Examining the Sense of Belonging of First-Generation Students and their College Persistence: An Exploratory Interview Study

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DEDICATION

To my husband
Eric Stokes

My children
Kendalyn and Evan Stokes

My Parents and family
George and Colette Berry
T. George and Jackie White
Doug and Beverly Stokes
Dorian, Daran, and Ed Taylor
Roena Hamilton

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ABSTRACT

It has been suggested that low-income, students of color, and first-generation students face major impediments to feeling like they belong on campus (Ostrove & Long, 2007). Because first-generation students come to college with a myriad of challenges that directly impact their first-year experience, understanding how best to support this population is a crucial responsibility. Sense of belonging has been shown to be related to academic achievement, retention, and persistence to degree completion for students from historically marginalized groups (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rhee, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008d; Walton & Cohen, 2011). The purpose of this study was to understand how first-generation students achieve a sense of belonging in the first-year of college and how their sense of belonging contributes to their persistence. The following research questions guided the study: 1) How do first-generation students achieve a sense of belonging; 2) How did their sense of belonging affect their persistence from the first to second year?

Interviews were conducted with 12 first-generation students who completed their first year of college during the 2015-2016 academic year. Data were analyzed using an ongoing process that began with reviewing and coding each interview and consolidating codes recursively within and across interviews to derive the themes that addressed the research questions (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Three themes described how students tried to achieve a sense of belonging in the first year of college: (a) by building relationships with other students, faculty and staff, (2) by getting involved in activities on campus, and (3) by becoming engaged in the residence hall experience. Not all participants developed a sense of belonging, nevertheless they all persisted from the first to second year. The majority of participants (7) attributed their persistence to having achieved a

sense of belonging. Four of the remaining participants, none of whom reported having achieved a sense of belonging, attributed their persistence to personal reasons and motivations; and one, who achieved a sense of belonging, felt it played no part in her persistence.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

From 1980 to 2010, the undergraduate population increased by seven million students (Aud, Hussar, Planty, Synder, Biance, Fox, & Drake, 2010). This vast enrollment growth provided access to many who had not been considered "traditional" college students, i.e., under the age of 25, White, and from middle- or upper-income families. The new student profile included more students from underrepresented groups, including students of color, first-generation, non-traditional aged students, veterans, and students from low-income families (Choy, 2002; Kelly, 2008; Kim & Rury, 2007; Strayhorn, 2005; Synder & Hoffman, 2009).

Despite the troubled economic times of the Great Recession of 2006 – 2012, college enrollments continued to rise, with Black and Hispanic students showing the greatest increases (Buddin & Croft, 2014). In the fall of 2015, there were 17.4 million undergraduate students enrolled in post-secondary education. Women made up 55 percent of the student population, students of color made up 44 percent of the undergraduate population, and approximately 60 percent attended 4-year institutions (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, Mann; 2017). Furthermore, the presence of students with parents with little to no college education increased (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

While college access has improved for students of color, first-generation, and low-income students, retaining these students to degree completion has been a major challenge. The research on college persistence to graduation has found that students of color, first-generation students, and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds persist and graduate at much lower rates than those of traditional students (Bean & Metzener, 1985; Kezar, 2011; Thomason, 2014). Nationally, the six-year graduation rate for full-time students enrolled at 4-year

institutions is slightly below 60% (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013). For students of color, the graduation rate is even lower at 50% for Hispanicc, 40% for Black, 39% for Alaskan Native (Lee, Edwards, Menson, & Rawls 2011; NCES, 2013; Warburton, Burgarin, Nuñez & Carroll, 2001); the rate for low-income, first-generation students is 34% (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

The retention and graduation rates of the aforementioned underrepresented groups is worth noting since failure to complete the degree can have a potentially negative impact on individuals' socioeconomic future (Ostrove & Cole, 2003; Walpole, 2003; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Experts have predicted that by 2020, approximately 65% of all newly created jobs will require a college degree or at least some postsecondary education (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2013). Thus, failure to acquire a degree will render students who have not persisted to graduation ineligible for an increasing number of jobs.

In recognizing the role that higher education plays in the U.S. overall economy, the Obama presidential administration stressed the importance of college attendance. This conviction led to programs being developed to create a more educated society, address the changing job market, and provide a clear pathway to the middle class (Obama, 2014). Additionally, other scholars have found that completion of a college degree provides numerous societal benefits as college graduates have access to better career opportunities, earn higher salaries, pay more in taxes, and are generally better citizens (Carter, 2006; College Board, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Retention

Low college degree completion rates are problematic for society at large as well as for individual students. Thus, it is important for researchers, policymakers, and higher education practitioners to gain a better understanding of how to increase the likelihood of success for the changing undergraduate population (Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017). In general, student success and retention are most likely to occur when a student has strong background characteristics, sufficient academic preparation, and positive in-college experiences (Astin, 1984; Bean, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Tinto, 1994). The term "background characteristics" refers to a student's personal background and includes factors such as socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, gender, and parents' educational level. A student's socioeconomic status and income background continue to serve as a strong indicator of college persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; 2005, Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006). In 2004, the American College Testing (ACT) found that, with the exception of high-school grade point average, a student's socioeconomic status was one of the best ways to predict college retention (Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004). The findings from the ACT report were consistent with Walpole's (2003) finding that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were less likely to graduate from college.

Next, academic preparation is often viewed as the strongest predictor of college persistence and degree completion (ACT, 2007). Adelman (2006) completed an extensive study of college persistence and found that the quality of a student's high school curriculum was more important than standardized test scores (i.e., ACT and SAT) in predicting the likelihood of persisting from the first to second year of college. Adleman's findings were in line with those of Cabrera et al. (2003) who found that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds often had

limited academic resources in high school and were less likely to graduate from college when compared to students who received high-quality academic preparation in high school.

Finally, it is often believed that students are more likely to persist if they immediately get involved, engaged, or integrated into college life (Astin, 1985; Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Involvement is defined by Astin (1985) as the extent to which students invest in learning by studying, spending time on campus, participating in student organizations, and interacting with faculty and other students. Astin's definition of involvement is closely related to Tinto's (1993) concept of integration, which suggests that students are more likely to persist when they perceive congruence between their intellectual and social needs at an institution. This congruence, which has been referred to as academic and social integration, has been defined by Tinto (1993) as the student's level of involvement in the social and academic life of the college.

Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1987, 1993) emphasizes the critical importance of social and academic integration into college for student success and persistence. This theory has been widely adopted by institutions of higher education and drives many of the programs and services that are provided for students, particularly for students most at risk (Tierney, 1992). Tinto (2006-2007) recognized that there was a disconnect between the research on factors that support student persistence and the lack of improvement in student retention rates, particularly for at-risk students, and asked researchers to think about how they could improve the effectiveness of the higher education experience. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) suggested that researchers develop a more complex approach when thinking about persistence by recognizing that persistence is a multidimensional problem that cannot be addressed by a with a one-size-fits-all solution. Since students come to college from different circumstances (e.g., race, ethnicity,

socioeconomic status), it is important to recognize that they may have different experiences in college based on their background and the type of institution they attended (Reason, 2009).

Braxton and Lee (2005) completed a thorough review of the research on student persistence and concluded that there was a link between social integration, institutional commitment and a student's decision to persist at four-year residential institutions. Out of the nineteen studies they reviewed, sixteen supported the proposition that students were more likely to be committed to the institution and persist to graduation if they experienced social integration (Braxton & Lee, 2005). Furthermore, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concluded from their findings on engagement and persistence and found that student engagement, purposeful campus involvement, positive interactions with faculty, and time spent studying outside of class were all strongly related to persistence and graduation. Reason (2009) supported those findings in an extensive review of the retention research, concluding that involvement in co-curricular activities like student organizations and campus groups helped students gain experiences with purposeful activities that could lead to retention.

Campus involvement, engagement, and integration have been identified as significant variables in retention research (Astin, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). However, even though we have improved our understanding of what variables contribute to student persistence, that knowledge has not effectively contributed to increasing overall student retention rates (Reason, 2009).

Higher education institutions are interested in increasing retention and graduation rates for all students, and the growing need to address the reality of lower graduation rates for students of color, low-income, and first-generation students is making the concern more pressing. Indeed, members of these groups are four times more likely to leave college after the first year (Thayer,

2000; Tinto, 2001) than traditional students. There are a number of circumstances that collectively place students in these groups at risk for not completing their degrees (Quaye & Harper, 2014). First, they are disproportionately underprepared for college (Astin, 1993; Adelman, 1999; Hoxby & Turner, 2003; McDonough, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Thayer, 2000). Second, they come to college with limited knowledge of campus expectations and are often the first in their family to enroll in postsecondary education (Thayer, 2000; Walpole, 2007). Third, the overall cost of higher education is burdensome for many of these students and their families (Hornack, Farrell & Jackson, 2010; Walpole, 2003). Fourth, in addition to the previously mentioned challenges, it has been reported that first-generation students face problems related to their separation from home (Lubrano, 2004). Last, students of color attending predominantly white institutions have reported feelings of isolation (Allen, 1988), often indicating that they feel marginalized and unsupported in the college environment (McDonough, 2004; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993; Strayhorn, 2008d).

The challenges faced by underrepresented students could make integration into the campus community much more difficult. Although colleges and universities spend a great deal of time and effort developing programs and experiences to assist with transition to college, underrepresented students often need additional encouragement and support from faculty, staff, and their peers to utilize the support services available to aid in their integration and success.

Tinto's (1993) retention model placed the responsibility for college success on the student. This logic assumed that if a student dropped out, it was due to his or her failure to integrate, not because the institution failed to meet his or her needs. This way of thinking is problematic for underrepresented students since they are expected to assimilate into the dominant culture and, in so doing, reject their home culture for the sake of integration into the mainstream

(Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rendon et al., 2000). Thus, Tinto's theory on integration, which de facto promotes membership and participation in mainstream activities, has been criticized for its failure to understand the need for underrepresented students to seek support and membership from groups that are more closely aligned with their personal experiences and background (for example, religious groups, community service or activist organizations, and ethnic or culturally related organizations (Tierney, 1992; Braxton et. al., 1997; Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Hurtado and Carter (1997) proposed a theory that placed responsibility for persistence on both the student and the university by adding value to the need for culturally supportive college involvement activities. They proposed the concept of sense of belonging to "capture the individual's view of whether he or she feels included in the college community" (p. 27). This concept brought attention to the difference between students' membership and participation in campus related activities and students' subjective sense of feeling they are valued members of the community. Strayhorn (2012), who defined sense of belonging as "a basic human need" (p.3), suggested that sense of belonging was directly related to students' perceived social support on campus, feelings of connectedness, and feelings of mattering or being cared about, accepted and valued by others.

Sense of belonging differs from academic and social integration in the way it takes into account the individual's perception of support and being valued on campus, rather than looking at the student's involvement on campus (Strayhorn, 2012). Developing a sense of belonging is seen as critically important to helping students feel connected and valued at an institution – particularly for nontraditional students – and increases the likelihood that they will engage in the actions and activities found to be related to success and retention, e.g., academic and social integration. To better understand how sense of belonging can impact students and their

integration, we have to return to Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure, which recommends that students incorporate themselves into the college culture by separating or disassociating from their past community (Tinto, 1993). Maintaining relationships with family is critical in the emotional adjustment to college for students from underrepresented backgrounds; however, peer support is more important for academic and social adjustment (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). Peers can often provide a level of support that parents simply cannot provide, which is particularly the case for first-generation students whose parents may not understand the college experience. Peers are instrumental in influencing college outcomes because students can work together to form study groups, share notes and experiences, and offer advice and support (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Positive peer support – coupled with positive interactions with faculty – creates the ideal setting for helping a student establish a sense of belonging. These positive interactions can make the college environment seem less complex and help foster a foundation for academic and social integration.

Statement of the Problem

First-generation students comprise 25% of the student population in college and cover the spectrum of underrepresented students, providing institutions with greater diversity as they are often students of color and from low-income families (Choy, 2001; Stableton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014). Although college provides first-generation students with a great deal of academic and social opportunities, their opportunities are hindered if there is an institutional mismatch or if the student does not feel like the college is a good fit (Phillips, Stevens, and Townsend, 2016). Compared to their continuing-generation peers, first-generation students are more likely to drop out of high school; 35% less likely to go to college; and 51% less likely to graduate from college in four years (Ishitani, 2006).

It has been suggested that first-generation students face major impediments to feeling like they belong on campus in their first-year of college (Ostrove & Long, 2007). Unfortunately, 60% of first-generation college students do not continue enrollment from the first to second year (Stableton, Soria, & Huesman, 2011). Because first-generation students come to college with a myriad of challenges that directly impact their first-year experience, understanding how best to support this population is a critical responsibility. For the purposes of this study, a first-generation student is defined as a student whose parents did not graduate from a four-year college (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Sense of belonging has been shown to be related to academic achievement, retention, and persistence to degree completion for students from historically marginalized groups (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rhee, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008d; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Additionally, campus involvement and interactions with faculty have been said to enhance sense of belonging (Hoffman et. al., 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Maestas et. al, 2007; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012). However, factors such as first-generation status (Ostrove & Long, 2007) and racial discrimination (Harper & Hurtado, 2007) have been linked to a diminished sense of belonging.

While previous studies have found that sense of belonging for students of color (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2008; Chaves, 2012) is linked to persistence, no studies have looked at the impact of sense of belonging on persistence for first-generation students. It would be beneficial for faculty, staff, and administrators to know if sense of belonging is a significant factor for first-generation students' adjustment in the first year, or if the absence of sense of belonging has an impact on a student's decision to matriculate from the first to second year.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand how first-generation students achieve a sense of belonging in the first-year of college and how their sense of belonging contributes to their persistence. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do first-generation students achieve a sense of belonging?
2. How did their sense of belonging affect their persistence from the first to second year?

Significance of the Study

Today's college campuses are increasingly diverse, and the expansion of college access has made retention and persistence to graduation, particularly for groups who are persisting and graduating at lower rates than traditional students, increasingly vital. This study seeks to fill a gap in the literature on first-generation students and their sense of belonging and provide insight into the perception of belonging among first-generation students.

Findings from this study may help college administrators, advisors, and faculty. By gaining a greater understanding of sense of belonging, administrators and policymakers may be able to think creatively about how to better support and engender a sense of belonging in first-generation students, and in so doing, affect their retention.

Delimitations of the Study

This study will be delimited to first-generation undergraduate students enrolled at a large research public institution in the Southeast. By limiting the population to students attending one institution in the Southeast, the findings will not speak to the experiences of undergraduate students from other regions or at other types of institutions.

Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this study was to understand how first-generation students achieve a sense of belonging in the first-year of college and how their sense of belonging contributes to their persistence. The research will be grounded in the model of sense of belonging proposed by Strayhorn (2012) – Strayhorn's Model of Sense of Belonging. According to Strayhorn (2008), sense of belonging is achieved when students perceive a sense of social support and connectedness on campus. Alienation occurs when students feel marginalized, isolated, or as if they do not fit into the campus community. Sense of belonging is considered especially significant for students who are from historically marginalized populations, such as racial or ethnic minorities, first-generation college students, or students from low-income backgrounds (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012) because these individuals are less likely to feel a part of the dominant culture. Strayhorn's model places an emphasis on a student's need to belong at different places and times during the university experience. These needs are fundamental and are described within Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1987). As students seek to develop a sense of belonging on campus, the need to belong will directly impact their decisions and behavior.

Strayhorn's model (Figure 1) suggests that students who develop a sense of belonging will experience positive outcomes such as campus involvement, happiness, and retention. On the contrary, if a student is unable to develop sense of belonging, he or she is at risk for negative outcomes such as depression, suicide, or dropping out of college. This process recurs as students move through the various spaces and contexts during the college experience.

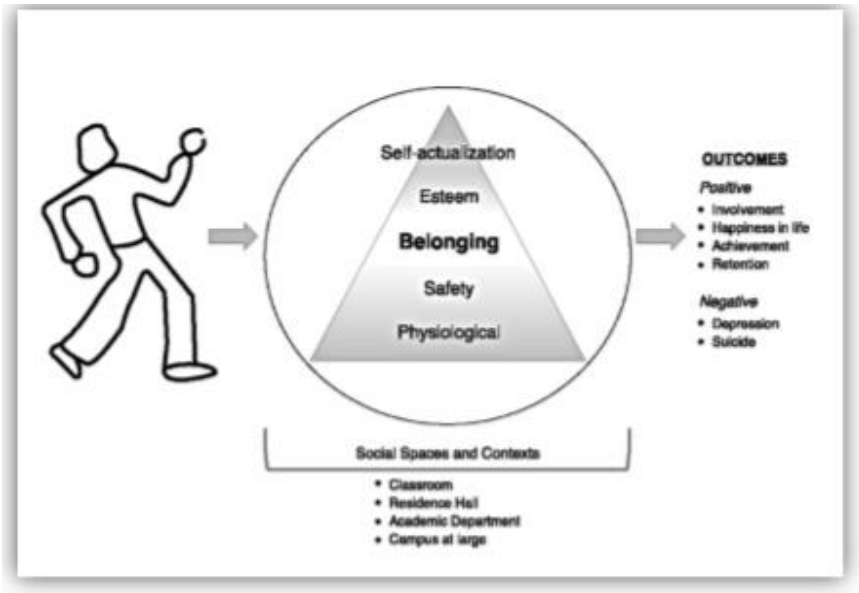


Figure 1. Sense of Belonging Model Strayhorn, 2012 p. 25

The current study uses Strayhorn's Model of Sense of Belonging because it is a comprehensive conceptualization of a sense of belonging and highlights the multiple spaces and contexts in which students encounter college experiences. Some of these spaces include the campus at large, academic departments, residence halls, and classrooms. This study seeks to determine whether sense of belonging is a factor in first-generation students' decision to persist from the first to second year.

Strayhorn's model influenced the study in multiple ways. First, it influenced the overall conception of the problem and the study as well as the research questions. Furthermore, it will influence the analysis of the data by showing the findings in relation to the various spaces and contexts.

Organization of the Study

The study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One provides an introduction to the study and rationale behind the study, states the problem and purpose, identifies the research

questions, describes the significance of the study, and provides clarification of the delimitations of the study. Chapter Two provides a critical review of the research and literature related to the study; it also describes the theoretical framework guiding the study. Chapter Three details the methods and procedures used in the conduct of the study. An exploratory qualitative design was selected for this study because this type of approach will allow the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of the sense of belonging of first-generation students and the impact on persistence (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). Exploratory studies, also referred to basic qualitative studies, are focused on expanding knowledge, which could inform practice, and these types of studies are commonly used in applied fields such as education (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Chapter Four will present the findings. Chapter Five will summarize the study and its findings, discusses the findings in relation to the literature detailed in Chapter Two and in terms of the meanings and implications of the findings, draws conclusions from those findings, and offers recommendations for further research.

Definitions of Key Terms

An understanding of the terms listed below will help the reader better understand the context of the study:

1. Attrition – refers to students who fail to re-enroll at an institution for consecutive semesters (Seidman, 2005).
2. First-generation student –a student whose parents did not graduate from a four-year college (Engle & Tinto, 2008).
3. Low-income student - low-income student is defined by eligibility to receive funding from the Federal Pell Grant program (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

4. Persistence – a student's continuation behavior leading to a desired academic goal. Persistence is interrelated with retention and attrition, and conceptualized by Seidman (2005), as the "desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from beginning through degree completion" (p. 14).
5. Retention – occurs when an institution retains a student from admission through graduation (Seidman, 2005).
6. Sense of belonging – "the psychological sense that one is an accepted member of a community" (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 327).
7. Underrepresented student – Student of color, first-generation, or from a low-socioeconomic background.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this study was to understand how first-generation students achieve a sense of belonging in the first-year of college and how their sense of belonging contributes to their persistence. In the first section, the prevalent research on college student retention is reviewed, and in the second section, the research on first-generation students is reviewed. In the final section, the literature on sense of belonging is reviewed, as this framework will guide the study.

Retention

Nearly half of the students who leave college make the departure decision prior to their second year (Tinto, 1998). Examining the reasons for this statistic is important because failure to complete a college degree has a substantial impact on the student, the institution, and the greater society (College Board, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). When students make the decision to leave college, they risk missing out on educational opportunities that could impact their future careers and overall earning potential (Kezar, 2006). At the same time, institutions of higher education competing for state resources risk missing out on state appropriations if they cannot show gains in student retention, which is often associated with institutional effectiveness (Tinto, 2006). Last, the greater society benefits from higher education as it provides a more educated workforce and socially conscious community (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003).

Student retention first became an issue for higher education administrators nearly 50 years ago. Student attrition was initially viewed as the student's problem and thought to be a reflection of their lack of motivation or lack of skills. As a result, attrition was viewed as the result of the failure of the individual student and not the institution (Tinto, 2006). More recent

research has increasingly focused on the institution's role in increasing retention rates. This change is partially due to the current environment in which higher education institutions must compete for diminishing resources with higher accountability measures (Tinto, 2006).

The research on student persistence has evolved over the past five decades and is abundant. The major findings from retention research have determined that student academic preparation (Westtick, Le, Robbins, Radunzel, & Schmidt, 2015), background characteristics (Bean, 1980, 1983), student involvement (Astin, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980), academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993), and engagement (Kuh, 2001) are critical to student success and persistence.

Background Characteristics

The Causal Model of Student Persistence says that college persistence can be explained by understanding models of organizational turnover and the intersection between student attitudes and behaviors (Bean, 1980). Bean (1980) investigated attrition in higher education to determine what factors were related to student attrition. There were three goals of that study: to apply a causal model from employee turnover to student attrition in higher education, to test the power of the model, and last, to rank variables in student attrition. Questionnaires were distributed by 88 instructors in a freshman composition course; of the 1,836 freshman enrolled in the course, 66% of the first-year students completed the survey. The sample was biased toward higher ability students with 40% scoring in the top quartile of the ACT, and the population was restricted to first-year, non-Hispanic, Caucasian students who were under the age of 22. Bean's model recommended that the background characteristics of students be taken into consideration in order to understand their interactions with the higher education institution. Background variables included past academic performance, socioeconomic status, residency classification,

distance from hometown, and size of the hometown. Bean's model also emphasized the importance of recognizing that students come to college with attitudes and expectations that are either confirmed or disproved once the student experiences campus life because it is through their campus experiences that students develop new attitudes and beliefs that shape their intent to stay enrolled or leave college. Past academic performance was indicated as a significant background variable affecting the level of institutional commitment and satisfaction in college. Bean's (1980) findings indicated that institutional commitment was the primary variable that influenced the decision whether or not to drop out.

Another, more recent, study conducted by Adelman (2006) emphasized the importance of background characteristics, specifically high school preparation, in predicting college momentum and matriculation. Using data collected from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), the researcher sought to discover more about the academic background of students, including the culmination of opportunity, guidance, choice, effort, and commitment. The data were collected from a nationally representative group of 12,000 students moving from high school into college from 1988 – 2000; 66% of the students earned bachelor's degrees. The academic momentum and curriculum intensity experienced during high school was found to be the most important predictor for college success; those students who made choices to take rigorous coursework and put in a high quality of effort in high school had a higher degree of academic leverage once they enrolled in college.

Adelman (2006) concluded that those students who are active, responsible participants in their academic pursuits had a greater likelihood of completing a degree. Furthermore, he found that students who were provided with the opportunity to take courses from an intense curriculum were often from the best high schools with low numbers of students of color or low-

socioeconomic backgrounds. For Latino students, following a rigorous high school curriculum and entering college immediately following high school provided the greatest likelihood for degree completion. For White and Asian students, taking the most rigorous courses and completing math beyond Algebra 2 were the most important variables for gaining academic momentum in college. For African-American students, the high-school curriculum coupled with earning at least four credit hours in the summer terms provided students with the momentum needed for persistence. And last, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to have academic momentum in college if they were provided with a strong high-school curriculum. Students from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds were less likely than their middle- to upper- income peers to attend a high school providing adequate opportunities for a strong curriculum that included advanced math or honors or AP classes (Adelman, 2006).

Fischer (2007) explored racial and ethnic differences among students as they adjusted to college and the consequences of different adjustment strategies on college outcomes. The purpose of the study was to determine how students' pre-college characteristics and college adjustment strategies were related to college outcomes (i.e. GPA, satisfaction). Data were collected from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshman, which sampled approximately 4,000 first-time students entering selective colleges and universities in 1999. Twenty-eight of the thirty-five selected institutions agreed to participate in the study, providing their freshman rosters to the researchers; 4,573 students were invited to participate in the study. The study yielded an 85% response rate with equal numbers of African-American, Hispanic, Asian, and White students. The students were surveyed at the beginning of the fall term to collect baseline data on the students' family, neighborhood, and school conditions. Follow-up surveys were conducted in the spring semester to collect data on the students' classes, grades, interactions with

faculty, experiences with other students, campus involvement, and perceptions/experiences of racial discrimination on campus. They found that satisfaction with college was most related to pre-college characteristics for the Asian and African-American students. Asian students with higher high school GPAs were more satisfied with college, and African-American students who rated the quality of their high school higher expressed greater satisfaction with college. There was a link between academic preparation and retention in college for Hispanic students since having a strong high school background reduced the likelihood of leaving college. Finally, the researcher examined how pre-college characteristics, social and academic adjustment, and the college environment affected the students' decision to leave college. For all students, Fischer (2007) found that having friends on campus helped with adjusting to college and provided greater satisfaction with the college experience, which reduced the likelihood of leaving college prior to degree completion.

Involvement

Astin (1973) and Chickering (1974) determined that living on campus was positively related to student retention because students who lived on campus were more likely to have more time and opportunity to get involved with campus life. The early research on student retention focused on the importance of student involvement in the first year of college (Astin, 1975; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). As a result, many early retention intervention programs focused on the transition into college, which spawned the creation of a variety of first-year programs such as first-year seminars, expanded orientation sessions, and the development of programs to help students connect with faculty outside of class. Astin (1984) defined involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 297).

The theory of student involvement was developed from Astin's (1975) longitudinal research on college dropouts, which found that students who lived in residence halls, joined Greek organizations, participated in extracurricular activities, or worked on-campus were less likely to drop out of college (Astin, 1975). His research on involvement allowed him to determine that there was a continuum of involvement, and that dropping out was the ultimate form of non-involvement. This conclusion was based on the assumption that students at the lowest end of the involvement continuum had the greatest risk for departure. Astin's (1975) work also introduced the importance of students selecting institutions that were the best "fit" based on their background characteristics.

In 1977, Astin continued his research on involvement theory by conducting another longitudinal study with a sample of more than 200,000 students from 300 institutions and examining approximately 80 student outcomes. The purpose of the study was to focus on the effects of different types of involvement, ranging from living on campus to involvement with student organizations. The results aligned with his 1975 findings and led to his conclusions that (a) living on campus increased the likelihood of persistence and graduate school aspirations, (b) participation in honors programs improved student satisfaction with instruction, (c) academic involvement was positively related to good academic performance and overall satisfaction but had a negative impact on developing friendships with other students, (d) interactions with faculty were strongly related to college satisfaction, (e) athletic involvement was associated with satisfaction but also isolated students from their non-athletic peers, and (f) involvement with student government provided students above average satisfaction with peer friendships and provided students with peer interactions that helped them adjust to college.

Later, Astin (1984) summarized his previous research on involvement theory and concluded that student involvement was simple yet comprehensive in that it was supported by decades of research and provided educators with the tools necessary to provide the most effective environments for learning. He determined that student involvement takes different forms, ranging from an academic involvement to extracurricular activities, and theorized that greater levels of student involvement led to more opportunities for learning and personal development (Astin, 1984).

In 1993, Astin conducted a study of involvement and retention. The purpose of the study was to focus on student outcomes as they are affected by college environments. More than 200 four-year institutions were included in the national sample in a longitudinal study that included 25,000 students who entered college as freshmen during the 1985 academic year.

The first set of findings were related to student involvement and revealed that any form of student involvement in the college experience provided a benefit to learning and student development. Specifically, talking to faculty outside of class, spending time socializing with friends, and seeking career counseling were directly related to retention. Working off-campus part-time was a factor that negatively impacted retention. The second set of findings were related to academic outcomes and suggested that the amount of time spent studying was positively related to academic outcomes such as retention, graduation with honors, and enrollment in graduate school. The third set of finding were related to peer groups and their effects, noting that peer groups had the most influence on students' academic, personal, and leadership development. The fourth set of findings showed that interaction with faculty was the second most significant aspect of development after interaction with peers. In addition, Astin (1993) noted that faculty interactions were positively correlated with students' self-reported

personal and intellectual development and academic attainment outcomes, including college GPA, degree attainment, graduation with honors, and enrollment in graduate school.

Engagement

Involvement has more recently been referred to as 'student engagement.' To put it simply, students who are more engaged academically and socially are more likely to persist to graduation (Tinto, 1993). According to Kuh (2001), student engagement represents two variables: first, the time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities; second, the effort the institution dedicates to using effective education practices for student learning.

Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008) conducted research to determine what behaviors and institutional practices helped foster student success and discover whether student engagement in purposeful activities differed among students from different racial and ethnic groups. The researchers collected data from 18 four-year institutions that administered the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) from 2000-2003. The institutions were selected because they had a sizable response rate and a racially and ethnically diverse student population. The institutions varied by size, types of students served, and types of degrees offered. Student engagement was measured by the amount of time spent studying, the amount of time spent on student activities, and from a global measure of engagement derived from 19 responses to the NSSE. All of the items from the global engagement measure had already been found to be related to positive student outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The findings showed that first-year students who engaged in educationally purposeful activities were more likely to persist from the first to the second year; additionally, engagement was found to be a positive predictor of persistence for students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Reason, Terenzini, and Domingo (2006) collected data from the National Survey of Student Engagement on approximately 6,700 students from 30 U.S. colleges. The purpose of the study was to explore the forces that influenced student success in the first year of college and to identify the college experiences that were the most influential. The framework guiding this study hypothesized that students arrive at college with a range of personal and academic characteristics and experiences that shape their engagement and involvement in the institution. The researchers found that multiple forms of engagement (i.e. social, cognitive, and academic) were powerful predictors of academic success. Students who were engaged academically felt that the institution fostered a culture of academic excellence, which jumpstarted their early engagement in the classroom. Furthermore, students who had opportunities to interact with people from diverse backgrounds were more engaged. The students' sense of support and level of engagement were related to their overall academic experience and commitment to the institution.

Academic and Social Integration

Tinto's (1987; 1993) theory of departure is well known and accepted literature on higher education. Tinto was the first researcher to provide a detailed, longitudinal model of retention that made connections between the academic and social systems of the institution and the student. He developed the interactionalist model of student departure, which supported the role of student involvement in college, and included generalizations about what was necessary to help students succeed in post-secondary education. Tinto suggested that there were three stages of student departure: separation, transition, and incorporation. In the first stage, students must be willing to separate from their family, high school and community, and past experiences to be successful in college. In the second stage – transition – students have to become a part of the

new campus community; students who are not able to successfully transition into their new communities are at risk for dropping out. In the last stage – incorporation – students must establish membership in both the academic and social college communities.

The Interactionalist Model of Student Departure (Tinto, 1987, 1993) proposed that student persistence is connected to integration in both the academic (e.g. faculty interactions in and outside of class) and social (e.g. interactions with peers) experiences in the first year of college. In addition, Tinto (1993) argued the need to develop a better understanding of the relationship between involvement in learning and the impact that involvement can have on persistence, commenting that "there is a link between learning and persistence, and the more students learn, the more likely they are to persist" (p. 131).

Tinto (2004) sought to provide strategies for promoting retention and graduation to federal policy makers and institutions. Longitudinal data were collected from a representative sample of college students from 1996 through 2001 using the Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) Longitudinal Study. Within the six-year period, 29% completed bachelor's degrees, 10% completed associate's degrees, 12% earned a certificate, 14% were still enrolled, and 35% were no longer enrolled and did not have a degree. Students from high-income backgrounds with family incomes of at least $70,000 were more likely to have completed a bachelor's degree within six years. In comparison, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, with family incomes less than $25,000, had lower degree-attainment rates: 56% of the higher-income students earned a bachelor's degree in six years in comparison to 26% of low-income students. There were several explanations offered for the differences in degree completion based on income: low-income students were in general not as prepared academically as their higher-income peers, social and cultural factors created additional barriers for low-income students who

were academically prepared and began college at a four-year institution, and students from low-income families had financial challenges in paying for college (Tinto, 2004).

Intervention programs such as summer bridge programs and living learning communities are two initiatives designed to help students with academic and social integration (Wibrowski et. al., 2016). Summer bridge programs are commonly developed to expose students to college courses, assist with the development of academic success skills, and to provide information on academic support services. Research has shown that participation in summer bridge programs can lead to improved academic motivation, retention and graduation rates for underrepresented students (Caberera et. al., 2013; Douglas & Attwell, 2014; Strayhorn, 2011). Cabera et al. (2013) examined the impact of a summer bridge program on academic and social skill development for students who were mostly from underrepresented groups. The researchers found that in comparison to their peers who did not complete the summer bridge program, participation in the summer bridge program improved the first-year grade point average and first year retention rate.

Similarly, the research on living learning communities shows positive retention outcomes. For example, in 2011, Buch and Spaulding studied the impact of a psychology learning community with six groups of students. The students were required to complete common courses, a service-learning project, and they were exposed to academic support resources on campus. When compared to their non-learning community peers, the learning community participants obtained higher GPAs, earned more hours, and had higher retention first-year retention rates.

First-Generation Students

There are multiple definitions for first-generation students in higher education literature. For the purpose of this study, a first-generation student is operationally defined as a student whose parents never graduated from a four-year college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). When compared to their continuing-education peers, first-generation students are more likely to have a number of characteristics that can disadvantage them as they work toward degree completion (Aspelmeier, Love, McGill, Elliott, & Pierce, 2012). For example, they are more likely to be older than the traditional student, live off-campus, enroll part-time, come from a diverse racial/ethnic background, and are financially independent from their parents (Bui, 2002; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The National Center for Education Statistics' Beginning Postsecondary Study described first-generation students as more likely to be low-income (having a family income less than $25,000), four times more likely to leave college after the first year, more likely to leave college without completing a degree in six years (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Unverferth, Talbert-Johnson, & Bogard, 2012), and more likely to attend college within a 50-mile radius of their hometown (Proyor, Hurtado, Saenz, Lindholm, Korn, & Mahoney, 2005). Furthermore, first-generation students of color who attend predominantly White institutions are at risk of entering an institution with a negative racial campus climate, which can cause them to feel isolated (Fisher, 2007; McCoy, 2014).

Social and Cultural Capital

A major personal challenge for first-generation students is a deficiency of social and cultural capital. Social capital is developed by making connections with people who can help the student make meaning of the world and is gained by spending time with people who have a wealth of past experiences (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). When students know more college-

educated people than their peers, they have more social capital, which can provide an advantage in their academic career (Nichols & Islas, 2016). Students with college-educated parents have access to family members who can help them understand the culture of higher education and the role it plays in personal and socioeconomic development. The opposite is true for first-generation students who by definition do not have parents who can share such insights. Cultural capital is gained when a person has knowledge of "high-brow culture and culture cues" and is most apparent in families from high socioeconomic or well-educated backgrounds (Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999, p. 159). Cultural capital, which was described by Bourdieu (1986) as differences in educational outcomes for people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, is passed down from parents to their children over a long period of time. The lack of cultural capital in regard to higher education is a major obstacle for first-generation students. They are less likely to receive encouragement and support from their parents during the college decision-making process and are more likely to have parents who may not know how to provide advice and support during the transition into the first year of college (Davis, 2010; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Vesper, 1999).

Lacking social and cultural capital can impact first-generation students' academic engagement in the classroom, which in turn impacts their intellectual development (Bourdieu, 1986). Students who are uncomfortable about their academic preparation and background are more likely to avoid asking questions in class or seeking help from their professors or classmates (Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

Involvement

The adjustment to college can be a little easier for first-generation students who get involved in campus life and have positive experiences in the first year (Pascarella & Terenzini,

2005). Their involvement can have an immediate impact on their social capital and can be instrumental in helping them succeed in their academic pursuits (Pascarella et al., 2004). Student involvement in the academic and social contexts has been found to be related to increased retention rates (Astin, 1985; Reason, 2009; Tinto, 1993). Furthermore, students who live on campus are provided with more opportunities to get involved with extracurricular activities and to interact with their peers outside of class than those that do not; since first-generation students are more likely to live at home and commute to campus, they miss out on opportunities to connect and engage outside of class (Pascarella et al., 2004).

In 2005, Lohfink and Paulsen studied persistence factors using a national data sample of first-generation and continuing-generation students who first enrolled in a four-year college in 1995. The survey requested information on the students' demographic background, pre-college achievement, college choice, and academic and social involvement. They reviewed the responses from 1,167 first-generation and 3,017 continuing-generation students and found that faculty-student interaction was positively related to persistence from the first to second year for first-generation students, while social involvement was positively related to persistence for continuing-education students (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) sought to assess the differences between first-generation and other students in regard to their academic and nonacademic experiences in college. The random sample of 1,054 first-year students (214 first-generation) was comprised of students who participated in the National Study of Student Learning (NSSL) from 18 four-year colleges from 1992 – 1995. The students completed follow up studies at the end of each academic year for the first three years. The results showed that first-generation students completed fewer credit hours, were employed more hours per week, were more likely to

live off campus, and were less likely to be involved in extra-curricular activities when compared to their continuing-generation peers (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Academic Preparation

In 2001, Warburton, Burgarin, and Nuñez examined whether first-generation students were retained at the same rate as their peers with comparable academic preparation. The researchers conducted a statistical analysis using data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, which followed the experiences of students who started college in the 1995-1996 academic year. The initial sample size was 12,000 students; 10,300 students were contacted for the first follow-up survey three years after the students first enrolled. The researchers reported a 79.8% response rate. Ninety-two percent of the participants attended public schools, which were more likely than private high schools to have a high population of underrepresented minorities. Three factors were found to be significant in predicting degree completion: the level of math completed in high school, the academic rigor of high school courses to include Advanced Placement (AP) and honors courses, and composite scores on the SAT/ACT exams. They found that first-generation students were less likely to have taken advanced math in comparison to their continuing-generation peers, to have taken rigorous courses, had lower scores on college entrance exams, and were less likely to report taking an AP exam. Warburton, Burgarin, and Nuñez (2001) found that academic rigor was associated with first-year GPA, and that students who scored in the lowest quartile on the college entrance exams were more likely to have completed remedial courses.

In another study, Reid and Moore (2008), examined the college readiness and academic preparation of 13 first-generation college students at one four-year institution in the Midwest. Using a qualitative methodology, they interviewed the students to learn about their preparation in

high school. The importance of high-school preparation for college success and the students' awareness of missing the skills necessary for college success were the two themes that emerged from the interview data. The two students who said they felt the most prepared were both student athletes, who were required to participate in tutoring. The three international students felt the least prepared for college. Eight of the participants completed at least one Advanced Placement (AP) class and said completing AP courses helped improve their confidence in college classes. In fact, completion of AP English provided students with the most confidence in their college classes. One participant summed up his experience when he said the environment from high school should provide a "college-going culture" so that students would focus more on their education. He observed that his peers from suburban schools were more focused in the college environment due to the high expectations they had experienced in high school.

Several sub-themes emerged from the discussion regarding the skills lacking for college success: students felt unprepared for the rigor of college classes, they did not know how to study in college because they had not had to study in high school, they did not know how to manage their time, and they felt that they missed out on opportunities in high school (e.g. taking tough courses, completing scholarship applications) because they had not understood how important they would be for college. The findings of the qualitative study were consistent with the larger quantitative study and confirmed the importance of academic preparation prior to college enrollment (Reid & Moore, 2008; Warburton, Burgarin, & Nuñez, 2001)

Adjustment

Hertel (2010) studied the similarities and differences between first-year first- and second-generation students at one large Midwestern public university. The purpose of the study was to explore possible differences and similarities between first-generation students in their first year

of college in order to determine the variables that could predict college adjustment for the two groups. A random sample of first-year students from diverse majors were selected for the study, with a 29% response rate (n=130). Twenty-five respondents were first-generation, and 105 were second-generation college students. First-generation students were more likely to seek friends and social experiences off campus, while second-generation students emphasized the importance of building social networks on campus. The study found that second-generation students reported significantly greater social adjustment than first-generation students in the first year.

An important component of social adjustment is the student's ability to develop a sense of belonging in the new college environment. Research has indicated that perceived social support by the student is considered important during the first-year transition into college life (Cosden & McNamara, 1997; Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). Developing a sense of belonging is critical for first-generation students because they are less likely to have support from their parents, live on campus, create strong relationships with other students, establish relationships with faculty, and perceive the college community as welcoming (Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini et al., 1996). In 2001, Strange and Banning completed a review of literature on the complexities of campus environments and found that some students decided to depart from college because they perceived the environment to be unsupportive and they lacked congruence with the institution. The scholars affirmed that institutions are most effective when they provide students with a sense of security and inclusion, opportunities for involvement, and provide experiences to help build a sense of community.

Sense of Belonging

The present research seeks to address gaps in the retention literature by examining the sense of belonging of first-generation students attending a large, public research institution in the

Southeast. The term 'sense of belonging' refers to one's sense of community or sense of membership or value within a group or organization. Strayhorn (2012) defined sense of belonging as "the students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling of connectedness, or that one is important to others" (p.16). Sense of belonging can be viewed as a basic human need that has an influence on a person's behavior. In the context of college, it is particularly relevant as college students are typically in an awkward personal development period in which they are exploring their identity and are highly influenced by their peers. The absence of belonging occurs when students encounter experiences that are unwelcoming or unfriendly or cause feelings of alienation or isolation (Strayhorn, 2012). Sense of belonging is considered significantly important for students who, for instance, "are marginalized in college contexts such as women, racial and ethnic minorities, low-income, first-generation, and gay students" (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 17).

As students transition into college, they experience feelings of loss as they cope with the decision to leave their high school identities and adapt to new lives as college students (Fassinger & Schlossberg, 1992). Students who perceive a sense of isolation or incongruence with faculty and the dominant campus culture often feel unwelcome and find it harder to persist (Tinto, 1993). In contrast, students who report feeling a greater sense of belonging to the university have a stronger commitment to the institution and are more likely to remain in college (Hoffman, et al. 2002). The development of close friendships and feelings of socially acceptance is critical in helping students develop a sense of identity in the new environment (Panori & Wong, 1995), which ultimately leads to a sense of belonging.

Stebleton, Soria, and Huesman (2014) studied the mental health of first-generation students. The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of first-generation students

who attended large research universities and how those experiences might have influenced their mental health. The primary research question sought to determine whether there were differences between first-generation and continuing-generation students in their sense of belonging and satisfaction. The second research question sought to determine whether there was a relationship between students' sense of belonging and satisfaction and their mental well-being. The researchers administered the Student Experience in Research University survey in the spring of 2009 to 145,150 students at six large, public research institutions, obtaining an overall response rate of 40% (58,027 participants). Analysis of variance was used to test for significant difference between first-generation students and non-first-generation students' mental health and sense of belonging. Students who were integrated into the academic and social college community had a higher sense of well-being and reported a higher sense of belonging, which resulted in fewer instances of feeling depressed or upset. What is particularly relevant for this review is that first-generation students had lower ratings of sense of belonging than their continuing-generation peers. In this study, first-generation students reported feeling stressed, depressed, or upset more often than their continuing-generation peers.

Previous research investigated sense of belonging, motivation and persistence using quantitative methods (Freeman, Anderman, & Jenson, 2007; Morrow & Akermann, 2012). Freeman, Anderman, and Jenson (2007) studied the sense of belonging of college freshmen. The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between the students' sense of class belonging and their academic motivation. The survey of 238 participants at a Southeastern university found that there was a relationship between the students' feeling of belonging in class and their level of academic motivation. Furthermore, students who felt a connection to their classes felt a greater sense of belonging within the university community (Freeman, Anderman,

& Jensen, 2007). This research was limited since the researchers depended on self-reported data at one institution at one point in time. The study did, however, support the research on sense of belonging and academic motivation (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), which suggests that belongingness is connected to academic motivation. This conclusion is consistent with studies on motivation and belonging of younger students in K-12 (Goodenow, 1993).

Morrow and Ackermann (2012) also examined sense of belonging of first-year college students in order to assess the importance of sense of belonging and motivation in predicting persistence from the first to second year. They selected 959 students to participate in the study; 156 students completed the survey for a 16% response rate. The findings in regard to sense of belonging and intention to persist were measured by independent variables: peer support, faculty support, classroom comfort, and perceived isolation. The overall findings for sense of belonging and intent to persist were not significant; however, faculty and peer support were significant in predicting first- to second-year retention.

Research conducted on sense of belonging by race has determined that African-American and Hispanic students seek membership in peer groups as a way to feel a part of the campus community (Carter & Hurtado, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008). Carter and Hurtado (2007) studied the experiences of first-year Latino students, seeking to discover how racial and ethnic minority students viewed their participation in college in relation to the process of engagement in the diverse learning communities of a college. Surveys were sent to 493 students who were included in the 1990 cohort for the National Survey of Hispanic Students (NSHS); 287 students responded, resulting in a 58% response rate. The researcher conducted a factor analysis and found that interacting with students outside of class and joining religious and social organizations were important for students' sense of belonging during the first year of college.

These findings were consistent with those of Ingelmo (2007), who studied the perception of belonging of six Hispanic students at a predominantly White university in the Midwest and found that establishing a sense of belonging was difficult for students who did not fit in with the dominant campus population. Sense of belonging was established by developing relationships within the multicultural community and organizations with members who shared the same values and experiences.

Museus, Yi, and Saelua (2017) sought to generate a better understanding of how campus environments influenced sense of belonging. They were specifically interested in determining whether culturally engaging campus environments were associated with students' sense of belonging. An electronic survey was distributed to 12,000 students at three campuses (two community colleges on the West Coast and a 4-year institution on the East Coast). A total of 499 students completed the survey. The regression analysis found that Hispanics exhibited a stronger sense of belonging than whites, and women exhibited a stronger sense of belonging than men. In addition, academic preparation and financial aid awards were positively associated with sense of belonging. It is also important to note that there was a negative association between cultural community service and sense of belonging.

Additional research has been conducted regarding first-year student persistence by race and social class, but this research may not be totally applicable to first-generation students (Hausman, Schofield, & Woods, 2012; Ostrove, 2007). However, first-generation students are not only more likely to be from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, and they are also more likely to be from a racial or ethnic minority groups. Hausman, Schofield, and Woods (2012) studied sense of belonging as a predictor of persistence in African-American and White first-year students. The purpose of the study was to examine the role of sense of belonging in predicting

college students' intention to persist and to test the effect of an intervention designed to increase students' sense of belonging. The study included a sample of 254 first-year African-American and 291 White students; 83% lived on campus, and 60% were female. The response rate was over 80% for both groups in the second and third survey. Sense of belonging was predicted by student background, integration, and support variables. The study found that students who had regular interactions with their peers, interacted with faculty, had support from their friends, and had support from their family had a greater sense of belonging. Their findings were particularly interesting in regard to persistence: sense of belonging was positively related to persistence and institutional commitment at the beginning of the year, but the relationship declined over the course of the year. It is also worth noting that the findings were similar for both African-American and White students. The only significant differences between the groups were peer support and parental support, variables that were especially important factors for African-American students attending a predominantly White university

Ostrove and Long (2007) sought to gain a better understanding of social class and belonging in their study focusing on the role that social class background plays in students' experiences at one selective liberal arts college. They randomly selected 324 students from one small liberal arts college in the Midwest to participate in the study, achieving a 41% response rate that was representative of the student body. Their findings in relation to sense of belonging demonstrated that social class and background had an impact on students' sense of belonging and adjustment to college. Specifically, they found that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to feel marginalized and alienated in the college environment. Furthermore, they found that developing a sense of belonging was critical for academic and social integration, which has also been found to be critical for persistence (Ostrove & Long,

2007). While their population was not limited to first-generation students, the findings are relevant to first-generation students since first-generation students are more likely to be from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.

Although we appear to know a great deal of information about first-generation college students with respect to their academic preparation, academic and social integration, involvement, and engagement, surprisingly little is known about their college experiences in regard to sense of belonging. To date, a few studies have addressed the sense of belonging by race and class, but none have explored the sense of belonging of first-generation students.

In conclusion, while student involvement is a consistent theme in the retention and persistence research, it is important to consider the unique experiences of first-generation students and the factors that might influence their level of involvement once in college. Equally important to consider is the lack of social and cultural capital that first-generation students gain prior to entering college, which can inhibit their sense of identity when they first arrive on campus. While attending college provides an opportunity for first-generation students to connect and engage with students from a wide range of backgrounds, it can be overwhelming for students who have had limited exposure to the college culture and may have limited time for campus involvement due to family and work demands outside of school.

Sense of belonging is a subjective perception of mattering and feeling cared about on campus; therefore, it is important to gain an understanding of how students experience the concept of belonging. For the first-generation population, understanding their experiences is important given the growth of that particular college population over the past 30 years. More specifically, while first-generation students are entering college in larger numbers, a large percentage of them are not graduating, which suggests that there are obstacles or challenges early

in their college career that warrant further exploration. Understanding how first-generation students develop a sense of belonging in college is key to determining whether there is a relationship between their sense of belonging and persistence. The purpose of this study is to understand how first-generation students achieve a sense of belonging at one large, four-year public institution in the Southeast and to determine whether there is a relationship between their sense of belonging and their persistence from the first to second year. This study seeks to build empirical evidence about the connection between sense of belonging and persistence among first-year, first-generation students.

CHAPTER THREE

Method and Procedures

The purpose of this study was to understand how first-generation students achieve a sense of belonging in the first-year of college and how their sense of belonging contributes to their persistence. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do first-generation students achieve a sense of belonging?
2. How did their sense of belonging affect their persistence from the first to second year?

This chapter details the methods and procedures used in the conduct of the study. This chapter includes a description of the research design, site and population, sources of data, procedures, and data analysis. The chapter also explains the methods used by the researcher in establishing trustworthiness and guarding against bias.

Research Design

Qualitative researchers seek to uncover meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2013; Yin, 2011). Given this, an exploratory qualitative design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015) was selected for this study because this type of approach would allow a deeper understanding of the sense of belonging of first-generation students and its impact on persistence. Exploratory studies, also called basic qualitative studies, focus on expanding knowledge which could inform practice, and these types of studies are commonly used in applied fields such as education (Creswell, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Since little is known about the factors associated with the sense of belonging of first-generation students and its impact on persistence, it is important that the approach be exploratory, in-depth, and descriptive. Exploratory studies are appropriate to understand situations in which the phenomenon under study has no clear, single set of outcomes (Yin, 2003).

This exploratory study sought to build on the existing knowledge of sense of belonging while adding the perspectives of first-year, first-generation students through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Boyce and Neale (2006) suggested that in-depth interviews are particularly useful when the researcher wants to explore new issues in depth and wants a full understanding of why something happened. Thus, through in-depth interviews, the participants in this study described their college experiences and explained how those experiences influenced their persistence decision (Brinkmann & Kyale, 2015).

Site and Population

The population for this exploratory qualitative study was first-generation undergraduate students who enrolled in their first year of college during the 2015-2016 academic year at a large, public institution in the Southeast, identified in this study by the pseudonym "Golden University" (GU). GU is classified by the Carnegie Commission as a research-intensive university. Students attending GU have access to 11 academic colleges, more than 300 undergraduate degree programs, and are served by a faculty of approximately 1,400. The university has a total student population of 27,800, of which the undergraduate enrollment accounts for approximately 21,800. The overall student population is 50% male and 50% female. In Fall 2015, 87% of the university's undergraduate population was classified as in-state, and 24% identified as students of color. Currently, the overall first-year retention rate is 85%, and the six-year graduation rate is 70%. In 2015, the institution developed a leaver survey to gain a better understanding of why students chose not to return. Almost half of the students transferred to other institutions, and 24% said they planned to return to GU within one year. The permanent leavers were more likely to talk about social environment, lack of diversity, and their inability to form relationships as their reasons for leaving (Daugherty, 2015).

According to the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment at the institution (OIRA), there were approximately 4,700 first-time, first-year students enrolled in fall 2015. Twenty-two percent of the first-year students were classified as first-generation (n=1,020), meaning that neither parent completed a four-year degree (GU Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2016).

The goal of qualitative research is to carefully select participants who will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). First-year, first-generation students from the 2015-2016 cohort were the group from which participants for the study were drawn. First-generation students are defined for the purposes of this study as those whose parents never attended a four-year college and therefore did not complete a bachelor's degree. Criterion sampling was used to recruit the initial participants for the study. Criterion sampling, a form of purposeful sampling, allowed the researcher to decide what attributes of the sample were most beneficial to the study so that the researcher could find participants or sites that met the established criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, snowball sampling was used to acquire additional participants for the study when the predetermined sample size was not achieved from the initial recruitment email. Snowball sampling involved starting with a few participants who clearly met the criteria established for participation in the study. As those participants were interviewed, each was asked to forward the recruitment materials to other potentially interested students.

Since the experiences of first-year students across racial/ethnic groups may vary, this study included 12 participants from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, including White, Black or African American, and Hispanics, the three largest racial/ethnic groups on campus (Table 1). Therefore, the intent was to include students from these three groups in the final sample. In

addition, the participant sample included two males and 10 female students. Although the researcher hoped for a more balanced sample, the female students were more responsive than their male counterparts in responding to calls for participants. Interviewing continued until saturation was achieved and 12 participants had completed interviews. Saturation occurs when no new information or insights have emerged (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Table 1.

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Racial/Ethnic Background	Gender
Kyra	Middle Eastern	Female
Amira	Middle Eastern	Female
Anya	West African	Female
Jasmine	Black	Female
Lexie	White	Female
Kayla	White	Female
Jose	Hispanic	Male
Fanisha	Black	Female
Claire	Black	Female
Lydia	Black	Female
Yemi	West African	Male
Julia	White/Hispanic	Female

Procedures

After approval of the University of Tennessee Institutional Review Board (IRB), the Associate Director of the Achievement Center (pseudonym) was asked to send the study recruitment materials to approximately 100 students from the 2015-2016 cohort to begin the recruitment process. The Achievement Center agreed to email the students (Appendix C). The recruitment letter and flyer (Appendix A) were sent via email to potential participants. The recruitment materials described the study's purpose, provided details on what participants were expected to do during the study, gave an overview of how the data would be used and reported, and described how the identity of the participants and the institution would be protected. It also explained that participation in the study was strictly voluntary, and that the participant had the right to withdraw from the study without penalty at any point, and his or her materials would be destroyed. The recruitment letter also provided information on the $20 Amazon.com gift card incentive to be provided to each participant at the conclusion of the interview.

Interested participants were asked to respond to the researcher via email. After receiving an email from a prospective willing participant, the researcher replied and addressed any questions or concerns the participant may have had. The process for scheduling the interview was explained including general availability for interviews, the Informed Consent Statement, and the demographic questionnaire. Interested participants were asked to review the informed consent, and complete and return demographic questionnaire before the interview date and time were confirmed. The demographic questionnaire was reviewed to determine whether the potential participant met the criteria for the study. In addition, the researcher reviewed the demographic questionnaire prior to selecting participants to ensure that the sample was diverse. This study included 12 participants from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. All of the

participants were at least 18-years old and were first-year, first-generation student at GU in the 2015-2016 cohort. Interviews were scheduled for participants who met the criteria for the study. Participants who did not meet the criteria were thanked for their interest in the study and told they did not meet the predetermined criteria approved for the study.

At the conclusion of each face-to-face interview, the researcher used snowball sampling (Patton, 2015) to recruit additional participants for the study. Each participant was asked to forward the study recruitment materials to others interested in participating. Recruitment continued until 12 participants were interviewed and saturation was achieved.

IRB guidelines were followed to develop the Informed Consent Statement (Appendix B) that was provided to each participant before the interview. To protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms and participant code numbers were used in the data collected (Kvale, 1996; Seidman, 2013). Participants were assured that the interview data would be stored on the researcher's password-protected computer and printed materials would be kept in a secure, locked drawer located in her office in Bailey Education Complex room 332. The following steps were taken to protect the confidentiality of the data and to increase the comfort level of the participants. First, at the time of the interview, the interviewer reviewed the Informed Consent Statement with the participant, and allowed time for questions. Second, once the Informed Consent was signed, the participants received a copy for their records. Finally, the data collection and analysis process was reviewed with the participant. Participants were informed that the interview would be audio recorded and that they would receive a copy of the interview transcript within three weeks as a method of member checking and ensuring the trustworthiness of the data. The member check provided the participants with the opportunity to review the

transcript of their interview and ensure their responses were transcribed accurately (Koelsch, 2013).

All interviews were audio recorded with the participants' consent. The interviews were transcribed to assist with data analysis. Recording allowed the researcher to be more attentive during the interviews and increased the accuracy of data collection (Patton, 2015). Field notes were taken during each interview to capture body language or changes in behavior that would not be obvious in the audio recording (Patton, 2015). Taking notes allowed the interviewer to focus on keywords or phrases and helped in probing for additional information as needed (Patton, 2015). Information on how to schedule a follow up meeting with the investigator was provided at the conclusion of each interview.

Sources of Data

Two data sources were used to conduct the study: in-depth semi-structured interviews and field notes from each interview. The primary data was the semi-structured, open-ended interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission of the participant and lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed by the researcher to address the research questions (Appendix D). In creating the interview protocol, the researcher drew on Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, and Newman's (2015) theoretical model of sense of belonging among students with disabilities, as well as from Strayhorn's (2012) theoretical framework related to belonging, for the questions about belonging. The interview questions and probes were designed to solicit in-depth responses about the participants' sense of belonging and persistence. The interview protocol was pilot tested with three first-generation students who were not included in the data analysis.

The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and allowed for follow-up questions when necessary. After each interview, the audio files were uploaded to the researcher's computer and uploaded to a password-protected web-based transcription service subject to confidentiality (Appendix F). All audio files were professionally transcribed, saved into a Microsoft Word document, and sent to the researcher through the password-protected transcription website.

All data files, audio files, field notes and transcriptions were stored on the researcher's password-protected computer. In addition, the files were backed up using Google Drive, a file storage cloud supported by the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (https://oit.utk.edu). All paper files (i.e., informed consent, interview protocol, and demographic questionnaire) are currently stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office located in Bailey Education Complex 332. All data files, audio files, transcriptions and analysis will be saved on the secure computer for three years following the completion of the research project. At that point, all data associated with the research project will be destroyed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is an ongoing process that begins with the first interview (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). The overall process of data analysis involves consolidating and reducing what people said in the interviews and making meaning of how the responses answer the research questions (Merriam, 2009). The interview questions in this study were constructed to answer the research questions (Table 2).

Table 2

The Relationship of Interview and Research Questions

Interview Questions*	**Research Questions**	
	RQ1: How do first-generation students achieve a sense of belonging?	RQ2: How did their sense of belonging affect their persistence from the first to second year?
1. Did you feel like you belonged in your first year?	X	
2. What people or experiences were important in influencing your sense of belonging – positively or negatively?	X	
3. What would you do differently to establish a sense of belonging?	X	
4. What worked well in helping you establish a sense of belonging?	X	
5. What influenced your decision to return to this university for your second year		X

* See Appendix D for protocol with introduction and probing questions

Each audio-recorded semi-structured interview was transcribed verbatim. Next, the data was reviewed and cleaned to remove any identifying information. The analysis process began with open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Merriam, 2009), which involved reading the first interview transcript and field notes to identify pieces of information relevant to the study to determine concepts.

Data analysis in qualitative research involves "making sense of the data…(by) consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said" (Merriam, 1998). The analytic process begins with the first interview and continues concurrently with the data collection process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While generally associated with the development of grounded theory, the three-step process for analyzing interview data articulated by Corbin and Strauss (1990) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) is an appropriate strategy for analyzing interview data that serves a variety of kinds of research outcomes. This strategy was used to analyze the interview data collected for this study.

The process involves three types of coding: open, axial, and selective coding. Open coding involves collecting discrete pieces of responses (words or phrases) responsive to the interview questions. From the beginning of this study, each interview was read at least two times, the first time to gain an understanding of what was said, and the second time to extract the words or phrases that captured the essence of the participants' responses to the questions. These words or phrases were noted in the margin. The procedure continued through all of the interviews. The notes from the margins were then compared and consolidated to capture the range of answers to the questions and used to construct the first iteration of coding.

Axial coding involves making connections across the categories and subcategories identified in open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and giving them labels that characterize the

responses. This allows for condensing the data while preserving all of the findings in a meaningful way. These conceptual labels made up the second round of coding in the course of this study.

The third step of coding is known as selective coding and involves "selecting the core categories, central phenomena" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) of the study, the patterns of responses, themes, that capture the responses of the interviewees and answer the research questions. These categories made up the third round of coding here, and each iteration of coding was presented in the final report of the study.

The findings from qualitative research are typically descriptive and presented as categories or themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Microsoft Word and NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program (http://www.qsrinternational.com/product), were used during the data analysis process to assist with organizing categories and themes.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is associated with rigor in qualitative research and is increased through the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Given the exploratory nature of this research, this study did not seek to provide transferable findings. Instead, the research focused on credibility, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility. Credibility was established with triangulation and member checking. Triangulation in qualitative research involves cross-checking data from more than one source (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During the interview, field notes were collected to capture key phrases, body language, and observations that gave insight to the study. The field notes were also used for self-reflection and awareness of possible bias. Lincoln and Guba (1985) regarded

member checking as the best technique for establishing credibility. This study's participants were given the opportunity to review their interview transcripts to ensure their responses were accurately captured.

Dependability and confirmability. Dependability and confirmability in qualitative research are similar to reliability and objectively in quantitative research, respectively (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). In order to establish dependability and confirmability in this study, the researcher maintained an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to describe how data were collected, how categories were formed, and how decisions were made throughout the study.

Admission of the researcher's assumptions and bias is also important for establishing confirmability. In qualitative research the researcher must drive the process of data collection and analysis, which can subject the data to the researcher's bias (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). From a constructivist approach, reality is constructed by the individual and, therefore, can contain multiple valid truths (Ponterotto, 2005) and is subjected to a variety of biases. A major component of the constructive perspective is the interaction between the researcher and the participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The position statement in the following section is provided to ensure that the reader is aware of the researcher's assumptions and bias. This information is included to establish trustworthiness.

Position Statement

In this study, my personal experience is a potential source of bias. Paying close attention to this potential bias will be a key to guarding against the intrusion of possible preconceptions. I engage with first-generation students on a daily basis in my work with undergraduate students in academic advising, and there are often times when I can see myself in the students whom I serve and feel compelled to provide additional advice and support.

My own experience as a first-generation student also has played a significant role in shaping my academic, personal, and professional life. As someone who grew up in the African American community with limited exposure to college-educated professionals, the decision to go to college was a significant step. Coming from a working-class family with few college-educated family members or mentors, I believed that attending college was the only way to improve my quality of life and gain financial independence. Furthermore, I was determined to do well in school because it was critical that I set an example for my younger siblings.

When I made the decision to go to college two hours away from home, I quickly recognized that I was at a disadvantage as my parents would not be able to give me advice or support in regard to what to expect once I enrolled in college courses. I came to rely instead on my friends and school counselors to equip me with the tools necessary to survive and thrive.

As I reflect on my own sense of belonging in college, I recall feeling out of place in my first year as I did not understand the college culture, did not have adequate financial support from my family, and did not have anything constructive to do in the evenings or on the weekend. It was not until I joined a service organization in my second semester that I started to feel like I "fit in" with the college community. The student organization gave me a purpose outside of class not only because it gave me something to do, but also because it allowed me to develop relationships with other students who had similar interests in service. My sense of belonging developed through my involvement in one student organization. It provided me with a network of peers who supported and encouraged me, and that boosted my confidence in getting more engaged in the total college experience. From there, I became active in my residence hall, joined more student organizations, and sought job opportunities on campus. Looking back, it is clear that it was through my experience in the residence hall, my involvement with student

organizations, and my on-campus job; I found my place in the college community. I am convinced that I learned and grew a great deal due to these experiences, and that my strong connection to my college experience stems from the friendships developed in those years. These experiences are what led me to pursue a career in higher education and specifically pursue a graduate degree in higher education administration. I am aware that my personal experiences as a first-generation student could influence my interpretation of the participants' responses, but at the same time my awareness of my bias has helped to me separate my own experiences from those of my research participants.

Chapter Summary

Chapter Three detailed the methods and procedures to be used in conducting this study. This chapter included a description of the research design, site and participants, procedures, sources of data, and data analysis. Finally, the chapter also explained the methods used to establish trustworthiness and guard against bias.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand how first-generation students achieve a sense of belonging in the first-year of college and how their sense of belonging contributes to their persistence. Interviews were conducted with 12 first-generation students who completed their first year of college during the 2015-2016 academic year. Data were collected from in-depth interviews with each participant and analyzed using an ongoing process that began with reviewing and coding each interview and consolidating codes recursively within and across interviews to derive the themes that addressed the research questions (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). After describing the participants, the findings of the study are presented in relation to the two research questions: 1) How do first-generation students achieve a sense of belonging? 2) How did their sense of belonging affect their persistence from the first to second year?

The Student Participants

The section is designed to provide an overview of the participants in this study. Two of the first interview questions asked the participants to talk about where they were from and how important it was for them to go to college. Additionally, they were asked whether they had a job in their first year and whether they felt like they belonged when they first arrived at GU. These questions provided background information about the participants and context for their journey to GU. This information about the participants is summarized in Table 3 and presented in ways to protect their confidentiality; pseudonyms are used in place of the participants' real names.

Table 3.

Participant Information

Pseudonym	Racial/Ethnic Background	Distance from Home	On-Campus Housing	Living Learning Community	Summer Bridge Participant	Job	SOB at First
Kyra	Middle Eastern*	2-3 hours	X	X	X		
Amira	Middle Eastern*	2-3 hours	X	X	X		
Anya	West African*	2-3 hours	X		X	X	X
Jasmine	Black	5-6 hours	X				
Lexie	White	< 1 hour	X				X
Kayla	White	< 1 hour				X	
Jose	Hispanic*	5-6 hours	X	X			X
Fanisha	Black	2-3 hours	X		X	X	X
Claire	Black	5-6 hours	X	X	X	X	
Lydia	Black	5-6 hours	X	X	X	X	
Yemi	West African*	5-6 hours	X				
Julia	White/Hispanic	2-3 hours	X	X			X

* Children of immigrants

The participant sample included 12 students. All of the participants were first-generation students—that is, their parents did not graduate from a four-year college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). However, five of the students identified as first-generation on two levels: because their parents were immigrants from other countries and because they were the first in their families to enroll in post-secondary education in the United States. Two of these students were Middle Eastern, two were West African, and one was Hispanic. The remaining seven students were American. Four of the American students were Black or African American, two were White, and one was biracial (White Hispanic). The researcher hoped to recruit a diverse sample that would include students from the three largest racial/ethnic groups on campus (White, Black or African American, and Hispanic) and was modestly pleased at the diversity of the students willing to participate in the study.

From the literature, higher education professionals know that 50% of first-generation students are more likely to stay within 50 miles of their hometown when attending college (Proyor, Hurtado, Saenz, Lindholm, Korn, Mahoney, 2005); however, only two participants in this study were within a 50-mile driving distance from their hometown. Five students were from two to three hours (approximately 180 miles) from their hometown, and five students were from five to six hours (approximately 390 miles) from their hometown.

Six students had completed the GU Summer Bridge Program prior to enrolling at GU in the fall. This five-week program provided the students the opportunity to enroll in classes and live on campus during the summer before their first year. The program was designed to help the students acclimate to campus and earn college credit prior to the start of their first year. Four of the six summer bridge students also said they had come to GU for a campus tour or a diversity campus-visit program prior to making the decision to apply. Two students, both local, neither

participated in the Bridge Program nor made an official campus visit. They said that having grown up coming to GU for football games with their family members, they felt they knew GU and had long sought to enroll. The remaining four students did not have any prior experience on campus but said they came to GU because a friend was admitted (three students) and because they were excited about the academic programs (one student).

Since GU requires first-year students to live on campus unless their parents or guardians live within a 50-mile radius of the campus, all but one participant lived on campus the first year. Six participants lived in a living learning community (LLC), a residential "neighborhood" for first-year students based on their interests or academic discipline. The LLCs were designed to engage students in shared coursework and help them connect to faculty and staff. It is interesting that five of the six participants who chose to live in an LLC had completed the GU Summer Bridge Program. The remaining five participants lived in traditional residence halls on campus.

Five of the student participants reported having a part-time job during their first year. Four of the five had part-time jobs on campus. The remaining student both worked and lived off campus and talked about how challenging it was to coordinate making it to work on time after leaving class. The questions about where they lived and whether they worked during the first year of college were asked since existing research suggests that first-generation students are often more academically at risk if they have a job or live off campus and are thus less likely to be involved in campus activities (Pascarella et al., 2004).

The participants were asked if they felt like they belonged when they had first arrived at GU for the fall term. Of the 12 participants, seven said they did not feel like they belonged when they had first arrived. Four of the students who said they did not feel they belonged when they first came to GU had participated in the Summer Bridge Program, the very program designed to

acclimate them to campus beforehand. The four students from the Summer Bridge Program said that even though the program gave them a chance to meet people and get acquainted with the campus, the campus did not feel as welcoming when they returned for the fall semester as it had in the summer. They mentioned that they were "instantly" aware of the lack of diversity on campus, and they found it was hard to make friends with people outside of their summer cohort. They remarked that their sense of belonging was much stronger during the summer when they were surrounded by a close-knit group of students, faculty, and staff. Once the fall semester started and they were expected to integrate into the larger campus community, the feeling of belonging dissipated.

The three other students who did not feel they belonged attributed their lack of initial belonging to their distance from home, the size of campus, and their need to work off campus. Jasmine and Yemi indicated that they did not feel a sense of belonging from the very beginning. GU is about 5 hours away from their hometowns, and they did know anyone (outside of their roommates) when they arrived on campus. Jasmine said the large size of the campus made it hard for her to feel connected. Although he was excited about the opportunities at GU, Yemi missed his friends from high school. He said that he could remember the day when he was sitting in his room wishing his friends would visit when he decided he needed to change his behavior by "figuring it out and finding something to do." Kayla, a commuter student from less than an hour away from campus, had a part-time job off campus and spent most of her time commuting to and from home, school, and work. Kayla said she did not feel that she belonged at first but shared that she did not think that "anyone really finds their place until they've been around for a while."

Five of the participants said that they felt like they belonged from the moment they arrived on campus for the fall term. They attributed their feelings of belonging to their participation in campus visits prior to enrolling (two students) and the orientation, welcome week, and social opportunities at the start of the term (three students). Anya was a West African student from a large city two hours from campus. She lived on campus, had a part-time job, and completed the Summer Bridge Program. She reflected on how her summer bridge experience helped her feel a sense of belonging:

> I think this all boils down to being a part of the bridge program during the summer. I felt like if I did not go through that program, I would have suffered and struggled my first year. So, I think I just had that opportunity of being here ahead of time, getting to know different people. Once on campus, I did not feel alone. My other friends did feel lonely, but because of that exposure that I had during the summer, it helped.

Anya was the only participant from the Summer Bridge Program who thought the summer experience had helped her achieve a sense of belonging at the start of the school year. The remaining five Summer Bridge Program students did not feel that the program had helped them achieve a sense of belonging. Fanisha was a Black student from a large city two hours from GU who also completed the Summer Bridge Program. She lived on campus and had a part-time job, and said she felt that she belonged at GU before she enrolled. She completed three campus tours in high school and felt that GU was where she was supposed to be. She attributed her feelings of belonging to her outgoing personality and her ability to "fit in with the white students."

The remaining three students who had felt a sense of belonging when they first arrived on campus were Lexie, Julie, and Jose. Lexie was a White student from the local area who lived on campus and joined a sorority in her first semester. Julia was a White Hispanic student who moved three hours away from her small hometown to attend GU. She lived on campus in an LLC and commented on how her orientation experience had helped her get plugged in quickly. Lexie and Julia were thrilled to be a part of the large campus community and to get away from the clichés that were common in their small high schools. They both talked about how they appreciated that there were so many things to do in the early weeks of the semester. The last student who felt that he had a sense of belonging at first was Jose, a Hispanic student from five hours from campus. He lived on campus in an LLC in his first year and talked about how excited he was to be at GU in the first weeks. He attributed his positive experience of belonging to the staff and RAs on campus who planned events and programs to make the incoming class feel a sense of community during Welcome Week. He said the first few weeks were critical in helping him feel that he belonged even though he was still trying to make friends.

Research Question I: How do first-generation students achieve a sense of belonging?

The findings of this study with respect to RQ1 are presented in this section in terms of the three themes that emerged from the interview data to describe what contributed to the students' sense of belonging. A code map showing the emergence of these themes from the analysis of the data may be seen in Appendix F. It should be noted that all of the respondents, including those who felt they never truly achieved a sense of belonging, engaged in similar activities and experiences in seeking to belong. The three themes were (1) building relationships, (2) student involvement and engagement, and (3) the residence hall experience. There was overlap among the participants in the themes.

Theme 1: Building Relationships

The theme of seeking and building relationships referred to efforts to meet people and develop interpersonal connections with other students, faculty, and staff during their first year of college. This was important for the students because they were looking to find their place on campus with people who would care about them and provide support. Ten of the 12 participants talked about how their relationships with other students, faculty, and staff members were influential in affecting their sense of belonging in the first year. Whether it was making friends with students in class or getting to know a faculty or staff member during office hours or at an event on campus, the students looked to these relationships to begin establishing connections on campus.

Friends. Friendships were important for all 10 of the participants who identified building relationships as a theme. The students reflected on how the campus felt large and impersonal at first. They also said that they quickly realized that making friends would be more challenging than it had been in high school because other students kept to themselves or only talked to people that they already knew. Several of the participants talked about how they intentionally went about making friends on campus while others spoke about taking time to observe people around them so that they could identify people with similar backgrounds, values, or beliefs. For instance, Jasmine said it was important for her to find people who could relate to her experience as a student with limited financial resources, to find people that "understood her struggle." She built relationships with people in her classes, in her residence hall, and in the minority mentoring program.

Prior to developing friendships, three students talked about how excited they were to be in college but how lonely it felt on some days. For instance, Yemi reflected on his first few days:

> It felt like being at a weird summer camp where you are on your own because there's so much freedom and you literally could do whatever you want, and even so, I just remember thinking I wish my friends were here so we could go have fun.

Lydia also talked about feeling lonely at first. She did not connect with the students in her living learning community and often talked to staff members in the Achievement Center when she needed encouragement or support. Even though she came to GU with three people from her high school, her friendship with her roommate was instrumental in helping her feel that she belonged. She talked about how special she had felt when her roommate planned a surprise birthday celebration for her 19th birthday. She said the birthday surprise was the defining moment that made her want to stay at GU. Jose lived in an LLC in his first year. He knew only one other person at GU when he arrived. The friends that he met while hanging out in the lobby of his residence hall were most important in helping him establish a sense of belonging.

Kayla and Amira found comfort in developing closer friendships with people that they knew from high school. Amira was excited to come to GU and thought it would have been much easier to make friends than it turned out to be. She tried talking to people in class but never felt that people were interested in being friends with her. After a few awkward encounters, she decided to focus her energy on building friendships with people that she knew from her hometown. When Kayla got to campus, she only knew two people from her high school. Even

though they were not close in high school, they developed a close friend group quickly because the familiarity was comforting after graduating from a small, rural high school.

Anya, Julia, Lexie, and Fanisha knew that making friends quickly would be important in their first year, so they each arrived on campus with the goal of meeting new people. Anya and Fanisha talked about how it was usually easy for them to make friends because of their outgoing personalities. Anya's time in the Summer Bridge Program allowed her to make connections with other students and staff prior to enrolling, so she already felt a sense of connection to campus before arriving in the fall. Fanisha had been on campus for two campus tours during her senior year of high school and thus said campus felt like home. Her admission decision was delayed due to a mix up with her dual enrollment credits, so she agonized for months, afraid she might not get in. Once her admission was finalized, she could not wait to get to GU. She said that making friends with the tour guide ambassadors and students in her church ministry were influential in her feelings of belonging in the first semester.

Julia signed up for a campus ministry group when she attended orientation. When they reached out to her during the first week of class, she welcomed the opportunity to network with other students. By the third week of school, she had a core group of people who were inviting her to hang out. Similarly, Lexie made plans to join a sorority because she knew that membership in a big organization would allow her to have "an instant bond with a lot of girls."

Faculty and Staff. In addition to building relationships with friends in classes, organizations, and residence halls, six of the students also talked about how their encounters with faculty and staff played a role in helping them establish a sense of belonging in the first year.

The faculty and staff played a role in helping them establish a sense of belonging in the first year by listening, providing advice, and connecting the students with resources on campus.

Three participants talked about how good it made them feel knowing they could talk to their professors if they had a problem or needed help with an assignment. For instance, Fanisha said she went to her biology professor's office hours almost every day because she could not understand the concepts. The professor helped her discover that she had test anxiety and worked with her to get help from the Counseling Center so that she could pass the exams. Likewise, Anya said her math professor understood when she fell behind in class due to issues that were happening back home. She said that she had explained what was happening and the professor had said, "I will help you every step of the way." In addition, the students were appreciative when they felt that their instructors tried to personalize the experience. Jose talked specifically about how he enjoyed his pre-calculus course because his professor allowed for discussion and questions in class and was approachable outside of class.

Two students talked about how they were happy not to be treated like a number. Julia said that her sociology professor still smiles at her when they pass each other on campus. She said that she was impressed that a professor on a campus that large would even remember that she was in her class. Kayla said that she should have failed her astronomy class but thinks she passed because the professor felt bad for her. She said the professor was understanding when she explained how she was working a lot of hours and commuting to campus and simply did not have time to study the material well enough to pass the exams. She was so proud to pass the class with a D-.

Jasmine said her First-Year Experience instructor played an important role in helping her feel more comfortable on campus. She said, "My teacher was really nice. We did little journals, and she would comment on our entries and if she felt like something was wrong, she would talk to us one on one and that really helped." In addition to having a good relationship with her FYE instructor, she was also thankful to have a Black instructor for one of her professional development classes. She says that Mr. Jamal was great at making everyone feel comfortable, and she appreciated his style because he was relatable and encouraged students in the class to have a close-knit bond. Yemi was also excited to have a Black professor for his FYE seminar class on hip-hop. He was one of five Black students in the class and respected the instructor for allowing the Black students to speak to issues that impacted them culturally.

There were several staff members mentioned who contributed to students' achieving a sense of belonging. Staff members who worked in the Achievement Center, Admissions, the Diversity Cultural Center, and Student Support Services were all identified as people who helped the students achieve a sense of belonging. Lydia said there were two people in her first semester who made all the difference in helping her believe that she could be successful in her first year; the director of Student Support Services and an academic coach in the Achievement Center were of special help because they gave her "honest and straightforward" advice on how to be successful at GU.

Theme 2: Student Involvement and Engagement

The theme of student involvement and engagement referred to the impact that academic involvement, participation in extracurricular activities, and engagement in purposeful activities had on the student participants' sense of belonging in the first year of college. When the

participants were asked to talk about the people or experiences that were influential in affecting their sense of belonging in the first year, six of the participants said that getting involved or engaged with campus-based organizations was important. Involvement and engagement included activities such as joining a sorority, getting involved with a religious group, or joining a student organization connected to their academic program. These students reported that their involvement helped them not only make connections with other students, faculty, and staff but also build a connection to the institution and campus community.

Four students mentioned how their involvement on campus was critical to their feeling a greater sense of connection to campus in general. These students took an active approach to seeking out campus involvement to get more connected to the university and to meet more people. For instance, Lexie said she joined a sorority in her first year because she was looking for a way to build her self-confidence and hoped the sorority would provide her with opportunities to meet new people and do different things on campus. She felt that people on campus did not seem that nice or welcoming. On the other hand, she felt an instant bond with her sorority sisters who were really nice. Fanisha was also looking for a way to establish connections with other people with similar interests, so she decided to visit a Presbyterian church near campus. She was initially worried that she would not fit in because she was Black visiting a White church, but she was amazed at how they welcomed her and appreciated her for who she was. Through the church, she met other college students, as well as got involved with service projects on campus and in the local community. Yemi and Julia said their involvement with the campus ministry was the single most important thing they did in the first year outside of attending class. Yemi's connection with the campus ministry introduced him to Young Life and allowed him to serve as a mentor to high school students in the local area. Julia's network from

the campus ministry allowed her to build a relationship with a family at church who is now considered her GU family.

The last two students, Jose and Anya, became engaged in their academic colleges. Jose joined the engineering mentoring program. He admitted that he only attended one of the planned activities but said that he enjoyed meeting with his assigned mentor on a regular basis. He appreciated having the opportunity to talk to an upper-class student in his major and said,

> We would just talk about whatever we were doing. So, it's kind of like a good way to, I guess, de-stress almost. Talk to someone on a friendly level who isn't a friend, just about regular things throughout the school year.

Anya changed her major from psychology to communication after she accepted an invitation to attend the College of Communication diversity and leadership student organization (DLSO) meeting. After attending the DLSO meeting, she felt as if she had more clarity about what she was going to study while at GU and said she remembered thinking, "This is it. This is where I want to be. This is what I want to do." She went on to say that her experience in DLSO in her first year was wonderful and she was proud to have had the opportunity to meet the dean of the college and to travel to New York City to tour CNN and BET.

While half of the student participants said that student involvement was critical to helping them develop a sense of belonging, there were four students who found themselves feeling either overwhelmed by the pressure to get involved or uninformed about how to start the process. For instance, Jasmine, an introvert, said that people telling her to get involved was like “pulling teeth.” She did not know where to start, so she slowly started attending diversity-mentoring meetings but did not actively get involved until the end of the year when she decided to apply to

be a mentor. Lydia reported that she skimmed the student activities website for hours taking notes on organizations that she might want to join. She kept the list in her notebook but admits that she never followed up with any of the people on the list because she did not know what to say. She never joined a campus organization but said that she found an on-campus work-study job that she liked. Amira was a member of the diversity-mentoring program but was not actively involved. In the spring of her first year, she started the three-semester pledging process for a pre-health honors society but did not feel that she had the time or information to commit to anything else.

As a student who was overly involved in high school, Kyra said that she hit the ground running when she arrived at GU. She wanted to do everything and join as many organizations as possible. By the time she reached the end of the fall term, she was exhausted and felt like she needed to cut back on her involvement because she was not passionate about the things that she was doing, and she was not giving anything 100%. She scaled back her involvement in the spring and decided not to submit the orientation leader application at the end of the year even though this was something she had wished to do as a new student.

The last two participants, Claire and Kayla, were not involved or engaged on campus in their first year. Their lack of involvement was influenced by their need to work. Claire admitted that she did not try to get involved because she did not know what she would want to do. Finding a part-time job on campus was her priority. She chuckled and said that probably was not a good idea, but she needed money to buy the things that she wanted.

Kayla would have liked to join clubs or organizations, but she had no free time in her daily schedule. She explained her hectic schedule:

> I had zero time to really get involved with anything other than going to class. My job at the grocery store was only four to five hours a day for about 25 hours a week, but during that four to five hours I could have been doing homework. I could have been taking a nap. I could have been in a club or actually going to an event like going to a seminar or going to a movie screening or something, instead of just going to work and then going home to do my homework.

Theme 3: The Residence Hall Experience

The theme of the residence hall experience referred to how living on campus contributed to the students' sense of belonging. Eleven participants lived in the residence halls on campus. One participant, Kayla, lived within a 50-mile radius of campus and lived at home and commuted to campus. There were six participants who thought their residence hall experience contributed to their sense of belonging. Two of the six students were members of an LLC; the remaining four students lived on campus but were not affiliated with an LLC. LLCs were designed to provide a space for students to live, study, and interact with people who had similar academic or personal interests. Half of the study participants were members of various LLCs on campus, but only two of them thought their experience in the LLC contributed to their sense of belonging. The invitation to join an academic LLC was perfect for Jose, who said that he only knew one person when he arrived on campus. Finding an LLC associated with his academic college was a win for him because it guaranteed an early housing assignment and connected him with other students with the same academic interest. As Jose noted, living on an LLC floor also provided a natural social environment for making friends:

> Because there's a lobby, we'd go out there and sit, and then other people would be doing homework in there, and we just got to talking. And I'd say that was really important, just having the lobby there with the TV. We'd hang out, and we got to talking, and that's how I met all my friends. And it got to the point to we were always hanging out, doing all our homework together in the lobby.

Amira also thought the LLC experience helped her develop a sense of belonging. She was in the diversity mentoring LLC. Several people from the Summer Bridge Program were in her community, and she appreciated the immediate social network that the LLC provided. In addition, she said it was nice having people around to help her with homework or to join for study sessions. Her experience was much different from Kyra and Claire, who had also completed the Summer Bridge Program and lived on the same floor but did not feel included in the community. Claire said she initially thought the LLC would be cool, but she found herself feeling lonely on most days because the group seemed immature. Kyra said living in the LLC was okay, but she had problems with her roommate and never felt at home.

Lydia lived in another residence hall in the community service LLC. She was not thrilled about the lack of diversity in the community, and she never felt like she fit in with the group. She explained why the LLC did not help her establish a sense of belonging:

> The LLC didn't really help because for some reason when I came to college, I kind of shut down. In high school I was really outgoing and all over the place, really involved in everything. Once I got to college, I was really quiet and I didn't know how to get involved even though I would see fliers everywhere like, "Join this and join that." I was like, "Well, I don't know anything. I don't know how to do anything." My LLC was okay,

> but it was predominantly a White group of kids, and there was only like three Black people in there. It was not awkward, but I didn't know how to fit in with that. I'm from a predominantly Black city, went to a predominantly Black school with a lot of ignorant kids, so being among kids who were so much smarter than I was - or am - was kind of awkward. It took a little adjusting to.

She admitted that things improved over time and credited the community style bathrooms and shared kitchen space for helping her become more comfortable.

The final student, Julia, needed last-minute housing and was placed in the business majors LLC at the end of the summer. She was not an active member of the community but appreciated the convenient location of her residence hall. She says she never became close friends with her roommate or the other girls on her floor because she had an established network of friends outside of the residence hall.

Five participants lived on campus but were not a part of an LLC. Four of them felt like living on campus positively affected their sense of belonging. They talked about the early challenges of living in a residence hall but were thankful for the good times, new friendships, and shared experiences by the end of the academic year. For example, Yemi talked to his roommate through Facebook during the summer prior to his first year. They had great conversations prior to moving in, but there were personality clashes once the school year started. Yemi talked candidly about how their relationship developed:

> Over the summer, we would talk and text all the time, but when we actually started living together, it took a lot of getting used to from both of us. He was White. I'm Black. He

was a member of a super diverse church, so he kind of respected me, but even still, our personalities clashed at first.

He went on to say that they eventually became best friends, but it took time to work through their differences.

As an only child, Lexie did not know what it was like to share a room and bathroom. Learning to share her space with her roommate was a challenge at first, but she ultimately had a positive experience living on campus. She enjoyed the convenience of the location of her residence hall, and she liked how there were always people around for her to visit on the different floors. Fanisha also enjoyed the social and supportive environment that living on campus provided. She says she was sick with bronchitis and pneumonia in her first semester, but she never felt alone. Her roommate and the other girls on her floor became like family, and she had the best time once she was healthy.

Anya had a great time in the residence hall. Her roommate transferred to another institution at the end of the fall term, but she was fine because she still had friends from the summer program and she knew most of girls on her floor. Anya had always been the person on the floor whom people came to when they needed help with their hair. She said her resident assistant (RA) was instrumental in helping her feel a sense of belonging: "She's a wonderful RA. She also partakes in me feeling good at UT. She would tell people that like, 'If you ever needed a little fix up on your hair, Anya will help you.'"

Living in the residence hall had a negative influence on Jasmine's sense of belonging. She admitted that she only came to GU because her best friend from high school was coming, and they were excited to be roommates. Unfortunately, they did not get along once they were in

college, and it made it extremely difficult for her to be comfortable in her room. She recalled how she spent most of her days trying to avoid the room:

> The living space was very tense all the time, so I would go to the library often, or I made a couple friends on a different floor, so I would go to their room when she was there. That's the only way I could stay sane.

These findings about the experiences that were significant in influencing a sense of belonging are presented in Table 4 in terms of the three themes that emerged from the interview data. All of the respondents, including those who felt they never truly achieved a sense of belonging, engaged in similar activities and experiences in seeking to belong.

Eight of the 12 participants achieved a sense of belonging and talked about how the themes described in this section contributed to their belonging. There were four participants who reported that they did not feel that they belonged at the beginning of the year and never achieved a sense of belonging. Interestingly, three of those participants lived on campus in an LLC and participated in the Summer Bridge Program.

Table 4.

Research Question 1: How do first-generation students achieve a sense of belonging?

Pseudonym	Relationships	Involvement and Engagement	Residence Hall Experience	Belonging Achieved	Belonging not achieved
Kyra					X
Amira	X		X	X	
Anya	X	X	X	X	
Jasmine	X				X
Lexie	X	X	X	X	
Kayla	X			X	
Jose	X	X	X	X	
Fanisha	X	X	X	X	
Claire					X
Lydia	X				X
Yemi	X	X	X	X	
Julia	X	X		X	

Research Question II: How did their sense of belonging affect their persistence from the first to second year?

All 12 participants persisted from the first to second year; however, not all of the participants attributed their persistence to having achieved a sense of belonging. The findings of this study related to RQ2 are presented in this section in terms of the reasons provided by the participants for their persistence. Seven of the eight students who achieved a sense of belonging reported that their persistence to year two was related to their sense of belonging. There was one student who achieved a sense of belonging but did not feel that a sense of belonging contributed to her decision to persist from the first to second year. Rather, she attributed it to personal reasons. There were four students who reported they had not achieved a sense of belonging and attributed their persistence not to a sense of belonging but to personal or other reasons.

Theme 1: Sense of Belonging Affected Persistence from the First to Second Year

Seven students said they returned to GU because of friendships and relationships they had made. All seven also said they felt that their friendships and relationships contributed to their sense of belonging at GU and to their persistence. Two students provided great examples of how their friendships affected their persistence. Kayla explained that, after she was placed on academic probation at the end of her first year, it was her relationships with friends that motivated her to continue. She talked about how she "messed up really bad" and would have dropped out had she not had a support system with her friends. Jose said his first year at GU was better than he expected. He had a great group of friends, and he was happy in his academic department. In talking about his persistence, he said, "I never considered not coming back, I'd say, because of the friends I'd made and I really like the engineering department here. I think the department is really good and it's better than I expected it to be."

The remaining five participants whose sense of belonging affected persistence talked openly about why they returned. Amira and Anya said they did not want to leave their group of friends and start over at another institution. Julia said the people she met in her first year played a critical role in her overall growth, and those relationships influenced her decision to stay at GU. Yemi and Fanisha never directly said that they persisted because they felt like they belonged, but their comments regarding why they returned alluded to their overall feeling of belonging at GU. They talked at length about how they enjoyed their experiences and the relationships that were developed during the first year. Yemi did well both socially and academically in his first year, and he said that he looked forward to returning to campus for his second year to see his friends.

The last student, Fanisha, said that GU was where she was supposed to be. She loved everything about her experience at GU including the atmosphere and the people.

Theme 2: Sense of Belonging Did Not Affect Persistence from the First to Second Year

There were five student participants who did not feel that their sense of belonging (or their lack of belonging) contributed to their persistence. When asked about what influenced their decision to return to GU, they said they returned for personal reasons (four participants) and because campus was familiar (one participant). Kyra, one of the four students who said she returned for personal reasons, said she persisted because of her cultural background. As a female student from the Kurdish community, it was very important for her to prove to her family that she could be successful in college. Even though her parents supported her decision to go to college, they never imagined that she would move more than two hours away from home, because in her culture women were expected to stay near the family. Once she was at GU, she would call home and complain about how hard it was for her to fit in and make friends. Her mom tried on several occasions to get her to transfer closer to home, but she said it was her cultural pride that motivated her to return to GU for a second year.

Claire was not happy at GU in her first year, but she said she only considered leaving when she thought her scholarships would be cut after the Diversity Office was defunded. Once her scholarships were secured for the second year, she knew that she would continue. Going to college for free had always been a priority for Claire. She said she worked hard in high school in hopes that she would qualify for scholarships because she knew her mother would not have the money to help her. Leaving GU would have caused her to forfeit her full-ride scholarship.

Lydia was also worried about how the Diversity Office closure would affect her. She was confused and disappointed about the university's commitment to diversity and said that it was hard to feel a sense of belonging when diversity was not important to the campus. She said,

> The diversity thing was big. I already didn't feel like I belong here and taking away funding kind of said I kind of don't belong here. I don't know. I just feel like the programs that the Diversity Office funded were important. And those programs would have given African American, Hispanic, and Egyptian students a sense of belonging here. Most of those programs are the reason why most of these kids stay here.

Lydia said that she stayed at GU because campus was familiar and she did not want to have to start over at another institution and learn another campus and another financial aid system. She was comfortable with the people that she knew at GU and said she would rather "stick it out for the next four years" to see if things got better.

The other three students who said they stayed for personal reasons had defining moments for when they made the decision to stay. For instance, Jasmine never established a sense of belonging. She had problems with her roommate, was five hours from home, and did not connect to a student organization until late in her first year when she applied to be a mentor in the diversity mentoring program. She shared that she often thought about transferring to a college closer to home because she was unhappy and missed her family. During the summer prior to her second year, she got a job working part-time at the Wal-Mart in her hometown. After spending a summer working and living at home, she realized that she wanted to return to GU to "finish what she started."

Lexie felt a sense of belonging, but she also thought about transferring. There were many times in her first year that she wished that she would have gone away for college. She had grown up coming to football games and felt familiar with campus when she enrolled. She did everything to establish a sense of belonging including joining a sorority, living on campus, and making friends in the residence hall, but she did not think that belonging mattered. She said that she was encouraged to go to college by her parents, but she was doing it for herself. She was a first-generation student, but she did not act like the other first-generation students because she came from an extended family of GU alumni and had an aunt who had pledged in the same sorority. Her extended family's educational background, and her sense of connection to campus prior to enrolling meant that she did not have the "baggage" that many first-generation students bring to college. Her experience was much different from the other participants. She persisted because she wanted to be at GU with a cousin who was planning to enroll in her second year.

In conclusion, sense of belonging through friendships and relationships were important for the persistence for seven students. However, there were five students who felt their persistence was driven by their own personal reasons or life circumstances, rather than a sense of belonging.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

In this chapter, the researcher summarizes the study and its findings, discusses the findings in relation to the literature detailed in Chapter Two and in terms of the meanings and implications of the findings, draws conclusions from those findings, and offers recommendations for further research.

Interviews were conducted with 12 first-generation students who completed their first year of college during the 2015-2016 academic year. Data were collected from in-depth interviews with each participant and analyzed using an ongoing process that began with reviewing and coding each interview and consolidating codes recursively within and across interviews to derive the themes that addressed the research questions (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The findings of the study are summarized below in terms of the research questions: 1) How do first-generation students achieve a sense of belonging? 2) How did their sense of belonging affect their persistence from the first to second year?

Summary of the Findings

1. Three themes described how students tried to achieve a sense of belonging in the first year of college: (a) building relationships with other students, faculty and staff, (2) getting involved in activities on campus, and (3) engaging in the residence hall experience. All of the students engaged in activities to try to develop a sense of belonging; however, not all students achieved a sense of belonging.

2. Eight participants reported they achieved a sense of belonging; however, the remaining participants reported they never established a sense of belonging.

3. All of the participants persisted from the first to second year.

4. The majority of participants (7) attributed their persistence to having achieved a sense of belonging, in particular related to the friendships and relationships they developed in their first year. Four of the remaining participants, none of whom reported having achieved a sense of belonging, attributed their persistence to personal reasons and motivations; and one, who achieved a sense of belonging, felt it played no part in her persistence and, indeed, declared a sense of belonging to be unimportant.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings of this study are limited to a group of first-generation undergraduate students who enrolled at GU, a large research public institution in the Southeast. Clearly, the findings are limited to that group of students and cannot be generalized to the experiences of other undergraduate students at this institution or at other institutions. Nevertheless, the findings raise interesting questions about the role of belonging in nurturing persistence and of just what role belonging plays in that process. Is it vital to persistence or is it one factor in it or both? Do all students have to gain a sense of belonging in order to be willing to persist? Is the need to belong a phenomenon more closely associated with traditional campus environments, where living on campus may require a greater sense of belonging to survive?

When compared to their continuing-education peers, first-generation students are more likely to have a number of characteristics (i.e., from a low-income background, from a diverse racial/ethnic background, live off campus, lack social and cultural capital) that can disadvantage them as they work toward degree completion (Aspelmeier, Love, McGill, Elliott, & Pierce, 2012; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). Students with college-educated parents have an advantage because

they have access and exposure to information about what to expect from the college experience (Nichols & Islas, 2016). The opposite is true for first-generation students who do not have parents who can share such insights.

It is interesting to note that most of the participants talked about how they navigated the college application and admission process on their own or with the help of their school counselors because their parents did not know how to help, and the majority reported feeling lost and overwhelmed by college, the academic requirements, and the pressure to get involved. This was true even for students who had recently completed the Summer Bridge Program.

Developing a sense of belonging has been found to be important for first-generation students because they are less likely to have support from their parents, live on campus, create strong relationships with other students, establish relationships with faculty, and perceive the college community as welcoming (Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini et al., 1996). A sense of belonging refers to one's perceived sense of social support or connection on campus (Strayhorn, 2012). The findings from the current study regarding how students achieve a sense of belonging are consistent with the existing literature which suggests that students establish a sense of belonging by developing relationships with people who share the same values, beliefs, and experiences (Carter & Hurtado, 2007; Ingelmo, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008).

All of the participants engaged in activities to gain a sense of belonging, yet four females never achieved that sense of belonging. It is interesting to note, particularly in light of the literature that stresses establishing relations with people who share the same values, beliefs, and experiences, that all four students were students of color (3 Black, 1 Kurdish). They were each aware of their racial, cultural, and socioeconomic differences from the majority of students and

of the fact that they did not seem to fit at GU. Strayhorn (2012) has suggested that students who develop a sense of belonging will experience positive outcomes such as campus involvement, happiness, and retention. On the contrary, students who do not develop a sense of belonging are at risk for negative outcomes such as depression or dropping out of college. As articulated by the participants in this study, the students who established a sense of belonging were involved on campus and happy with their campus experiences. The students who did not develop a sense of belonging were involved on campus but not to the same extent as those who felt they belonged and talked about periods of time where they were unhappy and considered leaving GU.

While I cannot be sure why some of the students did not achieve a sense of belonging, I suspect that the campus racial climate, coupled with their attitudes about getting involved and meeting new people, contributed to their lack of belonging. All but one of the women who did not achieve a sense of belonging had participated in diversity recruitment programs prior to enrolling at GU. The diversity recruitment programs were designed to make the students feel welcomed and to give them a glimpse of the support services and social opportunities available on campus for students of color. While in the programs, they reported feeling as if they belonged. Unfortunately, once they came to campus in the fall, the campus culture and the racial climate felt much different and less welcoming to them than it had during the summer. Their reflections on their recruitment experiences caused me to question whether the recruitment initiatives targeted at students from diverse backgrounds were effective beyond the term of the program. It is possible that the very programs designed to help students feel comfortable applying to GU did more harm once the students enrolled because they arrived on campus with unrealistic expectations of diversity life—even though they had been told GU was a predominantly White campus. If indeed the lack of diversity and the sense that the campus

climate was not felt as conducive to embracing students of color took the students by surprise—despite the warning and in contrast to what they had experienced in the targeted diversity programs—it is not remarkable that they were less responsive to efforts to get them engaged and more aware of the differences they found hard to transcend. These findings are consistent with research on the challenges that students of color face when they enroll at predominantly White institutions (Fisher, 2007; McCoy, 2014). However, they are generally related to non-persistence. The fact that these students persisted in spite of not feeling a sense of belonging, but for personal reasons, is in contrast with the literature and raises questions about potential unexamined factors in persistence. It is possible that while academic and social integration and sense of belonging might be important for some students, it may not be as important for all students. If this finding is supported in future studies, it might reshape how student affairs practitioners approach student success initiatives, which are largely focused on involvement and engagement. The same three female students who participated in diversity recruitment programs prior to admission were also Summer Bridge Program participants and lived in an LLC in their first year. They were provided with multiple opportunities to establish a sense of belonging, yet belonging was not achieved.

I was admittedly surprised by the three students who did not achieve a sense of belonging after participating in two intervention programs designed to aid in their social and academic integration. Participation in academic intervention programs like Summer Bridge and learning communities have been found to positively impact first-year GPA, motivation, and retention (Buch & Spaulding, 2011; Caberera et. al., 2013; Douglas & Attwell, 2014; Strayhorn, 2011). Participation in the Summer Bridge Program and in the Living Learning Community did not help three of the students develop a sense of belonging. Perhaps there is not a one-size-fits-all

approach to helping students achieve a sense of belonging, particularly for students of color, or for helping them integrate into the academic or social life of an institution, a notion we may not have considered.

All of the students persisted from the first to second year; however, only seven of the participants felt that their sense of belonging contributed to their persistence decision. The relationship between sense of belonging and retention has been widely explored in the literature, which suggests that retention is enhanced by a sense of belonging (Hausman, Schofield, & Woods, 2012; Hoffman, et al. 2002; Morrow & Ackermann 2012, Ishitani, 2017; Strayhorn, 2012). These seven students seemed the perfect realization of the posited relationship between a sense of belonging and persistence. What was it about these students that made it work? Reflecting on these students—versus those that did not develop a sense of belonging or for whom belonging was not important as a group—these students seemed to have bought into the idea of belonging, to have grabbed onto the idea, and to have readily and with intent taken advantage of every opportunity to meet new people and get involved with activities or organizations on campus. Indeed, several said they had come to GU with the expressed purpose of doing so. It is possible that their buy-in and internal motivation to make the best out of their campus experience contributed to their ability to develop a sense of belonging.

The reasons that students who had not achieved a sense of belonging gave for their persistence were campus familiarity, their internal motivation, cultural pride, and the scholarship support. Going to college had been an important goal for each of them, and their family members were extremely proud that they had been admitted to GU. Three of them talked about how being the first in their immediate family to go to college was a big deal and how they had siblings and other family members looking up to them. Although their persistence from the first

to second year was a significant finding given their experiences and lack of belonging, it would be interesting to follow these students through the second year to see if they became more academically or socially integrated into the campus, which could impact their continued persistence. There is recent research (Ishitani, 2016) to suggest that first-to-second year persistence may be temporary for first-generation students, and the students may be more vulnerable in the second year when there are fewer programming and support initiatives.

Implications for Practice

First-generation students arrive at college with little to no prior knowledge about what it will take to be successful and may not understand the importance of taking advantage of campus activities to help them achieve a sense of belonging. We have a tendency to treat these students as a collective, as if they are all alike in their group—e.g., first-generation. Colleges and universities could think more strategically about how to provide more personalized opportunities for first-generation students to connect to campus resources, activities, faculty, and staff.

First-generation students could gain important social and cultural capital from family members, friends, community members, and mentors who have graduated from college. Pre-college programs, high school programs, and even college pre-enrollment and orientation programs might consider how to harness this potential for those first-generation students who could benefit from these associations.

College faculty, staff, and administrators need to look at other ways to engage first-generation students in their first year of college. The findings from this research suggest that sense of belonging may be achieved in different ways by different people based on their personality, interests, or expectations for college.

Finally, there is not a one-sized fits all approach to providing support to first-generation students. The programs and services that are available to first-year students need to be evaluated and assessed to determine if they make a difference. Furthermore, campuses need to develop more intentional opportunities to help students get connected both academically and socially. This could include rethinking how LLCs and Bridge Programs are formed, creating more opportunities for academic engagement in the student's major in the first year, and rethinking how to promote involvement.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, additional research is recommended. First, this study should be replicated with other groups of students to see whether the findings are similar. Also, replicating this study with groups of students from different racial/ethnic groups would allow the researcher to compare the findings and determine whether there are differences.

Second, this study should be replicated with another group of students during their first year of college. A limitation of the study was the decision to conduct the study during the second year, retrospectively after the students had already persisted. The timing of the data collection might have influenced the findings because all of the participants had already made the decision to return to GU and were asked to remember how they had achieved a sense of belonging after the fact. Collecting data during the students' first year might yield different findings because the students would respond to the questions in process rather than after the fact.

Third, a quantitative study (i.e. survey) should be developed and validated based on this study and its findings to examine questions related to developing a sense of belonging and its effect on persistence with a larger, more diverse population, both nationally and regionally.

Large-scale quantitative studies would allow for looking at potential differences in first-generation versus non-first-generation students, students and the sense of belonging and persistence at different kinds of institutions, and in different regions of the country. This study could be used to determine whether there are differences based on institutional type, size, and student demographics.

Fourth, additional research should be completed on the impact of participation in Summer Bridge Programs and LLCs on sense of belonging and student persistence of students. This study could be used to determine if there are certain types of experiences that are most beneficial for first-generation students.

Fifth, there is a need to better understand the challenges that first-generation students face in their second year of college.

Conclusion

Some first-generation students enroll in college with the intent to belong and welcome opportunities to help them connect with other students and campus activities. In contrast, there are other first-generation students who feel unprepared for college and are overwhelmed by the number of opportunities available to first-year students. These students could benefit from individualized care, mentoring, and support from the faculty, staff and administrators until they understand how to successfully navigate the opportunities and resources available on campus. While developing a sense of belonging was important for the persistence of the majority of the participants, it may not be important for all first-generation students. The current research suggests that there are some first-generation students who have personal reasons for persisting that are not related to feelings of belonging. In addition, predominantly white colleges and

universities can do more to help first generation students of color integrate into the academic and social community, which could lead to them developing a sense of belonging.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A
Recruitment Materials

Flyer and letter to be sent in one email to potential participants

First-Generation Students and Sense of Belong

Looking for first-generation students who completed their first year of college in 2015-2016 to participate in a doctoral research study

How to Participate:

- Schedule a one-on-one interview
  - Interviews can be scheduled in person or virtually with Google Hangouts or Skype and will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes.
  - Participants will receive a $20 Amazon.com gift card upon completion of interview.
- For more information please contact: Jamia Stokes at jamiastokes@utk.edu



Who is a first-generation student?

For the purpose of this study, a first-generation student is a student whose parents did not attend or graduate from a four-year college or university

Recruitment Letter to First-Generation Students

Dear Student,

As a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, I am conducting research on first-generation students' sense of belonging and persistence in college. For the purpose of this study, a first-generation student is a student whose parents did not attend or graduate from a four-year college.

You are invited to participate in the study to help to ensure that I capture the experiences of first-generation students who recently completed their first year of college. It is my hope that this study will fill a gap in our understanding of first-generation students and their sense of belonging. Findings from this study may allow college faculty, staff, and administrators to better understand the experiences of first-generation students and their college persistence decisions.

Participation in this study will not require a significant time commitment and will involve completing only one interview (approximately 45-60 minutes) and an optional review of the interview transcript. Before the interview, you will have the opportunity to review the Informed Consent document to ensure you understand the study. You will be reminded that participation in the study is voluntary and that all information will be kept confidential. Next, you will be asked to sign the Informed Consent if you wish to participate in the interview and you will be given a copy of the Informed Consent for your records. I will then ask you for permission to audiotape the interview. If you do not wish to be audio recorded, we can proceed with the interview, but it may take additional time to take detailed notes. Once the Informed Consent is signed, I will review the completed demographic questionnaire and confirm the pseudonym to be used in the findings and discussion section of the dissertation. Pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity and the institution's identity. The final step will be the interview, in which I will ask questions about your first year experiences and your educational goals.

Participants who complete the interview, will receive a $20 Amazon.com gift card. If you wish to participate in the study, please contact me at jamiastokes@utk.edu to schedule the interview or to ask any questions you may have about this study. Because of my dual role as the researcher and as an academic advising administrator at the institution, I want to assure you that your participation is strictly voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without penalty and without explanation.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Jamia Stokes, Doctoral Candidate
Higher Education Administration
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Appendix B
Informed Consent Statement
Sense of Belonging of First-Generation Students

INTRODUCTION
You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Jamia Stokes, a Ph.D. candidate in the Higher Education Administration program in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. This is a doctoral dissertation on first-generation students' sense of belonging and persistence.

The purpose of this study is to understand how first-generation students achieve a sense of belonging in the first-year of college and how their sense of belonging contributes to their persistence.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY
If you volunteer to participate in this study, I would ask you to do the following:

1. Complete a demographic questionnaire. Information collected from this questionnaire will be used to determine eligibility for participation in the study.
2. Complete a one-on-one interview about your sense of belonging in the first year of college. Interviews will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes and will be audio recorded. If you are not interested in being audio recorded, you may still participate in the study. If you are not available for a face to face interview, a virtual interview (i.e. Skype, and Google Hangouts) can be arranged.
3. Review the transcript from the interview and provide corrections or clarification if necessary

RISKS
Breach of confidentiality is a potential risk.

BENEFITS
There are no anticipated direct benefits to you resulting from your participation in the research.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The information in the study records will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless participants specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. No reference to the participant or institution will be made in oral or written reports which could link participants to the study.

_____ Participant's initials

COMPENSATION

Participants in the study will receive a $20 Amazon.com gift card at the completion of the interview. The gift card will be emailed to all participants at the conclusion of the interview. Participants will not be eligible for compensation if they withdraw from the study prior to completing the interview.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher, Jamia Stokes, at 1122 Volunteer Blvd. A332 BEC Knoxville, TN 37996, or via email at jamiastokes@utk.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Norma Mertz, at 325 Bailey Education ComplexKnoxville, TN 37916, or via email at nmertz@utk.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the University of Tennessee IRB Compliance Officer at 865-974-7697 or utkirb@utk.edu.

PARTICIPATION

Your decision to participate or not participate in this study, or withdraw your participation, will not affect your relationship with the University of Tennessee, Knoxville nor the services you receive from UT in any way.

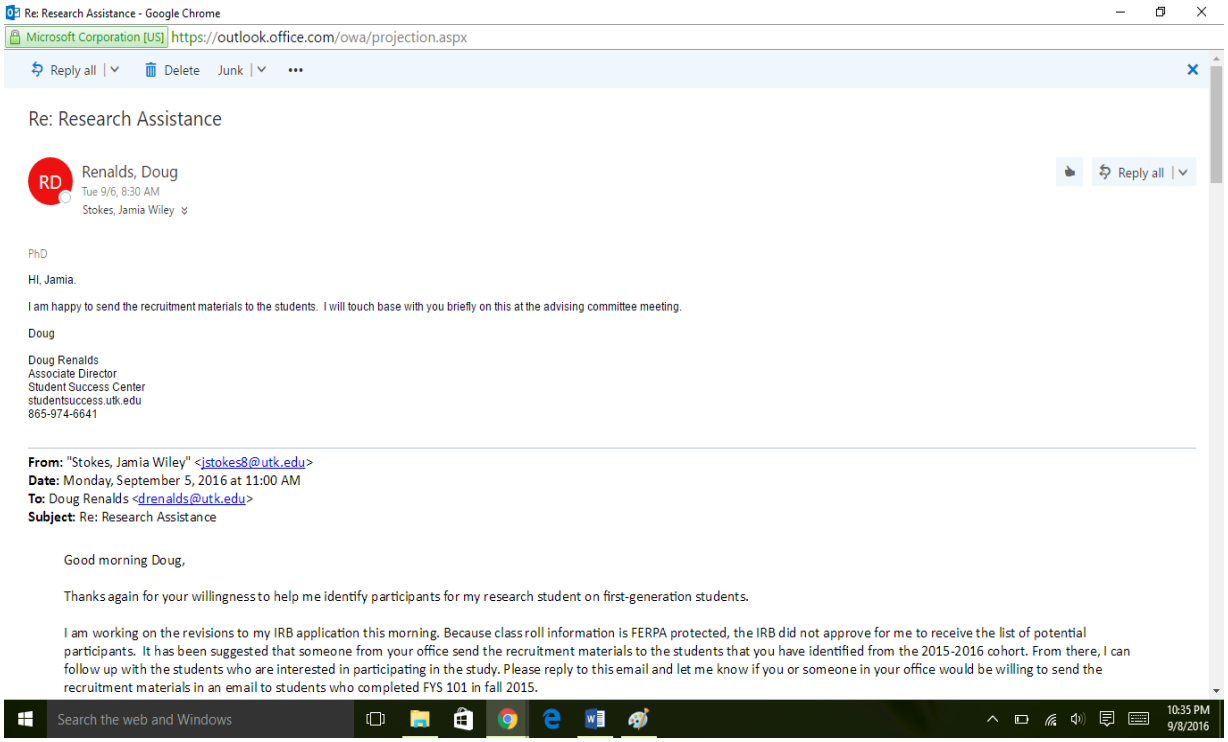
CONSENT

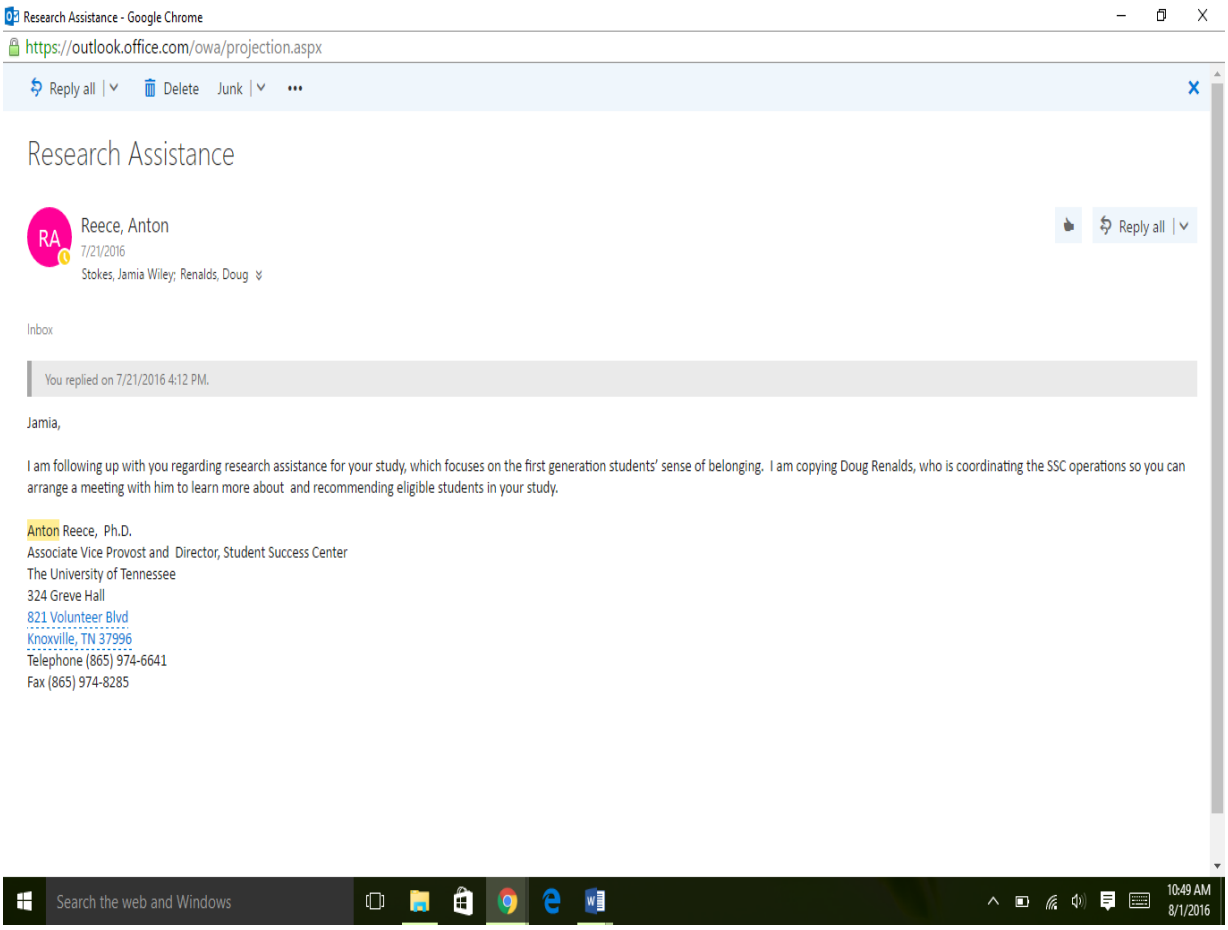
I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

Appendix C
Achievement Center Approval Email




Research Assistance - Google Chrome
https://outlook.office.com/owa/projection.aspx
Reply all
Delete
Junk
Research Assistance
RA
Reece, Anton
7/21/2016
Stokes, Jamia Wiley; Renalds, Doug
Reply all
Inbox
You replied on 7/21/2016 4:12 PM.
Jamia,
I am following up with you regarding research assistance for your study, which focuses on the first generation students' sense of belonging. I am copying Doug Renalds, who is coordinating the SSC operations so you can arrange a meeting with him to learn more about and recommending eligible students in your study.
Anton Reece, Ph.D.
Associate Vice Provost and Director, Student Success Center
The University of Tennessee
324 Greve Hall
821 Volunteer Blvd
Knoxville, TN 37996
Telephone (865) 974-6641
Fax (865) 974-8285
Search the web and Windows
10:49 AM
8/1/2016

Appendix D
Interview Protocol

Sense of Belonging of First-Generation Students

Participant Name:

Instructions and Introduction

My name is Jamia Stokes. I am here today to learn more about your first year of college as a first-generation student. This interview will last approximately 45 minutes. As a reminder, your $20 Amazon.com gift card will be emailed to you at the conclusion of the interview.

I appreciate your honest and candid feedback. Your experiences are important and can help us understand how first-generation students describe a sense-of belonging and determine if that [sense of belong] contributes to persistence from the first to second year.

Even though you have agreed to meet me today, you still have the option of declining to participate. Your participation is voluntary and you can opt out at any time. Any information you choose to provide today will be kept confidential; I will not connect your responses with your identity.

Thank you for completing the demographic questionnaire prior to the interview. Please review your responses and let me know if you need to make any corrections.

I will be recording the interview today so that I can accurately capture the information you provide. All audio recordings will be destroyed after the recording has been transcribed and cleaned for any identifying information. To protect the confidentiality of you and the institution, I will not identify any individual in the transcripts. Do you have any questions?

Is it okay that I audio record this interview? Yes or No (circle the response)

[If participant does not agree to have the interview recorded, take detailed notes. The transcriber will only be used for audio recorded interviews].

----------Begin Recording----------

Before we begin, do you have any questions? Okay, let's begin.

<u>Opening Questions</u>:

- Where are you fromHow did you decide to attend this university?
- How important was it for you [and your family] for you to go to college?

<u>Sense of Belonging Questions:</u>

Sense of belonging is "the psychological sense that one is an accepted member of a community" (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 327). More specifically, Strayhorn (2012) defined sense of belonging as "the students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling of connectedness, or that one is important to others" (p.16).

1. Did you feel like you belonged in your first year of college?
    a. Did you have that sense of belonging before you came to this university as a student, or was it developed once you were here?
2. What people or experiences were important in influencing your sense of belonging positively or negatively?
    a. Tell me about where you lived in your first year of college.
    b. Can you talk about your co-curricular involvement?
        i. If you didn't participate in any student organizations, can you tell me what kept you from participating?
        ii. Did you have a job during your first year of college?
    c. Can you talk about your academic performance in your first year?
        i. Did you have any memorable encounters with your professors?
        ii. Did you build relationships with other students in your classes?
3. What would you do differently to establish a sense of belonging?
    a. Tell me more. Please explain. [To be asked if the participant doesn't elaborate]
4. What worked well in helping you establish a sense of belonging in college?
    a. Tell me more. Please explain. [To be asked if the participant doesn't elaborate]
5. What influenced your decision to return to this university for your second year?
    a. If you decided not to return, can you tell me why?
    b. Do you feel like your sense of belonging affected your decision?
6. We are at the end of our interview time. Is there anything that you would like to share that we haven't already talked about?
    a. Do you have any questions for me?
    b. May I call or email you if I need to clarify anything you said or ask additional questions?
    c. Are you willing to help me identify other first-generation participants for this study? If so, I will send you the recruitment materials that can be emailed to people you think might be willing to participate.

Conclusion:

As a reminder, you will receive an email with the transcript of your interview approximately 3 weeks from now. At that point, I will contact you again to see if you have any additional questions or comments about the transcript.

This is the end of our time together. Thank you for taking time to participate in this interview. If you do not have anything else to share, that concludes this interview and I will end the recording. I appreciate your time and feedback. If you have additional information or would like to meet with me after the conclusion of this study, feel free to contact me [give participant business card].

----------End Recording----------

Appendix E
Participant Demographic Questionnaire
(To be completed prior to interview)

Participant Name:

Question	**Please circle or fill in your response**
1. My parents/guardians:	Attended a 4-year college Did not attend a 4-year college or obtain a bachelor's degree I don't know
2. My first year of enrollment in college was at UT during the 2015-2016 academic year:	Yes No
3. I am:	Below the age of 18 18+
4. I am:	Please indicate your racial/ethnic background _____

Thanks for completing the demographic information questionnaire. I will contact you within the next two business days to let you know if you meet the criteria for the study and to schedule an interview.

Jamia Stokes

Appendix F
Code Mapping

Code Mapping: Three Iterations of Analysis (to be read from the bottom up) (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002)

Third Iteration: How first-generation students achieved a sense of belonging		
Theme 1: Building Relationships	Theme 2: Student Involvement and Engagement	Theme 3: The Residence Hall Experience
10 participants	6 participants	6 participants
Second Iteration: Pattern Variables		
Making friends	Joining organizations or groups	Living on campus
Connecting with people	Participation in campus events	Living in LLC
Helpful faculty & Staff	Participation in mentoring program	Spending time in residence hall lobby
First Iteration: Initial Codes		
Friends from High School	Joining student organization	Living Learning Community
Adult Leaders on campus	Minority Mentoring Program	Roommate
FYS Instructor	Involvement	RA in Dorm
Meeting new people	Joined Young Life	Hanging out in dorm lobby
The Dean and his wife	Joined diversity organization	
Staff members	Joined sorority	
Hanging out with friends	Engineering Mentoring Program	
Meeting people from same background	Involvement with church	
Observing people	Joined campus ministry	
Inspirational staff members	Intramurals	
People want me to be successful	Summer program	
Staff member invited me to event		
Friends from class		
Staff were encouraging		

Appendix G

TranscribeMe's Security Policies

Last Updated: Feb 19, 2016 10:46AM PST

Standard Security Features

Our customers in enterprise businesses are satisfied with the security measures provided by TranscribeMe. We have passed the most rigorous security audits from Fortune 1000 companies concerned with security measures to protect their data, and we are confidently processing transcriptions for these customers today.

Our servers are located inside secure, dedicated Microsoft Azure data centers, with state-of-the-art physical and online intrusion prevention measures in place. The facilities are ISO certified, and are proactively monitored and kept up-to-date with the latest security patches by 24/7 Microsoft staff. The Azure data centers are amongst the most advanced in the world, and provide complete uptime reliability for the TranscribeMe service.

Our transcribers work on our proprietary WorkHub; meaning they cannot download audio, copy text, nor do they have access to the entirety of any audio file that is submitted by our clients - they are completing 10 to 60 second microtasks. The full audio is only accessible to our Quality Assurance Team after transcription, all of whom have signed NDAs.

Once completed, audio files do remain in our system, but they are not accessible to anyone but our internal team, all of whom have also signed NDAs. Audio files and transcription documents can be deleted from your Customer Portal account, and this will remove the files from our system permanently.

Micro-tasking Security and Confidentiality

As a major part of our service, we involve human crowd-workers in the delivery of transcriptions. To ensure confidentiality, we have invented a micro-tasking algorithm that splits complex content into bite-sized microtasks. Our proprietary platform ensures that no worker has more than a tiny portion of a single job, and jobs are randomized for the workers. In other words, our workers do not have the ability to select the work they will be processing, and do not see any connection between the short task they are performing and the context of the overall work or the identity of the clients.

VITA

Jamia Wiley Stokes completed a Bachelor of Arts in Communication in 2003 and a Master of Public Administration in 2005 at The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. She has worked in higher education for 14 years and has professional experience in undergraduate admissions, new student orientation, career development, academic advising, and student support services.

Jamia is currently the director of student services in the College of Education, Health and Human Sciences at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. In this role, she provides leadership and academic advising support to the faculty, staff, and students in the eight academic departments in the College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences. In addition to her work in the college, she serves on several campus-wide committees directly related to student success and retention, academic advising, orientation, undergraduate research, and diversity. Her academic pursuits are to successfully complete her PhD at the University of Tennessee and continue to serve students in higher education.