation may help situate the understanding of the meaning and consequences of these converging categories.

Economists and critical race theorists have offered examples or models that describe the effects of racism and discriminatory practices. For example, economist Glenn Loury (2005) argued that African Americans experience both reward bias and developmental bias. Reward bias is the act of rewarding members of different racial groups unequally for the same achievements. Reward bias can be seen when equally qualified African Americans are paid less than Whites for the same level of employment. Developmental bias involves practices that
prevent groups from maximizing their productive potential, even when no differences in competence or ability exist.

Critical race theorist Daria Roithmayr (2000) offered the lock-in model to describe the effects of racism and discriminatory practices. The lock-in model holds that racial inequalities can persist, even after discriminatory practices have ceased. This model suggests that the early advantages in resources and opportunities that Whites gained through past discriminatory practices reproduce themselves through positive feedback loops from others. As a result, the advantages for Whites continue over time with discrimination continuing to contribute to the persistence of inequality for people of color (Roithmayr, 2000). Without alternative feedback loops to counterbalance past exclusionary practices, racial inequalities will continue. The lock-in model is evidenced by the fact that adults from disadvantaged or poor backgrounds earn less income, complete fewer years of school, and are three times as likely to be poor as adults than White adults. Additionally, minorities are disproportionately represented in the lower socioeconomic strata. These issues are especially acute for African Americans, for whom individual deprivation and poverty are compounded by residential segregation, resulting in a greater proportion of Blacks living in concentrated poverty (Shapiro, 2004), and thus exacerbating the social challenges of first-generation students of color.

Literature supports the fact institutional inequality has strong historical roots (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009). Institutionalized inequality has resulted from a historical ideological framework that legitimized subordination of groups of people. Consequently, students of color have been systematically denied opportunities to fully engage in social institutions such as education and employment. Yet participation in social institutions is necessary for educational and economic advancement.
First-generation College Students of Color

First-generation college students of color represent a group of students whose parents or guardians have had no college experience (Inman & Mayes, 1999; McConnell, 2000). First-generation students are more likely to be females who have delayed entry into the postsecondary environment (Inman & Mayes, 1999). These students have historically struggled financially as a result of their low socioeconomic status and have attended college part time. Additionally, first-generation students often work full time while in college to provide for dependents and to fulfill other financial commitments (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; McConnell, 2000).

Research has consistently found that first-generation students of color tend to have negative perceptions of the college environment and are less involved in their college experiences both academically and socially. As a result, their learning gains are lower, and the attrition rate of first-generation students of color during their first semester in college is higher than their White peers (Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Miller, 2007; McConnell, 2000; Pascarella et al., 2003). In a study comparing engagement and intellectual development in first-generation and second-generation students, Pike and Kuh (2005) used Astin’s (1970) input-environment-output (I-E-O) model of college effects and Pascarella’s (1985) model of environment influences on college outcomes. Additionally, Pike and Kuh used a stratified random sample of 3,000 undergraduates from across the nation who completed the College Student Experience Questionnaire, Fourth Edition. The authors found that, overall, first-generation college students were overall less engaged and not as likely as second-generation college students to successfully integrate diverse college experiences. Additionally, first-generation students perceived the college environment as less supportive and reported making less progress in their learning and intellectual development.
In 2006, first-generation students represented approximately 30% of all college enrollments, an increase over the previous 10 years (Strayhorn, 2006, p. 83). Despite their increased enrollment, they are less likely to graduate from college within eight years of high school completion, as only 24% earn a college degree in that period (Strayhorn, 2006, p. 83). Although access to postsecondary education has increased for first-generation students, they have continued to face difficulty and uncertainty in their transition from high school to college or from the workforce to the college environment (McConnell, 2000). The culture and climate of college environments that have traditionally catered to White students and those from middle-class backgrounds require first-generation minority students to negotiate a myriad of unfamiliar cultural norms (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Many first-generation students of color enter the college arena lacking academic, cultural, and social capital (Rothstein, 2004; Shaw et al., 1999). As a result, these students also enter college with higher levels of stress, with very few resources or means to cope with their stress (Mehta, Newblood, & O’Rourke, 2011).

Because first-generation students enter the college experience without sufficient academic preparedness to succeed in college-level courses, many of these students are required to take remedial courses, extending their graduation dates. This extension of time required for a degree may discourage students from completing their degrees, as evidenced by their lower graduation rates (Strayhorn, 2006; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). Academic and social factors play an integral role in preparation for and persistence in higher education. Federally funded programs such as Upward Bound and Talent Search have targeted first-generation students and minority students as early as middle school to help enhance their academic preparation for college, as well as to help socialize them to the importance of attaining a college degree (Perna & Swail, 2002). Socializing students early for the purposes of understanding
mainstream norms plays a significant role in the college career of students, as the foundation of postsecondary institutions is based on mainstream norms. Despite efforts by the federal government to assist students in their pre-college endeavors, first-generation students of color are still academically and socially challenged once enrolled in college. Although some first-generation minority students struggle and ultimately fail to obtain their college degrees, some of them have the capacity and support to be successful.

**Resilience: Transcending Adversities**

Students of color transition to the college environment with past challenges negatively influencing their potential for success (Brown, 2008; Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007). These students, in comparison to their White peers, are more likely to experience life stress and adversities. They are more likely to come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, experience prolonged unemployment, live in violent communities, and have fewer financial resources (Brown, 2008; Utsey et al., 2007). Such risk factors result in social maladjustment and a lack of psychological well-being that affect their adjustment to the college environment and their development of important relationships with other students and instructors. These risk factors can therefore place many students of color in jeopardy of not adjusting to college and succeeding academically. Yet, resilient students of color are able to overcome environmental challenges and experience successful psychological well-being and social relationships (Brown, 2008).

Research in the area of risk factors and protective factors has led to a growing body of literature in the area of resilience. Resilience refers to one’s ability to be successful in spite of risk and adversity (Masten, 1994; Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007). Understanding the importance of protective factors as they relate to minority students’ ability to be resilient contributes to understanding how individuals are able to be successful despite risk factors.
Protective factors are multifaceted, as they encompass various components. Individuals possess protective factors, while families and extended families provide protective factors. Understanding the resilience of minority college students requires one to delve into the cultural beliefs, behaviors, and practices of minority students (Brown, 2008; Utsey et al., 2007).

The role of culture-specific coping strategies was examined in relation to resilient outcomes in minority students from high-risk urban areas (Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, and Williams 2007). The authors found that support networks served as the foundation that led to resilience among minority students. At the core of this support network were family members, community members, members of extended families, and churches. Coping strategies such as collective coping and spiritual coping emerged from support networks. For example, collective coping is relying on family and extended family in the face of trials and adversity. Spiritual coping was another mechanism that students of color employed when confronted with challenges. Indeed, spiritual acts such as prayer and meditation can provide a basis for positive thoughts and feelings of optimism (Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, and Williams 2007). For many minority students, their culture strongly embraces the belief in God, which explains the importance of a church family and its influence in the lives of students of color.

Research has shown that these support networks have contributed to the success of resilient students. The social skills that resilient students develop influence their decision-making. Students with high levels of social and cultural capital are more likely to feel an entitlement to a college education and may not only perceive college attendance as an entitlement, but may also persist to graduation. Previously acquired social and cultural capital and a perceived entitlement to postsecondary education may be factors that allow some students
to advance in their educational pursuits, whereas others fail to achieve their academic goals (Wells, 2008).

**Retention and Persistence**

College retention and persistence are popular topics that have generated years of research and theoretical perspectives to explain the relationship among students, institutions, student development, and student success. Amid increased scrutiny from the public and the government to ascertain accountability, considerable attention continues to focus on student retention and graduation rates. In addition, the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 2008 called for institutions to be more transparent about cost, accreditation, graduation rates, and other institutional data (U. S. Department of Education, 2008). Based on the mission of higher-education, institutions are expected to respond to the challenge of providing quality education that equips students with the knowledge and skills needed to perform in an information-driven society.

Institutions have not shied away from this challenge; however, various moving parts are at play that make the educational process complex. At the crux of this multifaceted challenge is the importance of student retention and persistence. Retention can be defined as the ability of an institution to retain a student from admission through gradation (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Seidman, 2005). Persistence, on the other hand, can be defined as the desire and action of a student to remain in the college system from the beginning year through degree completion (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Seidman, 2005). This section will discuss retention and persistence related to student-initiated action. This section will then discuss retention and persistence from the standpoint of institutional initiatives.
Over 30 years of research have been devoted to student retention and persistence (Seidman, 2005). Theoretical models have been generated to explain student behavior, and evidenced-based guidelines have served as institutional resources for developing and enhancing policies, practices, and procedures to increase student retention and persistence (Flowers, 2004; Seidman, 2005). Yet, retention and persistence continue to be challenges for many institutions, specifically institutions that serve first-generation students of color (Ishitani, 2006; Seidman, 2005).

First-generation College Students of Color: Retention and Persistence

As society quickly evolves and business and industry continue to demand an educated and skilled workforce, earning some form of a postsecondary credential is more important than ever before for individuals to gain employment. Although a college degree may lead to self-sufficiency, social mobility, and financial stability, some students struggle in their journey of persistence and degree completion. First-generation students of color are a unique group of students who are more challenged than other groups of students in persisting to their second year. Some institutions are acutely aware of the challenges of first-generation students of color and have attempted to developed multifaceted retention programs designed for students who are likely to depart early from the institution (Seidman, 2005).

First-generation college students transition to postsecondary institutions with a host of diverse characteristics that challenge their academic success and can result in their departure from college (Ishitani, 2006). Ishitani’s research used event history modeling to analyze the attrition behavior of first-generation students. More specifically, given diverse student characteristics, Ishitani examined the likelihood that students would depart from an institution early or persist to graduation. The results of the study indicated that various factors were
significantly correlated with student departure. For example, the study found that students who were the first in their families to attend college, students who were from low-income families, and students who graduated in the lowest high-school class-rank quintile were more likely to depart from college than continuing-generation students, students from middle to higher income families, and students who graduated from high school in the highest quintile.

Additionally, Ishitani (2006) found that first-generation students were 51% less likely than their non-White peers to graduate within four years. Ishitani also found that first-generation students were 32% less likely than their continuing-generation peers to graduate within five years. Furthermore, Black students were 58% less likely than White students to graduate in their fourth year of college. Family income, high-school class rank, and institutional type such as a public or private postsecondary institution, also influenced college graduation. The study indicated that students with family income less than $19,000 were 41% less likely to graduate in their fourth year of college and 69% less likely to graduate in the sixth year of college than students with family income between $20,000 and $34,999. Students who graduated in the lowest academic quintile in high school were 59% less likely to graduate in their fourth year of college than students who graduated from high school in the highest quintile. Lastly, students who attended private post-secondary institutions were 34% less likely to depart from the institution than students enrolled in public institutions. The overall findings of the study suggested that if a student is first-generation, is low-income, and is a student of color, there is a higher probability that the student will not persist to degree completion (Ishitani, 2006).

A study by Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) led to similar findings. Lohfink and Paulsen used data from a national sample—Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Survey: 96/01 (Wine, Heuer, & Wheeless, 2002)—to examine and compare factors that influenced first-to-
second-year persistence for first-generation and continuing-generation students who attended four-year public and private institutions. Lohfink and Paulsen studied the persistence behaviors of students who enrolled in an eligible post-secondary institution for the first time during the 1995-1996 school year. An eligible institution was identified as an institution: that offered an educational program designed for persons who have completed secondary education; that offered more than just correspondence courses; that offered at least one academically, occupationally, or vocationally-oriented program of study requiring at least three months or 300 contact hours of instruction; that offered courses that were open to the general public; and that was located in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, or Puerto Rico (Wine, Heuer, & Wheeless, 2002, p. 7). An analysis of the results revealed several findings that can be used to help institutions better understand the behavior of first-generation students when developing targeted retention practices. Similar to Ishitani’s (2006) study, Lohfink and Paulsen found that first-generation, low-income students were particularly challenged in advancing in college when compared to their continuing-generation peers. Additionally, first-generation students with higher family incomes were significantly more likely to persist than students from families with lower incomes. Such findings suggested that, again, students are negatively impacted by low-income and low levels of parental education.

Although scholars who have researched persistence and retention have consistently argued that involvement in social activities on college campuses positively influences student persistence (Seidman, 2005; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996; Tinto, 2006), Lohfink and Paulsen’s (2005) study suggested that first-generation students may value participation in academic activities or frequent interaction with faculty more than social activities. However, this finding may have been influenced by the fact that first-generation
students have competing external factors that demand their time such as dependent children and employment obligations, factors that may limit involvement in social activities. Lastly, findings from Lohfink and Paulsen’s study indicated that first-generation and continuing-generation students make decisions based on worldviews that may be unique to their groups.

The transition to college is challenging for first-generation students, many of whom are students of color. Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) play a major role in easing student anxiety by offering a culturally enriched supportive environment. Historically, Black colleges and universities serve at least one-third of all African American students (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005). These institutions educate students who are more likely than their White peers to come from low-income families, are more likely to be first-generation college students, and are more likely to have struggled academically during their K-12 schooling (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005).

Because first-generation students of color enter college with varying levels of achievement, HBCU staff and faculty are challenged in their efforts to retain students (Mehta, Newblood, & O’Rourke, 2011). As a result, these institutions tend to invest more in keeping faculty involved in academic-support programs and mentoring programs and in providing supportive social environments (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005). Integrating faculty into retention efforts helps foster a culture of student success. A 2002 survey of over 1000 students at HBCUs supported the idea of faculty interaction; the survey results indicated that frequent interaction with faculty was more related to student satisfaction than any other institutional characteristic (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005).
Retention and Persistence: Models and Theoretical Frameworks

Retention is a complex relationship between the student and the institution. The student enters the relationship with challenges and expectations that the institution is charged with identifying early and acting upon quickly (Seidman, 2005; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Many theoretical models and best practices exist to provide administrators with the knowledge needed to understand the role that the institution plays in student success and to provide administrators with evidenced-based recommendations when developing or modifying retention programs.

Swail’s geometric model of student persistence and achievement. Swail’s Geometric Model of Student Persistence and Achievement describes the intersecting relationship between individuals and institutions (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). More specifically, the model focuses on the cognitive and social attributes that students bring to the college environment and the institutional role in the student experience (Swail, Reed, & Perna, 2003). The geometric model was developed as part of a doctoral research study by Watson Swail in 1995. The model was initially developed to better understand minority student retention in science, engineering, and mathematics. The model evolved and developed into a research-based tool that has proven to be effective in increasing minority student persistence (Swail, Reed, & Perna, 2003).

The geometric model is an equilateral triangle that may shift in its shape at any time based on the amount of cognitive, social, and institutional forces affecting students. For example, although the desired shape is an equilateral triangle which denotes balance, students may have strong social skills but weak cognitive skills. Cognitive factors were described as students’ academic abilities. Social factors were described as students’ abilities to interact effectively with others, their personal attitudes, and their family influences. Lastly, institutional factors referred to the practices, strategies, and culture of the college or university that may
impact student persistence and achievement. Institutional factors form the base of the triangle because the institution forms the foundation for college success. Overall, the purpose of the model is to provide a method for understanding the relationship between cognitive and social attributes of students and institutional practices (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003).

**Seidman’s retention formula.** Seidman’s (2005) retention formula is another research-based framework, based on Vincent Tinto’s model of institution departure. Seidman’s formula is designed to influence student persistence. The core of Seidman’s formula is the idea that a retention program must be strong enough to effect change. The retention program must consist of four elements: (a) early identification; (b) early intervention; (c) intensive intervention; and (d) continuous intervention. Early identification is identifying students at the earliest possible time when a student is considered at-risk of not being successful in college. The application process offers institutions an opportunity to identify students who are more likely to depart early because it provides institutions with valuable information regarding students. This information typically consists of ethnicity, test scores, high-school grades, high-school class rank, and letters of recommendation. Examining the information provided during the application process gives staff the opportunity to understand more about entering students so that their needs can be met before failure begins to affect their college experience.

The early intervention element of Seidman’s college retention formula focuses on an intervention process at the earliest time possible upon identification of a problem. For some students, identification of the problem occurs during their K-12 experience. Seidman (2005) suggested that successful intervention efforts aimed at working with students and parents as early as seventh grade have proven to be successful for minority students. Seidman’s claim suggests that pre-college programs such as Talent Search and Upward Bound are beneficial early
intervention strategies because the programs identify first-generation, low-income students of color early in the educational continuum in an effort to address factors that may negatively impact their K-12 academic success and may subsequently influence their college persistence.

The intensive intervention element recognizes the importance of developing intervention programs that closely monitor students and have them demonstrate that they have mastered certain skills. For example, if certain deficiencies are identified, students must prove that they have mastered that skill-set before they can progress to the next level (Seidman, 2005). This strategy is woven into institutional policies that allow for student admission contingent on the student being successful in an intervention program such as a summer-bridge program. Lastly, continuous intervention is intervention that continues until the desired outcome is achieved such as degree completion (Seidman, 2005).

College student retention can be seen as a multifaceted issue, as there is no single solution and a number of possible strategies still may not yield significant improvements in retention and persistence (Seidman, 2005). However, research has consistently found that students are more successful if they are enrolled in institutions that provide a supportive college environment (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 2006). “The ability of an institution to retain students lies less in the formal programs they devise than in the underlying commitment toward students which directs their activities” (Tinto, 2003, p. 7). Student success is an institutional effort that requires support from the entire college community. Student success must be an institutional priority that is reflected in the institution’s mission, cultural assumptions, beliefs, values, norms, and perceptions (Kuh, et al., 2005; Seidman, 2005).

This ideology can be seen in the success of the Meyerhoff Program at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County; Florida State University; and San Diego State University. The
current president at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Freeman Hrabowski, III, was troubled by the low number of African American males enrolled and succeeding in disciplines such as science, math, technology, and engineering (STEM). In 1988, with the assistance of Robert Meyerhoff, a philanthropist in Baltimore, Hrabowski launched a campaign to increase the number of African American males succeeding in STEM disciplines. The success of the program required cultural change and institutional commitment. Hrabowski convened focus groups that consisted of students, faculty, and staff. He took an inclusive approach to create a program aimed at African American male achievement. Eventually the program took on a broad approach to include women and students from other minority groups (Hirshman & Hrabowski, 2011). The cultural shift that Hrabowski led to increase African American male achievement in STEM disciplines is an example of how institutional commitment is necessary to effect long-term student success.

Similar to the Meyerhoff Program at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Florida State University (FSU) and San Diego State University (SDSU) have developed success programs designed to increase the retention and graduating rates of minority students (Brusi, 2012; Engle, 2012). The mission of FSU’s Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement (C.A.R.E.) is to contribute to the retention and graduation rate of first-generation minority students. As such, the C.A.R.E. provides focused programs and services supported by retention and persistence literature such as a summer-bridge program, mandatory orientations, freshman interest groups, living-learning communities, and success courses for students at-risk of not persisting.

Operating in concert, SDSU’s Student Academic Success Center and the Office of Educational Opportunity Programs and Ethnic Affairs have provided services aligned with
institutional efforts to increase academic achievement among minority and low-income students. SDSU’s services are also services supported by retention and persistence literature such as summer transitional programs, academic support and counseling, and a program that targets students if their academic status falls into probation (Brusi, 2012). Both FSU and SDSU have experienced increased graduation rates among their first-generation, low income, minority population. From 2002 to 2010, Florida State University had little to no graduation rate gaps between White and minority students (Engle, 2012). From 2005 to 2010, San Diego State decreased its graduation gap between Whites and minority students from 19% to 8% (Brusi, 2012). The University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Florida State University, and San Diego State University were committed to fostering an academic success culture and increasing the rates of persistence to graduation for students of color. The commitments of the institutions were evidenced by institutional culture shifts and taking into account evidenced-based practices supported by the literature.

An institution may have a strong foundation that consists of evidenced-based practices, such as mentoring and summer-bridge programs, along with practice elements outlined in Swail’s geometric model of student persistence and achievement or Seidman’s retention formula. However, a student’s decision-making process is sometimes influenced by factors beyond institutional control. Practices and models recognize that although institutions play a key role in student persistence, economic, psychological, and sociological factors are also major influences with regard to student persistence. Thus, by understanding the underlying factors that influence a student’s decision to depart from an institution, retention and persistence can be understood through three theoretical lenses: (a) the economic lens; (b) the psychological lens; and (c) the sociological lens.
Economic theory of student persistence. Viewing persistence through an economic lens leads to a cost-benefit analysis. According to human capital theory, personal investments in education, training, or other learning endeavors can yield returns on the individual’s initial investment of time, money, and energy (Seidman, 2005). Consequently, student departure may occur if the student perceives that the costs of attending college outweigh the benefits of attending. Institutions that develop programs and services designed to minimize the costs associated with enrollment and maximize the perceived value of the student’s investment can influence persistence decisions.

Psychological theory of student persistence. Persistence can also be understood from a psychological perspective. Braxton and Hirschy (2005) maintained that the psychological characteristics and processes that distinguish students who persist from those who depart can be seen at both the level of the individual student and the level of the environment of the institution. Bean and Eaton’s (2001-2002) psychological model of college student retention offered an understanding of the interplay of psychological characteristics and psychological processes. Bean and Eaton maintained that psychological characteristics, such as past behaviors and beliefs, shape students’ perceptions of the college environment. The combination of such psychological characteristics and the institutional environment results in psychological processes that affect a student’s motivation to persist to graduation.

The psychological processes, which are the student’s interaction with the environment, result in increased positive self-efficacy, lower levels of stress, and increased internal locus of control. As students matriculate, they continue to make adjustments within their internal processes as they navigate both the college and external environment such as family influences. These psychological processes lead to academic and social integration in the college
environment and increased institutional fit or compatibility, institutional loyalty, intent to persist, and actual persistence (Bean & Eaton, 2001-2002). Thus, students are more likely to persist to graduation if they are academically and socially integrated into the college culture.

**Sociological theory of student persistence.** The sociological theory of persistence holds that social forces influence a student’s decision to persist or to depart from the college environment. Social forces can be described as peers, family socioeconomic status, and support from significant others. Bean and Metzner (1985) postulated that variables such as educational goals, academic performance, and environmental variables influenced the departure decision for older or nontraditional students. Additionally, Bean and Metzner found that environmental factors such as amount of finances, number of hours of employment, presence of outside encouragement, and the level of family responsibilities had a greater impact on departure decisions of students than academic variables such as study habits, academic advising, type of major selected, and course availability. Lastly, Bean and Metzner maintained that the most important retention variables are likely to differ among subgroups of students such as older students, part-time students, ethnic minorities, women, or academically underprepared students at different types of institutions (Seidman, 2005, p. 65). Therefore, institutions must understand the backgrounds of their students before developing programs designed to retain students through graduation.

**Institutional Role in Retention and Persistence**

College access has improved tremendously, opening the doors to allow an increasing number of minority students an opportunity to pursue post-secondary education. With increased access, many may believe that such progress has mitigated disparities in college attendance between minority and non-minority students. However, gaps continue to be an issue with access
and success, particularly for low-income, first-generation students of color. Institutions of higher education must continue to focus attention and efforts on retaining minority students and offering the resources needed for this population to persist to degree attainment. Additionally, understanding generational research and the generational dynamics present on college campuses can inform retention strategies.

Generational status influences how people make sense of the world. Values, perspectives, and voice are developed in part based on one’s generation status. That is, the lens through which one sees the world can be understood by where one is situated on the generational continuum. For example, students between the ages of 18 and 29 years of age present on college campuses are known as the millennial generation, with identifiable characteristics (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Pew Research Center, 2010). Millennials are high-touch students who are more collaborative and team-oriented. Millennials are confident, technologically savvy, and are predicated to be the most educated generation in American history due in part to more accountability in K-12 education, exposure to more rigorous curriculum, and the demand for a more educated citizenry.

Retention of students is a complex challenge, especially when the characteristics of the students are recognized. Retention can be defined as the ability of an institution to retain a student from admission through gradation (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Seidman, 2005). Retention is a difficult undertaking that requires institutions to meet the needs of a diverse student population. Therefore, institutions must base policy decision-making on continual assessment of student needs (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Students must be academically engaged and socially integrated into the college environment. Before an institution can develop retention programs that meet the needs of students, institutions must understand the relationships between diverse...
student characteristics and persistence. Such knowledge provides administrators with the necessary information to develop programs of value for students (Ishitani, 2006; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Mehta, Newblood, & O’Rourke, 2011; Seidman, 2005; Swail et al., 2003; Tinto, 2006).

Practices listed in Table 1 were extrapolated from empirical studies of campus-based interventions, from research reports related to minority student retention and persistence, and from recommendations for policy and practice advanced in empirical studies of college student retention. These practices form part of the conceptual framework for this study of first-generation students of color because student departure continues to be a challenge for many institutions, specifically institutions that serve first-generation students of color.

Table 2. Practices That Influence Student Persistence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Retention Practices</th>
<th>Supporting Sources</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-college programs*</td>
<td>Swail, Redd, &amp; Perna, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer bridge programs*</td>
<td>Brusi, 2012; Engle, 2012; Swail, Redd, &amp; Perna, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive orientation programs</td>
<td>Brusi, 2012; Engle, 2012; Merisotis &amp; McCarthy, 2005; Seidman, 2005; Swail, Redd, &amp; Perna, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-year experience programs</td>
<td>Braxton, Brier, &amp; Steele, 2007; Tinto, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring programs*</td>
<td>Braxton, Brier, &amp; Steele, 2007; Flowers, 2004; Hirshman &amp; Hrabowski, 2011; Merisotis &amp; McCarthy, 2005; Seidman, 2005; Swail, Redd, &amp; Perna, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-peer mentors (upper-division students)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-faculty</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Programs designed for at-risk students*</td>
<td>Braxton, Brier, &amp; Steele, 2007; Brusi, 2012; Engle, 2012; Hirshman &amp; Hrabowski, 2011; Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-targeted assistance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Academic support programs
- tutoring


Student support services
- academic advising
- counseling services
- career counseling
- financial aid

Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2007; Brusi, 2012; Engle, 2012; Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003

Adequate financial assistance*

Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2007; Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003

Participation in learning communities

Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2007; Hirshman & Hrabowski, 2011

Participation in social support groups*

Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2007; Brusi, 2012; Engle, 2012

Presence of culturally supportive environment*

Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2007; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Flowers, 2004

Faculty involvement with students*
- within freshman orientation
- though advising
- within out-of-class research experiences*

Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2007; Flowers, 2004; Hirshman & Hrabowski, 2011; Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005; Seidman, 2005; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003

College/university experience courses*

Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2007

Student monitoring/tracking system

Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2007; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003

Development of student profile*
- successful students
- unsuccessful students

Seidman, 2005

*Institutional retention practices that support first-generation students of color.

Based on the literature review, a conceptual framework was developed to guide the methodology. Additionally, the conceptual framework represents the findings of the study.

Figure 1 offers a visual representation of the interrelationships among multiple factors described in the literature and extrapolated from the data that influence student persistence and outcomes for first-generation college students of color (Bean & Eaton, 2002; Braxton & Hirchy, 2005; Berliner, 2006; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terezini, 2003; Rothstein, 2004; and Tinto, 1975).
Chapter Summary

First-generation students of color holistically experience a variety of challenges in attempting to complete higher education. Assisting first-generation college students of color in their transition from high school to college and thus being successful in college can be difficult. Although these students face the anxieties, confusion, and difficulties that all college students encounter, their challenges are heightened when coupled with other factors such as lower levels of college readiness, living in high crime communities, a lack of financial resources, a lack of family support, and limited knowledge pertaining to postsecondary education (Brown, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2003; Strayhorn, 2006). Such factors create unique challenges for first-
generation students of color, resulting in disparate academic achievement (Strayhorn). “First-generation college students’ lower persistence and graduation rates, and their lower scores on standardized assessments are the result of differences in the precollege characteristics of first-generation students in comparison to those whose parents have been to college” (Pike & Kuh, 2005, p. 277).

However, not all first-generation students of color allow risk factors to hamper their success. These students are characterized as resilient (Masten, 1994; Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007). Given similar circumstances, unlike their non-resilient first-generation minority peers, resilient first-generation minority students are able to be successful despite certain risk factors. Their success is realized because of protective factors or a positive social network that supports their academic endeavors (Brown, 2008; Utsey et al., 2007). Resilient students are able to excel socially and academically and persist toward graduation.

Understanding the experiences of these students inside and outside the classroom enables administrators to understand the types of programs and services needed to recruit, retain, and help these students to be successful in their academic careers.

As a result of the difficulties faced by first-generation college students of color, the present research study endeavored to understand, through qualitative research, the experiences of first-generation college students of color classified as juniors, at a predominantly White institution. Understanding how first-generation college students of color view their schooling experiences and other experiences in their lives that shape those schooling experiences has significance for those who are in positions to facilitate their success. The conceptual framework that supports this research study research study is depicted in figure 1. The conceptual
framework, informed by key concepts in the literature, was expanded to include the results of
data analysis in the present study.
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

First-generation students of color represent a group of students whose parents or guardians have had no college experience. This group of students deserves close attention because they continue to lag behind their White peers in academic achievement and college completion (Berliner, 2009; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Rothstein, 2004). Understanding the essence of what it means to be a college student with intersecting marginalized identities, coupled with factors that influence achievement, may provide educators, practitioners, and policymakers with knowledge that can inform policy and practice. Moreover, understanding the experiences of these students inside and outside the classroom will enable leaders to understand the services needed and the types of environments that may contribute to the academic success of first-generation college students of color.

This qualitative study endeavored to understand how first-generation college students of color at the junior level, in a predominantly White institution (PWI), perceived their school experiences. To that end, this chapter explains the thoughtful process of research design and methodology for the present study. The design and methodology of the study adhered to the requirements described by Howe and Eisenhart (1990) and met the standards of credibility as outlined by Eisner (1998). Howe and Eisenhart (1990) outlined the standards or requirements for a sound qualitative study. The present study carefully considered the requirements put forth by Howe and Eisenhart during the research process of this study: (a) a fit between the research question and study design; (b) transparency of methodology and data analysis for ascertaining rigor; (c) adequate review of the literature to guide the development of the research questions and research design; (d) overall warrant and validity; and (e) recognition of ethical concerns and value to the field of education. In addition to adhering to these requirements during the course of
this study, the design efforts sought to meet Eisner’s (1998) standards for qualitative inquiry: structural corroboration, consensual validation, and referential adequacy.

**Qualitative Approach**

Qualitative research recognizes the voice and subjectivity of participants (Patton, 2002; Peshkin, 1988). Additionally, qualitative research is an approach to uncovering the complexities that influence the experiences of people in an effort to seek knowledge and understanding (Creswell 2007; Patton, 2002). Because this study explored the experiences of first-generation students of color and the ways they understood those experiences to develop their worldview, phenomenological perspectives on research were relevant (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton 2002; van Manen, 1990).

Three principles ground phenomenological inquiry (van Manen, 1990). The first principle of phenomenology is its focus on the importance of what people know and how they view the world. The second principle of phenomenology is its commitment to study the phenomenon as directly as possible. The last principle of phenomenology recognizes the essences of shared experience (van Manen, 1990). “The essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced among a group of people. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essence of the phenomenon” (van Manen, 1990, p. 10). Moreover, “phenomenological research captures how people experience some phenomenon, how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p.104).

In order to capture such information, interviewing people who have directly experienced the phenomenon was the most appropriate data-collection methodology for the present (Patton,
Therefore, semi-structured, in-depth interviewing was the primary data-collection method for this phenomenological study.

**Data Collection Methods**

Although several qualitative data-collection methods exist such as observations and document analysis, qualitative interviewing was the most appropriate data-collection method for this study. As such, a research proposal was submitted to the University of North Florida (UNF) Institutional Review Board (IRB) that described my research methodology and a plan for conducting the study. The IRB proposal was approved March 27, 2014 (see Appendix A).

Interviewing people who have direct experience with a phenomenon leads to finding out from them those things which cannot be directly observed. Qualitative interviewing is the vehicle by which the researcher enters the worlds of others with the assumption that their perspectives are meaningful (Patton, 2002). Qualitative interviewing attempts to understand the meaning structures that participants use to organize their experiences and make sense of their worlds (Hatch, 2002). Thus, the goal of this data-collection method was to use the interview process to elicit thick and rich details regarding the lived experiences of first-generation college students of color.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviewing (Patton, 2002) was used to understand the lived experience of first-generation students of color. Semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate for this study because this type of interviewing supports structure with flexibility. That is, the researcher is permitted to use predetermined interview questions to guide the interview process, a set time is established for each interview, and the interviews are usually recorded (Hatch, 2002). However, although interview questions are determined in advance, the researcher is open to following the lead of the participants in the flow of the interview process.
itself by adapting questions and asking probing questions when necessary (Hatch, 2002; Patton, 2002). In addition to the interview process being semi-structured, the study also employed in-depth interviewing.

In-depth interviewing was appropriate in the data-collection process because the researcher was able to capture thick and rich data from people who have direct experience with a particular phenomenon. Individuals who have direct experience with a particular phenomenon have “lived experience” as opposed to secondhand experience (Patton, 2002). That is, first-generation students of color have a perspective about what it means to be a first-generation student of color. Thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and values, are part of lived experience; therefore, in order to understand these deeper perspectives, face-to-face interaction such as in-depth interviewing is necessary (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton, 2002). Although the primary data-collection method was semi-structured in-depth interviewing, components of phenomenological interviewing was also used.

In-depth interviewing grounded in phenomenological inquiry attempts to answer the question of what it means for something to be (van Manen, 1990). Additionally, it focuses on the lived meanings that events have for individuals and assumes that these meanings guide actions and interactions (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton, 2002). As such, the data-collection method for this study attempted to understand the past and present experiences of the participants in an effort to have a holistic understanding of how the participants view their world.

“Phenomenological interviewing is a specific type of in-depth interviewing grounded in a philosophical tradition” (Marshall & Rossman, p. 104). Phenomenological interviewing captures and describes the meaning of a phenomenon that is shared by several individuals. The component of phenomenological interviewing that was central to this study was the foundational
question that phenomenology attempts to answer—the question of what it means for something to be (van Manen, 1990), or what it means to be a first-generation college student of color.

In an effort to have a holistic understanding of participants’ worldviews, Patton (2002) maintained that there are several types of questions that can be asked of participants during the interview process. Four types of open-ended questions described by Patton were particularly useful for the present study: (a) demographics questions to confirm the criteria used in initial participant selection; (b) questions about experiences and behaviors to understand the complexity of individuals’ experiences; (c) questions exploring feelings to understand how participants feel regarding their lived experiences; and (d) questions about opinions and values. Demographic questions identify characteristics of the people being interviewed. Experience and behavior questions are designed to elicit descriptions of behaviors, experiences, and actions that could have been observed. Feeling questions are designed to elicit emotions. Lastly, answers to opinion and values questions allow people to share their opinions and beliefs regarding a particular experience or issue. Additionally, questions about allow people to share their goals, intentions, and expectations (Patton, 2002, pp. 348-351).

The goal of interviewing is to enter into the world of others in an attempt to understand their worlds through their eyes. However, accomplishing this task requires the development of an interview protocol that will lead to a fruitful conversation. In addition to the four types of questions proposed by Patton (2002), the interview protocol reflect recommendations from: Hatch (2002); Kvale (1996); Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997); and Spradley (1979). During the data-collection process, I opened the interviews with demographic or background questions. Starting an interview with demographic or background questions eases anxiety of participants and allows them to feel comfortable enough to speak about familiar information.
Although demographic questions should start the interview, Hatch (2002) cautioned not to ask a series of short answer questions such as, “How old are you?” or “Where did you go to high school?” because the questions are terse and set the wrong tone for the interview. Therefore, I was careful to ask a general question such as “Would you tell me about your life before college?” Then I asked more specific follow-up questions. Opening the interview with a general background question followed by specific follow-up questions shows interest and starts a pattern of conversation (Hatch, 2002).

After establishing the tone for the interview, I later asked participants questions related to what it means to be a first-generation college student of color on a predominantly White campus. For example, I asked participants “How do you think your life experience differs from a student whose family went to college?” When asking questions about how participants feel about their experiences, I was careful to avoid asking participants “why” questions because this shifts “the dialogue from describing an experience to a more abstract, theoretical discussion” (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997, p. 30).

When designing an interview protocol, “what” questions should be asked first (Kvale, 1996). Probing follow-up questions may then yield the depth necessary to fully understand what participants are describing. For example, I asked participants, “What helps you be successful here at college?” I then followed with two probing questions; “What type of support did you receive your first year?” and “What type of support are you receiving now?” Answering “what” questions yields descriptions because the questions will encourage the participants to talk about the particulars of a social scene with which they are familiar (Spradley, 1979, p. 69). The interview questions developed for the present study can be found in Appendix B. Labels for some of the questions listed reflect the question categories to which that question relates.
Site and Participant Selection

Data for the present study were collected from first-generation students of color who attended the University of North Florida, and who were a part of the Jacksonville Commitment program. The University of North Florida is a comprehensive publicly funded state university with a wide array of majors. The University serves a broad student body drawn from the Northeast Florida region. Of the four higher-education institutions participating in the Jacksonville Commitment program, the University of North Florida is the only state-supported university. The Jacksonville Commitment is a scholarship program under the auspices of the Jacksonville Journey, a program developed in Jacksonville, Florida (Jacksonville Journey Oversight Committee, 2010). The Jacksonville Journey is a comprehensive initiative that was initiated in late 2007 by then Mayor John Peyton to address numerous challenges facing Jacksonville citizens.

The Jacksonville Commitment program under the Jacksonville Journey developed partnerships among four Jacksonville colleges and universities, the Duval County Public School System, and the City of Jacksonville in order to create a “college-going culture” in Jacksonville, Florida. In order for students to be candidates for the Jacksonville Commitment program, they must be eligible for free and reduced lunch at the time of application to the program in their senior year of high school. Additionally, students must be potential graduates from any Duval County public high school with a standard high-school diploma, be admitted to one of the four partnering postsecondary institutions, be a Florida resident, and be eligible for a Pell Grant (Jacksonville Journey Oversight Committee, 2012). The Federal Pell Grant Program provides need-based grants to low-income undergraduate students to promote access to postsecondary education (United States Department of Education, 2012). Thus, given the criteria of the
Jacksonville Commitment program, students in the program are likely to be first-generation students of color with low socioeconomic backgrounds. As a result, students from the Jacksonville Commitment program were ideal participants for the present study.

Because participants were in a unique scholarship program, study participants were comprised of a criterion-based selection (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Criterion-based selection is a typology of sampling that requires the researcher to establish a set of criteria in advance, and then to find only those who meet the criteria developed for a study (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). The criteria established for the present study were directly related to the purpose of the study.

The sample for the present study included students who had met the following criteria:

1. Were a part of the Jacksonville Commitment program;
2. Had self-identified as a first-generation college student;
3. Had self-identified as a student of color; and
4. Had attained junior-level standing as defined by the University of North Florida.

Because of their acquired knowledge about everyday life as first-generation students of color and their ability to communicate their knowledge in their “native language” (Spradley, 1979 p. 25). Juniors were selected for the study because they had survived the first two most challenging years of college (Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010). Additionally, by their junior year, students are more likely to have enough collegiate experience to articulate their experiences and perspectives as first-generation students of color.

After official permission to recruit student participants from the Jacksonville Commitment program was obtained from the Director of the program at the University of North Florida, I provided the Director with an email inviting students to participate in the study (see
Appendix C). The Director emailed 119 students on my behalf inviting them to participate in the study. Students who believed that they met the criteria and wanted to volunteer as participants in the study were asked to contact me directly regarding the study. Of the 119 students who were emailed, 25 students responded with interest to participate in the study. However, given scheduling conflicts, only 12 students were interviewed between May, 2014, and September, 2014. All participants attended college immediately after high school. Therefore, at the time of data collection, all students were between 19 and 22 years of age. Appendix D provides additional self-reported demographic information about each participant. High school preparation indicates the type of college preparation program students were exposed to while in high school. Race represents the group that students identified with during their interview. Family composition reflects who reared students during their K-12 experience. Lastly, major indicates the student’s major at the time of this study.

The number of participants who were interviewed is consistent with recommendations from the methodological literature. For example, Creswell (2007) recommended 5-25 participants, Rudestam and Newton (2007) suggested that 10 or fewer would be appropriate. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) recommended a sample size range of 5-12 participants.

**Interview Process**

Interviews with the students took place at the University of North Florida in the library. Meeting on campus was convenient for the participants because they either lived on campus or because they were on campus for classes. Two hours were allocated for each interview. This timeframe gave me the opportunity to ask semi-structured interview questions with follow-up and probing questions in a flexible way. Prior to the interviews, I explained the process of informed consent and had each participant sign an informed consent document (see Appendix E).
The informed consent document explained the intent of the study, the recording of the interviews, the steps that were taken to maintain participant confidentiality, the risks and benefits of participating in the study, and the possible use of the results of the study. The signed consent form was returned to me prior to the start of the interview, and a copy was subsequently emailed to the participants the next day for future reference. At the conclusion of each interview, I gave each participant a $10 gift card per their selection when they confirmed their participation in the study by email.

Various steps were taken to protect the participants. Before the start of each interview, I reminded each participant that their participation was voluntary and they could end the interview at any time. Additionally, before the start of each interview, I reminded participants that their identity would remain confidential and asked each participant to select a pseudonym that would later be used to identify his or her stories through the study. Transcripts of the recorded interviews were stored on a password-protected secured server at the University of North Florida. After the interviews were transcribed, the transcriptions were stored on a secure server. Notes taken during the interviews were electronically scanned and also stored on a secure server at the University of North Florida, with the originals then destroyed.

**Role of Researcher**

In qualitative research, the researcher is ethically obligated to acknowledge her or his role in the data-collection and analysis processes and to recognize the possibility that his or her experience and prior knowledge may influence the research process (Howe & Eisenhart, 1990). This recognition requires that I acknowledge my connoisseurship related to this study and account for my knowledge as it might have influenced the research process. Eisner (1998) described the experience and knowledge of the researcher as “connoisseurship” and noted that
connoisseurship relates to the use of background knowledge “to make fine-grained
discriminations among complex and subtle qualities” (p. 63).

From a different, phenomenological prospective, bracketing is described as the “process
of removing conceptual biases that may serve to distort one’s interpretive vision” (Pollio,
Henley, & Thompson, 1997, p. 4). Dismissing or shedding all existing knowledge of a
phenomenon before being able to gain a true understanding of participants’ experiences is known
as transcendental phenomenology (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997). Existential
phenomenology, on the other hand, rejects this position, arguing instead that “bracketing is better
described positively, as a way of seeing. Rather than suspending worldly knowledge, the
interpreter applies a world view such that a phenomenological understanding may emerge”
(Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997, p. 48). For the purposes of this study, I embraced Eisner’s
(1998) view and the position of existential phenomenology. This position considers one’s
background and connoisseurship as positive, even as it cautions the researcher to maintain
“empathic neutrality” (Patton, 2002, p. 49) through the research process.

A first point in recognizing my role as a researcher in this study is to acknowledge that I
am an African American. Furthermore, I was a first-generation African American college
student who was raised in an inner-city south Florida community. I have direct experience of
growing up without my biological parents, living in subsidized housing, working part-time,
being robbed, and not being exposed to college preparation courses in high school. Fortunately,
I was raised by a grandmother who was determined to shield me from the prolonged dangers and
challenges of inner-city living. Additionally, I had an older relative who was a grade level ahead
of me, which allowed him to share with me his experience and the necessary steps in planning
for college. Ultimately, I graduated from high school and college, earned a master’s degree, and was eventually hired as a community-college administrator.

Another dimension of the researcher as tool is my interest in the phenomenon being studied. My interest is rooted in the various American education reform efforts designed to increase the academic performance of students and to narrow the achievement gap between students of color and their White peers. Minority students continue to be disproportionately represented among those living in poverty and entering K-12 schooling without the expected skills, which consequently influences both their K-12 school experiences and their subsequent enrollment in postsecondary education.

In my role as a middle-level administrator at a large state college, I assisted first-generation college students who were homeless, had been abused, had unhealthy relationships with their parents, and exhibited other challenges that negatively impacted their schooling experiences. For approximately 12 years, I have counseled, mentored, and supported hundreds of minority students at the state college and university levels. I have heard the compelling stories shared by minority students who struggled with their academics, with their financial responsibilities, with psychological and emotional issues, and with being rejected and abused by family and friends. Their experiences illuminated themes of despair, hopelessness, and low expectations for their futures.

I should also acknowledge that given my age, I am considered Generational X, and the participants in this study are considered the Millennial Generation. Therefore, I recognize that my thoughts, values, and perspectives are aligned with where I am situated on the generational continuum and may in turn influence this study. Although I was a first-generation college student, I do not claim to know or understand a priori the lived experiences of the students who
participated in this study. Their experiences were unique to them, and their world views were shaped by their lived experiences. Yet, given my background, I recognize that my life experiences have played a role in the process.

Chapter Summary

Chapter Three presented qualitative research methodologies appropriate for understanding the schooling experiences of first-generation college students of color in a predominantly White institution (PWI). Qualitative research was the most appropriate research approach for this study because “human actions cannot be understood unless the meaning that humans assign to them is understood” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 53). Additionally, qualitative research was most appropriate for this study because it is an approach to revealing the complexities that influence the experiences of people in an effort to deepen knowledge and understanding. More specifically, phenomenological research was used to understand the schooling experiences of first-generation college students of color and what it means to be a first-generation college student of color.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviewing coupled with components of phenomenological interviewing was the data collection method used in the present study. Semi-structured interviews were most aligned with the purpose of this study because this type of interviewing supports structure with flexibility. In-depth interviewing was an appropriate data collection method because the researcher was able to capture thick and rich data from people who have direct experience with a particular phenomenon. Characteristics of phenomenological interviewing were incorporated into the design of the study given the focus of phenomenology on capturing and describing the meaning of a phenomenon that is shared by several individuals.
As a result, the semi-structured, in-depth interviewing process provided thick, rich narratives regarding the past and present experiences of first-generation college students of color.

This chapter also discussed the process of inviting students to participate in the present study, the criteria for participant selection, and the role of the researcher. Lastly, this chapter presented ethical considerations and identified strategies to maintain confidentiality. The overall goal of this chapter was to present an approach and rationale for conducting qualitative research aimed at capturing the perceptions of first-generation college students at the junior level in a predominantly White institution (PWI) regarding their school experiences.
CHAPTER FOUR
DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative research is an approach to investigating the complexities of human experience by seeking knowledge and understanding (Creswell 2007; Patton, 2002). To that end, the purpose of this chapter is to present an analysis of data collected in 2015 from 12 first-generation college students of color at the University of North Florida, in Jacksonville, Florida. These students were part of the Jacksonville Commitment, a program which provided wrap-around services designed to foster post-secondary academic success. Data analysis addressed the research question for this study: How do first-generation college students of color at the junior level, in a predominantly White institution (PWI), perceive their schooling experiences? The research question was designed to give voice to a group of students who otherwise may not have had the opportunity to share their perspectives. The data provided both voice and context regarding how students negotiated their schooling experiences, given their first-generation status as students of color.

Data collection focused on semi-structured, in-depth interviewing grounded in phenomenological inquiry, which in part attempted to examine what it means to be a first-generation college student of color (van Manen, 1990). The interview questions focused on how the participants perceived their lived experiences and how they perceived the contributions of those experiences in guiding their actions and interactions (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton, 2002). In an effort to describe, understand, and give meaning to the data from the interviews, three data analysis strategies were used. An overview of data analysis is described in the following section.
Overview of Data Analysis

Qualitative research studies give life and meaning to social phenomena (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton, 2002). Bringing order, structure, and interpretation to the data collected enables the researcher to understand the meanings of social phenomena to the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) in order to develop professional knowledge. Such interpretation involves a systematic search for meaning (Hatch, 2002).

This systematic search for meaning is influenced by the researcher’s connoisseurship regarding the phenomena being studied (Eisner, 1998). Connoisseurship is the ability to know through the art of appreciation. Such appreciation is developed through one’s meaning-making regarding life experiences. In part, my connoisseurship is shaped by my lived experienced as a first-generation African American college student. Therefore, I must acknowledge my connoisseurship related to this study and account for my knowledge, as my knowledge and experience have influenced the research process. In addition, my knowledge of the theoretical and research literature regarding African American college student experiences has informed the research process.

As previously discussed in Chapter Three, the qualitative researcher is ethically obligated to acknowledge her role in data collection and analysis processes. Additionally, the researcher must recognize the possibility that her experiences and prior knowledge could influence the research process (Howe & Eisenhart, 1990). This recognition requires that I acknowledge my connoisseurship related to this study and how it may have influenced the research process as a whole and particularly within data analysis. My interest in first-generation students of color arose both from my personal experiences as an African American who was a first-generation student and from my professional experiences working with first-generation students of color.
Given my personal and professional background, it is important that I am transparent to the readers of this study regarding my lived experiences.

I was a first-generation African American college student who was raised in an inner-city south Florida community. My background is similar to what is described in the literature with regard to first-generation students of color. That is, I have direct experiences of growing up without my biological parents, living in subsidized housing, working part-time, and not being exposed to college preparation courses in high-school. Additionally, I experienced anxiety and life stressors at various points in my adolescence as a result of a dysfunctional home environment.

In my role as a middle-level administrator in public higher education, I have worked with first-generation college students who were homeless, had been abused, and experienced life stressors that forced them to reevaluate the possible trajectory of their lives. For approximately 12 years, I have counseled, mentored, and supported hundreds of minority students at the state college and university levels. Therefore, given my personal and professional experience, I acknowledge that my experience may intersect with how I seek meaning in and analyze the data.

Three major data analysis approaches were used in the present study: (a) educational criticism (Eisner, 1998); (b) typological analysis (Hatch, 2002); and (c) interpretive analysis (Hatch). Figure 2 provides an illustration of the interconnection of the three approaches to data analysis in the present study.
Eisner’s (1998) educational criticism served as the primary data analysis approach, supported by typological and interpretive analysis (Hatch, 2002). Although three major data analysis approaches were used in this study, the researcher’s connoisseurship framed the overall process. That is, the researcher’s experience as a first-generation college student of color and professional experience in the field of post-secondary education framed the interpretative process used in the present study.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data related to the focus of the present study: the perceptions of first-generation college students of color at the junior level who were attending a predominantly White institution (PWI). Once the interviews were concluded, I began my initial analysis by using a six-step process, which were organized based on recommendations of Hatch (2002) and Patton (2002).

1) I transcribed the interviews verbatim.
2) I read the transcripts thoroughly.
3) I developed tentative typologies based on topics in the literature review, my connoisseurship regarding students of color and their first-generation status, and my research notes.

4) I thoroughly reread the transcripts as a whole within a short period of time and noted recurring statements or ideas representing the typologies. During this process, the tentative typologies were also revised.

5) I reread the transcripts numerous times and color-coded statements or ideas related to each of the typologies.

6) I grouped the coded statements under the appropriate typologies.

7) I reviewed data not initially connected to a typology, identified where such might fit, or saved the information for future reference if needed for further data analysis.

These steps served not only to organize the data, but also to begin data analysis itself.

In the first step, I transcribed the interview data. It was important to transcribe the interview data verbatim to represent what the students actually shared. Listening to the interviews again during the data transcription process was helpful to engage more deeply with the data. Once the interview data were transcribed, the next step was to read and reread the data for accuracy and to identify tentative typologies. The typologies used in the present study were informed by the literature review and my own connoisseurship regarding the experiences of first-generation college students of color.

During the interviews, I took research notes. My research notes also guided the development of the typologies. The notes were observations of nonverbal behaviors, student reactions during the interview process, my ideas regarding potential categories for data analysis, and other areas for follow-up inquiry. Finally, after the initial draft of the typologies, I reviewed
my data again to refine the typologies and develop sub-categories. I listened to the interviews again for the purpose of understanding and reflecting on the data.

Data transcription is an intimate process that is cultivated by reading and reflecting on the data collected from participants. Because transcription requires listening and reflecting on the interview data, it was important for me to be aware of my connoisseurship and monitor my subjectivity (Peshkin, 1988). Although subjectivity is unavoidable, continually repeating the steps of listening, transcribing, and reading the data gave me the opportunity to focus on the content of the interviews, thereby minimizing my subjectivity. This process also contributed to data analysis within the typologies that will be described later in this chapter.

Specific Data Analysis Approaches

Data analysis is a systematic search for meaning. Analysis requires organization of data in a way that allows the researcher to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, and extrapolate meaning (Hatch, 2002, p. 148). The structure of educational criticism provided the overall framework for data analysis in the present study. Hatch’s typological analysis and interpretive analysis supported two of the four dimensions of educational criticism—description and interpretation. Throughout the process of data analysis, I consulted with a senior scholar in qualitative research who offered feedback and critique in order to ground the analysis in evidence and with appropriate and logical connections to relevant literature.

Educational Criticism

Educational criticism (Eisner, 1998) was the primary data analysis strategy used in this study. The primary purpose of educational criticism is to increase understanding through four dimensions—description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics (p. 88). However, criticism cannot take place void of connoisseurship. Educational connoisseurship is the “art of
appreciation” of the complexities inherent in experiences, and educational criticism is the “art of disclosure” with regard to what one appreciates (p. 86). Although educational connoisseurship is a private act, educational is the act of making such connoisseurship public in order to provide others with insight (Eisner).

Description, the first dimension, enables readers to connect to the experiences described by participants. Readers might imagine the situation being described as if they were living within the situation. The second dimension, interpretation, involves making sense or meaning of the descriptions. That is, interpretation is the process that requires the critic to explain the meaning of the data and to make inferences from the data. For the present study, research literature, theoretical literature, and my connoisseurship contributed to the interpretation of the data. Because Eisner (1998) argued that the educational critic is obligated to consider the values evident in the data, the third dimension of educational criticism is the act of assess the values evident in the data. In assessing value, the researcher acknowledges, based on the data, if participant perceptions regarding their experiences reflect experiences that fostered growth and development, were inconsequential experiences that did not have a lasting impact, or were experiences that hindered growth and development. Thematics, the final dimension, is the process that identifies recurring messages within the data (Eisner, 1998; Patton, 2002). These four dimensions of educational criticism organized the process of data analysis used in the present study.

**Typological Analysis**

Typological analysis was used to describe the data in the present study. Typological analysis is a data analysis strategy that begins with dividing the overall data set into categories or typologies (Hatch, 2002). The initial step in developing typologies is to recognize information in
the literature that supports the study while being cognizant of the gaps in the literature. Prior to solidifying categories, possible typologies were noted during the data collection phase as I reflected on data and took notes after the interview sessions. Next, during the transcription of the data, I listened to and then read the data, made further notes, and highlighted areas related to possible typologies. After transcriptions, I read the data several times and noted statements or ideas that related to one typology at a time (Hatch, 2002).

Four typologies were developed to frame the analysis of this study: (a) family relationships; (b) socioeconomic status; (c) resilience; and (d) college retention and persistence. After an identification of the typologies, the data were read again in order to identify where in the data each typology was addressed. Then, these sections were color-coded using highlighters to represent each typology. This process allowed me to easily identify statements associated with a given typology. After color-coding the data, I read the data again, focusing on one typology at a time, which allowed me to identify sub-categories within each typology.

**Interpretive Analysis**

Similar to the interpretive dimension of educational criticism, Hatch (2002) described interpretive analysis as the process of extrapolating meaning, attaching significance, and developing insight. Interpretive analysis is the “why” in the data process (Hatch, 2002, p. 180). Literature, theories, and my connoisseurship were used to give meaning to the schooling experiences of students in the present study.

**Presentation of Data Analysis**

Data analysis in the study presented accounts by students during their interviews. Thus, the first part of data analysis is description (Eisner, 1998) using typological analysis (Hatch, 2002). Hatch’s typological analysis approach led to the identification of several typologies
relevant to the schooling experiences of first-generation college students of color. The concept of self-efficacy was also extrapolated from the interview transcripts and was used to explain the persistence of students within this study.

The interviewees used different terms to describe their lived experiences, and it was evident that their stories were similar as it related to their academic preparation, home life, and collegiate experience. Further analysis of their stories also provided clarity about the locus of their motivation, which was either intrinsically or extrinsically related to familial bonds. Additionally, it was clear that students believed at the time of entering college, that they had the ability to matriculate successfully. This feeling of self-efficacy supported their academic success in college. The following four sections of data analysis both describe and interpret the data by typology. Because “descriptions of experiences and interpretations are so intertwined that they often become one” (Patton, 2002, p. 106), typological and interpretive analysis was used simultaneously to describe the experiences of first-generation students of color and subsequently to give meaning to their experiences. Individually and collectively, the descriptions present a portrait of the environmental and social factors that students perceived as relating to their academic success and influencing their perspectives of the world.

**Typology 1: Family Relationships**

Many students in this study attributed their academic success in part to strong family relationships. Students defined those they considered family based upon different characteristics. For some students, family included only biological relatives, and, for others, family also included adults from school or the community who provided support and encouragement. Throughout the interviews, students shared the importance of family relationships in their lives. Whether referred to as familial bonds or connections to extended
family, teachers, or mentors, students reported that at least one adult in their lives was critical to them feeling nurtured, valued, and supported.

For example, although Olivia was raised by her great grandmother, aunt, and two uncles, she also considered her 9th grade teacher as family.

So, my great grandmother raised me and looked out for me, but it seemed like each school year, there was someone else looking out for me. When I got to high school, the hardness of my college prep high school got to me. My biology teacher pulled me into her room closet and was like, “You are better than this. Why are you acting like this?” She encouraged me to go to tutoring, and she supported me. We become like family. Ms. Baker is the one I call when I feel like giving up. I use to have anxiety attacks, and she would calm me down and encourage me to keep pushing. My grandmother also kept me calm when I became overwhelmed with the pressure to perform.

Although Olivia struggled in school, she had a small network of people who provided the necessary support for her to be successful. The relationship that Olivia shared with her teacher, together with her great grandmother’s support, was the added layer of protection she needed to excel and develop as a potential first-generation college student of color. Olivia’s relationship with her high-school teacher echoes the literature regarding the positive correlation between social support and reduced academic and personal stress (Brooks, 2015; Pollock, Kazman, & Deuster, 2014).

Evidence from the literature indicates that parental involvement and interest in a student’s academics are directly related to the academic success of students (Pollock, Kazman, & Deuster, 2015; Nichols, Kotchick, Barry, & Haskins, 2010). For example, although some parents may not have attended college, their interest in and valuing of education influence the academic achievement of their children. Valuing education and setting expectations start at the outset of students’ educational experience and continue throughout their K-12 experiences. Parental involvement in education also has a positive correlation to students’ educational aspirations and post-secondary plans (Nichols, Kotchick, Barry, & Haskins, 2010).
John’s parents were very involved in his education. John was raised in a traditional two-parent household that included nine siblings. Because John was the oldest, his family expected him to take on a paternal role with his younger siblings. Additionally, John’s parents expected him to perform at high levels in school. John’s father retired from the military, and his mother took care of the home. From John’s perspective, his family circle consisted of his parents, siblings, and those members of his church family. John eagerly shared:

My father is a family man. He always stressed family, God, and the importance of doing better than he did. He wants us to do better, achieve more. My father taught me life lessons like paying bills, being respectful, and being obedient to God. We always had family devotions. Now that I’m in college, I call in for family devotions. That’s our bonding time.

Analysis of the data revealed that John was very proud of his family and admired his father. His father served his country, instilled the importance of God and spirituality in his children, supported a family of 12, and challenged John to be a man of integrity. Family systems theory may explain the bond amongst John and his family.

Family systems theory is an identifiable system that operates within itself. The theory begins with the argument that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2004). Flexibility and cohesion are key to the overall functioning of any family system. The intersection of flexibility and cohesion establishes the level of balance within a family system. The ideal balance of flexibility and cohesion yields optimal family functioning, which ultimately works to reduce the level of stress. This approach is relevant to various life adjustments experienced by certain populations such as college students, minority students, and single parents (Whitchurch & Constantine, 2004). Similar to other students in this study, a support network was key in John’s life, particularly to help him navigate the intersecting challenges associated with being a first-generation student, being a student of color, and adapting.
to the dominant White culture (Guiffrida, 2005; Love, 2008; Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007). For John, spiritual devotions were central to family cohesion, keeping him connected to the family while in college.

Minority students contend with a myriad of factors as they transition to college (Howard, 2007; McConnell, 2000; Terenzini et al., 1996). The students in this study transitioned to a predominantly White institution. As such, these students had to negotiate a dominant culture that did not mirror their own (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Martin, 2005). Most of the students in this study did not possess the social and cultural capital needed to immediately integrate into a predominantly White institution (Rothstein, 2004; Shaw et al., 1999). However, they benefited from positive nurturing relationships with adults who cared about their success. Helen recalled the support she received from her family.

I have a great, great, great family support. My mom, godparents, and cousin are awesome. I didn’t realize how much support I had until I talked to people whose parents don’t help them out or encourage them. I’ve always had people in my corner saying “Helen, you can do it.” I consider my cousin to be my second mom. She would always drop anything she was doing if me, my sister, and brother needed something, especially if it had to do with school. So, yeah, support has definitely got me this far.

Such supportive family relationships encouraged students to apply and subsequently attend college. Family influences played a major role in the academic aspirations of students in this study. Helen’s older immediate family members were proud of her high-school performance, and it was understood that she would attend college. As a result, some family members sacrificed their limited resources to ensure that Helen was supported. For most students in this study, positive familial relationships continued in college, which supported their academic success and persistence.
Although most students in this study described positive family relationships, others acknowledged that some of their family experiences were negative. Olivia described her family as “jacked up” [dysfunctional], which she used as a growth opportunity.

Some of my family members are sad and miserable. I mean, they can’t be happy for anyone. When I told some of them about me going to college, they laughed. It was kinda like a joke to them. Even now, when I’m about to graduate from college, all that I hear from them is, “You’re not gonna make it,” or “That degree isn’t gonna get you what you wanna get; you’re still gonna be here in the hood.” No matter what, they are still gonna try to find a way to keep me in this one little box. I guess it’s pretty obvious that my relationship with some of my family members is negative at best.

Olivia was determined to experience the world beyond a five-block radius that she called “a little box.” Although the literature argues that negative family relationships may cause psychological distress, Olivia had the strength to recognize the negativism thus countered the negativism as a motivational tool to succeed. Family dysfunction can either elevate psychological strain or promote a high level of self-efficacy (Griffin, 2006; Nicolas et al., 2008). With such self-efficacy, students can be more motivated, which in turn affects goal setting. Further, their motivation may contribute to more effort (Griffin, 2006).

Ingrid also described her family as dysfunctional. However, unlike Olivia’s economic and psychological family dysfunction, Ingrid’s description of her family dysfunction related to their tactics to control her behavior and decisions.

My family was financially stable, but unstable at the same time. My family is very traditional and conservative, and I would consider myself more liberal, which caused a lot of issues. They gave me no breathing room. They were overprotective, so I rebelled. It’s almost like they wanted the best for me, but under their terms and conditions. Because I don’t do things their way, they don’t help me much. If they can’t control you, they will not help you.

The control tactics of Ingrid’s family were couched in their concern for her wellbeing. Ingrid’s family interjected themselves into her life, which did not lessen her level of stress. However, she
responded to the stress positively, which was evidence of Ingrid’s belief in her ability to be successful and independent of her family.

Family relationships are complex, multifaceted systems that play a major role in the lives of students of color (Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Pollock, Kazman, & Deuster, 2015; Nichols, Kotchick, Barry, & Haskins, 2010). Students provided insight into their unique backgrounds, which were important in understanding their perspectives and worldviews. Positive family influences, whether from biological parents, extended relatives, or teachers, had a positive influence on the success of students in the present study. Although some relationships were challenged by financial pressures, unresolved issues outside of the students’ control, or negativism, students used these family dynamics as an example of what they did not want their lives to become in the future. Overall, although students were challenged by their first-generation status, their support networks provided them with the necessary balance of challenge and support to help them be successful.

**Typology 2: Socioeconomic Status**

Socioeconomic status can be used as a lens to understand the schooling experiences of first-generation college students of color. Students of color from low-income backgrounds typically experience a number of interlocking circumstances that may explain the challenges that they encounter as they transition from high school to postsecondary education (Jackson, 2007; Pascarella, 2003; Rothstein 2004). Because the students in this present study came from homes with limited financial resources, many students worked while in college. Although these students worked while in high school and in college to help support their families, the additional income was often not enough to make a significant difference. Students from low income homes typically have higher rates of mobility and transportation challenges (Berliner, 2009; Rothstein,
It wasn’t easy growing up poor. My mom was on Section 8 [government subsidized housing]. Although the rent was being subsidized by the government, we still struggled to pay the rent, buy food, keep the lights on, pay for gas—you name it, we struggled to get it. Being on Section 8 meant that my mom wasn’t supposed to earn over a certain amount. I remember being evicted from one place because the government found out that my mother was working too much. We had to move to a trailer park. When we moved, life got a bit more stressful because my mother was no longer eligible for subsidized housing. I remember coming home, and the lights were disconnected because my mother could not afford to pay the bill.

Many students in the study shared similar experiences growing up in homes where resources were limited. For some, being poor seemed normal because they were always poor, and families in their neighborhood were poor. Therefore, working to contribute to household bills or providing food for the family was simply a way of life, not an option.

Some students in the present study found it difficult to maintain their grades while being in a home environment that was not necessarily conducive to their academic success. Kat shared her story in a melancholy tone, as if she had emotionally returned to a place that she described as difficult and unstable.

I never really had a stable home. I lived with different family members, friends of the family, all in poor areas. I worked so I could buy the things I needed because the people I lived with barely had enough money to pay the rent or keep the lights on. It was tough working and taking Advanced Placement classes, but I’ve always enjoyed school, so I made it work. I believed in myself and knew I could do anything if I worked hard enough. I graduated with over a 4.0, which is amazing given all that I experienced in high-school. One of my goals is simply to make a better life for myself because living the way I used to live is no way for a person to live.

Although Kat received minimal support from her family and did not have a stable foundation, she understood the importance of education and believed in her ability to be successful. Kat did not allow her environment to negatively influence her academic performance. Although not directly stated, Kat’s various living environments and her frequent mobility most likely made it
difficult for her to maintain her grades presented challenges likely made it difficult for her to maintain her grades and some form of mental and emotional stability.

Similarly, Amiyah experienced conditions associated with being low-income. Amiyah was raised in a home with two parents, but her mother did not work. Her father was the provider, but his income was not enough to support a household of four. Amiyah further elaborated:

My first year of Early College, the college prep program I was in during high school, was stressful because of my parents’ financial situation. We had to move in with my aunt because we didn’t have enough money to move into our own place. Four of us were living in one room in my aunt’s mobile home. My brother and I slept on the floor, and my parents slept in the bed. That time in our lives was really tough. Then we found out that my mom was pregnant. My mother was always worried, and my father seemed disconnected from the family most of the time. We didn’t know what we were going to do, and that was really hard.

Early College is a high-school acceleration program that provides high achieving students the opportunity to earn both high-school and college credit for enrolling in and subsequently passing college courses. Because the program can yield college credit, students must qualify to take college course work. Amiyah’s enrollment in the program is evidence of her ability to succeed, despite what some may consider improbable odds (Howley, Howley, Howley, & Duncan, 2013).

Literature has consistently reflected that in college, financial burdens continue to play a significant role in the lives of many first-generation students of color who work to help support their families (McConnell, 2000; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003). For example, Olivia shared her experience working and going to college full-time.

I work 30 hours a week because I have to help my great grandmother because she is on a fixed income, and she also helps support other family members. My other family members know her situation, but they don’t seem to care. They know that she is on a fixed income, but they still borrow money that they never repay. One month she got behind on Jacksonville Electric Authority, and she called me to ask for the money. The bill was over $200. So, I had to pull some money together to pay the bill. Working and going to school full-time is difficult, but it makes me feel good to be able to help support
my grandmother. My grandmother sacrificed so much for me, so providing financial support is the least that I can do to show my appreciation.

Working to help support family members is the norm for many first-generation students of color (McConnell, 2000). Balancing the need to work and maintain college scholarship requirements can be difficult, yet Olivia managed to provide support to her grandmother while disengaging from the demands of college.

Although students in the present study experienced being poor, John’s experience was different. Because his father retired from the military, the family was financially stable. As a result, John did not come from a low-income family. Therefore, some of the challenges that the other students in the study faced were not a concern for John:

My parents have always taken good care of me and my siblings. My mom never had to work post being married, and she’s been a great stay-at-home mom. She always handles the business at the house and helps my dad with anything he needs. They are both pretty business-minded. My parents are always talking to us about building a legacy and doing well in school so we can have a good life. We are actually building a new house right now. We just need a bigger house. Our family is forever expanding, and my dad is a future thinker. He’s thinking about his grandbabies and his future daughters-in-law and sons-in-law. He’s always thinking about that.

The notion of building a legacy might seem far removed from the thoughts of parents of first-generation students of color. These parents have to contend with inadequate housing, low-paying jobs, and being single parents. The day-to-day struggle of providing for a household from limited income is burdensome. Although John’s parents did not attend college, the military provided his parents with stability and a degree of social capital that shaped John’s view of the world.

Similarities and differences were evident in the interview data. These similarities and differences both supported and departed from the literature. For example, some students worked to support themselves and a family member. However, working did not negatively impact their
academic success, in contrast to the literature, which typically argues that students struggle with balancing financial and educational obligations (McConnell, 2000; Pascarella et al., 2003). Students in the present study did not allow outside factors to circumvent their academic goals. Their academic preparation was central to their persistence, and, thus, they did not consider failure an option.

**Typology 3: Resilience**

First-generation students of color come to the K-12 schooling environment with a number of life challenges that influence their ability to be successful (Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Miller, 2007; McConnell, 2000; Pascarella et al., 2003; Rothstein, 2004; Shaw et al., 1999). Unlike White students, students of color are more likely to experience life stressors that are typically associated with the intersectionality of their minority status and social class. For example, first-generation students of color are more likely to come from single parent households, live in racially defined communities, attend predominantly minority high schools, and have limited funds and resources (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009; Rothstein, 2004). Such risk factors have the potential to negatively affect the social and psychological adjustment of students. If students do not have the necessary skills and support to help them appropriately deal with difficulties, they have the propensity to disengage in a way that is counterproductive to social adjustment and academic success (Brown, 2008; Rothstein, 2004). However, some first-generation students of color perform academically at higher rates in adverse settings and thus demonstrate high rates of resilience or educational resilience (Williams & Bryan, 2013). Resilience can be seen as the result of two intersecting forces—risk factors and protective factors.
Risk Factors. Many students in this study overcame circumstances that had the potential to limit their opportunities to be successful. Circumstances associated with their minority status (Morales, 2014; Williams & Bryan, 2013) were risk factors that seemed to be normalized over time. Although the literature indicates that such risk factors tend to influence the ability of students to be successful, students in this study negotiated various areas in their lives. However, risk factors such as unstable living environments, limited financial resources, and a lack of family support made it difficult for some students in the present study to enjoy and be fully engaged in their schooling experience.

Kat reflected on the environmental risk factor that impacted her childhood:

Life as a child was horrible. My mother died when I was younger, so me and my siblings moved with my father and his girlfriend. His girlfriend didn’t like us. She kicked us out of the house because she didn’t like us living there. I’ve never really lived in a stable environment. Being gay caused other issues. The mental and emotional impact was a bit much.

Risk factors affect individuals differently. Kat had to face not only how to deal with the emotional and mental feelings of being unwanted, but also how to handle being a gay woman in a society that is not always accepting. As a result, identity development likely became even more complicated for Kat. Managing the sociological and psychological impact of being gay is a multifaceted dynamic. Students who identify as LGBT are challenged regarding how to develop their social role, how to manage stigma, how to become more self-aware, and how to develop a homosexual self-image (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

In addition to environmental risk factors, students in this study faced other risk factors such as abuse—substance abuse and physical abuse. Helen described a home environment that exposed her to risks or stressors that later fueled her desire to be academically successful.

Before my mom moved back to California, she was an alcoholic. Growing up with her was just stressful. So not only were we poor; my mom was an alcoholic. I was on
eggshells. When me and my sister would get out of school, we would always ask my brother, “So how’s mom doing; what mood is she in?” Now that I’m older, I think it was more than alcohol. Sometimes I find myself mad that she waited so long to get sober. I could have had an easier life and been a lot more relaxed. But I just continued to work hard in school so I could eventually do something different.

Although Jane’s life experience was not that of dealing with an alcoholic parent, she experienced physical abuse.

My daughter’s dad was really abusive. He was verbally and physically abusive. I stayed in the relationship so I would have someone to watch my daughter while I went to school and went to work. I had two jobs and went to school. My second year in college, I left my daughter’s dad and got an apartment off campus.

Although Helen and Jane experienced environments that exposed them to forms of abuse, their desire to have a better life fostered what researchers have described as psychological resilience (Love, 2008; Kenny & Rice, 1995). Psychological resilience enables individuals to adapt to a situation or environment despite adverse life circumstances.

Helen and Jane experienced life stressors brought on by environmental factors and financial difficulty. The literature indicates that such life stressors can lead to psychological distress. Academic difficulty can exacerbate stressors, which can lead to heightened mental distress (Kenny & Rice, 1995; Love, 2008). However, Helen’s and Jane’s apparent internal locus of control and the support they received from other family members were enough to counter the life stressors they experienced while in abusive environments.

**Protective Factors.** Protective factors are attributes that exist in a person’s environment that decrease the negative effects caused by life stressors. Protective factors such as support from family, friends, and the community lessen the impact of stress and mitigate against academic failure (Love, 2008; Williams & Bryan, 2013).
Oliva recounted the importance of supportive friends:

My first semester in college, I started hanging with the wrong group of girls. I was partying all night, not getting enough sleep, barely making it to class, and somehow lost myself. I was raised in the church and stopped going. One of my good high-school friends noticed my behavior and the fact that I stopped going to church. I told her I had took a break from church because I didn’t have time, and she said, “No, you need to start going back to church.” My friend knew that I was slipping. One day I called her, and she dropped what she was doing, came over to my room, and prayed for me.

Olivia’s decision to change her group of friends is evidence of her self-reflection and her acknowledgment of the potential consequences that could result from poor decisions. Although Olivia did not directly state that she was disappointed in herself about engaging in risky behavior her first semester in college, her decision to call a spiritually grounded friend is evidence of her need to regroup and reframe. The decision of Olivia’s friend to immediately come to her aid and pray for her is an example of a protective factor that Olivia needed at a specific time in her college life.

Protective factors and coping factors play a major role in the affirmation and development of students of color (Brown, 2008; Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007). Students in the present study were connected to an exclusive scholarship program that provided a support network and resources designed to counter risk factors and yield academic success. The Jacksonville Commitment program can be considered a protective factor because the program provided students with leadership opportunities and professionals who supported them during their first two critical years in college, and committed to support them through their matriculation. The program was akin to a learning community that consisted of students working toward a common goal.

Many of the students in the study discussed at length the support they received from the program. In particular, students reported that the program reinforced the importance of
education in general and stressed the importance of persisting to graduation. Jamar and Jane shared similar stories regarding the support they received from the program.

The program has been great. We have advisors who help us to pick our classes. And if we have problems, they help us to navigate the issues. It’s like you always have someone there to help you with the challenges of school. If I wasn’t in the program, I don’t think I would be as successful. It’s like we’re a family because we have meetings with adults and other students in the program. Some of us even study together, given our major and the scholarship program. (Jamar)

You get to talk to other people who have the scholarship and talk to others who are first-generation students. You also get to network with people. I’ve developed a good relationship with my financial and academic advisors in the program. You work with advisors who are always encouraging. There were workshops on Fridays and other events that were organized for us. I enjoyed the events and hearing their stories that motivated us to continue on. (Jane)

The literature highlights the importance of identifying factors that contribute to or promote psychological stability among students of color (Brooks, 2015; Love, 2008). Often students are working to understand who they are and how to operate in a world that seems disconnected from their home lives and family. Therefore, building and sustaining strong relationships with adults are critical to their maturation (Berk, 1998; Love, 2008). The Jacksonville Commitment program was instrumental in helping students adjust to college and encouraged relationship development. Various scholarship requirements were incorporated into the program, which aided in the transition process and fostered relationship-building amongst students and program professionals.

For many college students, the transition to college comes with multidimensional challenges (Brown, 2008; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2003; Strayhorn, 2006). Students in the present study embraced protective factors that served as coping strategies to navigate the challenges they faced. Many of the students in this study had an internal locus of control (Aspelmeier, Love, McGill, Elliott, & Pierce, 2012) and tended to view adversities as learning
opportunities to control their life outcomes. Alean recounted her struggle during her freshman year.

My first semester in college was hard. I came in the spring, so I missed chances to join clubs and organizations. In high school, I was social, and people knew me. Then I got to college, and kids here weren’t trying to socialize with me. I was depressed and felt alone. I didn’t know how to deal with what I was feeling, but I knew I had to figure it out.

Alean recognized that she was not the same persons she was in high school. For Alean, finding relatedness and social connections was difficult and negatively impacted her emotional and mental well-being. She understood the source of her developmental challenge, but she lacked the motivation to mediate the issue. However, she had a degree of internal locus of control and believed that she could rectify the situation.

I lived on campus with a high-school friend. She told me I needed to get involved. For me, this social thing was hard because in high school, I was so social and people knew who I was. But when I got to college, none of that mattered, so I was like really lost. But I knew I had to figure it out. I know I went to like the Women’s Center once to talk to some people there. Besides going to the Women Center, I decided to join a sorority sophomore year, which helped a lot. It’s like way easier now. You feel like you’re at UNF, but you are also within a smaller community.

Various student development and student engagement theories highlight the need for connection, relatedness, or interpersonal relationships (Jenkins-Guarnieri, Vaughan, Wright, 2015). Alean had a heightened sense of the need to be connected, the need to belong. She transitioned to college and realized that she had to rediscover herself in a world that that seemed drastically different from her previous life. However, given Alean’s internal locus of control (Aspelmeier, Love, McGill, Elliott, & Pierce, 2012), she believed that she could control that complex moment in her life, and that belief positively affected her subsequent social engagement and her well-being.

Most literature paints the lives of first-generation students with a broad brush. The literature postulates that first-generation students of color come to the college environment
without the requisite academic and social skills needed to be successful. However, the students in the present study challenged the view that their minority and low-income status would result in low academic performance (Williams & Bryan, 2013). Students in this study demonstrated that they were capable of exceeding academic expectations amid challenging circumstances.

Various protective factors contributed to the educational resilience and academic success of these participants. Protective factors ranged from supportive family members, parents who set realistic expectations, teachers who provided additional support outside of the classroom, and spiritual guidance from church and community members. Most students in the study reported that they had at least one supportive parent who set expectations, encouraged them, and acknowledged their academic success. For example, Helen shared:

The way my mom raised us, she expected us to do well in school. One time I came home with homework, and I wrote it sloppy. My mom tore it up, so I had to rewrite the whole thing on paper. I was like, “How could you rip up my homework?” She said, “Well, you wrote sloppy, and that will not be acceptable when you’re older.” We couldn’t watch TV before we did homework. School was always first, and she made it known.

Such parenting practices can be considered protective factors that contribute to academic success (Brown, 2008; Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007).

Coping strategies can be considered a type of protective factors play a major role in the affirmation, development, and academic success of students of color (Morales, 2008). Coping strategies such as relying on family, friends, or faith during burdensome times helped students in the present study appropriately manage life stressors. Students in this study shared several experiences and important people in their lives who offered continued support and encouragement.
Typology 4: College Retention and Persistence

First-generation students of color in the Jacksonville Commitment program who persisted to their junior year were the only group invited to participate in the present study. The first two years of college often cited in the literature as a time when college attrition is high (Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010). Therefore, the decision was made to narrow the scope of participants in order to understand persistence from the perspectives of students with challenging backgrounds who successfully navigated the first two years of college.

The literature provides well-documented evidence of factors that influence student persistence. These success factors include self-efficacy (Brown et al., 2006; Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010; Wright, Jenkins-Guarnieri, & Murdoc, 2012), college preparation, and environmental supports (Brown et al., 2006; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 2006). Students in the present study attributed their academic success and persistence in part to their self-efficacy, college preparation, and environmental support. Each factor will be discussed in the following sections.

Self-efficacy. Several perspectives exist that can describe the factors that contribute to the academic success of first-generation students of color. An analysis of the data for the present study indicated that student motivation theory (Bandura, 2002; Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010; Wang & Castaneda-Sound, 2008; Wright, Jenkins-Guarnieri, & Murdoc, 2012), specifically, self-efficacy, offered an understanding of student achievement and persistence. Self-efficacy as a concept within motivational theory, is an individual’s perceived capability in performing necessary tasks to achieve goals. Self-efficacy influences the decisions people make and the course of action they pursue. To further the motivational theory of self-efficacy,
academic self-efficacy is a more contextualized construct that considers students’ confidence in their ability to be successful with academic tasks.

Analysis of the data in the present study indicated that internal and external factors influenced students’ level of self-efficacy, which in turn translated into the students’ academic success. Students in this study often performed at an above average level in their K-12 education. As a result, they were able to internalize their perceived abilities, and, therefore they set academic goals that were aligned with that self-awareness. For example, Sophia’s confidence in her ability to be accepted to college and to persist toward graduation was directly related to her K-12 academic success. She explained:

Me getting accepted to college was never really an issue. I did well in the IB, so I didn’t worry about getting accepted to college. I know what I’m capable of, and I knew that I would do well in college. My GPA is above a 3.0.

Although the International Baccalaureate (IB) program prepared Sophia for college, another interpretation of her response is that she was conditioned by her preparation to continue to achieve academically. As a result, she did not question whether or not she would be admitted to college. Past experiences determined her level of self-efficacy, which in turn, positively influenced her level of achievement in college. Additionally, Sophia’s response is aligned with a model of task performance (Wright, Jenkins-Guarnier, & Murdock, 2012). This model posits that people’s ability is based on achievement or past performances. Achievement or past performance influences self-efficacy, which in turn affects future performance. As a result, the developed level of self-efficacy helps sustain performance.

Sustained performance and self-efficacy are interrelated concepts to understand one aspect of human behavior. A person’s degree of self-efficacy in a particular area of behavior will influence the individual’s level of persistence and performance when engaging in that
behavior (Wang & Castaneda-Sound, 2008, p. 103). The level of persistence or sustained performance is directly related to a person’s strong degree of self-efficacy. Helen’s completion of her Associate in Arts degree while in high-school is evidence of persistence and sustained performance. Helen shared:

Everybody in my family always call me the smart one because I’ve always loved school, and I’ve always excelled at school. So, it was a “no brainer.” I was going to college. I think where it became real was when I did dual enrollment and eventually got my Associate’s degree while in high school. That really gave me a boost with my confidence. Then, when I think about it, I’m, like, I really did something.

Helen understood that earning her Associate in Arts degree while in high school was an exceptional accomplishment. Such an accomplishment provides a level of motivation that yields future success, which in turn facilitates persistence.

Increasing levels of self-efficacy did not happen in a vacuum for students in this study. Self-efficacy was not the result of exclusively internal factors. Students described external factors that contributed to their striving to be academically successful. These factors included being good stewards of the benefits from their scholarship from the Jacksonville Commitment, making their families proud, and anticipating potential career opportunities. For example, Alean attributed part of her persistence to being a part of a scholarship program.

Receiving the Jacksonville Commitment scholarship means that I need to be on my “A game” all the time. I have to work hard and be responsible. So much is expected of me because I was awarded this scholarship, and I don’t want to let them down. So, the thought of letting them down makes me work really hard.

Alean was keenly aware of her scholarship requirements and the value of the investment to her future. Although Alean’s decision to perform well was due in part to comply with the policies that governed her scholarship, she was also actively engaged in her studies due to her own external factor, such as the need for continued academic success (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Griffin, 2006).
Kat also acknowledged that the Jacksonville Commitment program motivated her to persist in college.

Being in the Jacksonville Commitment program pushes me to do my best. Knowing that someone invested in me and believed in me means a lot. I don’t want to waste money or mess up this opportunity. I have to be successful.

One interpretation of Kat’s response is that she valued the Jacksonville Commitment program because she received neither the adequate resources needed from her family to yield academic success nor the adequate emotional support to feel a sense of belongingness. Therefore, this opportunity was especially meaningful, given Kat’s past experiences with adult relationships.

Family was another external variable that contributed to students’ increased level of self-efficacy. Many students shared their desire to make their families proud of their accomplishments. They understood that they were extensions of their families. Therefore, they considered their success as representative of their family unit. Jane shared:

Knowing that all my family is depending on me, pushing me to work hard, even when I’m tired from work, school, and taking care of my daughter. I’m the only one out of five kids who decided to go to school and the only one who got pregnant as a teenager. I’m really ambitious, so my family expects me to do well. My grandmother and my daughter, those are the main two people who I do this for.

Jane’s grandmother raised her and continued to provide support by caring for Jane’s daughter. Although not directly stated, Jane’s way of repaying her grandmother for the sacrifices she made was by using that external support as a source of strength and motivation.

Students in this study described potential career opportunities after college graduation as influencing their behavior. Overwhelmingly, all students in this study were motivated by possible social and financial outcomes from earning a college degree. For example, Jamar communicated his excitement about climbing the proverbial socioeconomic ladder:

Money, my potential earnings excite me. Not having to think about money all the time because I’ll have money excites me. Since I’m a Psychology major, I know I need to go
to grad school. But just thinking about my life after graduation makes me work harder, even when I don’t feel like working.

Jamar’s sentiments reflect his desire to avoid the experiences of being raised by a single mother with limited income. Limited income has compounded effects such as inadequate housing, increased levels of stress, and a lower quality of life (Berliner, 2009; Briddle, 2001; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Rothstein, 2004). As a result, the ability to change one’s socioeconomic status becomes even more difficult.

Students in this study described internal and external factors that influenced their perceptions of their abilities. These influences shaped not only their worldview but also how they would succeed in the world. Self-efficacy builds upon positive and negative experiences to shape students’ outlook on their ability to succeed in challenging coursework, matriculate to college, and to persist. Students in this study reported positive reinforcements in their K-12 experiences, and much of the positive reinforcement from their family supported a positive of self-efficacy.

**College Preparation.** First-generation college students of color tend to have more difficulty persisting and earning their college degrees than their peers (McConnell, 2002; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003). Research often highlights the challenges of first-generation college students of color, and often reference their backgrounds as an explanation for their academic challenges in college. Specifically, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, single-parent household are often referenced as barriers that result in high attrition or early college departure.

Students in this study challenged past research regarding the low college performance, high attrition rates, and negative perceptions of college for first-generation students of color (Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Miller, 2007; McConnell, 2000; Pascarella et al., 2003).
Although these students were first-generation students of color who came from households with very limited resources, they excelled in their K-12 education and persisted in college for many reasons. One factor that contributed to their college persistence was their academic preparedness. Students in this study entered college with the requisite skills needed to be successful in post-secondary education. Requisite skills were developed as a result of their college preparation programs such as the International Baccalaureate program, Advanced International Certificate of Education program, Advanced Placement courses, and the Early College Program. In addition to their involvement in college preparatory programs, most students in this study were socially integrated while in high school. As a result, students were conditioned to meet high standards and balance the demands of their academic and social responsibilities.

Students who have been exposed to a rigorous curriculum will likely transition to college with a readiness to learn and be more engaged in the educational process (Farkas, 2003; Howell & Peterson, 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996). For instance, Amiyah did not attend a college preparatory high school; however, she developed college-ready skills. Her high-school offered Early College, a college preparatory program that allowed her to complete the first two years of college while simultaneously completing her high-school requirements. Amiyah stated:

I applied to the Early College program my 9th grade year and was in the program until 12th grade. A requirement of the program was that I take classes at FSCJ during my junior and senior year. Going to FSCJ was so different from high school. It’s like the world was so different. I can truly say that Early College really prepared me for college and going from high school to UNF wasn’t hard. Also, the level of studying that I did back then just followed me here. It wasn’t such a huge difference.

College preparatory programs are typically designed to foster intellectual stimulation and challenge students to think critically and independently (Haxton et al., 2016). Such programs support the future educational ambitions of students from at-risk backgrounds and can play a
critical role in addressing their disproportionately low college-going rates (Haxton et al., 2016; Zhang & Smith, 2011).

Academic programs that prepare students for college while in high school are positively correlated with college enrollment and persistence rates in the first two years of degree or certificate-seeking programs (Karp, Calcagno, Hughes, Jeong, & Bailey, 2007; Wiley, Wyatt, & Camara, 2010). Sophia attended a college preparatory high-school where she was enrolled in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, which fostered holistic growth in the areas of social, intellectual, personal, and emotional development (Haxton et al., 2016). Sophia reflected on her college-preparation high-school experience:

I went to a college-prep high school. I studied there within the IB program. High school was difficult, but it was much, much worth it. I did all four years of IB. IB was very tough, which certainly prepared me very much for college. So, the transition to college wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. I didn’t know what to expect, but I was ready.

The analysis of the data in the present study supports persistence literature, which argues that exposure to rigorous high-school curricula minimizes the difficulty that first-generation students of color encounter during their transition to college. Although Sophia may not have understood the entire admission and enrollment process, she has the intellectual capacity to navigate the process, a capacity that was challenged and nurtured in the International Baccalaureate program.

Similar to the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, Advanced Placement (AP) and other college preparatory programs provide students with the necessary academic tools to graduate from high-school and subsequently to graduate from college. Mellie associated her college success with her high-school preparation.

I took AP courses and honor courses. The courses were hard, but I enjoyed the courses. The courses really helped me get ready for college. The courses built my confidence, and I’m doing well in college. I did earn college credits from the AP courses and, of course, my grade point average was pretty good.
Providing college experience at the high-school level shapes students’ perceptions of college and potentially awards college credits to students who meet certain standards. Research has demonstrated that students who take college classes during high school are more likely to earn high-school diplomas, enroll in college, enroll full-time, and persist in college than are students without college experience during high-school (Karp et al., 2007).

**Environmental Support.** The college environment, particularly, the Jacksonville Commitment program, created a supportive environment that fostered a culture of academic success and encouraged persistence for the participants in this study. Persistence is a complicated construct that is influenced by environmental factors. Students in this study benefitted from the scholarship program and its wrap-around services which supported persistence. Students were assigned admissions, academic, and financial aid advisors to support them throughout college. Once enrolled, there were continuous interventions, especially during the first two years of college, which research argues are the most critical years for high student attrition (Siedman, 2005; Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010). Social support structures such as mentoring opportunities, engaging with faculty and staff, and interaction with other likeminded students (Griffin, 2006; Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005) play an important role in the success of college students of color, which was evident from student reflections in the present study.

Many students in this study attributed their academic success and development to the Jacksonville Commitment program. Amiyah, Helen, and Olivia expressed similar perspectives regarding the environmental factors that were central to their development and academic success in college.

The Jacksonville Commitment program was great, and not just because of the money. They also give us an advisor that we had to see. They did workshops for us. They also
had us to take this class, something like “Surviving Your Freshman Year.” It taught us time management skills, how to pick your major, and how to study. The program helped us grow. (Amiyah)

The Jacksonville Commitment program really helped me and forced me to be more focused with my studies. I’ve learned to be more independent and how important it is to be involved. I also enjoy learning even more. The program encourages involvement in campus activities. So, now I help do research, and I’m a mentor. I mentor with the on-campus transition program, which helps high-school students with disabilities. I want be that person that gets acknowledged for doing something great. (Helen)

It means a lot to me to be a part of the Jacksonville Commitment (JC) program. I love my JC family. I’ve certainly become a better person. From my financial aid advisor, to my academic advisor, and the director of the program. It’s nice that we have dedicated people in place to help us. The JC staff really helped me transition to college. My academic advisor just took me under her wing. I love my JC family. They’re so awesome. Always there for you, willing to help you, give you additional opportunities for yourself that you didn’t know existed. I love it, I love it. (Olivia)

Research has consistently found that students are more successful if they are enrolled in institutions that provide a supportive college environment (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 2006). “The ability of an institution to retain students lies less in the formal programs they devise, than in the underlying commitment toward students which directs their activities” (Tinto, 2003, p. 7). The Jacksonville Commitment program was founded on the ideals of access and equity with a commitment to providing resources. Amiyah’s, Helen’s, and Olivia’s comments are indicative that the Jacksonville Commitment program was a value-added component of their college experiences.

**Evaluation Dimension**

Educational criticism (Eisner, 1998) was the primary data analysis strategy used in the present study. Supported by typological and interpretive analysis (Hatch, 2002), educational criticism provided structure for data analysis that honored the voices of the participants. Description and interpretation, the first and second dimensions of educational criticism respectively, were combined to describe and give meaning to the data. Evaluation, the third
dimension of Eisner’s educational criticism, is derived from what Dewey (1938) described as the value of educational experiences. That is, understanding the educational experiences of students requires assessment of the types of experiences students have in schools (Eisner, 1998).

**The Role of Educational Experiences**

Schools are social institutions that are uniquely positioned to change and enhance the lives of students. Because schools play a significant role in educating students, what transpires in school is subject to appraisal that considers the value of student experiences. Eisner argued that qualitative inquiry requires evaluation of experiences if it is to accomplish its task fully. These experiences can be, according to Dewey (1938), noneducational, miseducative, or educative. Noneducational experiences do not influence human growth and development. Noneducational experiences are simply experiences that do not leave a lasting impact. The second kind of experience is miseducative. Unlike noneducational experiences, miseducative experiences negatively impact human growth and development, which can cause maladjustment. An educative experience, the third type of experience, “fosters growth of human intelligence, nurtures curiosity, and yields satisfaction in the doing of those things worth doing” (Eisner, 1998, p. 99).

The purpose of this study was to understand the school experiences of first-generation college students in a predominantly White institution (PWI). In so doing, analysis of the data reflected that the experiences of students in the present study were educational and that the students themselves perceived the experiences as growth-producing in their lives. Although much in the literature argues that these students should not have been successful given their backgrounds, they attended educational institutions that nurtured growth and development. For example, their K-12 experiences exposed them to rigorous curriculums that challenged them to
think critically and independently, while their post-secondary experiences challenged them not only academically, but also personally. Students reported that college encouraged them to be involved, forced them to be more reflective, and led them to be more self-governing.

John had educational experiences that the literature highlights as being positive and directly related to academic success (Pascarella & Nora, 1996; Seidman, 2005; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Tinto, 2006).

I’m pretty involved on campus. I’m involved in campus ministries and clubs related to my major. I’m president of Society of American Military Engineers (SAME) and treasurer of National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE), so I’m thinking about stuff I can do and fun activities to reach out to freshman and sophomores. I’ve gone to a convention with NSBE, and it was fun. Next week, I’m going up in the mountains with the campus ministry I’m a part of here on campus. No phone, no work, no nothing. Just me, my Bible, and nature.

College provided students in this study with the opportunity to engage in activities that lead to intellectual growth and personal development. John’s account of his planned activity with a campus ministry is evidence of such opportunities. As a consequence, such engagement in purposeful learning while in college positively impacts persistence (Seidman, 2005; Strayhorn, 2008; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996; Tinto, 2006).

Because students who participated in this study were a part of a unique scholarship program, their lives were enriched given the structure, requirements, and services provided by the program. The Jacksonville Commitment program provided access and opportunities for students to be academically engaged and socially integrated into the college environment. For example, Jane shared part of her experience of being in the Jacksonville Commitment program.

You get to talk to other people who have the scholarship and talk to others who are first-generation. You also get to network with people. Also, I’ve been with my financial aid advisor since I started, and we have developed a relationship. You work with advisors who are always encouraging. There are workshops that they would do on Fridays. There are also other events that you go to and hear their stories, and they try to motivate you to continue on. I enjoy it.
Students of color value interaction between faculty and staff, which also contributes to persistence and a feeling of belongingness (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005). Relatedness results from such interaction. Similar to the basic needs of love and belongingness as articulated by Maslow (1943), the concept of relatedness is a basic need that foster persistence and development. Relatedness is the development of secure, satisfying relationships with others in one’s social environment (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). Although Jane did not directly state that she developed relationships from networking events, she did make connections with others when she shared commonalities with her peers. However, the notion of relatedness was evident given Jane’s direct comment regarding her financial aid advisor. The social events and networking opportunities are examples of educational experiences that enriched the schooling experiences of students in this study.

Analysis of the data from interviews with these students indicated that educational experiences not only fostered relatedness, but also cultivated competence. This idea was particularly apparent in Mellie’s depiction of her college experience.

College gives me a template of how to problem solve. College has taught me critical thinking skills. College has taught me how to work through issues and how to organize my day. I’ve learned to be more articulate and be more persistent. I don’t think I would be the person I am today if I hadn’t decided to go to college.

Mellie’s collegiate experiences were aligned with the types of experiences that the literature demonstrates are important for academic success. For example, Hu and Wolniak (2013) highlighted theoretical perspectives to examine college student engagement related to outcomes. Their economic perspective, which of human capital, echoes Mellie’s college experience. Human capital is considered to be a set of skills that individuals acquire through education and training that improves health and productivity (Hu & Wolniak). In formalizing human capital
theory, Becker (1994) argued that schooling results in greater earnings and productivity because it provides “knowledge, skills, and a way of analyzing problems” (p. 19). Although Mellie may not have viewed the development of critical thinking skills and problem solving from a human capital perspective, based on Becker’s argument, Mellie’s college experiences were an example of developing human capital. Thus, increased competence and improved analytical skills, are the types of educational experiences that should result from attending academic institutions.

Analysis of the data indicated that students in this study developed the capacity to learn, engage, and take advantage of their opportunities. They understood that making social connections contributed to their academic success and personal development. Moreover, students recognized that the opportunities afforded to them aided in their successful matriculation, which would ultimately result in graduation and the likelihood of career attainment. The data in this study demonstrated that students were not only satisfied with their educational experiences, but also valued those experiences.

The Role of Race

Discussing the evaluation dimension of Eisner’s (1998) process of educational criticism provides an opportunity to note characteristics within the data provided by the participants in these semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Specifically, part of the interview protocol (see Appendix B) included the following questions: How does being a student of color at a predominantly White college impact your everyday interactions with people on campus? Given the tenets of critical race theory (CRT) and the characteristics of a predominantly White institution (PWI), surprisingly, students shared little data regarding their experiences as students of color attending a PWI.

Critical race theory suggests that racism is so ingrained in American social institutions that it appears both normal and natural to those who have been raised and conditioned in
American culture (Delgado, 1995). This notion may explain why students in this study provided little information about their experiences. However, students were acutely aware of the racial divide and lack of diversity on campus. For example, Amyiah shared her perspective.

When I see White people, I don’t think that I live up to their standards. Me and my brother are always joking that we are too poor to hang out with White people or have White friends. So, we say that we are not in the league. We have firms that come and talk to us about their prospective jobs, and I’ll notice right away that they are all White. Subconsciously it’s the first thing I think about. It gets me thinking. I guess I feel more comfortable around black people.

Students acknowledged that their interactions across racial lines were limited for various reasons, such as being uncomfortable with engaging with White students, the perception that White students viewed them as inferior, having a negative experience that gave them pause, or their own perceptions of being inferior to White students. Helen captured some of these feelings:

I think there are so many stereotypes about black people and whites. So, if you see a group of white people I can’t just go up there and start talking to them because they are going to judge me because I’m black and say “What is this ghetto girl is doing?” It’s more intimidating trying to make friends with White people when you are the minority, because there’s only a handful of Black people at UNF. Also, growing up with predominantly Black people, I subconsciously have these negative stereotypes about White people because I grew up around all these bad things that have happened to Black people.

Although these students were just as academically talented as their White peers, they were sometimes viewed as academically inferior. Jane shared her story:

You know those huge sciences lectures? I would always sit in the front row and come to class early. But instead of looking at me in the front, professors they would look everywhere else so they wouldn’t direct their conversation to me. Also, here is a reason why I don’t really talk to professors during their office hours. One time I went to a Jacksonville Commitment event and the head of an academic department was there. He didn’t know my name or who I was. So, all these White people crowded around asking him questions. Eventually I went up to him and said “Hi, I changed my major [your department].” He told me “You will never make it.” He turned around and walked away.
Such observations indicate that race mattered, but was not as dominate as it could have been given their self-efficacy within the environment of a predominantly White institution.

Although race was not a central focus in the present study, one would assume that race would have been more present in the data. Given that the question directly related to race was toward the end of the interview process, it is also possible that student responses were limited due to interview saturation. Thus, because of the central focus on perceptions of first-generation college students of color at the junior level regarding their school experiences and because my own awareness of the timing of the interviews, I did not pursue the topic further.

**Thematics Dimension**

Thematics is the fourth dimension of Eisner’s process of educational criticism (1998). This approach to data analysis process leads to the identification of themes based on patterns and recurring messages within the data (Eisner, 1998; Patton, 2002). A theme has pervasive qualities that tend to unify situations and objects (Eisner, 1998). Data analysis of the present study led to the development of three themes: (a) Students perceived that they persisted in college as a result of being exposed to a rigorous K-12 curriculum; (b) Students perceived that they persisted in college due to their support network; (c) Previous academic experiences contributed to the development of student self-efficacy. Each of these themes will be discussed in the follow sections.

**Theme 1: Students perceived that they persisted in college as a result of being exposed to a rigorous K-12 curriculum.**

The prediction of postsecondary academic success for many students of color begins with an analysis of their K-12 experience. Most students in this study were uniquely positioned to persist in college because they were involved in college preparatory, honors programs, or
attended college preparatory high schools. Students acknowledged that their high-school academic experience prepared them for college. When asked what steps he took in high school to prepare for college, Mikael commented: “the Early College Program, which was like high school on steroids. If it wasn’t for Early College, I probably would have still gone to college, but wouldn’t have been as ready for college.” Other students echoed Mikael’s comments regarding their academic preparation for college. For example, Mellie acknowledge that taking honors courses set the foundation for her college success: “You know, my honor courses really helped me get ready for college, not to mention doing well on my entrance exams. My teachers really helped me, as well.” Similarly, Mia acknowledged that honor courses were instrumental in her academic preparation for college: “I took honor courses, so I felt ready for college. The courses were harder than average courses, more was required.” Exposure to a rigorous K-12 curriculum translates into positive high school and college outcomes for students of color. Students who are exposed to a rigorous curriculum are more likely to graduate from high school and transition to college with the necessary academic skills needed to succeed (Haxton et al., 2016; Howell & Peterson, 2006; Howard, 2007).

Theme 2: Students perceived that they persisted in college due to support from a variety of individuals.

Students of color at predominantly White institutions rely on family support. Research indicates that supportive family relationships are critical to the academic success of minority students (Brooks, 2015; Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Students in this study perceived that much of their academic success was due to their support system. For example, Mia, Helen, and Amiyah shared their perceptions regarding how the support they received contributed to their academic success.
Being in the college environment has helped me do well in college, but without the people I have supporting me, I know I would have a hard time. The Jacksonville Commitment program is a big part of my support. I also have a really close family and a good group of friends. I’m really appreciative for the circle of people I have in my life because I’m sure college would have been harder without them. (Mia)

The support I receive from family has kept me motivated in college to do well. I have great, great, great family support. I didn’t realize how much support I had until I talked to people whose parents don’t help them out or encourage them. I’ve always had people in my corner say, “Helen you can do it.” (Helen)

I owe everything to my mom. She has always been my source of motivation, from high school to college. She fought harder than I did. College is hard, but the support that she gives me, she deserves praise way more than I deserve the praise. I really appreciate her for that. (Amiyah)

During their K-12 experience, students received support from a community of people, which included their family, extended family, teachers, and coaches. Although some students in this study received support from what may be considered the traditional family, others received support from individuals with whom they developed close relationships and whom they considered family.

Students continued to receive family support throughout college, but they also received support from their scholarship program, the Jacksonville Commitment. The Jacksonville Commitment is a scholarship program that provides access and opportunity to students from low-income backgrounds. Central to the goal of the program, emotional, social, and financial support was provided to scholarship students. Although such forms of support are important for all students, the assistance was particularly meaningful because students had the opportunity to develop close relationships with program professionals. The program cultivated a culture of success by being intentional in its intrusive advising practices (Seidman, 2005; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003), in addition to creating opportunities that allowed students to develop relationships with other students in the program, scholarship donors, and program staff.
Theme 3: Students’ previous academic experience contributed to their development of self-efficacy.

Data analysis demonstrated that students in this study had confidence in their capacity to be successful at the collegiate level. The development of confidence or self-efficacy manifested from their early academic success during their K-12 experience. Students were conditioned to meeting high academic expectations, and, in so doing, they developed high levels of self-efficacy. Students shared that they were expected to go to college, and they were confident in their ability to be successful. Such comments were usually followed by the source of their confidence, which was their academic success in rigorous programs. For one student, in particular, the development of self-efficacy translated into social capital. For example, Alean developed the social skills needed to connect with her instructors in a way that she believed could aid in her academic success.

After my first year, I realized that the professors don’t really care to know your name. I would email my teachers at the beginning of the class to let them know I was excited to be in their class and ask questions so they would know I read the syllabus. I kind of wanted to set myself apart. So, if I was on the boarder of a B, they would remember that I emailed them and expressed my excitement. I just want teachers to know that I’m interested and excited, and it’s nice to have professors to know your name.

Alean’s comment was evidence that she developed a level of social intelligence, which was directly related to her confidence. Additionally, Alean’s actions were a reflection of her growth since her freshman year.

Because of their self-efficacy, which was developed in part due to exposure to a rigorous K-12 curriculum, students in this study successfully navigated their first two years of college, which research demonstrates are the most difficult years of college (Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010). Additionally, the first two years are when attrition is relatively high, especially for
first-generation students of color. However, students in this study matriculated to their junior year because their K-12 experience laid the foundation.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to present an analysis of data collected from 12 first-generation college students of color at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville, Florida. This chapter gave voice to a subset of students who may not have otherwise had an opportunity to share their experiences as first-generation college students of color attending a predominantly White institution (PWI). This chapter challenged the deficit perspective related to students of color (Ford, 2014). Students in this study challenged the notion that students of color tend to transition to college with poor academic preparation, tend to have little to no family support, tend to be less socially engaged once enrolled in college, and tend to experience high attrition rates (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; McConnell, 2000; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003). Such misconceptions are problematic and continue to fuel the deficit school of thought related to minorities. Many first-generation students of color transition to the college environment with the requisite academic and social skills needed to persist in college, have the capacity to think critically, and are socially engaged, as evidenced by the data analysis in this study.

This chapter presented a comprehensive outline of the data analysis process and the data analysis approaches used in the present study. The data analysis process provided detailed explanations and justification to support decisions made. Educational criticism (Eisner, 1998) was the primary data analysis strategy used in this study. Eisner’s four dimensions of educational criticism were incorporated in the present study: description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics. Hatch’s typological analysis and interpretive analysis supported two of the four dimensions of educational criticism—description and interpretation.
As previously mentioned, because “descriptions of experiences and interpretations are so intertwined that they often become one” (Patton, 2002, p. 106), Eisner’s dimensions of description and interpretation were addressed simultaneously, both to describe the experiences of first-generation students of color and to give meaning to their experiences. Typological analysis supported the description dimension of educational criticism. This approach divided the data into categories or typologies (Hatch, 2002) developed from the conceptual framework, the literature review, and my connoisseurship. Using Hatch’s typological analysis led to the identification of four typologies relevant to the schooling experience of first-generation college students of color in this study: (a) family relationships; (b) socioeconomic status; (c) resilience; and (d) college retention and persistence. The interconnection of the three approaches of educational criticism supported by typological analysis and interpretive analysis gave voice to the participants and thus led to understanding their perspectives and assessing the value of their experiences.

The last two dimensions of Eisner’s (1998) educational criticism, evaluation and thematics, followed description and interpretation. Evaluation was particularly useful in assessing the value of the educational experiences of students in this study. Relevant literature, theories, and my connoisseurship were used to assess the value of students’ educational experiences and give meaning to those school experiences. Such experiences were educative, as students’ developed competence, developed interpersonal skills, and were satisfied with their educational experiences. Lastly, the thematics dimension identified recurring messages within the data as a whole, which were: (a) students perceived that they persisted in college as a result of being exposed to a rigorous K-12 curriculum; (b) students perceived that they persisted in college due to support from a variety of individuals; and (c) students previous academic
experience contributed to their development of self-efficacy. Together, evaluation and thematics rounded out the data analysis process.
CHAPTER FIVE
SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceived school experiences of first-generation students of color enrolled in a predominantly White institution (PWI), who were a part of the Jacksonville Commitment program and who persisted to their junior year in college. Eleven students who identified as first-generation students of color were interviewed to gain a better understanding of their K-12 and subsequent post-secondary school experiences.

The American K-12 and postsecondary education systems are interconnected, outcomes-based, and complex institutions that reflect systemic aspects of American society. Over the past four decades, K-12 school systems have experienced a wave of school reform efforts designed to increase the academic achievement of students and to narrow the achievement gap between students of color and their White peers (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Howell & Peterson, 2006; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). Although minority students have made academic gains, they still lag behind their White peers. Low levels of K-12 academic performance have several negative impacts on other areas of college and career options; they include decreased opportunities for students of color to succeed in higher education, gain employment, and to earn an income that will afford them the opportunity to improve their socioeconomic status.

Scholars have offered various explanations for the widening achievement and opportunity gaps among students in K-12 education, particularly based on race and socioeconomic status. Arguments range from economic challenges related to poverty, absence of cultural capital, low levels of student motivation and resilience, to failing schools. Irrespective of the rationale, the overall picture suggests that first-generation college students of color, those students whose parents or guardians have had no collegiate experience (Inman & Mayes, 1999;
McConnell, 2000), often enter the collegiate environment less prepared than their White peers, which ultimately results in their struggle to have positive outcomes that result in persistence, academic achievement, and degree completion. The challenges that first-generation students face are complex and interrelated, in part because of social inequalities, which influence the everyday experiences of most people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The intersectionality of their first-generation status and minority status produces inequalities that play a significant role in the academic success of these students and subsequently influences their life chances.

A significant amount of research focuses on the challenges students of color experience when navigating and progressing in education. Paramount to this reality is understanding the experiences of these students and the factors that influence the success of students of color who have persisted in college. Understanding the lived experiences of first-generation college students of color can provide educators and policymakers the background that would be beneficial for students’ academic success. This knowledge can then inform efforts to justify and implement initiatives that can support the unique academic and psycho-social needs of students of color. Therefore, to better understand these needs, the purpose of this study was to understand how first-generation college students of color themselves perceived their school experiences.

This study tells the story of 12 high achieving college students of color classified as juniors attending the University of North Florida, in Jacksonville, Florida, who were a part of a scholarship program known as the Jacksonville Commitment program. In order to capture and understand the lived experiences of first-generation students of color, the design of this study was informed by five topics in the literature: (a) the historical context that shaped the educational experiences of students of color; (b) the influence of socioeconomic status on students of color;
(c) the characteristics of first-generation college students of color and their postsecondary challenges; (d) the characteristics of resilient college students; and (e) retention strategies designed to improve the persistence of first-generation students of color in both the K-12 environment and college environment.

The research question for this study was: How do first-generation college students of color at the junior level in a predominantly White institution (PWI) perceive their school experiences? Embedded in this research question were perspectives regarding their first-generation status, their minority status, and how the intersection of those two statuses shaped their school experiences. Students who identified as first-generation students of color shared their perspectives through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Because these students were a part of a unique scholarship program, their post-secondary schooling experiences were in many ways influenced by the program.

This final chapter of the present study contains seven sections. The first section summarizes the literature that provided the context for this study. The second section summarizes the research methodology used in data collection. The third section describes the data analysis procedures, steps followed in the procedures, and the results of data analysis. The fourth section acknowledges the limitations of the study. The fifth section suggests implications from this study for educational leadership and educational policy. The sixth section offers recommendations for future studies. The final section presents conclusions. Collectively, the seven sections reveal the lived experiences of the participants in this study and contribute to the ongoing discourse related to the collegiate success of first-generation students of color.

**Summary of Reviewed Literature**

A historical exploration of American social institutions provides an understanding of how the past has influenced the conditions faced by first-generation students of color within the
college setting. Born out of the need to establish White privilege, the institution of slavery reduced Blacks to property (Cook, 2005). Terms such as second class, subordinate, and property became common descriptors for African Americans. Such descriptors implied that Blacks were not considered members of society, a perspective that continued after the abolishment of slavery and one that supported institutional racism (Rothenberg, 2004).

The history of education for African Americans began with laws prohibiting the teaching of Blacks to read and write (Daniel, 2005; Rothenberg, 2004). The end of the Civil War and the subsequent passage of the 13th and 14th Amendments to the United States Constitution marked the beginning of a new era for Blacks. Slaves were freed, and those who were born in the United States were extended citizenship and guaranteed equal protection of the law (Rothenberg, 2004). However, southern states quickly enacted laws to circumvent the rights that the 13th and 14th Amendments had bestowed on African Americans. In southern states where African Americans were heavily concentrated, Jim Crow laws were enforced to prevent the integration of Blacks into mainstream social institutions (Marger, 1999; Minor, 2008; Rothenberg, 2004). Southern states began to legalize the separation of races in all aspects of public and private life.

These efforts resulted in the “separate but equal” doctrine upheld by the 1896 Supreme Court decision in Plessy v. Ferguson (Rothenberg, 2004). The Supreme Court ruled that separate but equal facilities did not violate the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. As a result, the decision legitimated laws requiring that Blacks be educated separately from their White peers. However, although separate facilities were created, the facilities were not equal. Consequently, students often received an inferior education with substandard instruction and instructional materials (Daniel, 2005).

The separate but equal doctrine reflected the ideology of the judiciary from
1896 to 1954. The doctrine governed society until the case, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954), was brought before the Supreme Court. Access and equity were the fundamental tenets of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling (Cook, 2005; Rothenberg, 2004). The Supreme Court ruled that the “separate but equal” doctrine had no place in American education. However, given that desegregation became a reality in American education with the Brown decision, local school boards were charged by the Supreme Court to desegregate schools and to integrate minority students successfully into the culture of predominantly White schools without prejudice.

Although African Americans were lawfully acknowledged as members of society with the same rights and privileges as Whites, the Court’s decision did not transform the core beliefs of society (Saddler, 2005). Critical race theory (CRT) helps to explain the complexities accompanying the challenges of confronting society’s fundamental beliefs. Consequently, critical race theory calls attention to race and racism within the framework of American society, rather than to individual acts against persons of color (Parker & Lynn, 2002).

Critical race theory is a legal theory designed to uncover or unmask how race and racism operate in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker & Lynn, 2002). Additionally, critical race theory is a tool by which educational challenges can be defined, exposed, and addressed (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Basic tenets of critical race theory form the foundation of the theory: (a) that the normalcy of racism exists within American society; (b) that the critique of liberalism is appropriate; and (c) that a need exist to recognize interest convergence.

The 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board* (1954) was the impetus for scholars to evaluate the progress of African Americans in the educational arena. Some education scholars argued
that desegregated learning environments had improved cultural understandings, thereby reducing racism, discrimination, and structural segregation (Nieto & Bode, 2008; Tatum, 1997). Although the ideas of desegregation and multiculturalism have gained social value, others scholars raised concerns about the lack of progress (Kozol, 2005; Orfield, 2001).

The educational experiences of Black students did not mirror the educational experiences of White students (Tatum, 1997). Minority students have been treated as inferior students from the moment they have entered desegregated institutions, and school curricula continued to systematically devalue the culture of non-White students. As a result, African American students have performed at lower levels than they did before desegregation. Racism is a challenging issue in modern society. For example, people tend to avoid racial conversations because they are operating from the perspective that racism no longer exists (Tatum, 1997). Indeed, Blacks and Whites alike have argued that society has evolved to a point at which considering race in order to achieve equity, to seek diversity, or to rectify past injustices is no longer necessary (Allen, 2005; Minor, 2008). Others argue that analyses of enrollment rates, degree completion rates, and graduation data by race clearly point to a lack of equity and the need for programs to assist minorities in achieving greater access to educational opportunities and equality in degree attainment (Minor, 2008).

Institutional racism and ethnic discrimination remain barriers to education opportunities for students of color. The dynamics of such inequalities inform the current conditions that students of color face in school because the impact on educational opportunities is so heavily influenced by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Consequently, Black students’ academic achievement levels may never match the achievement levels of White students. However, the lack of academic achievement at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels has
lifetime consequences, which include limiting opportunities for minority students in education institutions, employment, and earnings. Such consequences shape the culture of African Americans and their perceived fit within society.

**The Influence of Socioeconomic Status on Students of Color**

Socioeconomic status is commonly conceptualized as the social standing or class of an individual or group. It is often measured as a combination of family education level, level of income, and occupational status (Marger, 1999; Rothstein, 2004). Low socioeconomic status is a self-perpetuating category marked by persistent and pervasive inequalities of income, wealth, status, and social power (Marger, 1999; Rothstein, 2004). Research has consistently found that socioeconomic status plays a major role in the life chances of students. “The resources a person starts with, the opportunities open to that person, the circumstances in which the person lives, and the way others react to that person all depend to a significant extent to the groups of which that person is a member” (Gollnick & Chinn, 1994, p. 179). As a consequence, the reactions of others may, in turn, influence the educational opportunities open to individuals. Specifically, students of color have historically come from low socioeconomic homes. This historical disadvantage continues to impact the life chances of students of color. They are still more likely than White students to have limited resources and opportunities needed to fully engage in social institutions such as schools and, later, the workforce as they transition to adulthood (Berliner, 2009; Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009; Rothstein, 2004). Further, students of color from low economic backgrounds tend to enter K-12 schooling less academically prepared than White students, which has long-term consequences as students proceed through high school graduation and then enter post-secondary institutions (Loury, 2005).
Inequalities in access to resources result from a stratified social system that is rooted in institutionalized racism (Martin, 2005). Institutionalized racism is the extent to which racism is woven into the fabric of dominant organizations and power structures of society (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009). Viewed through a historical lens, the developments of social institutions, influenced by racial ideologies, have led to social inequalities. Over time, social injustices were justified as normal practices, which were perpetuated from generation to generation. The socioeconomic divide is characteristic of America’s deeply rooted racial history that continues to challenge American ideals and practices (Martin, 2005). However, institutional practices do not mirror the promise of equal access to resources and opportunities (Martin, 2005). This disconnect underscores the need to maintain open dialogue regarding the persistence of the compounding effects of race and socioeconomic status on the educational experience of students of color.

Another source of inequality lies in the effects of poverty on the educational opportunities at both the K-12 and post-secondary levels. African Americans are far more likely than other groups to have been raised in areas of concentrated poverty. Whereas 27% of African American youth and 13% of Latino youth are raised in neighborhoods characterized as “severely distressed,” only about 1% of non-Hispanic White youth are raised in similar conditions (O’Hare & Mather, 2003). Parents are limited in their ability to develop social capital or networks that may contribute to the development and advancement of their children. As a result, students of color struggle to experience similar social benefits as their White peers. Although income and skin color themselves do not influence school achievement, the collection of characteristics that define socioeconomic status differences in education, income, and
occupation are likely to influence parenting styles, performance in school, and social mobility 

Intersectionality as a conceptual framework can be used to understand the complexities, 
dynamics, and experiences of individuals with multiple identities such as race, gender, sexuality, 
etnicity, age, and disability (Cole, 2009). Critical race theorists define the term as “the 
examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation, and how their 
combination plays out in various settings” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. 51). Intersectionality 
of low socioeconomic status, minority status, and first-generation status was of particular interest 
in the present study because of the resulting perceptions, experiences, and life outcomes for 
individuals who can identify with multiple forms of social categories (Hardaway & McLoyd, 
2009). Although scholars have studied the effects of race and socioeconomic status 
independently, both race and class are interrelated and may compound the effects of each other 
for those with multiple disadvantage statuses (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009; Rothstein, 2004). 
For the present study, considering the intersectionality of multiple social statuses such as low 
social class, race, and first-generation status, may help situate the understanding of the meaning 
and consequences of these converging categories.

**First-generation College Students of Color**

First-generation college students of color represent a group of students whose parents or 
guardians have had no college experience. First-generation students are more likely to be 
females who have delayed entry into the postsecondary environment (Inman & Mayes, 1999). 
During college these students have historically struggled financially as a result of their low 
socioeconomic status and have attended school part time. Additionally, first-generation students
often work full time to provide for dependents and to fulfill other financial commitments (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; McConnell, 2000).

Research has consistently found that first-generation students tend to have negative perceptions of the college environment and are less involved in their college experiences, both academically and socially. As a result, their learning gains are lower, and the attrition rate of first-generation students of color during their first semester in college is higher than their White peers (Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Miller, 2007; McConnell, 2000; Pascarella et al., 2003). In addition, the culture and climate of college environments that have traditionally catered to White students and those from middle-class backgrounds require first-generation minority students to negotiate a myriad of unfamiliar cultural norms (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Many first-generation students of color enter the college arena lacking academic, cultural, and social capital (Rothstein, 2004; Shaw et al., 1999). As a result, these students also enter college with higher levels of stress with very few resources or means to cope with their stress (Mehta, Newblood, & O’Rourke, 2011).

Academic and social factors play an integral role in preparation for and persistence in higher education (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; McConnell, 2000; Pascarella et al., 2003). Federally funded programs such as Upward Bound and Talent Search have targeted first-generation students and minority students as early as middle school to help enhance their academic preparation for college, as well as to help socialize them to the importance of attaining a college degree (Perna & Swail, 2002). Socializing students early for the purposes of understanding mainstream norms plays a significant role in the college career of students, as the foundation of postsecondary institutions is based on mainstream norms. Despite efforts by the federal government to assist students in their pre-college endeavors, first-generation students of color are
still academically and socially challenged once enrolled in college (Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996; Tinto, 2006). Although some first-generation minority students struggle and ultimately fail to obtain their college degrees, some of them have the capacity and support to be successful.

**Resilience: Transcending Adversities**

Students of color students transition to college with past challenges negatively influencing their potential for success (Brown, 2008; Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007). These students, in comparison to their White peers, are more likely to experience life stress and adversities. They are more likely to come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, experience prolonged unemployment, live in violent communities, and have fewer financial resources (Brown, 2008; Utsey, Bolden et al., 2007). Yet, resilient students of color are able to overcome environmental challenges and experience successful psychological well-being and social relationships (Brown, 2008).

Research in the area of risk factors and protective factors has led to a growing body of literature in the area of resilience. Resilience refers to one’s ability to be successful in spite of risk and adversity (Masten, 1994; Utsey et al., 2007). Understanding the importance of protective factors as they relate to minority students’ ability to be resilient contributes to understanding how individuals are able to be successful despite risk factors. Protective factors are multifaceted, as they encompass various components. Individuals possess protective factors, while families and extended families provide protective factors.

Research has shown that these support networks have contributed to the success of resilient students. The social skills that resilient students develop influence their decision making. Students with high levels of social and cultural capital are more likely to feel an
entitlement to a college education and may not only perceive college attendance as an entitlement, but may persist to graduation. Previously acquired social and cultural capital and a perceived entitlement to postsecondary education may be factors that allow some students to be resilient and to advance in their educational pursuits whereas others fail to achieve their academic goals (Wells, 2008).

**Retention and Persistence**

College retention and persistence has generated years of research and theoretical perspectives to explain the relationship among students, institutions, student development, and student success. Amid increased scrutiny from the public and the government to ascertain accountability, considerable attention continues to focus on student retention and graduation rates. Institutions have not shied away from this challenge; however, various moving parts are at play that make the educational process complex. However, at the crux of this multifaceted challenge is the importance of student retention and persistence. Retention is defined from the point of view of the institution as its ability to retain a student from admission through gradation (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Seidman, 2005). Persistence, on the other hand, is defined from the perspective of students as their desire and action to remain in the college system from the beginning year through degree completion (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Seidman, 2005). Theoretical models have been developed to explain student behavior, and evidenced-based guidelines have served as institutional resources for developing and enhancing policies, practices, and procedures to increase student retention and persistence (Flowers, 2004; Seidman, 2005). Yet, retention and persistence continue to be challenges for many institutions, specifically institutions that serve first-generation students of color (Ishitani, 2006; Seidman, 2005).
First-generation students of color are a unique group of students who are more challenged than other groups of students in persisting to their second year. Some institutions are acutely aware of the challenges of first-generation students of color and have attempted to develop multifaceted retention programs designed for students who are likely to depart early from the institution (Seidman, 2005). Although scholars who have researched persistence and retention have consistently argued that involvement in social activities on college campuses positively influences student persistence (Seidman, 2005; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996; Tinto, 2006), a number of first-generation students value participation in academic activities or frequent interaction with faculty more than social activities (Lohfink & Paulsen 2005). However, this finding may have been influenced by the fact that first-generation students have competing external factors that demand their time such as dependent children and employment obligations, factors that may limit involvement in social activities.

Retention is a complex relationship between the student and the institution. The student enters the relationship with challenges and expectations that the institution is charged with identifying early and acting upon quickly (Seidman, 2005; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Many theoretical models and best practices exist to provide administrators with the knowledge needed to understand the role that the institution plays in student success and to provide administrators with evidenced-based recommendations when developing or modifying retention programs.

Swail’s Geometric Model of Student Persistence and Achievement describes the intersecting relationship between individuals and institutions (Swail et al., 2003). The geometric model is an equilateral triangle that may shift in its shape at any time based on the amount of cognitive, social, and institutional forces affecting students. Cognitive factors are described as students’ academic abilities. Social factors are described as students’ abilities to interact
effectively with others, their personal attitudes, and their family influences. Lastly, institutional factors refer to the practices, strategies, and culture of the college or university that may impact student persistence and achievement. Overall, the purpose of the model is to provide a method for understanding the relationship between cognitive and social attributes of students and institutional practices (Swail et al., 2003).

Seidman’s (2005) retention formula is another research-based framework, based on Vincent Tinto’s model of institution departure. Seidman’s formula is designed to influence student persistence. The core of Seidman’s formula is the idea that a retention program must be strong enough to effect change. The retention program must consist of four elements: (a) early identification; (b) early intervention; (c) intensive intervention; and (d) continuous intervention. Early identification is identifying students at the earliest possible time when a student is considered at-risk of not being successful in college. The early intervention element of Seidman’s college retention formula focuses on an intervention process at the earliest time possible upon identification of a problem. For some students, identification of the problem occurs during their K-12 experience. The intensive intervention element recognizes the importance of developing intervention programs that closely monitor students and have them demonstrate that they have mastered certain skills. Lastly, continuous intervention is intervention that continues until the desired outcome is achieved such as degree completion (Seidman, 2005). Although an institution may have a strong foundation that consists of evidenced-based practices, along with practice elements outlined in Swail’s geometric model of student persistence and achievement or Seidman’s retention formula, it is important to acknowledge that a student’s decision-making process is sometimes influenced by factors beyond institutional control.
Practices and models recognize that, indeed, institutions play a key role in student persistence. However, economic, psychological, and sociological factors are also major influences with regard to student persistence. Thus, by understanding the underlying factors that influence a student’s decision to depart from an institution, retention and persistence can also be understood through three theoretical lenses: (a) the economic lens; (b) the psychological lens; and (c) the sociological lens.

Viewing persistence through an economic lens leads to a cost-benefit analysis (Seidman, 2005). According to human capital theory, personal investments in education, training, or other learning endeavors can yield returns on the individual’s initial investment of time, money, and energy. Consequently, student departure may occur if the student perceives that the costs of attending college outweigh the benefits of attending (Seidman, 2005).

Persistence can also be understood from a psychological perspective (Bean & Eaton, 2002 & Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). Psychological characteristics and processes that distinguish students who persist from those who depart can be seen at both the level of the individual student and the level of the environment of the institution. Psychological characteristics, such as past behaviors and beliefs, shape students’ perceptions of the college environment. The combination of such psychological characteristics and the institutional environment results in psychological processes that affect a student’s motivation to persist to graduation (Bean & Eaton, 2002; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005).

Lastly, persistence can be considered from a sociological. Social forces such as peers, family socioeconomic status, and support from significant others can influence a student’s decision to persist or depart from college. Environmental factors such as amount of finances, number of hours of employment, presence of outside encouragement, and the level of family
responsibilities influence the departure decisions of students more than academic variables such as study habits, academic advising, type of major selected, and course availability (Bean & Metzner 1985).

College student retention is a multifaceted issue, as there is no single solution and a number of possible strategies still may not yield significant improvements in retention and persistence (Seidman, 2005). However, research has consistently found that students are more successful if they are enrolled in institutions that provide a supportive college environment (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 2006). “The ability of an institution to retain students lies less in the formal programs they devise than in the underlying commitment toward students which directs their activities” (Tinto, 2003, p. 7). Furthermore, student success is an institutional effort that requires support from the entire college community. Student success must be an institutional priority that is reflected in the institution’s mission, cultural assumptions, beliefs, values, norms, and perceptions (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Seidman, 2005).

**Summary of Research Design and Methodology**

Qualitative research is an approach to uncovering the complexities in the experiences of people in an effort to seek knowledge and understanding (Creswell 2007; Patton, 2002). More specifically, phenomenological inquiry informed the design of this study in order to capture the school experiences of first-generation students of color (van Manen, 1990). The study was designed in a way to give voice to a group who shared common experiences that may not typically be valued in mainstream America. Moreover, “phenomenological research captures how people experience some phenomenon, how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p.104).
Because the study explored the experiences of first-generation students of color and the ways those experiences developed their worldviews, phenomenological perspectives on research were relevant to its design (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton 2002; van Manen, 1990). In order to capture such information, interviewing people who have directly experienced the phenomenon was the most appropriate data-collection methodology (Patton, 2002).

This study endeavored to give voice to 12 students who self-identified as first-generation students of color, were classified as juniors attending the University of North Florida, and who were part of the Jacksonville Commitment program. Thus, the participants comprised a criterion-based selection (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Interviews took place at the University of North Florida for the convenience of the participants because they either lived in campus housing or because they were on campus for classes. Two hours were allocated for each interview. Students shared their schooling experiences from the perspective of a student of color whose first-generation status was a by-product of their socioeconomic status.

In qualitative research, I am responsible for being transparent and acknowledging my role in the data-collection and data-analysis processes and the possibility that my experience and prior knowledge may have influenced the research process (Howe & Eisenhart, 1990). This recognition requires that I, as the researcher, acknowledge my connoisseurship related to this study and account for my knowledge as it might have influenced the research process. A first point in recognizing my role as a researcher in this study is to acknowledge that I am an African American. Furthermore, I was a first-generation African American college student who was raised in an inner-city south Florida community. Given my background, I have direct experience similar to the experiences articulated by participants in this study.
Another dimension of the researcher as tool is my former role as a middle-level administrator at a large community college and my current role as a Director of Academic Advising at a predominantly White institution. I have assisted first-generation college students who presented with a host of intersecting challenges that negatively impacted their school experiences. For approximately 12 years, I have counseled, mentored, and supported hundreds of minority students at the community college and university levels. Although their experiences are unique to them and their world views have been shaped by their own lived experiences, I am able to connect with them, although with “empathic neutrality” (Patton, 2002, p. 49).

Summary of Data Analysis

Three data analysis approaches were used to capture, describe, understand, and give meaning to the experiences of the students who participant in this study: (a) educational criticism (Eisner, 1998); (b) typological analysis (Hatch, 2002); and (c) interpretive analysis (Hatch). As discussed in Chapter Four, educational criticism (Eisner, 1998) served as the primary data analysis approach. As such, the structure of educational criticism provided the overall framework for data analysis in the present study, with Hatch’s typological analysis and interpretive analysis supporting two of the four dimensions of educational criticism—description and interpretation. Because “descriptions of experiences and interpretations are so intertwined that they often become one” (Patton, 2002, p. 106), typological analysis and interpretive analysis were used simultaneously to describe the experiences of first-generation students of color and subsequently to give meaning to their experiences.

Based on the literature and my connoisseurship, four typologies were developed from interview data for the purposes of describing the experiences of first-generation students of color: (a) family relationships; (b) socioeconomic status; (c) resilience; and (d) college retention
and persistence. The four typologies were used to frame the processes of description and interpretation. Many students in this study attributed their academic success in part to strong family relationships. Whether they described familial bonds, extended family, teachers, or mentors, students reported that at least one adult in their lives was critical to their feeling nurtured, valued, and supported. Socioeconomic status was the second typology that supported data analysis. Students who participated in this study came from low-income backgrounds, which resulted in a series of interlocking circumstances that influenced their development. Because these students come from homes with limited financial resources, some students worked while in college. Although some students worked while in college, they maintained their grades and provide a level of financial assistance to their families.

The third typology identified during data analysis was resilience. Resilience is the ability to be successful in spite of risk and adversity (Masten, 1994; Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007). Many students in this study overcame circumstances that had the potential to limit their opportunities to be successful. Circumstances associated with their minority status (Morales, 2014; Williams & Bryan, 2013) were risk factors that seemed to be normalized over time. College retention and persistence form the last typology within the present study. Students attributed their academic success and persistence in part to their self-efficacy, college preparation, and environmental support. Self-efficacy is the level of confidence students had in themselves to be successful. Increased self-efficacy that was developed over time resulted in part from their academic success in their high school college preparation courses. Students in the present study acknowledge that being exposed to rigorous curricula adequately prepared them for the academic rigor of college. Lastly, the academic success of students in this study was influenced by environmental factors such as the Jacksonville Commitment program. The
Jacksonville Commitment program fostered a culture of academic success and encouraged persistence.

Evaluation, the third dimension of Eisner’s educational criticism, is concerned with the appraisal of educational experiences. That is, understanding the educational experiences of students requires assessment of the quality of experiences students have in schools (Eisner, 1998). The purpose of this study was to understand the school experiences of first-generation college students in a predominantly White institution (PWI). In so doing, analysis of the data reflected that the experiences of students in the present study were educational and that the students themselves perceived the experiences as growth-producing in their lives. Analysis of the data from interviews with these students indicated that educational experiences not only fostered relatedness, but also cultivated competence. Students in the present study shared collegiate experiences that were aligned with the types of experiences that the literature describes as important for academic success. As a result, they were able to persist beyond the first two years of college, and they learned to advocate for themselves as they negotiated unfamiliar academic and social norms, that, in turn, became familiar.

Thematics is the fourth dimension of Eisner’s process of educational criticism (1998). This approach to data analysis leads to the identification of themes based on patterns and recurring messages within the data (Eisner, 1998; Patton, 2002). A theme has pervasive qualities that tend to unify situations and objects (Eisner, 1998). Data analysis for the present study led to the development of three themes: (a) Students perceived that they persisted in college as a result of being exposed to a rigorous K-12 curriculum; (b) Students perceived that they persisted in college due to their support networks; (c) Previous academic experiences contributed to the development of student self-efficacy.
Students in this study were uniquely positioned to persist in college because they were involved in college preparatory, honors programs, or attended college preparatory high schools. Students acknowledged that their high-school academic experience prepared them for college. Students also acknowledged that they persisted to their junior year because of their support networks. Their support networks included family, extended family, and school professionals. Self-efficacy was also a theme that was developed from the data. Data analysis demonstrated that students in this study had confidence in their capacity to be successful at the collegiate level. The development of confidence or self-efficacy began with their early academic success during their K-12 experience. As a result, students in this study continued to experience success as they negotiated the terms of their new academic environment and used available resources to their advantage.

**Limitations of Study**

Because a unique group of students were invited to participate in this study, its results reflected the perspectives of these students. For example, this study focused only on first-generation college students of color with junior classification attending a public university. Focusing on juniors eliminated students at the freshman and sophomore levels who could have offered perspectives on their school experiences. The second limitation was geographical, as the participants in the present study resided in Jacksonville, Florida. The experiences of students who reside and attend college in Jacksonville may not be the experiences of first-generation college students of color who reside elsewhere and attend other colleges. The third limitation was that the study only focused on students who volunteered to be interviewed for the study. It is also possible that those students who volunteered to participate in this study were highly motivated students, who overall, had positive collegiate experiences. Furthermore, these
participants were affiliated with the Jacksonville Commitment, a scholarship program under the auspices of the Jacksonville Journey. The Jacksonville Commitment is a program that has a support system designed to foster academic success for first-generation college students. Therefore, students who are not affiliated with a program that is specifically designed to facilitate their academic progress may have different perceptions about their school experiences.

**Implications for Educational Leadership**

First-generation students of color arrive on college campuses not only with a number of strengths, but also with a number of disadvantages. Those strengths often include resilience, perseverance, determination, and mixed levels of academic preparation. However, the disadvantages include low or nonexistent levels of cultural capital, few support systems for long-term success, and the challenges of understanding the nuances of navigating a predominantly White institution. Research in higher education indicates that it takes more than rhetoric to support these students to graduation in a more focused, purposeful, and intentional way. As an economic leader on the world stage, it is critical for the United States to support first-generation college students of color in being successful as they apply for admission, matriculate, and graduate from postsecondary institutions. These students will enter various professions to continue the work of building a strong global economy. Although inroads have been made to increase the number of students of color who graduate from college and enter the workforce, more has to be done. Serving this population of students successfully will enable them to be globally competitive.

This study provided both focus and depth regarding the school experiences of first-generation college students of color and how these students were able to strive based upon their internal drive, strong academic preparation, and supports provided by the Jacksonville
Commitment program. Its results provide evidence of the critical roles played by K-12 schools and higher-education institutions in the success of first-generation students of color.

K-12 schools, especially at the secondary level, are the entry point for students’ exposure to rigorous knowledge acquisition, learning, and how they feel about their academic abilities. Therefore, it is important to provide supports and robust academic preparation in K-12 education to prepare students for postsecondary educational success. The following list includes suggestions to address the needs of first-generation students of color for focused supports and academic preparation in primary and secondary schools:

1. Early college and career exposure programming needs to be provided in the primary grades.
2. Ongoing professional development needs to be provided for school counselors on best practices to support students of color in schools.
3. Collaboration between district-level and school-level leadership can expand the access to international baccalaureate, STEM, and college and career academies in middle and high schools that serve large populations of students of color.
4. Academic texts and intervention materials should be selected that are challenging for students to develop the requisite college and career readiness skills.
5. After-school groups for aspiring students of color who are interesting in attending college should be established to foster a college going culture.

These suggestions should be addressed by district school agencies and supported by local postsecondary, business and industry advisory boards. Through comprehensive planning, leveraged financial supports, and political will, these K-12 suggestions actionable steps can serve as an important lever to support students of color to build strong academic preparation as they
prepare for postsecondary education. Strengthening the pipeline of more academically prepared students of color benefits both students and postsecondary institutions. Less time will be spent on remediation, and students will have a better chance at collegiate success.

Institutions of higher education also play a significant role in supporting first-generation students of color as they apply for admission, matriculate, and persist toward graduation. Postsecondary administrators can better support students of color through these approaches:

1. Provide a dedicated retention department that focuses on traditional and nontraditional interventions and supports for first-generation students of color;
2. Provide early alert systems to raise awareness of student academic challenges as soon as possible. The more intentional institutions are about early interventions for first-generation college students, the better the chances are for these students to be successful;
3. Offer these students wrap-around supports that not only facilitate academic progress, but also address food, shelter, clothing, and health services needs that affect academic success;
4. Identify faculty across all majors who are supportive and willing to offer additional academic supports for first-generation college students enrolled in their courses; and
5. Expand live and learning communities to provide targeted supports and residence hall programming that can support the academic progress and social growth of first-generation students of color.

Overall, analysis of the data supports two primary factors needed to foster success for students of color: exposure to a rigorous academic K-12 program and someone or an institution to provide them the cultural capital that does not exist in their home or community.
Recommendations for Future Studies

It is important to understand the intersection of the preparation of students in high school, and postsecondary programs that support these learners to be successful. The present study examined the influence of the following topics on first-generation postsecondary students: (a) the historical context that has shaped the educational experiences of minority students; (b) the influence of socioeconomic status on students of color; (c) the characteristics of first-generation college students of color and their postsecondary challenges; (d) the characteristics of resilient college students; and (e) retention strategies designed to improve retention, coupled with retention theories that explain underlying factors that influence a student’s decision to remain or to depart from college.

Significant historical evidence exists that students of color are disadvantaged in the American educational system due to challenging environmental factors, poor academic preparation, low levels of cultural capital, and institutional racism. However, the present study did not find that participants experienced the racial barriers that other studies have described. One explanation for this is that these students participated in academically rigorous programs in high school before they enrolled in postsecondary education. Therefore, their peer groups in high school were students who also demonstrated increased academic ability. Such rigorous academic programs can set the stage for the development of academic self-efficacy within mainstream academic environments. Therefore, from their perspective, race may not have played as much of a central role in their schooling experience. However, in schools that are homogenous with regard to race, socioeconomic status, and ability, academic self-efficacy may not develop to the same extent. Participation in mainstream academically rigorous programs in
high school can not only contribute to the self-efficacy of students of color, but also can influence positively the racial and social context of such environments to benefit all students.

To better understand how first-generation status, race, ethnicity, college preparation, the college environment, and academic achievement intersect, a number of areas for future research can be suggested. First, future studies could explore the perceptions of students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities regarding their school experiences in order to determine how the college environment at predominantly White institutions (PWI) adopt similar approaches to support student achievement. Second, given that the present study focused only on the school experiences of students in the Jacksonville Commitment program, other research could investigate the role of academic preparation and its intersection of race and socioeconomic status on students of color who attend a PWI and who are not enrolled in such a scholarship program. Third, future research could explore the perceptions of students regarding their school experiences who did not continue in the Jacksonville Commitment program at the University of North Florida. Fourth, given that some student who participated in this study were affiliated with a sorority, future research could explore the role of fraternities and sororities in shaping the experience of first-generation students of college at a predominantly White institution. Finally, exploring other factors beyond race, ethnicity, first-generation status, and membership in a particular scholarship program may provide further understanding with regard to the success of first-generation college students of color, particularly the role of gender.

It is important that first-generation students of color continue to be a topic of discussion because inequalities in education continue to influence their life chances. Qualitative studies should continue to explore the factors that influence the success of students at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels. Additionally, research studies should continue to explore unique programs
that have improved the academic success of students of color. The challenges that first-generation students face are complex for multiple reasons. Therefore, understanding this group is key to supporting their high school and college outcomes.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to understand how first-generation college students of color at the junior level in a predominantly White institution (PWI) perceived their school experiences. The present study used phenomenological inquiry (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton 2002; van Manen, 1990) to seek to understand how they understood those experiences and developed their worldview. In order to capture such information, interviewing people who have directly experienced the phenomenon is the most appropriate data-collection methodology (Patton, 2002). Therefore, semi-structured, in-depth interviewing was used as the data-collection method for this phenomenological study.

The present study gave voice to 12 first-generation students of color who challenged the deficit model of their anticipated academic achievement in college and described factors that contributed to their academic success. The students who participated in this study transitioned to college with the challenges that the literature indicates could lead to early departure from college (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; McConnell, 2000; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003). First-generation students of color have holistically experienced a variety of challenges in attempting to complete higher education. Assisting these students in their transition from high school to college, and thus being successful in college, can be difficult. Although these students face the anxieties, confusion, and difficulties that all college students encounter, their challenges are heightened when coupled with other factors such as lower levels of college readiness, living in high crime communities, a lack of financial resources, a lack of family support, and limited
knowledge pertaining to postsecondary education (Brown, 2008; Pascarella, et al. 2003; Strayhorn, 2006). Such factors create unique challenges for first-generation students of color, resulting in disparate academic achievement (Strayhorn).

A historical exploration of American social institutions provides an understanding of how the past has influenced the conditions faced by first-generation students of color within colleges and universities. The dynamics of such inequalities inform the current conditions that students of color face in school because the impact on educational opportunities is so heavily influenced by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status,

The results of the present study indicate how the participants challenged the dominant model of underachievement by students of color at both the K-12 and collegiate levels. Changes in policy and practice can indeed alter the educational attainment of these students, not only for their own benefit, but also for the benefit of others within a democratic society.

Chapter Summary

This final chapter summarized the problem statement, the central research question, the related literature, and the methodology for the study. It then presented a summary discussion of data analysis, major themes that were developed, limitations of the study, implications for educational leadership, recommendations for further research, and final conclusions.


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Programs_and_Services&CONTENTID=42703&TEMPLATE=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm


doi:10.1080/095183998236863


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doi:10.5430/ijhe.v3n3p92


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MEMORANDUM

DATE: March 27, 2014

TO: Ms. Jennifer Doster

VIA: Dr. Elinor Scheier
LSCSM

FROM: Dr. Jennifer Wesely, Chairperson
On behalf of the UNF Institutional Review Board

RE: Review of New Project by the UNF Institutional Review Board IRB#545623-1:
"Experiences of First-Generation, First Time in College Students of Color: A Case Study"

This is to advise you that your project, “Experiences of First-Generation, First Time in College Students of Color: A Case Study” was reviewed on behalf of the UNF Institutional Review Board and has been approved as "Exempt Category 2". Therefore, this project requires no further IRB oversight unless substantive changes are made.

This approval applies to your project in the form and content as submitted to the IRB for review. All participants must receive a stamped and dated copy of the approved informed consent document when possible. Any variations or modifications to the approved protocol and/or informed consent forms that are substantive or might increase risk to human participants must be submitted to the IRB prior to implementing the changes. Please see the UNF Standard Operating Procedures for additional information about what types of changes might require an amendment. Any unanticipated problems involving risk and any occurrence of serious harm to subjects and others shall be reported promptly to the IRB within 3 business days.

Your study has been approved as of 3/27/2014. Because your project was approved as exempt, no further IRB oversight is required for this project unless you intend to make a change that is considered substantive or might elevate risk to participants. As an exempt study, continuing review will be unnecessary. When you are ready to close your project, please complete a Closing Report Form which can also be found in the documents library called “Forms and Templates” in IRBNet. This closing report will need to be submitted as a new package in IRBNet.

As you may know, CITI Course Completion Reports are valid for 3 years. Your completion report is valid through 8/27/2016 and Dr. Scheier’s completion report is valid through 10/06/2016. The CITI training for
renewal will become available 90 days before your CITI training expires. Please renew your CITI training within that time period by following this link: http://www.crtprogram.org/. Should you have questions regarding your project or any other IRB issues, please contact the research integrity unit of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs by emailing IRB@unf.edu or calling (904) 620-2455.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within UNF’s records. All records shall be accessible for inspection and copying by authorized representatives of the department or agency at reasonable times and in a reasonable manner. A copy of this approval may also be sent to the dean and/or chair of your department.

UNF IRB Number: 545623-1
Approval Date: 03-27-2014
Expiration Date: Exempt — None
Processed on behalf of UNF’s IRB

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Appendix B: Interview Protocol

1. Would you tell me about your life before college? (D/BQ)
   a. Why did you decide to go to college?
   b. How did you talk about going to college with your family and friends?

2. What did you do in high school that prepared you for college? (EQ)

3. How did you go about the enrollment/admission process?

4. When you heard that you were accepted to college, how did you feel? (FQ)

5. When you received notification that you were accepted to the Jacksonville Commitment Program, how did you feel? (FQ)

6. What does it mean to you to have this type of support from Jacksonville Commitment?

7. What made it possible for you to get to college?

8. What people in your life have helped you get to college?

9. How do you think your family and friends feel about your college opportunity? (O/VQ)

10. How has coming to college changed your living environment?

11. What helps you be successful here at college?
   a. What type of support did you receive your first year?
   b. What type of support are you receiving now?

12. How do you interact with faculty?
   a. Do you stay after class?
   b. Do you go to office hours?

13. How would you describe your day as a college student? (EQ)

14. If you had a big test next week, how would you prepare for it? (EQ)

15. How do you make big decisions? (EQ)
a. What is your thought process/what things do you consider before making your decision?

16. How do you think your life experience differs from other students who have family members who went to college? (O/VQ)

17. How does being a student of color at a predominantly white college impact your everyday interactions with people on campus? (FQ)

18. What difficulties are you facing as a student that you don’t think other students are facing?

19. What would make your life better @ UNF?

20. What do you know now that you didn’t know when you first came to college?
   a. Social experiences
   b. Academic experiences

21. How have you changed as a person since being in college?

22. What does your life look like after college graduation?

23. Now that you are a junior and have had the chance to experience college, what advice would you offer other first-generation college students of color? (O/VQ)

24. What would you like to tell me about your experiences that you haven’t had a chance to tell me?
Appendix C: Email Invitation to Participate in Study

June 17, 2014

My name is Jennifer Doster and I am a doctoral student in the College of Education and Human Services. I was a first-generation college student of color and I would like to invite you to participate in a research study about the life experiences of first-generation college students of color.

Why Should I Participate?

- **It’s all about you** - allow your voice to be heard by sharing your life experiences.
- **Each one teach one** - Provide an “insider’s” perspective that will allow school leaders an opportunity to develop programs and services to address your unique needs and foster academic success.
- **Give back** - take advantage of the opportunity to impact education for other first-generation college students of color.

What Will Be Expected of Me?

- If you agree to be in this study you will be asked to participate in an hour to an hour and a half face-to-face interview.
- The interview will take place in a quiet location at the University of North Florida that is convenient for you.
- Steps will be taken to protect your identity and maintain the confidentiality of your interview.

A Token of Appreciation

- A $10 gift card will be provided to all research participants from Starbucks, Target, or Publix.

I value your participation and I look forward to your contribution to this study. Please email me at [redacted] or call and/or text me at [redacted] to schedule your interview session.
## Appendix D: Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>High School Preparation</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Family Composition</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alean</td>
<td>AP &amp; DE</td>
<td>Bi-racial (African American &amp; Caucasian)</td>
<td>Single Parent</td>
<td>Sociology &amp; Criminal Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amiyah</td>
<td>EC</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Two Parent</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>EC</td>
<td>Bi-racial (African American &amp; Caucasian)</td>
<td>Two Parent</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingrid</td>
<td>HP</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Single Parent/Extended Family</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamar</td>
<td>HP</td>
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<td>Single Parent</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>MMP</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Great Grandmother</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>AP</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Two Parent</td>
<td>Electrical Engineering</td>
</tr>
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<td>Kat</td>
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<td>Single Parent/Extended Family</td>
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<td>Mellie</td>
<td>HP</td>
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<td>Single Parent</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Olivia</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Sophia</td>
<td>IB</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Single Parent</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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2 Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE); Advance Placement (AP), Dual Enrollment (DE), Early College (EC), Honors Program (HP), International Baccalaureate (IB), Medical Magnet Program (MMP)
Appendix E: Informed Consent Form

University of North Florida Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership

Title: Experiences of First-Generation, First Time in College Students of Color: A Case Study

Investigator: Jennifer L. Doster

Contact Information: Florida State College at Jacksonville

11901 Beach Boulevard; U-101
Jacksonville, Florida 32246
Phone: 646-2120
Fax: 646-2163
Email: jdoster@fscj.edu

Approved By Institutional Review Board: March 27, 2014

Dear Participant:

I am a doctoral candidate at the University of North Florida. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study about the life experiences of first-generation students of color. For the purposes of this study, a first-generation student of color is a student whose identifies as being of African descent or Latin American descent and whose parents or guardian has never attended college. The study seeks to understand what it means to be a first-generation student of color. Understanding the experiences of students inside and outside the classroom could enable leaders to understand the services needed and the types of environments that may contribute to the success of first-generation students of color.

If you agree to be in this study you will be asked to participate in an hour to an hour and a half face-to-face interview with the investigator. The interview will take place in a quiet location at the University of North Florida that is convenient for you. You can share any experiences you choose to share. Based upon what you share, you will be asked follow-up questions. However, there are no “right” or “wrong” responses. You also reserve the right to decline answering any questions. Based on what you tell me, I may ask to meet with you again to continue the interview. The decision to have another interview session is up you.

Audio Recording:

This research project will include audio recording of the interview you are consenting to participate in. The audio recording will be accessible to authorized individuals. The audio
recording will be transcribed by the investigator. You may access the transcriptions or participate in the data-analysis process to ensure accurate and fair reporting. The recordings are digital and will be stored on a password protected secured server at the University of North Florida. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by the parties who will have access to the recordings, your confidentiality for comments you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed although the investigator will try to limit access to the recording as described above.

**Risks and Benefits to the Participants:**

Risks of participating in this study are minimal. You may experience feelings of sadness if you reflect or talk about your life experiences. However, since you may decide what to discuss or keep private, the foreseeable sadness is minimal. If at any time you feel that this sadness is too much for you, you have the right to end the interview, and the interview will end immediately. Also, if you need to speak with a professional regarding your feelings, please contact the Counseling Center. During Spring and Fall, the hours of operation of the UNF counseling center are as follows: Monday to Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00p.m. The UNF Counseling Center is located in Building 2, Founders Hall, Room 2300, 1 UNF Drive, Jacksonville, FL 32224-2645. The phone number is (904) 620-2602.

There are no direct benefits to you for participation in this study, but your valuable input would be contributing to increasing what is known about the lived experiences of first-generation college students of color and the resources needed that may contribute to their academic success. This information might be useful when policymakers and educators make decisions that may influence the academic achievement of first-generation college students of color.

**Costs and Payments to the Participant:**

There are no costs or payments for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality and Privacy:**

To prevent personal identification, you will select a pseudonym that will be used instead of your name. Data from this study may be published and/or used for educational purposes. However, your name will not be disclosed unless ordered by a court of law. Further, any notes taken during the interview will be electronically scanned, stored to a password secured server at the University of North Florida, and then destroyed. The audio recordings will be deleted from the server once the transcripts are verified.

**Participant’s Right to Withdraw from the Study:**

You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to participate in this study, you have the right to stop or withdraw from this study at any time, without penalty to you. If you choose to withdraw from the study, you may request that any or all of your data, which have been collected, be destroyed unless prohibited by state or federal law.

**Other Considerations:**
You will be provided with any important new findings or changes in the study or procedures that may impact you. If any, you may speak to me, my dissertation chair, Dr. Elinor A. Scheirer, or a staff member of the Institutional Review Board. You may wish to contact Dr. Scheirer if you have questions related to the study. You may wish to contact the Institutional Review Board if your rights as a participant have been violated or you have concerns regarding breach of confidentiality. You may contact Dr. Scheirer at the University of North Florida by phone at (904) 620-1803 or by email at escheire@unf.edu. You may contact a member of the Institutional Review Board at (904) 620-2498.

_________  __________
Signature of Participant                             Date

_________  __________
Printed Name of Individual Obtaining Consent    Date

_________  __________
Signature of Individual Obtaining Consent     Date
JENNIFER L. JACKSON

PROFILE

Progressive positions in public institutions and one private institution serving diverse student populations, which consisted of non-high school completers, traditional students, and nontraditional students. Experience in developing comprehensive students services department which consist of admissions, academic advising, student records, and financial aid. Experience in providing key strategic leadership in student services in an effort to develop and deliver new services, processes, and functions related to student enrollment that are reflective of practices that contribute to institutional long range planning for student persistence.

EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH FLORIDA
College of Education and Human Services Doctorate of Educational Leadership Currently Enrolled

FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
College of Education Master of Science: Higher Education Administration Graduated: December 2004

FLORIDA A&M UNIVERSITY
School of Arts & Sciences Bachelor of Science: Political Science Graduated: April 2002

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH FLORIDA 2016-PRESENT
Director of Academic Advising Services – Coggin College of Business

- Responsible for the overall direction of the Coggin College of Business Academic Advising Department.
- Responsible for managing departmental budget.
- Provide oversight to various college functions to include: student recruitment and retention, new student orientation, and scholarship management.
- Serve as the college liaison to various university departments.
- Design and implement departmental strategies and objectives to ensure departmental goals are met.
- Responsible for the development and implementation of programs, policies and procedures.
- Serve in an advisory capacity, providing coaching and consultation.
• Develop proposals, recommendations and reports for senior leadership.
• Collaborate with senior leaders to integrate departmental objectives that impact the university.
• Manage the student petition and graduation certification process.
• Work with the Director of Development and Associate Director of Development to manage the processing of Cogging College of Business scholarships, including advertising and processing.
• Work with Department Chairs, Office Managers, and the Office of the Registrar to develop college course schedule CCB schedule.
• Responsible for conducting annual employee evaluations.
• Responsible for processing suspension and probation list each semester.

FLORIDA STATE COLLEGE AT JACKSONVILLE 2007-2016
Student Success Manager - South Campus

• Managed all functions of the Student Success Department, which included enrollment services, academic advising, student records and registration, and veteran affairs.
• Responsible for staying current in the overall student enrollment process to include admissions, new student orientation, academic advising, career exploration, records and registration, and financial aid options.
• Oversaw all aspects of personnel administration for 14 staff including performance review and staff development.
• Mentored and guided staff to evaluate effectiveness of enrollment services, functions, and procedures.
• Responsible for ensuring that staff attended Student Success trainings as needed for their areas of responsibility.
• Reviewed and recommended improvements to quality of services, functions, and procedures to determine compliance with applicable legislation.
• Responsible for implementing the Student Success strategic plan and lead departmental efforts in the achievement of goals.
• Prepared weekly reports and reviewed data related to student volume to determine staffing needs during peak period.
• Collaborated with district leadership to ensure consistent and efficient delivery of all procedures and policies.
• Collaborated with district recruitment team to coordinate and conduct recruitment efforts.
• Maintained close operational ties and consulted with all offices associated with student enrollment management.
• Provided direction and training to academic departments and faculty on policies and procedures regarding admissions, enrollment, and records and registration.
• Reviewed assessment data and collaborated with academic deans to determine course offerings.
• Supervised the South Campus Dual Enrollment and Early College Programs.
• Collaborated with Duval County Public Schools and area private schools in continuous planning and implementation of Dual Enrollment and Early College initiatives.
ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

- Led departmental efforts to design and implement the “Center” concept known as the Student Success Center, which serves 10,000+ students.
- Successfully integrated three major departments: enrollment services, academic advising, and financial aid.
- Successfully cross-trained 25 full-time employees.
- Collaborated with college-wide staff to develop the First Year Experience program and student guidebook.
- Collaborated with college-wide staff to create college-wide forms and consistent enrollment and advising processes.
- Played a key role in the development of a college-wide enrollment checklist to help students successfully navigate the enrollment process.
- Collaborated with senior administrators of the College, district public school systems, and area private schools to increase the South Camps dual enrollment population to 500+ students.
- Launched a successful Early College program under the auspices of the Dual Enrollment Program.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH FLORIDA 2005-2007
Enrollment Services Coordinator & Team Leader

- Assessed and resolved student issues regarding admissions, records, financial aid, and veteran affairs.
- Served as a liaison between university administrators, students, parents, faculty, staff, and others regarding Enrollment Services activities.
- Interpreted university rules and policies and recommended new and improved programs and systems to effectively manage Enrollment Services administration.
- Assisted management in developing and implementing improvement cycles to continuously improve services for students.
- Responsible for participation in recruitment efforts and execution of the institution’s recruitment plan.
- Supervised a team of five members by providing leadership and guidance.
- Assisted in the training efforts of new employees.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

- Assisted in the training efforts of 20 new employees.
- Collaborated with various departments to implement the One Stop concept.
- Successfully provided guidance and continued training to a team of five staff members.

FLAGLER COLLEGE – TALLAHASSEE CAMPUS 2002-2005
Admissions & Financial Aid Coordinator

- Worked with the appropriate administrative staff in reviewing and suggesting policy changes as they pertained to admissions and conversion rates.
- Advised prospective students and provided them with information regarding course offerings, schedules, cost of tuition and fees.
• Provided initial transcript analysis and informed applicants of all prerequisite requirements necessary for admission.
• Monitored prospect applicants and managed conversion process to follow prospects through the admissions process.
• Tracked all applications and enrollments; maintained historical records; prepared weekly report for the Chancellor and the Campus Director.
• Collaborated with other departments to provide assistance in identifying appropriate steps to resolve student issues.
• Prepared student data to identify trends and made recommendations accordingly.
• Supervised the student campus employment program.
• Provided accurate record keeping for all financial aid files and forms.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

• Launched successful recruitment efforts, which increased student from 70 students to over 500 students in three years.
• Established a campus work-study program.
• Established a partnership with local community college staff to provide students with a seamless college transfer process.

TALLAHASSEE COMMUNITY COLLEGE 2000-2002
Adult Education Specialist and Liaison

• Provided prescribed guidance to prospective and currently enrolled students in the Adult Studies Program in an effort to ensure a positive student experience and successful completion of a high school diploma. This guidance included, but was not limited to, academic and behavioral pre-screening, career assessment and goal setting.
• Analyzed and evaluated adult education data, performance, assessment, and compliance data.
• Participated in student recruitment and retention efforts.
• Prepared long range plans for departmental operations and need; made oral presentations to various groups about department programs.
• Assisted students in achieving post-secondary educational goals and/or effective transition to employment.
• Provided academic, personal and performance advising, career and academic planning, transcript analysis, and transfer assistance for Adult Education students.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

• Supervised 5 part-time support staff and 10 volunteers.
• Recruited approximately 75 students per semester.
• Retained approximately 1/2 of entering students per semester.
• Successfully transitioned 352 students from the Adult Studies program to Tallahassee Community College degree and certificate programs.
• Secured corrections grant to provide alternative education for over 600 inmates.
• Secured community partnerships to provided citizenship and English language courses to 200 non-native English speakers.
• Launched the online high school completion program.
• Provided targeted professional development for the Center for Workforce and Economic Development faculty and staff.

SERVICE TO THE COLLEGE

Florida State College at Jacksonville
• Welcome Center and Student Services Institutional Effectiveness Team: South Campus Representative
• Student Life-cycle Process Committee: South Campus Representative
• ERP – Online Admissions Application Business Practices: South Campus Representative
• Academic Foundations Council: South Campus Representative
• Student Inquiry Response Team: South Campus Representative
• Program of Study Design Committee: South Campus Representative
• Enrollment Management Committee: South Campus Representative
• Dual Enrollment Management Team: South Campus Representative
• Sandalwood Family Resource Center Oversight Committee: College Representative

University of North Florida
• Parking Services Appeal Board: Member
• Financial Aid Advisory Committee: Member
• Academic Advising Advisory Board: Member

Flagler College – Tallahassee Campus
• Recruitment Team: Facilitator
• Financial Aid Advisory Board: Member
• Enrollment Planning Committee: Member

Tallahassee Community College
• Grant writer
• Disciplinary Committee: Member
• Basic math tutor

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS: MEMBERSHIP
Association of Florida Colleges
American Education Research Association
Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education
Florida State University Alumni Association

PRESENTATIONS/WORKSHOPS
Academic Degree Planning: Classroom Presentation  Dual Enrollment Transition
Workshop Financial Aid 101: Classroom Presentation  College-wide Open House Presenter
National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships Presenter

AWARDS
Employee of the Month – 2009 and 2013
Chancellor’s Leadership Seminar: Certificate of Completion High Level Leadership
Two Day Leadership Experience: Certificate of Completion
University of North Florida Enrollment Services Spirit of Excellence Award