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I DON'T KNOW WHO I AM—CONSIDERING WHERE I CAME FROM:
FIRST-GENERATION WORKING-CLASS COLLEGE GRADUATES DESCRIBE THEIR
JOURNEYS TO BACCALAUREATE DEGREES

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored recent memories of some of the struggles and joys that first-generation students faced in their college experiences as they successfully completed four-year degrees at a private liberal arts college in the Midwest. These lived experiences included personal and structural issues of individual identity, class identity, first-generation observations, campus experiences, and family relationships. Their stories will inform research and provide insights for professionals working to improve levels of college retention and student growth.

First-generation college students are retained and graduate at a lower rate than second-generation college students and are consequently at risk for dropping out or stopping out of college before graduation. Current retention programs for first-generation students have been only somewhat effective in increasing their completion rate. This qualitative exploration of the lives of successful first-generation college graduates gives insights into how these students achieved their goals of a college degree, in spite of the great odds against them. These graduates were expressly aware of those odds as they negotiated systems of complex bureaucracies and formed relationships in various social settings. While meeting and maintaining academic standards, they needed to learn new middle-class languages, system codes, and geography.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

While there is a wide spread belief in the United States that class mobility is a desirable and attainable goal, statistics show that the United States actually lags behind many other nations in the percentage of citizens who achieve such mobility (Breen & Jonsson, 2005; Bullock & Limbert, 2003; Muntaner, 1999; Nesbit, 2006). With post-secondary education being a primary factor measuring class status it is important for students from working-class backgrounds to gain access to four-year university degrees if they hope to become members of the middle-class. However, many first-generation students leave college before attaining a four-year degree (Livingstone & Stowe, 2001). With scholarships, grants, and loans to help support financial need and institutional efforts to attract minority and other disadvantaged students, why do students still leave college? What other factors could be leading to the loss of promising students who come from first-generation working-class families?

Identity is a fundamental aspect of human character and in the United States social class is an important factor in identity formation. Identity includes markers such as language, dress, consumer habits, leisure activities, and workplace assumptions. By identifying with working-class norms, first-generation working-class students are at an

immediate social and academic disadvantage when they enter a world of middle-class values and resources in most college classrooms.

First-generation students must cope with ignorance of college campus expectations. Since they had parents who never experienced college they had little personal training in what to expect in classrooms and social settings. Middle-class backgrounds create images and memorable experiences that seem standard to middle-class students. These same images and experiences are exotic for working-class, first-generation students.

Working-class, first-generation students live in this unfamiliar campus environment for months at a time and eventually learn to negotiate unfamiliar class signals. They adapt as necessary and immerse themselves in what it means to be middle-class at college. These students learn to speak up in class and not see it as challenging authority. They learn that they can use critical thinking skills, in addition to memorizing data, and call it education. Their public voices change as they learn to express themselves logically with special attention to sentence construction and vocabulary. They begin to behave and sound different than they did before college (Aries & Seider, 2005; Bufton, 2003; Cushman, 2007; Kaufman, 2005; Ryan & Sackrey, 1996; Wentworth & Peterson, 2001).

Then they go home. Depending on the expectations of their families of origin, these students feel successful in their determination to be class-mobile or they feel like they have changed to such a degree that they are no longer comfortable around friends and peers back home. Class mobility may be a much honored goal, but it involves change at a fundamental, personal level that may be more than many students can manage.

Do we as a society mean it when we applaud class mobility as a good thing or do we reproduce the class structure as it stands and affirm its merit? If all children are

assumed to be equal in opportunity in the United States, do we reinforce that assumption in public policy and through institutional access and sensitivity to the struggles of class differences in quality standards of education?

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) affirmed with quantitative data that all students change in psychosocial ways as they progress through four-years of college. Students move from dogmatic thinking to critical thinking, become more civic minded, and value the arts as expressed in music and visual productions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). These are values also held by the middle and upper classes in the United States and are expressed in language, topics of discussion, and choice of career and leisurely activities. While attending a college or university, middle-class students with college educated parents become successful in reproducing their class of origin and seem very familiar to family and friends back home. Members of these groups reinforce and delight in the changes college has produced in students. An individual middle-class student can return home and fit right in.

However, working-class students whose parents did not attend college seem transformed and unfamiliar to family and friends back home. These groups recognize the subtle differences in language, aspect, and attitudes that seem to define their own working-class attitudes and behaviors as less desirable than what the students experienced at college (Bufton, 2003; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Reay, 2001; Sacks, 2007). There can be a sense that these children of the working-class were sent away to college to become better people. This realization in both the students and the families to which they return can cause emotional distancing and discomfort. Since such realizations do not happen abruptly but are part of the transformation over four years, it is possible that certain students are unable

to accept the pain involved and simply leave college. They become part of that pool of students who drop out due to personal circumstances (Breen & Jonsson, 2005; Bufton, 2003; Cooke, Barkham, Audin, Bradley, & Davy, 2004; DiMaria, 2006; Elkins, Buckingham, & Cochran, 2003; Ishitani, 2006).

This study explored recent memories of some of the struggles and joys that first-generation working-class college graduates faced in their college experiences as they successfully completed four-year degrees. These lived experiences included personal and structural issues of individual identity, class identity, first-generation observations, campus experiences, and family relationships. Their stories of persistence and success can inform research and provide insights for professionals working to improve levels of college retention and student growth.

Statement of the Problem

First-generation college students are retained and graduate at a lower rate than second-generation college students (Ishitani, 2006) and are consequently at special risk for dropping-out or stopping-out of college before graduation. Ishitani (2006) concluded that current retention programs for first-generation students have been only somewhat effective in increasing their completion rate to be on par with second-generation students. The challenge for educators is to develop programmatic and individual interventions that result in increased retention rates for first-generation working-class students that approach graduation rates for second-generation students. Because adjusting to college can be difficult for all students, many colleges provide orientation programs during the first few months of a student's college experience and make institutional support, like counseling centers, available throughout the student's entire college experience.

Retention issues are often addressed in institutional terms, for example some institutions provide first-year experience enrichment programs for first-generation and minority students, but sociocultural patterns in students' lives may have a larger impact on behavior than institutional programs, classroom conditions, or methods of instruction. First-generation students must leave their familiar communities and experience a new culture complete with its own language, geography, codes of behavior, and dress. Challenges faced by first-generation students outside the classroom can undermine academic achievement and cause students to question the choices they have made to attend college (Aries & Seider, 2005; Baxter & Britton, 2001; Bufton, 2003; Cushman, 2007; Farley, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tett, 2004). Such challenges can also be seen as opportunities for students to grow and mature during their years in college.

Questions about the success of first-generation students on campus are many and varied. Some examples are: What causes some first-generation students to succeed on campus while others are unsuccessful? What issues of identity formation did these successful students encounter? Are there college structures in place that supported or hindered these successful students along their journey to degree completion? How important were family relationships to these successful students? Could the stories of successful students lead to new research and practice in the field of student retention?

One view of higher education institutions in the United States is that they are designed and function as mechanisms to reproduce a specific set of classed values, behaviors, and world views (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). This reproduction of class is not accomplished by simple membership in clubs and organizations, but by the systematic institutionalized reinforcement and the personal internalization of classed values and

norms. For first-generation students the processes of learning new class-based values and norms are similar to any students' learning to think in a new language or live in a new culture. Living on campus is not as simple as learning to translate words or be a tourist. These campus-based classed behaviors and attitudes are part of the fabric of a college experience that second-, third-, and fourth- generation students find familiar and comfortable. For these students campus is an experience that confirms their class. First-generation students, typically from a working-class background, experience campus quite differently than students from college educated families (Aries & Seider, 2005; Barfels & Delucchi, 2003; Bufton, 2003; Bullock & Limbert, 2003; Cheung, Rudowicz, Graime, Xiao, & Kwan, 2001; Cushman, 2007; DiMaria, 2006; Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007; Kaufman, 2005; Reay, 2001; Wentworth & Peterson, 2001). For first-generation students, campus life inside and outside the classroom requires a conversion experience.

First-generation students are often consciously aware of new social and academic expectations, as well as different norms of behavior, speech, and dress as they negotiate the new campus environment. This heightened consciousness can add stress to their lives, affecting interpersonal relationships, campus activities, and family dynamics (Aries & Seider, 2005; Barfels & Delucchi, 2003; Bufton, 2003; Bullock & Limbert, 2003; Cheung et al., 2001; Cushman, 2007; DiMaria, 2006; Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007; Kaufman, 2005; Reay, 2001; Vandrick, 2000; Wentworth & Peterson, 2001).

The learning and maturity that arise from the first-generation students' experiences during their college years can displace students from their families and childhood friends who do not share their campus experiences and consequent growth, development, and maturation (Aries & Seider, 2005; Bufton, 2003; Bullock & Limbert, 2003; DiMaria, 2006;

Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007; Kaufman, 2005; Wentworth & Peterson, 2001). The adjustment to college for a first-generation student can be exceptionally difficult and may be one of the factors that contribute to student departure.

While social class itself is a social construct, it is also reinforced through institutional structures and interpersonal behaviors (Kaufman, 2005). Access to resources on campus is often predicated on formal and informal boundaries defined by social class. First-generation college students are expected by college faculty and administrators to navigate a new environment at college while attempting to meet the academic challenges of college coursework, and these students are expected by families and friends not to change as they go through their college experience.

Cultural barriers, real and perceived, are important because the financial realities of attending university mean that students need as much social support as possible. A perceived lack of support for the idea of attending university may be enough to persuade many students not to go (Cooke et al., 2004).

Purpose of the Study

The questions addressed in this study were designed to discover how first-generation students describe their experiences in college and the impact of these experiences on their relationships with friends and families. DiMaria (2006) found that “as less privileged students become more educated, they tend to feel estranged from their families, homes and neighborhoods. They often feel ill-suited to what they view as a privileged culture at many colleges” (p. 64). There is a real problem for working-class students who manage to get into college, despite the odds against it. These students must sometimes address issues of family resistance to their decisions to pursue a college degree.

“Although we cherish the notion that working-class families welcome the opportunity to improve their children’s lives through higher education that is not always the case” (Casey, 2005, p. 34).

In order to explore these issues further, the first-generation graduates who participated in this study were asked to describe their personal and institutional experiences during their college years. This qualitative existential phenomenological study gave voice to college graduates from working-class backgrounds as they explained their lives in context of being the first in their families to earn a college degree. It supported questions regarding the role of class bias in many areas of college life. (Casey, 2005, p. 34).

Casey (2005) stated that students from backgrounds in which education is simply not valued, or in which it is an alien arena, have every reason to hide that fact and to assume that perspectives shaped by those circumstances are illegitimate. The association of college with empowerment, prestige, and upward mobility casts their personal experience as irrelevant.

Definition of Terms

First-generation college student. This is a student whose parents did not attend college. The definition is specific, in that neither parent had experience in a post-secondary educational environment. It is the definition used by the U.S. Department of Education in its 2001 report *Students Whose Parents Did Not Go to College* (Choy, 2001).

Lower and working-class. Working-class is a social term as well as an economic status. For purposes of this study, the following criteria will also be used to include participants: To be classified as working-class, participants must come from families in which the parent or parents had jobs and worked at least nine months of each year, must

have family of origin incomes in the lower 40% of all US families, and cannot have either parent working in a middle-class occupation. Working-class occupations include such titles as:

White-collar bank tellers, call-center workers and cashiers; blue-collar machinists, construction workers, and assembly-line workers; pink-collar secretaries, nurses, and home-health-care workers. . . . The working-class are those with little personal control over the pace or content of their work and without supervisory control over the work lives of others. . . . The United States has a substantial working-class majority. (Zwieg, 2006, p. 117)

Middle-class. These occupations involve more decision-making and control of the work and its environment. The middle-class gains intrinsic as well as extrinsic rewards associated with employment and they anticipate lives of comfort and community respect. They include:

Professionals, small-business owners, and managerial and supervisory employees. They are best understood not as the middle of an income distribution but as living in the middle of the two polar classes in capitalist society. Their experiences have some aspects shared with the working-class and some associated with the corporate elite. (Zweig, 2006, p. 117)

Complicating these designations is the problem of self-identification. In the United States the national mythology includes references to universal access to class mobility. Aronson and Sartre (2001) pointed out that Sartre was studying this phenomenon in a visit to the United States in 1945. Sartre concluded that “American workers . . . lacked class consciousness and identified with their bosses and nation rather than their fellow workers

elsewhere, which is to say, they accepted capitalism” (Aronson & Sartre, 2001, p. 27).

These observations from the middle of the last century would hold true today. Social class is a subjective term and most Americans choose to describe themselves as middle-class, although in reality there are a wide range of social classes in the United States.

While class becomes an increasingly important category of analysis within academic discourse, it is simultaneously, paradoxically, being drummed out of our national rhetoric. In this nation whose central myth was and remains the rise of the individual ever-upwards through social and financial strata that, cloud-like, apparently fade away as they are passed through, “class” remains the unspoken category. (Campbell, 1996, p. 116)

Interpersonal relationships. College students develop interpersonal relationships with roommates, classmates, faculty, and staff through memberships in club and group activities and casual encounters with members of the campus community. These relationships are important in identity development, as interpersonal encounters reinforce or negate beliefs individuals carry about their place in society.

Campus environments. Campus environments are structures of instruction, student life, clubs and organizations, and various university administrative offices designed to enroll and maintain students through various activities to eventual graduation.

Family relationships. Family relationships are those that exist by nature of birth and personal history. These are the relationships with people from students’ families of origin and those environments where students lived before entering college.

Rather than having cultural parameters, social class definitions in the United States are often based on a statistical metric like individual and family income. The Census

Bureau has chosen to stratify incomes into five equal groups, ranging from the lowest to the highest reported incomes each five years. This provides a historical reference for observing and comparing trends in income distribution (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

Research Questions

1. How do college graduates who were first-generation students from working-class backgrounds describe their college experiences in terms of interpersonal relationships, campus environments, and family relationships?
2. What meanings do first-generation college graduates from working-class backgrounds attribute to their college experiences?

Significance of Study

The stories from participants in this research will inform further research and have implications for professional practice of college administrators, faculty, and counselors working with first-generation students. By identifying important experiences of working-class, first-generation students, programmatic and structural efforts can be made to address the needs of these students. Individual awareness and subsequent skills of campus workers, such as academic and student life advisors, can be more effectively based on research evidence.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Research exploring identity formation supports the impact of institutional influences throughout a person's life. Previous studies have suggested that the middle-class environment of most college campuses helps shape who students become as adults. First-generation working-class college students face different challenges to identity than students raised in middle-class families where parents are familiar with college norms. Previous research described how students experience these challenges while negotiating academic and personal relationships on campus, as well as when they return home (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

This research relied on findings from earlier studies. A number of researchers have defined the problem of retention for first-generation students in terms of identity formation and how students must establish themselves in context of the middle-class structure of higher education (Aries & Seider, 2005; Bufton, 2003; Ostrove & Long, 2001; Tett, 2000, 2004). Others have asked how education affects class mobility as students transform attitudes and behaviors while attending college (Campbell, 1996; Gomme & Micucci, 1999; Gos, 1995; Hassler & Mora, 2000; Karabel & Astin, 2001; Livingstone & Stowe, 2001; Nelson, Englar-Carlson, Tierney, & Hau, 2006; Raines & McAdams, 2006). Some researchers have approached the problem in terms of access to higher education as it

reflects social class expectations and the acquisition of cultural capital necessary to succeed in college (Cheung et al., 2001; Cooke et al., 2004; Dumais, 2005; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Georg, 2004; Hillmert & Jacob, 2003; Howard-Hamilton, 2002; Nash, 1999; Schwebel, 2006; Steele, 2003; Swartz, 2002; Trusty, Robinson, Plata, & Ng, 2000; Tsui, 2003; Youn, Arnold, & Salkever, 1999). Other researchers see the issue of social class as a persistence and retention factor for professionals in the field of student services (Elkins et al., 2003; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Farley, 2002; Lau, 2003; Lotowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; Pusser & Turner, 2004; Reay, 2001).

Identity

Structural symbolic interaction is one method to describe the relationship between an individual and her or his environment. This interpretation of identity is based on the three concepts of self, language, and interaction. “The self originates in the mind of persons and is that which characterizes an individual’s consciousness of his or her own being or identity” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 9).

Language consists of complex symbols and is specific to a community or culture. Symbols are abstract representations of objects or ideas and are useful tools in a society as meanings are attached to them. Language forms the basis for conveying information between people within a given society and is also important to individuals as they create an idea of themselves and who they are and want to become.

Through the possibility of responding to oneself and one’s own thoughts, plans can be made, action opportunities created, and the past remembered. Indeed, there is a tendency to symbolize virtually everything that is important to us, in order, through

thought and interaction, to bring that which is symbolized under our control. (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 11)

Interaction is implied in language and other symbolic forms of communication, as a message is sent and also received. At the same time that such messages are being exchanged at an individual level, the structures that surround the individual are being affected by the interaction. Systems are reinforced or altered by the individuals acting within them. The possibility of initiating change is at the root of individual agency.

As agents, they willfully take actions. And their actions may not fully confirm their identities or the identities of others or the meanings of symbols that we use.

Although the general picture is of two role identities doing what they must do, the details are in the eyes of agents themselves who must choose what to do. (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 14)

Identity carries both intrinsic and extrinsic values for an individual. The merit placed on each of these factors is specific to a person's goals and circumstances. Burke and Stets (2009) stated that identities contain roles that are both *conventional* and *idiosyncratic*, in that they conform to both society expectations (conventional) and individually defined wants and needs (idiosyncratic) within society (p. 39).

One of the factors that define identity is how a person situates herself or himself in perceived social status. In some societies such a measure is defined at birth and remains static through a lifetime according to custom and law. In those societies social mobility is neither a goal nor an expectation. However, in the United States, social mobility is part of a common belief in the American dream that individual hard work will result in success and higher economic status. Past studies have shown flaws in that assumption (Barfels &

Delucchi, 2003; Breen & Jonsson, 2005; Bullock & Limbert, 2003; Deresiewicz, 2006; Georg, 2004; Karabel & Astin, 2001; Lott, 2002; Marjoribanks, 2001; Nelson et al., 2006; Nesbit, 2006). In spite of this evidence, people still carry the perception that individuals can beat the odds against social mobility in the United States if they just work hard enough and get the breaks (Bullock & Limbert, 2003).

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reviewed research which confirms a multitude of developmental challenges for students encountering a new environment at college including academic, cognitive, intellectual, psychosocial, and moral challenges. While such challenges and student developmental changes are true for students from all socioeconomic backgrounds, students from the lower classes are under extra stress as they work toward life goals unfamiliar and sometimes antagonistic to values held by their family and friends. Structural belief systems that shape life goals and help shape identities start at home and are confirmed in play groups, public education settings, and playgrounds. By the time working-class students graduate from high school, if they do so, they may not have acquired many basic academic and social skills necessary to succeed in higher education.

Students from all social classes inherit and acquire different abilities to function in privileged class environments. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) referred to such skills as cultural capital. Bourdieu's description of habitus implied unconscious modeling of class-related attitudes and behaviors (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Savage, Warde, & Devine, 2005; Sulkunen, 1982; Zweigenhaft, 1993). Social class is defined by how a person follows cultural norms and these cultural norms are established through the process of habitus. The environment soaks in cultural norms over time.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus leaves room for individual agency, thus avoiding mechanistic assumptions of structuralism (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). However, agency is very hard work as individuals must be able to experience cognitive dissonance as an opportunity for change rather than a threat to personal identity. First-generation college students must experience the tension created between old working-class assumptions and new middle-class assumptions as they adapt to new ways of experiencing the world they inhabit. Such agency requires confidence and the ability to take risks. Becker (2004) argued that cognitive dissonance is the result of a new cognitive structure rather than the cause. This argument supports the idea that change is indeed a difficult psychological task that requires acceptance of discomfort as a path to new perceptions and behaviors. Assumed habitus breaks down and allows stress and confusion to exist while a person adapts to new experiences and new reactions to old stimuli. First-generation students must become comfortable with discomfort in new social and academic environments. "The prevalent constructivist account of cognitive development is dependent on individuals feeling a perturbation and responding to it with work directed to overcome it" (Becker, 2004, p. 79).

Marketing professionals often apply academic theories as they test consumer reactions to their products. Consumers identify to varying degrees with products as they express themselves through brand identification and association. Many of these choices are methods for an individual to be associated with a preferred group who become peers in buying habits. Ward and Reingen (1990) analyzed the relationship between cognitive and social processes as they relate to consumer choice. The results showed that social structure influences cognitive structure, that shared knowledge is related to choice, and that the

sociocognitive perspective provides new insights to prior literature on group decision making and the relation between group membership and brand choice (Ward & Reingen, 1990). This group identification with a brand choice is very similar to students' identification with an alma mater. First-generation students acquire a brand unfamiliar to family and friends back home.

Identity is an ongoing personal construction with components of ties to family, community, and various institutions that an individual encounters over time. Each component of these encounters produces a separate set of rules, expectations, and rewards for individual and group behaviors. Identity is reinforced or challenged in various social and institutional environments (Aries & Seider, 2005; Cheung et al., 2001; Baxter & Britton, 2001; Bloom, 2007; Kaufman, 2003; Savage, Ward & Devine, 2005; Wentworth & Peterson, 2001). A working-class student who graduates from a public high school in a working-class neighborhood has typically experienced a world where higher education is not part of the expectation for life after high school. Therefore, the challenges for working-class students who find themselves in college are different from the challenges experienced by middle-class students who carry an expectation of higher education in their futures. Working-class students are frequently first-generation college students who have no one to turn to in families where college is not part of the language spoken or implied (Aries & Seider, 2005).

Kaufman (2005) defined the process for working-class students who choose to enter college as one of *social transformation* which involves the factors of associational embracement, associational distancing, and presentation of self. Kaufman described traits such as speech patterns and clothing choices as fundamental to people choosing to

transform their social status, and he argued that interpersonal attempts to form identity must precede institutional attempts to support such changes.

The difficulty in achieving social transformation—besides all of the structural barriers such as limited access to education, health care, child care, and job networks, as well as racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination—lies in the interpersonal negotiations of establishing ties with a relatively unfamiliar group while reducing or terminating ties with a known group. (Kaufman, 2005, p. 501)

Social Class

Social class is one of the structures in which individual identity is defined. Given agency, opportunity, and tools, an individual may be able to redefine his or her identity within a given social class. While people in the United States struggle with recognizing the existence of social class and its impact on their personal lives, the idea of class mobility is a treasured American value. This tension between the ideal of social mobility and its necessary base in the existence of disparate social classes forms an interesting dynamic for working-class college students when they encounter the daily dynamics of class change. Abundant research exists concerning social class in the United States and its relationship to higher education. There are ongoing issues related to distribution of resources and K-12 preparation for post-secondary education. Political questions of public school funding intersect with individual needs to get the best education for themselves and their families.

Livingstone and Stowe (2001) confirmed in their “New Approaches to Lifelong Learning” working paper that working-class students are less likely to finish degree programs than students from professional and managerial class families. This report stated that there are “substantial inter-generational class mobility and continuing inequalities in

formal education attainments by class origins” (Livingstone & Stowe, 2001, p. 3).

Livingstone and Stowe also pointed out that if learning potential for individual students is approximately equal throughout the population, then “the current social stratification of education in the elementary and public education systems is leaving a large number of qualified students behind in the post secondary arena” (p. 3). Some social critics have argued that

neither initial opportunity nor continuing participation measures are sufficient to overcome reproduction of systemic educational inequality and that more proactive steps should be taken toward equal outcomes, favoring those from disadvantaged backgrounds to try to ensure that they graduate in proportionate numbers and obtain commensurate social positions. (Livingstone & Stowe, 2001, p. 4)

Nelson et al. (2006) explored the issue of class as it relates to professional identity for counseling psychology academic professionals from lower-class backgrounds. In their conclusion, Nelson et al. noted that “the path from dirt roads to ivory towers is winding, unpredictable, highly challenging, and, at times, lonely. Success seems to depend on complex contextual and personal factors—including important cultural aspects, such as race and ethnic background” (p. 14).

Given the range of social class issues being studied as they relate to higher education, many researchers have come to believe that social class should be treated as a diversity parameter (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Entin, 2005; Jaffe, 1998; Kahlenberg, 1998; Karabel & Astin, 2001 ; Linkon & Russo, 2005; Sacks, 2007; Stevens, 2007; Valdata, 2005; Vander Putten, 2001; Van Galen & Noblit, 2007). These researchers noted similarities in a privileged population’s exclusionary practices as applied to economic and

class-based descriptors of difference. Studies such as these are made more difficult by attitudes in the United States that resist analytical descriptions of class structure.

The experiences and perceptions of low-income groups and social constructions of class identity are understudied. Yet, reports of growing disparity between the rich and poor make class-based inequality difficult to ignore, underscoring the importance of studying social class from both structural and psychological perspectives. (Bullock & Limbert, 2003, p. 694)

Lott (2002) stated that poverty in the United States needs to be addressed as a diversity issue, in that poor people are treated as invisible in our society. Lott explained that “classism is examined in the context of theoretical propositions about the moral exclusion of stigmatized others and is illustrated by cognitive distancing, institutional distancing [in education, housing, health care, legal assistance, politics, and public policy], and interpersonal distancing” (p. 100). Vander Putten (2001) looked forward to a time when class issues are addressed on campus in many of the same ways that race and gender issues have been in the past. “Just as celebrating the presence of women students and students of color on campus has helped to fight sexism and racism, including and celebrating the presence of students from working-class backgrounds can help fight classism” (Vander Putten, 2001, p. 18).

Kingston and Lewis (1990) found the premise worthy and the evidence compelling that social stratification exists in the United States in large part due to selectivity of elite schools. If access to resources is indeed a zero-sum model, then privileged populations with enhanced opportunities to gain access to elite colleges will create obstacles to those populations without such opportunities. Kingston and Lewis stated that

many qualified individuals seek desired, but scarce, social and/or economic opportunities. Truly open competition for highly desired outcomes leaves privileged groups vulnerable. Because the socially desired positions are finite at any given moment, processes that give advantage to the members of certain groups work to limit the opportunities of individuals from other groups. In these ways, dominant groups enhance their chances, at the same time that a few worthy newcomers are advanced, a process which serves to reproduce and legitimate a structure of social inequality. (p. 42)

In the United States, inequality of access to educational resources is a concept in direct contradiction to perceived community standards of access based on individual merit. The realities of uneven distribution of resources in the public education system are clouded by political dynamics of the local control of taxes which support the system. Social class and its expression in the public arena seem no more apparent than in public K-12 education systems. Muntaner (1999) stated,

Justification of inequality has also been attributed to several cultural factors: the hegemony of ruling-class values and explanations that are readily incorporated into schooling and the media; and the role of Protestantism that links wealth accumulation to divine reward via personal effort. (p. 162)

Even students who opt for more working-class friendly community colleges or state universities can find the transition daunting. Historically, before the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the GI Bill, higher education in the United States was reserved for the children of people with wealth or people with a college or graduate education. As access increased, new institutions of open access evolved to serve

many of the new students wanting the benefits associated with a college degree, including the perceived ability to move into higher social circles. There are some doubts, however, about the outcomes for students in such institutions as related to class mobility. “Initial attendance at two-year versus four-year institutions has been found to adversely affect college persistence, degree attainment, and occupational status” (Tsui, 2003, p. 319). Since this study explored the experiences of graduates of four-year colleges, issues of persistence and status will carry meaning for future study in those areas.

Lack of equal access to quality public education today is evidenced by the uneven distribution of tax-based funds across the United States. Public schools are notorious for their uneven outcomes based on uneven wealth in neighborhoods. This is the definition of location in real estate terminology and is assumptive in such transactions. Consumers in the United States have accepted this state of wealth distribution as a given, as a form of habitus that is part of the paradigm of neighborhood production in the United States.

Pierre Bourdieu devised a genetic structuralism, which recognizes that the world is socially constructed by individuals but with instruments of cognitive construction that are themselves constructed by the world, that is, by history deposited in bodies meeting with history reified in institutions. (Wacquant, 2003, p. 478)

The theory of social capital drives many of the theories relating to the persistence of class structures. Social capital is acquired and distributed by individuals and is the foundation for various forms of communication across and between social classes.

A longitudinal study conducted in Britain found that the university experience was measurably different for students from working-class backgrounds than it was for students from middle-class families. This study measured not just academic results,

but student life as it exists outside classroom environments. Results showed that students from disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to have parents that attended university, more likely to have been in paid employment, less likely to have participated in non-academic activities and spent fewer evenings per week socializing compared with students from advantaged background. Also, there was some evidence of less positive perceptions of social support among disadvantaged students. (Cooke et al., 2004, p. 407)

It is important to note that Great Britain has only recently had private education. Public education, especially at Oxford and Cambridge, had been available to only the well-to-do and well educated. However there are strong similarities to this system in the United States where private colleges and selective public universities are often populated by students from wealthy and well-educated families with long histories of participation in higher education.

Ryan and Sackrey (1996) approached the topic of the impact of social class on educational attainment from the perspective of academic professionals who came from working-class backgrounds. Their research comprised a series of stories from people who experienced moving from one social class to another. Ryan and Sackrey believed that class mobility through higher education started after World War II when access to college became possible for a wider range of people in the United States. They consciously reinterpreted the circumstances and motivation for providing post-secondary education to the general population.

While we do not wish to deny the talents and dedication of the traveler across class lines, we do insist that the individualistic, meritocratic explanation of success that is

integral to both official dogma and popular belief falls considerable short of explaining the reasons why people “got ahead” during that time period. (Ryan & Sackrey, 1996, p. 15)

The participants in the Ryan and Sackrey (1996) study were professionals in their academic fields as opposed to recent college graduates. The stories were consistent in their statements of class transformation over the expanse of years in academia. They wrote about “the rich interplay of talent, excited discovery of the world of ideas, the role of public support, expanded personal horizons, luck, and even misfortune that blazed the mobility path, leading, often circuitously, to the gates of academia” (Ryan & Sackrey, 1996, p. 15).

Hassler and Mora (2000) brought an economic perspective to the issue of education and social class mobility with their quantitative study “Intelligence, Social Mobility, and Growth” in 2000. They discussed and measured the impact of two variables: genetic heritage and social heritage. Hassler and Mora contended that improved public schools would lead to an actual merit-based opportunity system for all students. They concluded that “the resulting improvement in social selection could prove to be self-enforcing by leading to a more dynamic society in which social background is less important for social sorting” (Hassler & Mora, 2000, p. 904).

First-generation

The term *first-generation* carries a myriad of influences on a particular student’s college experience. The participants in this current study are college graduates who were the first in their families to attend college much less graduate. Statistically this makes them much more likely to be from the working-class since incomes rise in the United States as people become more educated. First-generation students are therefore more likely to be

raised in households without access to goods and services that middle-class students take for granted. First-generation students also lack cultural advantages that many college educated parents provide for their children. If their K-12 educational experience also lacked these cultural resources then first-generation students must develop middle-class cultural awareness while adapting to the academic and social demands of a college campus (Pascarella & Terenzinzi, 2005).

According to research (Cushman, 2007; Elkins et al., 2003; Hodkinson & Bloomer, 2001; Ishitani, 2006; Lau, 2003; Livingstone & Stowe, 2001; London, 2006; Longwell-Grice, 2003; Maldonado, Rhodes, & Buenavista, 2005; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Pidcock, Fisher, & Munsch, 2001; Wentworth & Peterson, 2001; Woodbury, 2005), first-generation college students are at special risk for dropping or stopping-out of college before graduation. Developmental changes experienced at college may be so dramatic that the student finds it difficult to return to the language, rhythms, and values of life before college. This difficulty may be due to subtle and overt changes in language, behavior, and cognition that alienate the families they left behind. “Because of personal development’s foundations in cognition, the individual simply ‘can’t go home again’ because development alters perceptions and the structures that give meaning to the world” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 33).

First-generation working-class students who decide to go to college must also choose the type of college to attend. This is often an overwhelming chore for a young person who has no experienced family members or social network to help with this important decision. The type of college the student chooses will eventually play a large part in the formation of his/her new identity. Community colleges actively market to

working-class students who may place a high value on the concept of education as training for work. Public universities have residential, distance education, and commuter options which traditionally create opportunities for working-class students to attain college degrees. Private colleges often have histories of favoring the upper classes with long histories of elite systems of access including legacy scholarships where prominent families assume passage-rites into an institution.

While many working-class families support a student's decision to acquire a college education such goals are as alien as the language of college admissions and financial aid (DiMaria, 2006). If a student chooses a college which historically taught and reinforced upper class values, that student must learn a set of life skills to match the expectations of fellow students, professors, and administrative staff. These new life skills are by definition at odds with the practices of their working-class families and friends. Cushman (2007) described these feelings:

During their first few months of college, many first-generation college students . . . feel the tensions of entering new territory, and their parents are unable to reassure them. Their fellow college students often seem to be members of a club of insiders to which they do not belong. These kinds of cultural tensions may be one reason that almost one-fourth of first-generation students who enter four-year colleges in the United States do not return for a second year. (p. 44)

Campus Experiences

Since interaction plays a major role in identity formation, the college campus setting has a profound impact on how individual students define and refine their identity traits moving into adulthood. Research exists on the dynamics of working-class and first-

generation students in college environments. These studies (Aries & Seider, 2005; Bufton, 2003; Campbell, 1996; Cooke et al., 2004; Cushman, 2007; DiMaria, 2006; Gomme & Micucci, 1999; Gos, 1995; Ishitani, 2006; London, 2006; Longwell-Grice, 2003; Nagle, 1999; Pusser & Turner, 2004; Woodbury, 2005; Youn et al., 1999; Zweigenhaft, 1993) uncover patterns of exclusion and stereotyping of students based on unfamiliar behaviors and attitudes expressed by these students in the middle-class environment of college. Inherent in the findings was the assumption by many faculty and staff that working-class, first-generation students lacked tools and information necessary to succeed and meet the academic demands of post-secondary education. The burden frequently falls on students to prove those assumptions wrong or to work on their own to acquire the tools and information necessary to succeed if they choose to stay the course.

Reay (2001) described some of the difficulties that working-class people have with success in academic environments. She emphasized the systematic oppression of class-based values as expressed in language and perceived expectations. Reay examined the specific experiences of working-class students and how they perceived the educational settings they had encountered. “Many of the working-class students were trying to guard against being made to feel inferior and this generalized fear haunted their descriptions of visits and interviews at traditional universities” (Reay, 2001, p. 339).

Language is a key element for students who must negotiate the social contexts of two different classes. Combined with the ability to use language and syntax of the prestige U.S. variety of English is the ability to be assertive in voicing ideas. In the United States, middle and upper class cultures encourage confident verbal displays of knowledge and expertise, in order to move into professional management positions. Lower class

individuals are expected to listen to authority figures without expressing their own interpretations or ideas. Members of the working-class are taught from infancy how to be obedient and passive in order to be good employees. In college environments, instructors expect active participation in class discussion to prove interest and evidence of completing homework:

By participation we [college instructors] mean, generally, that students speak in class: they are ready to answer questions, they ask questions, they make comments, they join in class discussions. Students who do not participate actively in these ways are often considered to be lazy, unprepared, passive, and/or uninvolved students, and are generally penalized when class grades are assigned. (Vandrick, 2000, p. 2)

Given that college instruction and learning involves more complex cognitive skills than K-12 education, it is important to understand the challenges faced by all students, but especially working-class students whose motivation for education may be more focused on training for the workplace. Such perspectives limit a student's patience with more theoretical approaches to learning and can sabotage success in the classroom. Hansen (1998) addressed the need for understanding individual student motivations for learning in the classroom environment. "Among the four content-related conditions of classroom learning that are described, particular emphasis is placed on the relationship between teaching for cognitive dissonance and reflective self-assessment" (Hansen, 1998, p.7). Such emphasis on critical thinking can benefit first-generation students who are not accustomed to challenging ideas or authority either in the classroom or in family

environments. Becoming comfortable with cognitive dissonance can also promote personal agency and lead students to take risks in order to deal with change.

Family Experiences

While campus interactions are helping students grow into new identities and express themselves in a middle-class structure, first-generation students must continue historic interactions with family members in a structure that does not conform to life on a college campus. First-generation working-class students must find ways to bridge the growing gap between expectations of them at school and expectations of family and friends back home. The more comfortable a student begins to feel with her or his new middle-class skills the more those same skills seem out of place around family and childhood friends. Students must choose individually how to navigate between these worlds, and students make those decisions based on their own needs.

First-generation students from the working-class are under particular stress in determining their adult identity. Their family role models were not familiar with the rules for success in an academic environment. This leaves such students at a disadvantage socially, as well as economically, when they get to campus. Given this acknowledged developmental hurdle for all students, the addition of class estrangement creates risks beyond traditional measures for retention. First-generation students must “consider complex issues of identity and family/community connectedness, especially since they have often been distracted from their familiar support systems, and they must determine how they will represent themselves in and to a larger stranger world” (Seitz, 2004, p. 221).

Hartig and Steigerwald (2007) discussed a variety of hurdles that first-generation college students encounter in their transition to higher education including *survivor guilt* as

they move up the economic ladder not available to the rest of their families. “This guilt manifests itself when students feel hope in pursuing a higher education while they watch their families struggle to survive” (Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007, p. 159). The U.S. university system is in the business of producing successful middle-class citizens who have the skills to make it on their own while developing networks and systems to support fellow college graduates. Such systems often begin with parents who are already insiders and know how to negotiate college entry systems from applications to financial aid. Since by definition first-generation students lack this systemic support, an extra burden exists prior to them entering the college system. “These students tend to have less parental support with the logistics of college and career planning. They may also experience cultural and values conflict between home and college communities” (Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007, p. 159).

Middle-class students are typically advantaged in households where interpersonal dynamics reflect the environments found in traditional higher education institutions. Gos (1995) described the differences between middle-class and working-class positioning in communities and households.

The managerial/professional class home is person-oriented, that is, roles are determined not by position or birth order, but rather by who the individuals are. These children are born into an environment where they are seen and responded to as individuals with their own rights. They have a specific social status. Roles are changeable, mainly through the process of negotiation. Children of the managerial/professional classes essentially get to create their own roles within the family and community. (Gos, 1995, p. 31)

One of the threats a first-generation working-class student poses to friends and family back home is the perception that the student is trying to be better than the people he or she grew up with (Marks, Turner, & Osborne, 2003). Indeed, a college education is premised on the creation of standard middle-class values and aspirations. Baxter and Britten (2001) explored this threat to identity and concluded that working-class students risk losing their sense of self while pursuing a college degree.

To be “educated” is to stake a claim to a new identity which can be threatening both to one’s own self or to others. This may be experienced either as being seen by others as superior, or as feeling superior to others, but in both cases, there is an implicit challenge to former relationships. (Baxter & Britten, 2001, p. 87)

Gos (1995) explained that, unlike the middle-class, “working-class social structure is position-oriented” (p. 32). Individuals are born into lines of authority within a family and children are taught to respect the power or lack of power of each player in the group. Middle-class children are expected to succeed and prosper because of their abilities. These students see opportunity and ask themselves: “Can I do it?” On the other hand, working-class students seek permission from authority figures to test their abilities. The anticipated success is first based on approval to act. Their first question is: “May I do it?” This question stands as a gate-keeper to transformational pursuits. Gos continued to explain this relationship between family authority and autonomy by stating that

probably the greatest effect that position-orientation has on the successes of working-class children is in this area of authority. In working-class families, authority and legitimacy of a statement come from the form of social relationships rather than reasoned principles [“Do it because I said so”]. When a statement is

challenged, it is the relationship that is being questioned, not the logic of the statement. The authoritarian environment that working-class students experience discourages them from questioning, while the more open, relativistic environment of the managerial/professional classes encourages students from that background to question. (Gos, 1995, p. 32)

Retention

Forms of social capital are reinforced in higher education as students prepare for work and life in a world stratified by educational achievement. Professional positions require certain levels of well-defined educational attainment and within those levels institutions providing education are also ranked by status. If a working-class student manages to break into the middle-class environment of higher education and succeed there, she or he must display a functional knowledge of skills required for middle-class cultural capital exchanges. In doing so, the student may need to reject and/or replace working-class values and methods of expression. This may require rejection, or appearance of rejection, of family values and practices the student grew up learning as the way of the world. Such students often become aware of these dynamics once they enroll in college and find they must negotiate new physical and educational environments on college campuses. Some working-class students are not able to find a comfortable path to fit into the academic community and one reason may be their inability feel comfortable with their new middle-class roles (Aries & Seider, 2005; Baxter & Britton, 2001; Kaufman, 2003; Wentworth & Peterson, 2001). Retention of these motivated, bright students is surely in the interest of colleges and communities nationwide, and listening to their success stories may lead to new perceptions of need.

Retention is an important problem because recent research (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008) has shown a continuing disparity between college completion rates for students from different income groups in the United States. The quantitative data support more subjective cultural interpretations of social class differences in access and completion rates in higher education. “Data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicate that while an estimated 56 percent of high-income students who begin postsecondary education will earn their four-year degrees within six years, only about 26 percent of low-income students will do so” (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008, p. 47).

A subtle relationship exists between persistence and retention. An individual student’s ability to persist in the face of social pressure to withdraw from college is a key factor for students from working-class families and neighborhoods. College advisors and professionals in student development often recognize academic problems as issues of retention but may overlook an individual’s very personal struggle with identity formation and a lack of family support for perceived changes in values and life goals. Not all students cope well with these tensions and may decide to opt out of college to please family and friends.

Many retention programs address academic needs at the expense of psychosocial imperatives. While academic success is the perceived goal of a college education, students have full lives outside the classroom and campus environment, where they interact with family, friends, and employers. These relationships can have profound impacts on school success (Aries & Seider, 2005; Baxter & Britton, 2001; Bloom, 2007; Kaufman, 2003). Academic methods to address retention often include such measures as formal learning centers, freshman year programs, and honors programs. Efforts to improve retention

through facility management and structures include attention to residence hall design, study rooms, handicap-access spaces, career centers, and social and professional organizations (Lau, 2003).

Researchers have begun to question purely institutional approaches as they explore patterns of social exclusion related to race, ethnicity, and social class (Nagle, 1999). These studies suggest that

[colleges and universities] should take an integrated approach in their retention efforts that incorporates both academic and non-academic factors into the design and development of programs to create a socially inclusive and supportive academic environment that addresses the social, emotional, and academic needs of students. (Lotkowski et al., 2003, p. viii)

Public education officials in the United States carry a responsibility to answer to national, state, and local political expectations and demands, which are formally legislated and reinforced in each classroom experience. Whether overt or understood through cultural systems, education in the United States has become a system to replicate social class systems. “As the culminating stage of an ongoing sorting process operating within the formal schooling structure, higher education enables members of privileged status groups to accrue greater educational advantages while those of less privileged backgrounds go educationally disadvantaged” (Tsui, 2003, p. 318).

Payne-Bourcy (2001) addressed this phenomenon in a longitudinal measure of two rural working-class adolescents who moved from their rural home to a residential higher education environment. This study led Payne-Bourcy to suggest that professionals in

higher education “engage in serious conversations about a continuum of expectations and related communication from the secondary to the postsecondary level” (p. 1).

Summary

The preceding studies pertaining to identity, social class, campus experiences, and family experiences provide an overview of the context in which first-generation college students must seek to define themselves while moving into adult lives. In addition, these factors provide a frame through which higher education professionals can view issues raised in recruiting and retaining first-generation students.

These contexts have an impact on identity formation as defined by structural symbolic interaction theories. Students who find themselves in the new middle-class environment of a residential liberal arts college must learn to negotiate status and daily life interactions while facing the daunting task of accomplishing their academic goals. They must accept the discomfort of this reality and set out to learn the symbols (including language) of middle-class success and immerse themselves in the structural demands of campus life.

Chapter 3

Method

Research Questions

1. How do college graduates who were first-generation students from working-class backgrounds describe their college experiences in terms of interpersonal relationships, campus environments, and family relationships?
2. What meanings do first-generation college graduates from working-class backgrounds attribute to their college experiences?

Qualitative Methodology

Ponterotto (2005) created a useful primer on qualitative research methods, including a glossary of relevant terms. This definition of qualitative research was utilized by Ponterotto in the context of counseling psychology for researchers more accustomed to quantitative methods. Ponterotto stated that “qualitative methods refer to a broad class of empirical procedures designed to describe and interpret the experiences of research participants in a context-specific setting” (p. 128). The definition also emphasized the subjective perspective of the interview setting. “Qualitative findings are generally presented in everyday language and often incorporate participants’ own words to describe a psychological event, experience, or phenomenon” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 128).

The idea of discovering information beyond the pre-constructed survey model is a core value in qualitative research designs. Sherrod (2006) stated that “individuals create meaning through social actions and understand these experiences or realities differently” (p. 24). Phenomenology is one of several qualitative research tools used to study these manifest experiences. In the field of family psychology, qualitative research is becoming an accepted model in research. “Among the uses for qualitative methods are theory building, model and hypothesis testing, descriptions of lived experiences, typologies, items for surveys and measurement tools, and case examples that answer questions that surveys cannot” (Gilgun, 2005, p. 40).

Wertz (2005) explained why a qualitative life-world interview method is particularly appropriate for the goals of this study. While a researcher can compile survey tools that seem scientific and positivist, the truth will always lie buried until the participant gives it meaning from his or her very unique perspective.

The individual person experiences this world in a way that is uniquely relevant and meaningful to the self in the course of their individual histories that begin with their birth and end with their death, making the life-world a place meaningfully apprehended from “one’s own” perspective. (Wertz, 2005, p. 169)

The purpose of this present work was to listen for, record, and describe the world-views of individuals in a given set of circumstances. From these data, themes evolved that merit further research or affect practice of student development professionals. This was an existential phenomenological study of the effects of the college experience and the coping strategies that research participants employed during and since their college experiences. The study design was built around a series of personal interviews with the participants.

The interviews were designed to “deal with inner experiences unprobed in everyday life” (Merriam, 2002, p. 7). Finding common themes present in all the interviews gave research participants the opportunity to exhibit that a “person and his or her world are interrelated and interdependent” (Merriam, 2002, p. 93).

Research Method

I applied phenomenological qualitative research techniques to study first-generation college graduates who self identified as coming from working-class backgrounds in order to get a fuller understanding of the impact of their college experiences on their adult lives. I explored the topic by utilizing interviews and observations. This information could lead to more effective practice in the areas of recruiting, retention, and student counseling.

Interviews recorded the words and phrases that graduates used to describe their place in the cultural setting of a residential college campus.

I used a phenomenological research technique to uncover themes in the lived experiences of individual college graduates with regard to relationships, their experiences on campus, and their relationships with their families of origin. Phenomenology is by its design a snapshot of information provided during an interview and is tied to that place and time. Patterns across time cannot be addressed with this format. However, themes can be found across subjects and these can become a basis for future longitudinal studies (Morrissette, 1999).

Phenomenology-based research is a shared experience between researcher and participant that evolves over the course of the interview. To ensure validity, this shared experience must be held present in the text. To ensure rigor, techniques such as participant review and member checks verified the researcher’s interpretations of the interview results.

My personal reactions were acknowledged as part of the results. “For phenomenologic research to be credible, documentation of this process must exist from the selection of the topic to all phases of the collection and analysis of the data and creation of the essential description of the phenomenon” (Donalek, 2004, p. 516).

Phenomenology-based research is also systematic, in that it seeks patterns. These patterns are not pre-established in the form of a survey, but evolve over the course of the interviews. This is why the actual questions asked must be open-ended and not lead participants down paths presumed to exist by the researcher. “It is useful to use when the researcher has identified a phenomenon to understand, and has individuals who can provide a description of what they have experienced” (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004, p. 23).

Personal, individual interviews are one of the tools used in qualitative research. Life experience becomes the source of information for the researcher, rather than having the participant respond to lists of choices on a survey. In particular, “the phenomenological approach introduces the issue of perspective, which points to the mutable and relative character of truth” (Sadala & Adorno, 2002, p. 282). Phenomenology allows the participant to create the format for individual discovery and explanation. “The emphasis is more on what it means to be a human being and less on explaining and predicting human phenomena. Ontology—what it means to be human—takes precedence over epistemology, or concerns about reliability, validity, and universal theory” (Gilgun, 2005, p. 42).

Interview Questions

Specific interview questions were designed to meet the requirements of the research questions. The following list describes how the interview questions and possible follow-up

questions relate to the research questions and the rationale for choosing each interview question.

Research question 1. How do college graduates who were first-generation students from working-class backgrounds describe their college experiences in terms of interpersonal relationships, campus environments, and family relationships?

Research question 2. What meanings do first-generation college graduates from working-class backgrounds attribute to their college experiences?

Interview question 1. Describe what being a college graduate means to you. Follow-up: Could you tell be more about (specific detail in the response)? Could you expand on that? Tell me a little more about (detail in response)? Rationale: Overview encourages story-telling in descriptive format within the context of meaning. This question explores issues related to research questions 1 and 2.

Interview question 2. What part did your college years play in creating the person you are now? Follow-up: Who would you be if you had not gone to college? Could you expand on that? Rationale: Define self-identity and perception of the impact of college on that definition. This question explores issues related to research question 2.

Interview question 3. Describe some encounters with faculty and staff during your years at college. Follow-up: (A personal relationship or episode) seems to have meant a lot to you. Do you think it changed you in any way? If so, how? Rationale: Explore campus institutional structure as defined by professional relationships. This question explores issues related to research question 1.

Interview question 4. How did your family and childhood friends respond to your college years? Follow-up: Did their responses match your expectations? Rationale:

Explore family class/values structure as defined by personal relationships. This question explores issues related to research question 1.

Interview question 5. Tell me about the friends you made in college. Follow-up: Are you still in contact with any of them? Rationale: Explore campus environment as expressed in peer relationships. This explores issues related to research question 1.

Interview question 6. What surprised you most about your years in college? Follow-up: What tips would you give a first-generation student entering college today? What satisfied you most about your years in college? Rationale: Establish prominent moments of college experience and define participant assumptions/meaning and how participant's college experiences altered these assumptions/meanings. This question explores issues related to research questions 1 and 2.

Interview question 7. Is there anything else you would like to share about your college experience? Follow-up: Is there an important question I forgot to ask? Is there anything you would change if you were starting college today? Rationale: Opportunity for participant to express personal observations, values. This question explores issues related to research questions 1 and 2.

Participants

Midwest Christian College agreed to supply contact information for former students who met the criteria for the study. Midwest Christian College is a residential evangelical Christian college. It is a not-for-profit private institution offering undergraduate and graduate programs in an urban environment. The college offers a liberal arts program of studies with a career and personal growth orientation.

Midwest Christian College had a total enrollment of 2,165 students, with 1,930 undergraduates and 235 enrolled in graduate programs in fall term 2009. Within the total population, 34% of the students were male and 66% were female. There were 77% full-time students and 23% part-time. The student population was 80% white, 13% African American, 3% Hispanic, 1% American Indian or Alaska Native, 1% Asian/Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander. Total on-campus cost per year for an undergraduate student was \$32,260. The college competes in the NAIA athletic sports division and is accredited through the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.

Participants were identified through purposeful sampling, which is “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). I recruited first-generation, four-year degree, college graduates who graduated within the past five years and who now live in Northern Indiana or the Chicago area. The rationale for using recent graduates is the probable clarity of recent memory. The rationale for participants living in Northern Indiana is the geographic proximity to both the college and the researcher’s home. The college itself was chosen because it is a residential campus with a good academic reputation, including graduate programs.

Data Collection Procedures

I contacted alumni staff from Midwest Christian College who had contact with recent graduates who met the criteria for inclusion in this research of first-generation college graduates. The college provided names and contact information of 605 potential participants. The graduates were identified as probable first-generation students by the absence of an identified college attended by either parent. Midwest Christian College does

not keep a specific count of first-generation students as a statistical category. Initially 73 potential participants were contacted by letter or e-mail in order to achieve the goal of 12 interviewees. These letters and emails included a description of the study, its purpose, and a request for participation, including informed consent (see Appendix A). The letter or email (see Appendix B), offered them the opportunity to participate in the study. Individuals who were interested in participating in this study were asked to call or email me with their contact information. Individuals who agreed to participate were contacted by e-mail to arrange for interview dates and times.

Participants were sent information about the study before the interview (see Appendix A). Before interviews began I explained each point of the information about the research and asked each participant if he or she had any questions. Participants were given a document containing the same information they were previously sent, which was covered orally, and asked to read it and sign the document if he or she agreed to participate in this research study. They were urged in the letter to ask any questions they had before they signed the document (see Appendix B) and I again gave them that option during the interview. Participants also were to consent to a follow up interview in the event that I determined that such a need existed from the substance of the findings.

I initiated the interviews after a purposeful sample of nine participants agreed to be part of the study. The interviews consisted of a series of questions with follow-up questions as appropriate (see Appendix C). These nine became the basis for a snowball sampling procedure where the participants were asked to identify other graduates who had similar backgrounds and who met the criteria for inclusion in the research study.

“Snowball sampling is a strategy in which each successive participant or group is named by

a preceding group or individual” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001, p 401). From the nine original participants, I was referred to three more participants who met the criteria for the study. One of them was a graduate of Midwest Christian College. One had graduated from a liberal arts college in the southern part of the state and the third was a graduate of a for-profit institution. The eventual sample included twelve graduates (see Appendix D) and saturation was reached, whereupon redundancy began to occur. Saturation and redundancy refer to responses that begin to form recognizable similarities in form and substance. Saturation is often reached in a range of 8-12 interviews (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2002, 2009).

Ninety minutes were allotted for each interview. Questions were structured to minimize psychological risk and the participants were free to end the interviews at any point and withdraw from the study. The open-ended questions were designed to allow the participants to express their individual personal experiences as first-generation college graduates. Creswell (2003) explained that qualitative interviews “involve unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in number and are intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants” (p. 188).

The interviews were audio recorded with a digital recorder. I took written notes. Manual notes included two columns, one for descriptive notes and one for reflective notes. Participant demographic information was included in the notes (see Appendix D), in addition to the date, place, and time. Demographics included age at time of college entry (traditional or non-traditional student), self-identified working-class status, and self-identified first-generation status. Identities of the participants were coded (see Appendix E) on tapes and notes to maintain anonymity and all recordings and notes are kept in a locked

drawer in a room with key controlled access. All computer files are kept on a password controlled computer and any copies of these files will be kept with the recordings and notes in a locked area.

Data Analysis

Participant interviews were transcribed verbatim and I analyzed the information to code the material according to themes, patterns, ideas, and common insights. E-mails verifying the information recorded in the transcriptions were sent to participants to confirm the accuracy of the recordings. Field notes were transcribed to support chronological references and context for each interview.

Member checks and participant reviews (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001, p. 408) were the major forms of verification of the information shared in the interviews. These were done with follow-up questions pertaining to the subject's experience of the interview process, both at the time of the initial interview and with an email follow-up after the research narrative had been completed. I also compared their individual interpretations of the findings as themes emerged. Each participant received a copy of the finished draft of their interviews for review and comment. Further, themes that emerged during the initial nine interviews were checked against the experiences of participants in the later three interviews for validity.

Researcher Standpoint

It is important that the researcher in a phenomenological study allow information in the interview to come forward without leading the exchange toward a preconceived premise (Creswell, 2003). This is based on the concept that interviews will produce moments of revelation that will be useful in future research. "Qualitative research is an

emergent design in its negotiated outcomes. Meanings and interpretations are negotiated with human data sources because it is the subjects' realities that the researcher attempts to reconstruct." (Creswell, 2003, p.198)

Qualitative methodology is generally considered . . . to be the art and science of the postconceived notion. . . The researchers take a presuppositionless stance at the outset of the study to allow the more abstract, non-independent "moments" of concern to present themselves as they are in the whole phenomenon. (Schultz & Cobb-Stevens, 2004, p. 221)

My study carries with it my experience of being raised in a working-class family and being the first in my family to graduate from college. This reality brings with it an understanding of the differences between existence in a working-class world and a middle-class world and how difficult it is to exist in both. Sociology uses several terms to describe this placement, including *marginal*, *intercultural*, and *straddler* (Carter, 2006). In my case, this stress led to eventual estrangement from my family of origin and the establishment of familial relationships in other social contexts. I must also acknowledge an implied perspective as a professional in the field of higher education. Since these perspectives have the potential to create bias in interview settings, it was important for me to stay vigilant and use techniques such as participant review and member checks to filter perceptions of the stories heard in the interviews. When reviewing the themes discovered during the research, I compared them to my own experiences as a first-generation college graduate. My personal history met the criteria for three of the five Fluid Identity Themes present in the interviews. I worked closely with the dissertation committee to construct questions that were free of leading or suggestive phrases.

I am currently a first-generation college graduate with a master's degree in liberal studies, working toward a Ph.D. in higher education leadership. I worked at a small liberal arts university in an administrative position where I encountered students from various socioeconomic backgrounds. I am the oldest daughter from a family of six children and I am the only one who has earned a four-year college degree. In fact, the other three daughters did not finish high school. As I pursued my education, a few credits at a time as an adult, I was keenly aware of the higher education environments of which I was a marginal participant. This awareness led me to explore avenues to understand the circumstances as I viewed them. I was involved in a community project in Northeast Indiana which had a mission to move first-generation, underprivileged middle school students into college preparation high school tracks. I have an undergraduate degree in sociology. Qualitative research is a natural frame for my educational and professional perspectives.

Limitations

Identity involves a range of adjectives to describe an individual, and studies are typically conducted using a specific category of identification. Examples include race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, and age. This study sought information about first-generation, working-class college graduates. This broad category contained sub-groups of identities which were salient, but not addressed specifically. The sample was collected by self selection and the interviews relied on information from participants' memories, which may distort facts over time. The sample was being drawn from a limited geographic location. The college chosen for the study was a small Christian liberal arts environment, which may have influenced the participants in ways not found in a larger secular setting.

This was a qualitative study, based on the experiences of a limited number of respondents. Unlike quantitative studies, the findings are not meant to imply probability or duplication of results.

CHAPTER 4

The Stories

A majority of the participants for this study were graduates of Midwest Christian College, which provided a specific frame for their undergraduate experiences. This small urban campus is affiliated with a conservative Christian church organization, which applies strict behavior codes to the expectations held for students. Each participant responded in individual ways to these expectations, but these codes were reflected in their stories. The academic standards were high, however, and this environment of educational rigor was also a factor for these students.

As a result of snowball sampling, two of the twelve participants attended different schools. One of them graduated from a small town Christian college and one from an urban for-profit institution. These students met the general criteria of a first-generation working-class student who lived on campus and attained a four-year degree. Even as their stories reflected campus differences, the resulting themes stayed consistent.

Donna

Donna graduated from Midwest Christian College in 2007, with a major in American Sign Language. At the time of the interview she was 26 years old and managed her own small sign language interpreting business. She and her siblings were raised by her

divorced mother, who supported the family with various low wage jobs, including retail clerk. Her absent father worked at a number of hourly general labor positions. Donna struggled with finances as a college student and paid for her education with loans, scholarships, and employment. Recently married, Donna was excited about setting up a household and starting life as a professional woman and wife.

The interview with Donna took place in her home. Donna lived in a small urban apartment with her new husband, who had just returned from combat in Afghanistan. Expressing enthusiasm and confidence, she described her life as filled with transitions and challenges that she looked forward to meeting. “Just in terms of accomplishment, I wanted to go to college and get through it and do something my parents had never done, a hurdle for me to jump over.” Donna also referenced the pain she found in her decision to go to college. During the interview it became apparent that she felt burdened by the responsibility her mother had placed on her to graduate from college, without specifically encouraging her to expand on specific academic interests she had displayed. “I kind of felt forced, because my brothers dropped out before me and my parents didn’t have any college education and I felt like I was the last hope for the family.”

Donna felt set adrift to fend for herself as she chose basic general education courses at a local college her freshman year, while she kept alert to interesting courses that might lead to a career. While she knew had the responsibility to make her way alone, Donna displayed optimism and energy. All on her own, she discovered the field of American Sign Language and investigated colleges where she could build a career around it. “Because I didn’t know what I wanted to do at that time, and I took sign language as one of my foreign

language courses and I really picked up on it quickly and I really liked it and I thought the language was cool and I thought, ‘I wonder if I can get paid for that?’”

Donna had always doubted her skills as a student and she often felt like she was in over her head. Even though Donna had made it into college and knew she could succeed in class when she studied, she still believed she lacked the necessary ambition to graduate. She had believed that college work might be beyond her skills and work habits. Then she encountered university professors who saw promise in her and expressed it. With support from these professors, she was able use her personal attributes to prove to doubters that they were wrong. Some professors used negative incentives that gave her a boost in terms of guilt and obligation, by telling her that she had a responsibility to her first-generation successors. She took these reprimands in stride and pressed forward to earn a degree and later start a business. Not all the encouragement was negative, however, as Donna encountered caring professionals who supported her strong points as well. Donna had not anticipated this aspect of her college experience and she appreciated the support.

Donna continues to use her skills and confidence to run a sign language interpreting business from her home. She had graduated with the ability to perform the work of interpreting in American Sign Language and she was aware of the types of venues which required her expertise, but she was not prepared for the business end of working as a contractor. “I don’t know if this is relevant at all, but after I graduated, the thing that surprised me most was just how hard it is to become an adult.” Instead of seeking an employer, she studied the details of setting up a business—including taxes, bookkeeping, marketing, and fees to charge. She is still learning these business practices, but she believes she gets better at it with each contract.

Donna had vivid memories from childhood, where she watched her mother struggle as a single mother with three children, “Yah—I didn’t want to be stuck like my mom.” She knew that a college education would make life easier for her in general. Donna was very specific about the life she did not want for herself. “I saw my mom—she was so worn out—she was providing for us, but she was so tired.” This observation translated into general awareness of her need to become a different person than her mother or other members of her family. She realized that she needed to go to college in order to learn “how to grow up—how to be on your own and how to make the transition between high-school [student] and adult.”

Donna needed to feel comfortable with the few friends she had time to make while at college. Therefore, she described them as a mix of those who shared her major and those who came from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. She felt she had more in common with them and could understand their struggles with money and other life challenges. Donna also believed that these similarities made them understand her need to make a difference with her life. She believed that they too wanted different lives for themselves.

Donna could speak forcefully about the need for parents to let their children follow their own path even if it did not include college, but on the other hand she felt that parents should support a child’s passion and encourage education in that field. “To me it’s so important, nurturing kids in things that they excel at and things that they are passionate about, but not forcing them into it.” This complicated view of the inherent merits of education expressed itself in Donna’s sadness when she saw friends or family members decide to leave college before graduation.

Lily

Lily graduated from Midwest Christian College in 2006 and she was 26 at the time of our interview. Lily was married and held a job as a non-profit administrator, which she believed fit well with her degree in psychology. Her parents were divorced when Lily was young and her mother worked in clerical positions and hourly retail jobs until she was certified as a nurse assistant. Her mother planned to go back to nursing school once her children were grown. Lily's father worked as a freelance photographer. Lily's family was very supportive of her college education, but she had to pay for it herself. She managed this with a combination of loans, scholarships, and employment.

I met Lily at her small house on a quiet street in a small city in Northern Indiana. Originally from the Indianapolis area, she and her husband had settled in the community where they both went to college and formed lasting personal and community relationships. Lily had asserted her independence when she chose which college she would attend. Her family supported her by laying the groundwork to attend a college where her sister was already a student. However, Lily decided she wanted to find a place all her own, so she contacted a college she had heard about but never seen. Upon doing so, she not only found her alma mater but she discovered a mentor for her college years. She saw this behavior as an adventure and understood that she would continue to have the support of her family as she blazed her own trail. "I went there not knowing anyone and that to me was really exhilarating—to start something fresh and new."

Lily believed she was fully capable of doing academic work if she set her mind to it, even if she struggled with work habits or motivation. She did not listen to messages of inferiority, but set her own goals for success. She felt that if given the chance, she could

manage college level courses. “I feel like there were so many times in college where I really pushed through and I studied hard or put my all in a paper.” Lily was very proud of being a college graduate and felt confident in her future. She was employed in a job she loved, but she was also sure she could find something else if it ended. “I feel very satisfied with the fact that I was able to graduate college. It feels empowering. My options are wider and my capabilities are greater than they would be if I hadn’t finished that.”

Lily had been encouraged from a young age to get a college education. However, Lily also needed a strong outside influence in an academic setting to tell her that her efforts mattered and that these efforts would lead to success in college. These outside influences first appeared in high school, when an instructor spotted potential in her and signed her up for her first AP class. “I was invited by one of the [high school] English teachers to join a class that was actually an AP class for English and literature.” Although this surprised her at the time, she took the bait and did very well in this new classroom setting, where interaction with other students and the instructor consumed as much class time as lecture.

Lily went on to respond positively to challenging coursework in college, with the encouragement of engaged and engaging professors. She became aware that adults were investing in her and her future and she wanted to live up to their expectations, while at the same time realizing her own interest in and capacity to learn. “It was probably the first class where I recall I just put effort into it and really enjoyed putting effort into it and really reaped results.” One professor not only recognized her academic abilities, but understood some of the financial challenges facing her as she tried to stay in college. With some extra effort, this professor worked with her to find resources through financial aid. These were internal administrative mechanisms that Lily was not aware of on her own.

Lily also found this support from her self described mentor—the admissions counselor who had touted the school’s offerings and encouraged her to enroll sight unseen when she was an incoming freshman. This mentor continues to be in her life after graduation and Lily looks forward to a lifelong friendship with this woman. “She told me so much about the college and so I was able to stay in touch with her and the faculty. The staff really encouraged all the students and mentors who could just kind of be a listening ear and support system.”

Lily appreciated and admired her mother’s belief that education was a good in its own right, without regard to potential improvements in income. She was raised to understand the intrinsic value of citizenship, community participation, and enjoying your work. This surprised her as she got older, since her mother was divorced and struggled financially her whole life. “The idea of me going to college was never focused on the idea of making more money, which is surprising, because my family was very low income—especially after my parents divorced.” Lily was also proud of her mother, who was seeking a college degree after raising her children.

Meredith

Meredith was a 2008 graduate of Midwest Christian College, with a degree in psychology. She was 24 at the time of our interview and had just returned from working in Korea. Meredith had decided to go on to graduate school in the fall and was living with her parents until then. Unlike many of the participants, her parents were married and she was part of a large conventional family with close relationships among extended family members. Her father was a construction contractor and her mother was a homemaker.

Although she had a supportive family, they did not have resources to pay for her college education. Meredith paid for college with scholarships, loans, and employment.

I met with Meredith in the dining room of her grandparents' comfortable suburban home. She had recently returned from spending two years in Korea where she taught English, and she was now living with family until she finds work or returns to graduate school. Meredith had always had the support of her family as she planned to go to college. As the oldest of five children, she felt a responsibility to lead them by example as a college student. She sought new experiences offered through campus organizations and assumed leadership responsibilities.

Meredith also felt like she grew as a person during college and became more outgoing. She did not describe it in terms of popularity, but in her comfort level around people in general. "I guess it surprised me how easy it was to make friends." She specifically attributed those changes to her taking responsible positions where she interacted with students and even mentored them. She was surprised at the person she became as she looked beyond campus life and traveled to the Far East. "I never expected that I would study abroad or even consider living abroad in the future."

Meredith had a mentor on campus who was also the mother of her best friend in high school. Because of this earlier connection, the mentor knew more about her life in high school than many campus staff and faculty would otherwise understand. Even with this personal resource, Meredith also took advantage of more traditional academic mentoring relationships with professors. In addition, she utilized formal counseling services available to students.

Meredith remembered a particular advisor who helped her through several transitions during her undergraduate years. This professor gave her a psychological coping tool to use during times of stress when she was trying to make a major decision in her life. This tool was an *invisible ticket* that said “I don’t have to decide today; I just need to take a deep breath.” Meredith appreciated this gift after she graduated and used it in career and personal decisions.

Meredith had attended leadership development seminars while still in high school, where she began to look forward to college as a growth opportunity. While she expected to change and expand her horizons, she was amazed at the magnitude of those changes. She saw many options that were completely new to her and she realized she would change in fundamental ways if she pursued them. She took advantage of a multitude of resources on campus to participate in international programs, as well as explore her psychological and social strengths.

Meredith gave an indirect recognition of the relative value of higher education in its own right. She worked in Korea for two years after college and found that the specific nature of her degree did not matter in order to get the position. She just needed to prove that she had a bachelor’s degree in something. This qualitative bureaucratic metric verified the intrinsic importance of acquiring formal education beyond high school.

Londa

Londa was 29 years old when we met and she had graduated from Midwest Christian College in 2005 with a degree in education. She was now happily married and a fifth-grade teacher. She beamed at how much she loved the work. She saw it as not only a job, but a calling. Londa remembered her difficult childhood as an opportunity to learn

everything she could about life's struggles and how to succeed in spite of them. She believed it was her duty to pass these lessons on to children in similar circumstances. Her own parents were divorced and her mother struggled to raise her children on her income as a hair stylist. Londa's father had been in and out of her life and worked as a computer systems administrator. Londa had paid for her college degree with scholarships, loans, and employment.

Londa and I met at her workplace—a classroom in a small suburban school in Northern Indiana. She was working her usual long day in the place she had always been drawn to—school. Londa underscored her conversation with a self-acknowledged worldliness that she learned at a young age. She remembered her college years as a time when she added structure to her plan for a better life. She had approached college as an adventure to pursue, complete with dangers and backsliding.

I've always been one that likes adventure and going in head first and so I don't think my experience felt overly scary and I'm sure there were things that came up and I thought I was different or I wasn't prepared for, but I usually was one that would just go ahead and try it and if I failed, I'd try again.

Her confidence and curiosity were obvious components of her college adventure and she looked forward to translating tales of her experiences to her young, at-risk students. Londa was very self-aware and she recognized the needs of similar students in her elementary classrooms. She looked forward to mentoring and advising the students she encountered.

Londa was a determined student who knew she could get very good grades if she had the time to study. However, she was also a pragmatist who realized her need for

money to stay in school. Therefore, she would sometimes make a conscious decision to trade the best grade for the opportunity to work more hours.

There were times when I had to settle and say, you know you can get a C to pass the class, and you know you have a bill yet to pay, so you might not have as much time to study or work on that paper, but you're just going to have to put it off and go to work so you can have the money to continue school. I think some people didn't understand that.

She accepted the conflicts this decision caused and realized that many of her peers did not have such conflicts.

Londa talked very candidly about her mother's household, where college was not considered a likely goal for any of her children. Her mother was not openly opposed, just not convinced that it could be part of their future, so she did not take much interest in it. Londa felt grateful to her stepmother, who encouraged her from her teenage years to get a college education. She not only helped her plan for such a decision, but she acted by supporting Londa in her high school academic challenges. Her step-mom supported her in her search for the right college and then made herself available as a resource all through Londa's undergraduate experience. "She was very important to me. She and I were the ones that went away for Mother/Daughter weekends to visit colleges and stuff like that. To this day, I still call her if I'm sad."

Londa also referenced the effect that certain professors had on her as she matured and developed her own sense of her place in the world. "This professor seemed like the professor you could go to and say, 'Look I screwed up, but don't abandon me.'" She thought it was important that they were not judgmental and would listen to her ideas as they

formed. “I admired that about him. He was open-minded, yet still stood firm with his beliefs and he was really respectable.”

Londa was proud of the way she had proven that it was possible for someone from a welfare home to achieve a college degree. “It is the first college degree in my family, so it is a sense of accomplishment. I was proud of myself. I knew my family was proud of me and I had younger siblings looking up to me.” She made this story part of her teaching curricula for young children and believed she was an example for those who would follow.

Combined with this awareness was a sense of wonder at her growth, politically and intellectually. Londa acknowledged that her politics had become different from both her father and her mother, and this surprised her. She knew many adults who believed certain things because their families had always held those beliefs. It pleased her that she had changed and grown away from that concept.

Londa had a sense that her college education would sneak up on her in different ways at different times. She suddenly seemed to know things she did not know she knew, or she could handle situations in a professional manner that she was not aware she had learned. She was somewhat surprised that these changes had happened without her being consciously aware of them during her years at college.

Londa had many stories of how she had to fight to stay at college. Sometimes it was a struggle to fit in with other students and maintain relationships with family back home. She had been put on probation her senior year because she had helped a friend in need and yet she went back to graduate the following year. “So that was a big learning experience. I had to reapply and I think a lot of the people on the committee knew my heart and knew that it was a lesson learned, although I didn’t agree with their policy—I did sign to it.”

Londa had also endured personal attacks from family members for expressing her happiness at getting a college education. Instead of turning away from them, she used the experience to try to understand their vantage.

Londa had been the target of false rumors her freshman year and realized that her friends would doubt her throughout the remainder of her years on campus. She accepted their lack of loyalty as part of their relationships with her and experienced every future interaction in context of that reality. “It was very hurtful and I don’t think I ever recovered emotionally from him doing that. I never regained—or gained—the trust or interest of people who just weren’t interested in people that weren’t like them and how they grew up.” She also felt that professors were not sensitive to her financial struggles and her personal responsibility for payment of the education she received, so she spoke up and expressed these concerns. Londa kept her voice in the face of her personal and academic struggles.

Robyn

Robyn graduated from Midwest Christian College in 2006 with a degree in psychology. Her life then took a turn she had not anticipated when she entered college as an undergraduate: She became a graduate student in medical school. Robyn was 26 at the time of our interview and she had paid for her education with loans, scholarships, and employment. Her parents were divorced when she was young and her single mother struggled to survive and support her children on her income from miscellaneous hourly jobs. Robyn had erratic contact with her father who worked in computer support positions.

I met Robyn at a busy restaurant in a suburb of Chicago, where she had spent the morning taking qualifying exams for her next medical school clinical rotation. Robyn described herself as driven to learn about the world around her from an early age.

I pushed myself. Even as a child I would do weird things, like memorize all the state capitals and learn different languages. I pushed myself in cross country and track and going to college was like I never thought I would accomplish it.

Robyn had taken advanced coursework from middle school forward and she had gained a reputation with her young peers as being boring because of her interest in learning.

Robyn understood that college was a place to pursue educational activities at a high level. Today she sees herself as an example to younger cousins who have college aspirations. She described herself as competitive with herself in school work and athletics, where she had received scholarships for track. However she had felt a bit lost in her quest for higher education, in that she was not encouraged to stretch her horizons and test herself for admittance into more elite universities and colleges:

You put a little bit of a barrier on yourself when you're not going to shoot for the stars, instead you're going to shoot for this little spot right here. It's like I can get there, but I never even tried to go anywhere else. I've achieved all the goals I've set for myself, but I don't know who I am, considering where I came from.

Once Robyn decided to go to graduate school to study medicine, she took two years off to work and saved money to pay for it herself. She had been admitted into a pre-med program where she could take her undergraduate introductory courses all in one place. However, this option would have required her to take on more loans and she did not want that burden in her future. Instead, she completed the courses at her own pace at a variety of schools as she worked to earn the money to pay for them.

Robyn had an interesting story pertaining to a surprise outside person who changed her life her junior year at college. Until that time, Robyn had seen herself as self-sufficient

and able to set her own goals, without a great deal of support from family or friends. She had used her confidence, skills, and intelligence to set a course for her life from an early age. She was firmly on that course, expecting to earn a bachelor's degree in psychology and perhaps follow through with a master's to pursue something in a helping field—maybe social work. She liked knowing that she would be the first in her family to get a college degree and she looked forward to being an example to younger cousins as they planned their own futures. Then, a caring adult (an aunt by marriage in California), stepped in and helped her steer an entirely new course into medical school. “At that time, I wasn't even thinking about three or four more years of college. It was just like doctors and lawyers and all that were in a different realm of what I would be able to attain.” However, Robyn had laid the groundwork herself—without knowing it—and her aunt provided her with insight, tools, and suggestions for action to get into medical school.

Robyn was conscious of her childhood bringing her unpleasant experiences that her middle-class college peers had not had and probably would not comprehend. However, she now sees those same experiences as useful resources for understanding the range of attitudes and problems her patients face.

I feel like all these different experiences kind of shaped me, who I am as a person, including relationships and being open to different kinds of people. They challenged me to think about the world from different religious perspectives and the rest of the world's political perspective.

Robyn described herself as a work in process toward becoming someone she does not know yet. Even her college friends were temporary and understood her only as the person she was to them at that time.

Robyn has explored many religious traditions and when she got married last year, it was a combination Catholic/Hindu event. Robyn's father had a dream for her to find a nice conservative Christian boy at a conservative Christian college and become an educated version of her younger self. Instead, Robyn followed her instinct to explore the world and determined her own conclusions about who she would become. Although this created stress between her and her father, she was happy with her choices and looked forward to the changes yet to come.

Robyn had been ready to challenge traditional norms from a young age and she was able to express that inclination more fully during her years in college. She relished the ability to openly discuss ideas and form new opinions, and she carried that attitude into her adult life and continuing education. She placed particular value on the intrinsic value of learning when she described becoming an educated person:

College kind of pushed me to learn all these different things, especially different philosophies, different people's points of view and explore scientific perspective and religious perspective and counselor perspective as part of psychology. You know that things are always probably a mixture of everything.

Robyn had a sense that in some ways her peers felt like she did not belong because of her past experiences before going to college and yet she made the choice to make friends in spite of those perceived feelings. Robyn viewed these friendships as transient in her quest toward establishing an adult identity:

Of course I made really good friends in cross country and track, and I had a lot of fun, but it was . . . like they really didn't understand where I came from. You know,

their experiences were more wholesome than my experiences. They didn't really relate as well.

After her stepfather rejected her and her sister by kicking them out of his home, Robyn was welcomed by her grandmother whom she lived with again after graduation from college. Robyn told stories of hardship and humiliation from her youth. One such story still lived vividly in her memory. Her mother did not have money to buy extra school supplies, so Robyn improvised when a middle school instructor told students they could use a 3x5 index card during a test. She had cut out 3x5 paper shapes and written as many quick facts as she could fit in the space provided. On the day of the exam, the teacher told her she had not followed instructions (it was not a card) and humiliated her by taking the small paper from her and scolding her in front of the class. Later when she was in an accelerated English course in high school, she disagreed with an instructor who would not let her speak up in class. It was an accelerated course which encouraged group discussion and Robyn felt singled out and confused by his dismissal of her. Today Robyn sees these incidents as examples of social injustice and how hard it is for low income parents to support their children's school needs.

Michael

Michael earned a degree in education from Midwest Christian College in 2007. At the time of our interview he was 26 years old and worked as a pharmacy technician while searching for a teaching position in his community. Michael's parents were divorced when he was a child and he spent his teen years in his father's household. His father was a construction contractor and his mother worked at miscellaneous hourly jobs. Michael had paid for his education with loans, scholarships, and employment. In fact, he had held his

pharmacy position for a number of years and wondered if he should seek a career through graduate education toward becoming a pharmacist.

I met Michael at his home on a quiet street in a small Northern Indiana city. He was very proud of the well-kept older home that he and his wife had been left by her grandmother. They were also the happy parents of a two-year-old daughter, and he was pleased to have a fine home in which to raise her. Michael was confident that his daughter would benefit from having them as parents.

Michael was certain going into college that he could do the work. He had been successful in his K-12 experience and assumed he would continue to be so. He also took risks and changed majors as his circumstances and future plans changed. He realized that such decisions would cause him to take longer to graduate, but he was willing to pay the price for the right outcome.

Michael had been struggling to find employment in the teaching field since graduation. He took the certification exam twice before passing, but persisted and passed on his third attempt. He was interviewing for positions, hoping to get a job in his preferred subject and location. "Each interview is a learning experience. I have to look at it that my verbiage and my language get so much better with each interview." He viewed the process as a learning experience and was optimistic about the outcome.

Michael had encountered setbacks in his search for employment that he viewed as unfair and political. He knew people who had been placed in positions because they were related to an administrator or because their families were well known in the teaching community or they had just grown up in the area. One of his most painful disappointments came when a fellow church member had been given a church school position over him.

“So, that was an interesting experience and I’m just going to keep trying—that’s all I can do.” He displayed anger and confusion, but decided to use the experience as a teaching tool for the future.

Evan

At age 33 when I conducted the interview, Evan had graduated from Midwest Christian College with a degree in ministry in 2006. He had experienced a traditional college curriculum and housing environment, although he was two years older than his student peers on campus. Evan was successful in corporate sales and did not plan to take a ministerial position with a church congregation. However, he believed his degree was useful in many facets of his life. His parents were divorced when he was young and he remembered years of financial struggles when he grew up. Evan needed loans, scholarships, and a job in order to pay for his college education.

I spoke with Evan on the porch of his small home in a working-class neighborhood. I met his wife of five months, who was inside during the interview. Evan described physical hardships on campus as he made his way back into an undergraduate experience after spending a few years in the labor force after high school. He expressed frustration at encountering many bureaucratic obstacles, including financial aid, and his fight to be accepted in the ranks of traditional students. He found support from fellow students and gained confidence as he became accepted as part of their peer group. “I was more motivated, obviously, but it most definitely wasn’t simple. College was not an easy thing for me to go through, so a lot of those people helped me in those situations.” He was also rewarded with campus appointments as administrator and director of chapel activities.

Even though Evan felt alienated at times from the campus he grew to love, he was also reinforced in his professional life when faculty called on him to give presentations to students in business and marketing courses. “They asked me to come out and speak in a sales class. I told them it’s a process for me and it’s going to be a process for you.” This was more proof for him that he had made the right decision in returning to college for a bachelor’s degree.

Evan saw his college experience as a spiritual as well as an academic journey. Therefore, conversations with his mentors were steeped in theological and philosophical viewpoints that he felt helped him become the man he hoped to be. He was welcomed into the campus community by mentors who found him positions of responsibility within the worship programs sponsored by the college. “I think that having the Spiritual Director see something in me . . . that was a massive impact on me and I think that forced me into really exploring myself.”

Evan perceived many of the changes he went through, and continues to face, as struggles to be fought and won. He had failed the first time he tried college and then succeeded in a sales career that paid him very well. However, he believed that he had left something undone, so he quit his job and applied to become a college freshman at age 24. In spite of resistance from family, friends, and some staff at the college, Evan pursued his goal and eventually acclimated well to the campus environment. “So there was a maturation process going on pointing to that 2001-2002 year. You know, I’m 33 now and I still think I have a lot of growing up to do.” He knew he wanted to change who he was and become a new version of himself.

Evan found employment outside his degree major, but overall he believed that he was “better equipped . . . to handle adulthood” because he graduated from college. He described friends and family members who could not understand spending all that time in classrooms without a specific career goal. Evan just listened and understood the experience as something of value in itself:

I came into it later, but you have to have a college degree—it doesn’t matter what in. It means more to me, not just the pride factor, but also the factor of I have a stronger realization of what my faith is and I feel better equipped and more mature to handle adulthood.

Evan embodied a difficult combination of love and resentment toward his alma mater. He had specific incidents which caused him pain, including the inability to participate in his graduation ceremony. The college had a policy that did not allow adult baccalaureate students to participate in the traditional ceremony. They were routed to a special ceremony for non-traditional students. Since Evan had lived on campus as a full-time student and took traditional courses toward a traditional degree, he felt left out and alienated from friends he had made as a student. “It was very anti-climatic for me. There was no celebration for me . . . There was no last bonding moment. It’s like burning bridges.” However, he still speaks highly of his experience there and embraces the education he received.

Evan also carried scars from his childhood, when he went to a private Catholic school and felt punished for his differences. He was diagnosed as ADHD and he gripped his pencil in an unusual fashion. For both, he suffered extreme remedies that linger in his mind as torture. “There’s a lot of humiliating things. They taught me to hate my life. I

wasn't comfortable at school." He remembered these incidents as motivation for change as he sought to improve himself over the years.

Evan also had a particularly painful memory of a false accusation from the president of the college. He remembers it as completely unfounded and he could not imagine why someone would falsely accuse him. He also felt singled out by the financial aid office on campus. Evan felt that he should have received scholarship opportunities since he was identified as a minority (Hispanic) and he had a low income. Instead, he felt saddled with loans that will take him many years to repay.

Sandy

At the time of our interview, Sandy was 26 years old and had graduated from Midwest Christian College in 2007. She was a psychology major in her undergraduate years and continues as a counseling major in her graduate studies. Sandy's parents were divorced when she was young and she remembered her mother struggling with many financial hardships. Her mother was a beautician and her father was a mechanic. Sandy paid for college herself, with scholarships, loans, and part-time jobs.

Sandy met with me in a student common area on the campus of a regional state university. Her conversation was filled with phrases that confirmed her innate confidence and striving personality. "I think I had always been very ambitious. . . . I've always been the one—give me something harder, give me something harder. . . . I didn't care about the games and the video stuff, I wanted the book stuff." As a child, her mother's nickname for her was Little Valedictorian and she thought of this as an honor and a burden. It gave her certain standards to maintain, as well as fear of falling short of her mother's expectations.

Sandy was willing to approach new experiences with great confidence. As an undergraduate Sandy traveled alone to Spain without speaking the language. Her first year out of high school she had gone to Chicago to study interior design and she described herself as being Type A. While all these traits could also describe a person who is reckless and naïve, Sandy seemed to be neither. She was aware of the risk involved and confirmed that beneath the confident action, she experienced a healthy level of fear. “I think behind my big façade that I just love all these challenges, I think I was just scared.”

Sandy had always been counselor to family members when they had personal problems and she had assumed, as a psychology major, that she would go into family or marital therapy. Then after interacting with caring and knowledgeable professors in her field during her undergraduate years, she changed direction and went into school counseling. “I would say that at the beginning of my senior year, I had wonderful professors who just saw a lot of potential in me and pushed me to really consider graduate school. So we started talking about potential interests.” She understood and appreciated the fact that these interested professors could show her the steps necessary to get into graduate school, which was very different from the emotional support her mother provided. In keeping with her natural tendency to dive into things, Sandy took that next step into graduate school the same summer that she graduated from college and got married. She and her husband shared the adventure of starting a life together as graduate students.

Sandy also found mentors on campus who inspired her to become involved in local community needs, and this continues to be an important part of her life. She appreciated the investments her campus mentors made in her future. She realized that such acts were not

required of her professors and she began to think of them as extended family as she grew into adulthood:

One professor was very down to earth. She was there with me in the moment and to have that investment from a professor was huge. Another one was a phenomenally intelligent woman and you just want to sit down and absorb everything she has to say.

Sandy was expansive in her descriptions of the metamorphosis she had anticipated during her college years. “I wanted to be a new person. I didn’t want my high school persona to follow me.” She had dismissed state university options because she believed they were structured to be continuations of her high school experiences. She described friends who had chosen a state school and had spent much of their time in social entanglements and parties. Sandy had expectations of growth and change as she continued her formal education after high school. “I saw the opportunity to really break out and go somewhere different. I was ready for it. I wanted the challenge. I had to make some decisions and I needed to grow up and become an adult.” She was happy in her college choice, because it met the needs she expressed.

Sandy incorporated a love of the work one learned to do with joy in being able to do it. She believed that learning had an inherent ability to enrich later experiences. She wanted to build a life that included these elements:

I think college gave me the blank canvas to build who I needed to be—without overdoing it. It was just allowing experiences and learning and knowledge and all kinds of things to guide me to who I am really supposed to be. And I loved it. I loved all the experiences.

Collin

Collin was 27 years old at the time of our interview. He had graduated from Midwest Christian College in 2005, with a double major in history and philosophy. He was married and worked as a political consultant. He had parents who are still married and had always supported his goal of a college education, although they were not able to cover its costs. His father had a small engine repair business and his mother was a homemaker who held part time jobs at a local elementary school. From a young age, he knew he would need scholarships, loans, and employment to pay for college.

I interviewed Collin in a conference room at his workplace. The firm supports political candidates with various marketing tools, including direct mail. Collin spoke enthusiastically about how he began his career in politics. He also described how he had shown personal initiative at every step of his education. He liked the act of investigating options and choosing what he believed was best for him. While a high school student, he had planned to study law. He then investigated the field by shadowing an attorney and decided it did not suit his dynamic personality. “I didn’t want to spend another three years, four years or whatever and you end up doing divorce law or whatever, just filing papers all the time. Once I got into their office and saw what they did, it really wasn’t that fun or exciting.” He continued to enjoy growing and becoming a new person as he encountered new ideas, people, and experiences.

When looking at colleges, Collin decided to visit the campus on his own—not trusting the packaged presentation of scheduled recruiting days. He even sought out a particular professor to meet with and discuss opportunities at the college. After discussing

his plans with the professor, Collin decided to study history and philosophy instead of political science as the basis for his career in politics:

I refused to go to the regular kind of prospect student days. I always figured that they changed the way they did things and spruced the place up and I didn't want to go stay in the dorms with groups of people I had never met.

When offered the opportunity to work on a political campaign during his undergraduate years, Collin turned the work experience into a qualified internship and returned to campus to complete an independent study credit. "What I did—and what a lot of people in politics will do—is to take a semester off to work full of one of those big, even year elections and go back and finish up in odd years. I created a real normal consulting job that I got a couple of credit hours for that they considered an internship." He expected to be challenged with college level work and was pleased to discover that the challenges were simply new hurdles to overcome.

While a student in public schools, Collin had been told by various teachers that his work was not up to his potential and suggested that he was not college material. He was proud to have proven them wrong. In fact, he was prepared for college to be tougher than it was. "If anything, I was a little surprised at how easy college was. . . . They scare you about college and then you go college and you realize, this is not so bad."

Collin had always tried to meet people's expectations for him. He was crushed in grade school when teachers told him he had let them down and he worked hard in college to keep from disappointing people. Collin stated that he hates it "when people tell me, or make it apparent, that I've disappointed them." He had a strong sense of his academic and personal strengths from a young age and would set out to prove such feelings wrong. He

avoided disappointing staff and faculty on campus because of a strong set of friends who surrounded him. This goal was sometimes difficult to meet as he continued to grow and make independent decisions about his future. He used an example of how he once failed a course he was not attending and the instructor felt very angry that he would allow this to happen. He worked to resolve the issue and the group rallied to keep him on course during the rest of his undergraduate years. “That was instrumental in kicking me back to not just be a better student, but to take into account the relationship side of it.”

Collin gained a deep appreciation for learning as a lifetime personal endeavor while he was a college student. He enjoyed the dialogue components of seminar settings and the fact that success was not always measured quantitatively, but could be expressed in narrative. His love for books began before he entered college and is still strong today. “I have a massive document of books that I want to read. When I run out of one, I look through the list. I walk through Barnes and Noble and I type out on my phone what I want to buy next time.” However, he believed deeply that it was the environment on campus and his relationships with professors that had the most profound impact on what he actually learned in college. “There’s no way, even with independent learning, that I would be as knowledgeable as I am now, without the years spent in college.”

Collin had experiences with mentors during his undergraduate years in both his professional life and his academic community. He was offered paid employment by a mentor during his freshman year, and he put together a plan of work and education to achieve his undergraduate degree while gaining valuable experience in his career field. Collin felt very fortunate to have attended a small college with high quality faculty who could help guide him personally in his academic pursuits:

I've probably learned more from my relationships with my instructors than all of the extracurricular, even discussions or going to colloquiums at Notre Dame or anything like that. . . . I think they put me more where I am today than just going and doing the four-year degree.

From a young age, Collin was aware that his parents expected him to go to college and that many of his relatives, especially on his mother's side, were not planning to pursue education after high school. In fact, some members of his family were hostile to the idea of him becoming one of them.

One of my uncles is absolutely against people going to college. Most of this is for religious reasons or just ignorance. . . . We had constant arguments about how somehow they were going to tell me that Jesus never lived or something.

Collin was more accepted by his friends at school, although most of them were opting for local state university options, which he dismissed as a continuation of high school. Collin found refuge from parochialism in the private college environment, where he studied history and philosophy with professors he respected. However, certain of the restrictions placed on him by the conservative religious atmosphere were at times stifling to his sense of expanding personal horizons. He believed that his circle of friends kept him at the college at a time when he was ready to move on to more permissive atmospheres. In the end, he felt that his decision to stay and graduate helped him become the new person he was meant to be. He has never completely fit in with his family, his work atmosphere, or the strictures of a Christian college, but he had adapted to each in his own way while becoming confident in his own beliefs and values.

Collin spoke eloquently about his understanding of the value of his education at a small private liberal arts college. He realized that his ongoing curiosity about life and his place in the world could be given structure and meaning through the exercise of intellectual tools he had gained in classrooms and private discussions with professors. “I think differently. I read differently. I spend more time doing those things than most of my friends because of a couple of professors, especially two history professors. I still keep in contact with both of them.” He relished this personal awareness as he grappled with career and life choices in his future.

Collin planned to leave his current job and move with his wife to Canada in the near future. Although he had no job in place, he was confident he would find a position to match both his broad educational background and his specific work experience. “I’m willing to find a completely different job at a completely different market and I’m sure that all the stuff we’ve talked about—the actual knowledge and intelligence and the way you think—is going to translate through.” The idea of not knowing was exciting for him and he believed that such dramatic transitions were a natural part of his growth and development as a person. He was grateful for his undergraduate liberal arts education and the valuable tools it gave him to deal with the world as he moves forward.

Brandon

Brandon was 25 years old at the time of our interview. Unlike the other participants, his college experience had been as a student at a for-profit institution that offered an accelerated program towards a bachelor’s degree. He graduated in 2008 with a degree in business administration. He was married when I spoke with him, and he was working the sales floor of a local discount store chain. Brandon’s parents were married and

both held low wage jobs at various factories. While they encouraged him to get a college education, they were not able to help pay for it. Brandon relied on loans and employment to find money for school.

I met with Brandon in a quiet area of a public library. His was one of the three follow-up interviews I completed after developing themes in the initial nine conversations. Brandon's story was different from the others, in that the college he attended was a for-profit institution and he participated in an accelerated bachelor's degree program. He expressed anger about his experience, in that he believed his degree is not respected by potential employers. Instead of giving up, however, he was enrolled at a community college and hoped to have a nursing degree in two years.

Brandon was very self-aware and he had been determined to go to college at a young age, in spite of the odds against it. While he was disappointed in the apparent value of his degree in the marketplace, he still carried a strong sense of pride in his ability to persevere in the classroom and achieve a degree.

I still put in the work. I still passed my classes and I still went through it. I still have a degree and I still graduated and that's something. I've accomplished something that only two out of six in my household did.

Brandon had experienced conditions in his small hometown as something he needed to get away from. Unlike many of his friends, he envisioned a different life for himself than his parents had and he believed he had the intelligence and fortitude to go out and find that life:

Where I came from, not a lot of people left town to go on and do better things.

Aside from me, in my group, me and my friend Cody were the only ones who left

town for college that I can think of. There were a lot of narrow-minded ways, except that I didn't agree with it, so I knew I always wanted to get out, because I knew that what I wanted wasn't there. I couldn't get what I wanted there. You could only grow so much.

Brandon was very conscious of the fact that in his case, being from a small town, he was on his own in trying to find a way out through education. His experience in high school taught him that teachers were not there to help and his family did not have experience in education to help. "Teachers tell you what you need to do, I suppose, but they're not going to quite push you. You don't have your immediate family there to, I don't know, rear you." He knew it was up to him to sink or swim.

Fortunately, Brandon had found comfort and inspiration in the context of his marriage. He believed he owed it to his two young children to find better employment to provide them with a better home and future. He also had the support of his wife, who had encouraged his new dream of completing another degree to become a nurse:

I don't know at what point my wife and I decided for me to go back to college. I can't work as a sales associate at Walmart forever, because we have aspirations and we're just living in a two-bedroom apartment and we do want a house and all that. I grew up my entire life to see my parents get by. Nobody wants to just get by.

Brandon was pleasantly surprised when he encountered caring, interested professors at college who were genuinely interested in his education and his future. He had not experienced such teachers in the public school system and he was open to these new interactions. He was especially grateful to an older woman who taught him not only

subject matter but also work habits and attitudes that he would carry into his personal life and the workplace:

There's a teacher I really did care about, she's actually a department head, and the one thing she always taught me was basically to stop making excuses. Regardless if there is a reason that something didn't get done, you should just own up to your shortcomings. Lacking a better term—it is what it is—either you did or you didn't. There's no justifying.

Brandon expressed a very profound understanding of the intrinsic value of education and how that value has an impact on his daily life. He treasured the lessons he learned on how to think about various issues and discuss them with people he encounters. He also reflected on the impact his education had on his ability to be a better citizen and member of an introspective community. He felt like he had increased his value as a functioning member of society:

[As a college graduate] I'm better as a person. I mean I've bettered myself as a human. I've increased my intelligence and my knowledge of general studies of everything. I'm smarter now and with that I can contribute more to society.

Brandon recognized that his pursuit of education made him different from his peers as he was growing up. He wondered at the levels of reckless behavior and self destruction present in the lives of young men from his home town. He believed that he was on a better path, even though he had yet to find employment related to his degree:

I've seen, by the time I graduated from high school, two or three close friends who died. One committed suicide. One didn't do anything with his life. All he did was drink a lot and one night he was in the passenger seat with someone else that was

drinking and he was ejected from the car and it killed him. Another guy got thrown from the back of a pick-up.

Brandon's anger was specific and two-fold. As a high school student who hoped to find a place in college to escape the future his small town environment held, he was disappointed and angry about the options made available to him. The only recruiters who seemed interested in him and his dreams were for-profit institutions who did not live up to the promise he felt they made. Once inside that college environment, he was angry and amazed that the curriculum and career opportunities he had assumed existed were not actually in place for him. By the time he realized the predicament he was in, he was too committed by contract to not complete the course. He felt betrayed and sad that he had been led into this no-win situation and he tried to make the best of the situation.

Brandon believed that the non-profit institution deliberately set out to recruit uninformed high school students in rural areas who would be trapped in educational programs that did not lead to meaningful careers:

It's like they targeted these kids an hour away in these little farm towns. They go to these small towns and they really sell you on it and then you realize, once you move there, that everybody lets you know what kind of bad decision it is to go there.

Through his own observations and conversations with fellow students, he realized that few students from the local city in which the college was located attended the college. Apparently, the school had a bad reputation that he was unaware of until he had signed up and paid for the program and his housing. He was angry and sad when he learned this, but he felt helpless to do anything about it. Brandon was also angry with the high school he attended. He did not believe the teachers took much personal interest in the students'

futures and he was disappointed that he remembered only one college that recruited at his high school and that was the for-profit institution that he attended. His parents knew nothing about finding a college, so he believed he took the only option available.

Brandon expressed his anger openly and felt passionately that people should be warned about what he saw as the pitfalls of signing a binding contract with this college. He had become an advocate for choosing less expensive alternatives that provide portable college credits:

If I knew anyone who was going to go to that college, I'd tell them not to go. I wouldn't recommend that college to anyone. I don't think it's worth what they pay. I think you can get a better college experience elsewhere.

He described his degree as just a piece of paper that did not reflect the amount of effort he put into it. He compared it to coming in fourth place at a race. However, he knows he ran the race and he knows he wants to keep running, so he also hoped that someday the effort will be recognized and rewarded.

Kimberly

Kimberly graduated from Midwest Christian College in 2006 and was 26 years old when we spoke. She had majored in business and marketing and was working in human resources at a local hospital. Kimberly was married and happy with her career, although she hoped to find another employer within a few years. Kimberly's parents were married and had always assumed that she would go on to college. However, they were not able to pay for it. Her father worked as a sales representative and her mother was in customer service. Kimberly had worked to earn good scholarships and held various jobs since high

school. Although she was not happy about it, Kimberly found she also needed student loans to cover all her expenses.

I met Kimberly at a coffee shop near the hospital where she worked in human resources. She described her life as happy since she graduated from college and she looked forward to building a career in her chosen field. Kimberly had always known she would be going to college after high school. Her parents had discussed it with her and they had planned together for how they would share in paying for it. Kimberly's decision making involved college choice and eventual major. She had applied to several schools and had vacillated among them, even into the beginning of fall term her freshman year. "I had always dreamed of going to college and it never crossed my mind not to go, but actually getting that degree really gave me a sense of accomplishment."

Once she decided to stay at her original campus, she concentrated on discovering her career goal. "I really started putting my whole heart into [Midwest Christian College]. That's when I actually decided to choose a major that I was comfortable with." She consciously made adjustments in her daily activities to feel more embedded in the campus culture and began to define herself as a member of the student body. She saw these steps as her personal responsibility and remembers feeling focused and content as her aspirations bloomed around her.

Kimberly was proud of the fact that she had held a job since age 14 and that she continued to have good work habits and initiative. She believed these qualities also described her efforts as a student as she set out to attain the first college degree in her family:

The agreement [with my parents] was that I needed to have scholarship money and I needed to keep that scholarship and I needed to work. I kept my grades up and I worked very hard to do that so that I could maintain my end of the bargain, and they did help me pay for college.

Kimberly embraced the new freedoms she found at college and her new ability to organize her own life and time. At first it felt overwhelming to her, but she adapted rapidly and well:

I probably didn't make the wisest decisions all the time, as far as what to do with my time, but I did learn that you have to prioritize whether you want to go out or whether you want to get an A.

When asked if her parents had been aware of the processes of entering college, Kimberly laughed and said that she and her parents had struggled through the journey and accomplished the goal by the seat of their pants. Kimberly had taken full responsibility for finding a college and completing the processes necessary to get in.

Once she arrived on campus, she assumed she would continue to make her way through her four years to graduation on her own. Kimberly was pleasantly surprised to find a professor who became her advisor who took a personal interest in her success. In addition to the technical support of negotiating academic and employment systems, this woman gave her personal encouragement to set goals and achieve them:

I had a professor that was just phenomenal and she focused on the human resources side. Learning from her and her experiences and just her passion for the human resources field really helped me learn that my personality would be very well suited to that type of work.

Kimberly believed that she learned skills in college that helped her live a more reflective life than she might have done on her own. She learned to challenge the why of events in her life as well as the how of them. She felt like she had gotten permission to challenge the beliefs assumed for her by her family:

I was raised in a Christian home and I was raised to never question and that sort of thing. But to actually be able to sit down and say, well this is why I believe this and why I believe that and I was never able to do that. It was really helpful to have someone guide us in that direction.

Marlo

Marlo graduated from a small Christian college in the southern part of Indiana in 2008. At age 26 during our interview, she was enrolled as a graduate student. Both her undergraduate and graduate majors were psychology. Her parents were married and they had always supported her in her college goals. Marlo's father was a professional photographer and her mother worked as a clerk in a local store. Because they were not able to pay for her education, it was up to Marlo to find scholarships, loans, and part time work to cover the expense.

I met with Marlo in her small house on a quiet street near the university she attended as a graduate student. She was proud of the ongoing work she had done to turn the space into a home that reflected her interests and experiences. Marlo had spent her childhood and high school years in gifted programs and accelerated courses. She had confidence in her abilities as a student and never doubted that she was college material. Her parents supported her goals, although they were unable to provide financial support, so Marlo sought scholarships, which she won, and eventually took on student loans to

complete her undergraduate degree. It was totally up to her to select a college and she confidently decided on one the moment she arrived on campus. “As soon as I got on campus, I was just like, this is where I’m supposed to be. There’s no doubt in my mind that this is the school that I’m supposed to attend.”

Marlo had many stories of support, encouragement, and planning with various professors during her college years. “Primarily I had professors who were interested in me. I think that was very formative. This is something that the first-generation part plays into because my parents didn’t know.” She saw professors as resources for information in negotiating the path to graduate school, as well as emotional anchors for affirming her merit as a scholar. She was consciously aware that she was on her own in these matters. Marlo was grateful that she did not need to seek out these mentors, but they came to her when they noticed her work or her potential.

Marlo anticipated changing during her college years, just as she had grown and changed in her K-12 years. However she was surprised at the depth of the changes she experienced in not only her knowledge, but her attitudes and expectations:

I was very much aware of how my mind was shaping and who I am and what I think is good or true or right was due to the fact that I was raised in Indiana and the United States and the Western Hemisphere.

She could not have predicted such radical transformations during high school, although even then she was an excellent student looking forward to growth at college. Part of this new awareness was her experience abroad encountering different cultures, but a large part was her change in perspectives of who she was in the larger context of life and its

expectations. These changes included changing her career focus and her desire to become part of new cultural environments.

Marlo relished the fact that in college she was able to encounter ideas and perspectives unlike those she grew up with. While she had always been bright and a good student, she had not found opportunities to express her own ideas and observations about the world until she participated in seminar environments that encouraged abstract intellectual arguments. She liked knowing that her campus had exposed her to people and ideas that were quite different from those she had encountered before entering college. She enjoyed such interactions, both in the classroom and in her personal relationships:

It was also formative in my personal, spiritual, and intellectual development as far as exposing myself to new ideas and thinking more about. . . very much just opening my world. I love academia for academia and I want to get close to the truth.

Context of Stories

This research was a qualitative exploration of the lives of successful first-generation college students. All of them had achieved their goal of a college degree in spite of great odds against them. They were expressly aware of those odds as they beat systems of complex bureaucracies, including the intricacies of financial aid, housing, and academic advising. Before approaching these systems, they needed to learn new languages, system codes, and geography. These graduates also struggled with typical college social networks and they understood the differences in their upbringing from the dominant middle-class culture on campus. Most of them believed that they would not have been as successful without the support of informed, caring adults outside their immediate families. They each

had a sense of approaching college on their own, in spite of emotional support from family members.

The title of this study was changed due to the nature of the findings. Originally, the title was to be “Can College Graduates from the Working-class Ever Go Home Again?” Instead, I called it “I Don’t Know Who I Am, Considering Where I Came From.” This quote was from Robyn, who exemplified an attitude carried by most of the college graduates I spoke to. They were comfortable with the fluid nature of their identities, which had changed during college and continue to change as they enter careers. The five themes they expressed supported this ability to transform themselves over time. When I began the study, I thought I might find college graduates who were alienated from their families of origin and had lost contact with the communities in which they were raised. Instead I found confident adults who may have different lives and experiences than family and friends, but these differences did not have a large impact on the way they went about living their lives.

As a researcher, I approached the retention of first-generation students as a social issue. In my own experience, I had encountered first-generation adults who related stories of conflict with their families of origin and high school peers. As I conducted the literature review, I discovered journal articles, books, and other resources supporting this experience. However, by choosing a phenomenological method to conduct the study, I could not know what themes would actually surface.

It is important to note my own status as a first-generation college graduate, although my experience was not as a traditional residential student earning an undergraduate degree. As a high school student, I shared their lack of information and experience about what it

meant to go to college. I have long wondered if that were still the case for first-generation students or if systems had changed to supply basic information to students during their formative years. This experience gave me a filter with which to listen for patterns in the interviews. Therefore, my findings may be different from those observed by other researchers.

After listening to the nine participants' stories, I went through the transcripts and articulated five themes that produced patterns of experience and personality traits. Not all participants expressed all five themes, but the majority fit the models presented most of the time (see Appendix F). As reflected in the title of the study, participants were able to gain and maintain fluid identities through their college years by having access to these themes.

Fluid Identity Themes:

1. Agency. Participants were bright, confident risk-takers.
2. Advocates. Participants encountered caring adults who believed in and encouraged them.
3. Mutability. Participants reported a need to break away from the past and create a new self.
4. Reward. Participants found intrinsic value in a college education.
5. Fortitude. Participants were motivated by rejection or disappointment.

A consistent underlying theme was the energy and fortitude each participant put into his or her goal of completing a college degree. It was a can-do attitude that they had expressed from a young age. This trait produced a sense of agency and ownership of their decisions. Another dominant theme was the importance of caring professors and advisors.

These experts provided information and encouragement for participants to act. The idea of mutability was an important theme, in that change can be a frightening inhibitor for people whose personalities are more conservative and risk averse. An interesting theme was the inherent value they placed on learning itself, outside the parameters of their major field of study. This was a surprise in the context of their standing as first-generation students from lower income families who may have been motivated by the prospect of training for a well-paid career. Memories of incidents in their lives where the educational environment caused them harm seemed to push these graduates to try even harder. Several of them expressed a desire to make up for these perceived wrongs by mentoring young people and making it easier for them. After completing the final three interviews, I found that the themes were consistent and these patterns reinforced my earlier observations.

While the interviews usually started slowly, the questions I asked were open-ended and this allowed them to follow their own passions when discussing the topic of their experiences at college. Each of them opened up, and they were often eloquent in their descriptions of topics that mattered most. In fact, if it could be called a theme, this emotional energy was an interesting factor in all the interviews.

Their confidence was reflected partly in the use of first-person pronouns in descriptions of high school and undergraduate decision-making. Each participant displayed a sense of ownership of his or her college experience. While they had consulted with important people in their lives, they put those exchanges in the category of advice and made their own decisions about where they would go to school and what they would study. This ability to assume risk was common to all the interviews. If the world had told them they could not do something, they often set out to prove the world wrong. It could be

observed that this trait may be necessary in an environment where family members are not familiar with how college works. For these first-generation graduates, their families were emotionally supportive, but they were unable to connect to the details of getting into or succeeding in college. One of the participants described the process her family experienced as flying by the seats of their pants. These graduates appreciated family support, but they would not have stopped going to college without it.

This absence of structural support from families increased the importance of mentors and advisors during their college years. These respected outsiders in their lives often provided the logistical means to their eventual success, in some cases changing the course of participants' futures in ways they never imagined. Advisors also reinforced the students' innate confidence as they struggled with coursework or job searches or planning for graduate school. Such challenges were familiar for college professionals and people in middle-class environments, but they were new and daunting obstacles for first-generation students. It should be noted that none of the graduates referenced institutional programs or sponsored resources as pivotal in their ability to succeed on campus. The relationships with mentors and advisors seemed to have a spontaneous aspect that was part of its strength. The participants felt like these trusted advocates had taken a particular interest in them and their futures.

Most participants also appreciated such input because they were not afraid to heed good advice, even if it meant a drastic change in their life plans. Their lives were in a constant state of metamorphosis and they welcomed it. The ability to assume risk also meant the ability to change identity. Several of them had shifted career paths in order to expand their horizons. Most had seen high school and college friendships as transient

experiences that they appreciated and spoke of fondly, but they expected to form new relationships as they matured and evolved into new versions of themselves.

Just over half of the participants told moving and often painful stories of what being a first-generation student had meant to them. Some of those experiences were the indirect result of their parents' lack of education, in that most of them came from low-income families who struggled to make ends meet while they were growing up. There were horror stories from childhood, where school teachers were insensitive to their lack of resources, in and out of the classroom. There were stories of institutional neglect as these bright students struggled to find quality in under-funded classrooms. Most were stories of humiliation or neglect that they fought to overcome and make right in their individual lives.

Londa found guidance on how to apply for college from her stepmother, whose sister was an administrator of a private high school. Londa believed that her move to the private high school was the reason she could transition into college. She believed she would not have had that opportunity at her previous public high school. Michael had a similar experience when he moved in with his father as a teenager. Robyn's family understood the difference in the quality of public schools and used a traditional method for low income families to improve the odds for their children. They used her grandmother's address for school purposes. How common is the practice of using a grandparent's address and why are U.S. families forced to do this?

Community and social dynamics were not lost on the students affected by them. Each participant had experienced these patterns in his or her own way. For Robyn, there were memories of her experience as a talented athletic performer. She had competed in high school and done well enough to be offered scholarships. However, when she got to

Midwest Christian College with a track scholarship, she was dismayed to find that there were girls she had run against and beaten who had scholarships at Notre Dame and other highly regarded colleges. She felt that Midwest Christian College was mid-tier and provided her with an adequate education, but she wondered why her coaches and counselors in high school had not presented scholarship options at more prestigious schools. Robyn believed it was because her parents had no clout, because her family was not prominent. In that regard, she felt invisible in the public school system.

Even though all the participants were first-generation students and had come from families with very limited means, most of them expressed an appreciation for the intrinsic value of education, outside its ability to provide better jobs in their futures. This recognition of how higher education had changed them as people was a topic that most of them expressed in very emotional ways. They described it as a gift that no one could take from them. Several participants were pleased that their families had not pushed them to school with the ultimatum that they find high-paying jobs or look at majors that would guarantee them an immediate career out of college. These graduates recognized that they thought about problems differently after they had been in discussion groups or studied logic or read materials outside their chosen fields. They told stories of relationships they formed with professors and how they stayed in touch with them after graduation. Each of them took the substance of academia seriously and believed they were happier because they had learned how to learn and they would continue those habits in the future.

Chapter 5

Themes

Participants in this study had accomplished a common goal of obtaining an undergraduate baccalaureate degree. This achievement had meaning for them as individuals and it had meaning for society at large, in that first-generation students are more likely to stop short of obtaining a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001; Cushman, 2007; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Ishatani, 2006; Livingstone & Stowe, 2001; Pidcock et al., 2001).

After reviewing interviews with nine participants, five fluid identity themes became apparent in the narratives (see Appendix F). Participants' individual abilities to fundamentally change their identities during their years in college led to the description of these factors as *fluid*. The themes provided structure for participants' statements about their eventual success in graduating from college. They also fit well with participants' ability to be comfortable encountering new challenges in life.

There were other factors that were common to most participants, including financial challenges, divorced parents, and stories of scarcity from their childhoods. These factors are worth noting and would be interesting topics to explore. However, the five fluidity themes identified from the interviews with the nine participants were the strongest across the initial nine interviews and were reinforced during the final three. Therefore, these five themes were chosen as the basis for analysis of the interviews.

Five Fluid Identity Themes

1. Agency. Participants were bright, confident risk-takers.
2. Advocates. Participants encountered experienced caring adults who believed in and encouraged them.
3. Mutability. Participants reported a need to break away from past and create a new self.
4. Reward. Participants found intrinsic value in a college education.
5. Fortitude. Participants were motivated by rejection or disappointment.

The fluid identity themes were expressed in different contexts, some having a basis in personal relationships, some in academic and campus experiences, and some in the workplace. There were also various levels of intensity within the fluid identity themes. For some participants one theme may have been a driving force toward their eventual success. For others that same theme may have been a by-product or shadow of a more dominant factor. These were very different individuals who expressed themselves with certain common traits and certain common reflections on their experiences before, during, and after college.

Fluid Identity Theme 1: Agency

Agency was a specific personality factor expressed during the interviews with each participant. These graduates spoke in terms of ownership of their actions and did not often find excuses for or blame others for their shortcomings. Participants were bright, confident risk-takers who did not internalize messages of inferiority. They felt they had efficacy in their lives and they made conscious choices to succeed. They expressed accomplishments and failures with first person pronouns. Agency is not egoism. Participants did not tell

stories of glory-seeking or being the center of attention. Their demeanors were self-contained with a subtle self-awareness that was expressed in language, assumptions, and experience.

Participants challenged stereotypes and assumptions made about them as working-class students in a middle-class world. They were not blind to or embarrassed by these false ideas about who they were. They either ignored low expectations by excelling or they dismissed false claims and went around them. Most graduates understood their personal disadvantages in being first-generation students but they did not assume they were less qualified to learn if given the opportunity to do so.

They faced the unknown territory of college with enthusiasm and a healthy level of trepidation. In their own ways, they had a sense of adventure in the face of adversity. These first-generation graduates had encountered a variety of personal and institutional obstacles during their childhood and teen years and had proven to themselves that they could have an impact on their own lives. They welcomed opportunities to explore and define their own personal goals.

Donna, Lily, Londa, Sandy, and Brandon were filled with a spirit of exploration and adventure when they chose to go to college. Donna stated, “I didn’t know what I wanted to do at that time,” and Lily called her first day on a new campus “just a leap of faith.” Londa was aware of the challenges on campus that came from being a student with a welfare family background. She chose her own adventure, stating that:

I think I developed enough confidence in my ability that if I didn’t figure it out I could go back, but I felt okay—I felt comfortable there. I’ve always been one that likes adventure and going in head first.

Sandy's animated responses to questions during the interview confirmed her natural attraction to adventure and new experiences. She had a history of taking risks and accepting the outcomes. After spending her freshman year at an art school in Chicago, Sandy chose Midwest Christian College where she could expand her horizons even more:

My international travel was a May term. It was amazing. I went without anybody I knew and I lived with a host family. I didn't know Spanish very well and I was basically a nobody for most of the time I was there.

Sandy was not reckless or naïve in her choices, but she chose paths that were not guaranteed to be safe. She was aware of the risk involved and confirmed that beneath the confident action she experienced a healthy level of fear. Expressing the energy, optimism, and confidence of Fluid Identity Theme 1, Brandon had not given up in spite of the odds against him. He always believed in his personal ability to face challenges and overcome obstacles.

Meredith, Michael, Evan, Kimberly, and Marlo had built solid academic credentials and school experiences that helped lead them to college success. However, they had done so in the face of structural and personal challenges associated with being first-generation working-class students in public school systems. They each learned to recognize opportunity and act on it. Meredith traveled abroad to study and eventually to find work there by staying alert to doors as they opened for her. "Different names started to pop up all over. I started getting connections and then I worked with an agency and that's how I got established and then got my position."

Michael faced his life with a can-do attitude and confidence. He knew he was different from his family and peers and he accepted this difference as an attribute. Evan

found support from fellow students as he slowly became familiar with the campus. He also gained confidence as he became accepted and then rewarded with campus administrative appointments. Evan eventually used his intelligence and fortitude to become a successful sales professional.

Participants did not choose to absorb messages of inferiority. Donna started her own business right out of college, although she had to learn the basics of bookkeeping and marketing on her own. Even in the face of bureaucratic and financial obstacles, Evan pressed forward to re-enter college. Collin expected to be challenged with college-level work and he was pleased to discover that the challenges were simply new hurdles to overcome. Brandon's drive was specific and unusual in that he was on his own and he knew it. "I found out that it doesn't matter where you are—the same people that you're trying to get away from are always there."

These participants were entrepreneurial in their outlooks and behaviors concerning their college goals and accomplishments. They were not waiting to be hired in life but were ready to build their own lives. They felt capable and ready to succeed. This perceived efficacy was displayed in their use of first person pronouns and positive assumptions about where they were going.

Lily expressed a desire for autonomy within a loving, encouraging family. Meredith had always been someone who steered her own path. Londa accepted defeats in her life and continued to move forward. Kimberly embraced the new freedoms she found at college and her new ability to organize her own life and time. Her confidence and ability to deal with risk were useful personality traits as she adjusted to college life. "I started not

going home every weekend and breaking away from my high school friends and forming new friendships at college and truly started opening up and coming out of my shell.”

Robyn had been a bright student in elementary school and had worked to fit in with other students. She took advanced classes from middle school forward and gained a reputation with her young peers as being boring because of her interest in learning. Robyn had looked forward to college as a place to pursue those activities at a high level. She had set her own goals late in her college career, but she relished her new opportunity to become a medical doctor.

Sometimes you put a little bit of a barrier on yourself when you’re not going to shoot for the stars; you’re going to shoot for this little spot right here. . . . It’s like—I can get there, but I never even tried to go anywhere there. I’ve achieved all the goals I’ve set for myself, but I don’t know who I am, considering where I came from.

There it was. This telling statement became the title of this research paper, as it seemed to define the experience of each of the participants interviewed. It’s not a statement of remorse or fear, but simple fact. The participants were and continue to be works in progress with fluid identities.

Participants chose to succeed. Donna compared her life to family and friends who had not completed their college educations and expressed her disappointment in their choices. Lily asserted herself and chose a college she had only heard about. Londa was a determined student who knew she could get very good grades if she had time to study. Robyn described herself as competitive with herself in school work and athletics. Sandy

was very conscious of the fact that her choices in life were different from those of her family and friends, but she did not let that get in the way of the dreams she had for herself.

Collin had a sense of control over the choices he made and his ability to act on his plans. Instead of scheduling a regular campus visit while in high school, Collin decided to visit Midwest College on his own, not trusting the packaged presentation of scheduled recruiting days. When he was offered the opportunity to work on a political campaign during his junior year, he turned the work experience into a qualified internship for credit. This ability to recognize and capture individual opportunity and turn it into something useful was a consistent trait in Fluid Identity Theme 1.

Brandon was alone in making his decision to attend college. He had little support from family, educational systems, or community. In spite of this, he forged ahead to find a college and graduate with a degree. He soon realized that college coursework demanded new study skills and a strong work ethic. He made a personal decision to meet those demands. On the other hand, Kimberly's parents were happily involved in her educational journey, but the actual choices Kimberly made were entirely her own. She saw college enrollment decisions as her own responsibility. Kimberly remembered feeling focused and content as her aspirations for higher education blossomed around her.

Fluid Identity Theme 2: Advocates

Participants encountered experienced, caring adults who believed in them and acted on those beliefs. Fluid Identity Theme 2 brought to light the influence of outside forces in participants' academic success. Graduates spoke in glowing terms of advocates who had gone out of their way to encourage and support them in their journeys toward undergraduate degrees. These stories included descriptions of specific observations,

encouragement, and tools that these advocates provided. In unofficial mentoring relationships, advocates provided external validation for these students. The relationships were also ongoing, in that after graduation many stayed in touch as the graduates began the next steps toward their careers.

Education professionals, relatives, and experienced friends who became advocates for these graduates often appeared in participants' lives unexpectedly and offered ideas, resources, and information that these first-generation students would not have discovered on their own. The relationships were not initiated through institutional programs or formal mentoring assignments, but seemed to blossom from individual encounters before and during their years in college. Mentors were not assigned to befriend them and their relationships would not have shown up on an advocate's resume under community service.

While nearly all of the graduates felt that their parents supported them in their higher education goals, participants felt alone in negotiating the specific steps toward attaining a college degree. The individual characteristics observed in Fluid Identity Theme 1 gave these first-timers the will and determination to succeed on their own, but the learning curve was steep once they began their college careers. Feeling that they had come to campus ill-equipped, the existence of caring experienced adults who were willing to help and provide tools to succeed was a pleasant and rewarding surprise for them. Unofficial mentors included college faculty, administrative staff, clergy, and extended family. In each case, these relationships continued at some level as they began their work lives.

Faculty relationships were the most common thread for all the graduates. Whether it was just a brief note on a difficult assignment or a more complicated mentoring bond,

trusted teachers' involvement mattered for participants in this study. First-generation working-class students were indeed strangers in the middle-class world of college and they relished being visible to permanent inhabitants of the college campus. Lack of visibility was a common phrase during the interviews, as students expressed a constant awareness that they did not quite fit in with the social expectations of middle-class activities on campus. College faculty affirmations helped bridge that gap.

Donna's story emphasized the difference between general encouragement from caring family and specific encouragement from interested adults. Donna felt extreme pressure from her parents who had no experience with college and could not offer specific instructions on how to achieve her goals. Instead of talking about specific possible areas of study, they told her that "whatever the highest thing you can get in college, then go for that." Donna had believed her whole college experience would be a series of difficult self-directed decisions. This changed as her confidence and validation as a competent student grew. Her perceived personal changes came from professors who noticed and reinforced her abilities. Donna treasured the reinforcement of her skills by a respected professor, and she kept the letters he wrote to her at the end of each term. She was a confident person, but Donna appreciated these positive comments from someone who was not required to say anything.

Meredith utilized traditional academic mentoring relationships with professors, as well as formal counseling services available on campus. However, she was also surprised to find faculty who were willing to go above and beyond what she had expected of them.

Sandy's family members had always come to her with personal problems and she had assumed, as a psychology major, that she would go into family or marital therapy.

Then she changed direction and went into school counseling after interacting with caring and knowledgeable professors during her undergraduate years. She summed this up in this way: “At the beginning of my senior year, I had wonderful professors who just saw a lot of potential in me to really consider graduate school, so we started talking about potential interests.”

Collin’s academic mentors included both professors in his major and members of the local intelligentsia. Collin believed these mentors provided wisdom and vision for this future. He even saw benefits in the times he was at odds with instructors. Collin currently maintains friendships with several of these people. “I’ve probably learned more from my relationships with my instructors than all of the extracurricular. I think they put me more where I am today than just going and doing the four-year degree thing.” While Collin felt capable of exploring ideas and information on his own, he believed that real education came from discourse and interaction with learned people. His reverence for the mentors he met at college was evident in his descriptions of relationships with them and he valued the ongoing friendships he had with many of his professors and mentors:

I think differently, I read differently, I spend more time doing those things than most of my friends because of a couple of professors. One is fairly political and so I keep in touch with him, and the other one, we just have a lot of common interests.

Marlo had experienced positive relationships with faculty during her undergraduate years. She saw these professors as resources for information as well as emotional anchors for affirming her merit as a scholar. Marlo was grateful they came to her when they noticed her work or her potential. “Primarily I had professors who were interested in me,

so I think that was very formative. This is something that the first-generation part plays into because my parents didn't know.”

Lily was confident in her academic skills, but she still needed outside voices to confirm her abilities. These outside influences first appeared in high school, when an instructor spotted her potential. Once Lily became aware that adults were supporting her, she wanted to live up to their expectations. She also began to invest in herself and she began to initiate her own growth at college.

I did really well and the professor liked me and just really showered compliments on me when I would answer in class and I became really focused on it. I think that developing a really great friendship with that professor helped see me through the rest of college.

Brandon had very few positive experiences with instructors in his K-12 education. He had described them as disinterested and perfunctory, and he held those expectations of teacher performance when he went to college. However, Brandon was pleased when he encountered professors who seemed interested in him and his learning, especially an older woman whom he now describes as wise and unlike many of her peers. She challenged him to think critically, instead of learning by rote. Her challenges energized him by encouraging his potential and he still carried a hopeful attitude of growth and change.

Marlo told the story of a highly respected professor who took time out of his busy schedule to simply sit with her and discuss her future. She felt honored that he would do that for her. He had made her feel visible in a world of regular students like herself:

It was him taking his time—we talked about an hour after class. He's busy; had lots of things to do and he just kind of sat down with me. He was very much invested in me, so that's one thing that definitely sticks out.

Marlo also remembered an important psychology professor who encouraged and supported her in making plans for her future. This professor wrote specific positive comments on her written work and she felt like he recognized her individual interests and skills. It was the unsolicited nature of their approval that struck a deep chord and made her work even harder.

Londa remembered certain professors that had an affect on her as she matured and developed her own sense of place in the world. They were not judgmental and would listen to her ideas. "This professor seemed like the professor you could go to and say, 'Look, I screwed up, but don't abandon me.' He was open-minded, yet still stood firm with his beliefs and he was really respectable."

College administrative staff, including departmental advisors and student services personnel, also provided needed technical support in negotiating the rules and resources on campus. Assumptions about language, past experiences, and choices abound in all class-defined social situations, but they can have crucial impacts on college students. These graduates had to negotiate their way through daily life experiences and larger structural elements to reach their goal of graduation. The help of a qualified insider who knew the ropes was essential to success for many of them.

Kimberly was grateful to her advisor for setting her on a career path early in her freshman year. Once Kimberly decided that human resources was her field of choice, the academic advisor went a step further and guided her toward a possible job in the local

community. Kimberly still regards this woman as a friend and mentor as she continues to work in the field of healthcare human resources:

I had an advisor that was just phenomenal and she focused on the human resources side. Learning from her and her experiences and just her passion for the human resource field really helped me learn that my personality would be very well suited to that type of work. She really changed my life.

Lily found support from the admissions counselor who had explained the school's offerings and had encouraged her to enroll without even seeing the campus. This mentor continued to be in her life and Lily anticipated a permanent friendship with this woman.

Sandy had confidence that she would continue her education after completing a graduate degree, but she sought and utilized departmental mentors to help her decide on a specific career path. The advisors she found most helpful were those she had formed personal relationships with and with whom she still stayed in touch.

Because Midwest Christian College was church affiliated it carried a religious component in its curricula for all majors. Administrative staff included clergy as well as secular advisors, and students were encouraged to seek out life guidance in the context of their spiritual lives as well as their career majors. Several graduates indicated that the religious aspect of their education was a primary reason they had chosen the school.

For Evan, his college experience was a spiritual as well as academic journey. Conversations with his mentors involved theological and philosophical arguments that he believed helped him become the man he was. Sandy also found mentors on who inspired her to become involved in the local community. She continued to be an active volunteer for various causes. The reality of an outside person investing in her was a life-changing

experience for Sandy. She was able to take on more responsibilities and she found herself echoing the behavior and ideals of these important role models.

All the participants emphasized that they felt burdened by the fact that they were first-generation students as they approached college age. They understood that it was a different world they were attempting to enter, and they were not equipped with some basic tools necessary to succeed there. Their parents were generally supportive of the concept of college, but had no clue on how to prepare or apply for admission. Often their parents did what little they could and cheered them on, but left it up to the students to figure it out on their own. Fortunately, these graduates had the personal confidence to forge ahead at a young age. However, they also needed outside advocates to help them along the way. Sometimes these people were closer than they knew and were extended family members ready to supply support and information.

Londa spoke candidly about her childhood home where college was not considered a likely goal for any of the children. Her mother was not openly opposed. She was just not hopeful that it could be part of their future. Londa was grateful to her stepmother, who encouraged her to get a college education. Her stepmother supported her as Londa searched for the right college and she made herself available as a resource while Londa was in school.

Robyn had always been self sufficient and able to set her own goals. She used her confidence, skills, and intelligence to set a course for her life from an early age. She had decided to pursue a possible master's degree in psychology when something amazing happened. In an extraordinary example of Fluid Identity Theme 2, an aunt by marriage in California stepped in and helped Robyn steer an entirely new course into medical school.

Robyn's mentor was a distant relative who valued her abilities for years before expressing an interest in her future. Because of this aunt, Robyn realized that she had always held the potential to succeed but had not known how to create a specific path leading there.

Fluid Identity Theme 3: Mutability

Participants reported a need to break away from past and create new selves. Among the participants there was a willingness to change their identities as they became more educated and explored new options. Not all the participants behaved this way, but most displayed a desire to part with their past selves as they matured. They were self-aware at a young age. They had a sense of their ability to change and felt able to achieve it. Each carried a vision of a possible new, improved self. While Fluid Identity Theme 1 (Agency) reflected risk-taking personalities, Fluid Identity Theme 3 involved outcome rather than process. These participants did not feel threatened by becoming someone they had yet to meet.

One feature of mutability was the internal rather than external descriptions of these changes. It was not about assuming new roles in life, such as doctor or teacher, but about owning the changes as particular to themselves. It was not a category or set of rules to learn, but personality traits which seemed to evolve. The language participants used was also forward looking, in that they were excited about what changes were yet to come. It was as though they were constantly shedding old skins to replace them with new ones. Graduates expressed respect for their old selves while imagining the contours of their new incarnations.

While in high school, Meredith had attended leadership development seminars. This experience helped her look forward to college as a growth opportunity. She had expected to change and expand her horizons, but she was amazed by the magnitude of those changes.

Robyn had been self-sufficient without a great deal of support from family or friends. She set a course for her life from an early age. Robyn was aware that her childhood brought her unpleasant experiences that her middle-class college peers probably would not comprehend. She knew that her father had a dream for her to find a nice, conservative, Christian boy at a conservative Christian college and become an educated version of her younger self. That had not happened. Robyn had followed her own dreams and had come to her own conclusions about who she would become. This decision created stress between her and her father, but she was happy with her choices.

Sandy was happy to describe the changes she had envisioned during her college years. She had ignored state university options because she believed they were no more than continuations of her high school years. Sandy remembered friends who had chosen the state school option. They had spent much of their time in social activities and parties. Sandy wanted to grow and change as she continued her formal education after high school:

I wanted to be a new person. I didn't want my high school persona to follow me. I saw the opportunity to really break out and go somewhere different. I was ready for it. I wanted to be away from home. I felt like it was time. I was ready to spread my wings.

Collin had been aware that his parents expected him to go to college and that many of his relatives were not planning to pursue education after high school. Some extended family members were openly hostile to the idea of him attending college. Therefore, the

plans for his future had set him aside as someone other from a young age. Most of Collin's high school friends had opted for local state university campuses, which he dismissed as a continuation of high school.

Brandon had been determined to go to college from a young age in spite of the odds against it. He believed that most adults in his world expected very little of him and he set out to prove them wrong.

Donna had a deep consciousness of her ongoing individual transformation. She stated that “just in terms of accomplishment—I wanted to go to college and get through it and do something that my parents had never done, so it was kind of a hurdle for me to jump over.” She sought like-minded college friends who supported one another in their transitions to new adult identities:

I just gravitate towards people who are broken and people who have had traumatic things in their lives. They wanted to stop whatever had been passed down through their generations or issues in their families. They wanted it to stop with them, so they were trying to better themselves so they could make different lives for themselves.

Meredith discovered a number of resources on campus where she could become involved in international programs, as well as explore her psychological and social strengths. This curiosity and sense of adventure kept her open to the possibilities for growth and change. She did not feel limited by the range of her experience:

The effects of college have been huge—just thinking about how much I've changed those four years of college has been really positive. I mean my college travel has

really affected me and caused me to look at the world in a completely different way.

I really got to know myself a lot better.

Londa was very conscious of her need for change and her ability to change. She was proud of the way she had proven that it was possible for someone from a welfare home to achieve a college degree. She made this story part of her teaching curriculum for young children and believed that she was an example for those who would follow. Not only did she want to present the concept of change, she wanted to embody the idea and become a role model for children.

Robyn entered college thinking she would complete a bachelor's degree and maybe get a master's to upgrade her skills in social work or counseling. But because she was able to change gears when necessary, today she finds herself in medical school and plans to pursue a specialty in her field. Robyn has explored many religious traditions, and when she got married last year, it was a combination Catholic/Hindu event. Robyn was open to the world as she found it and she was ready to change as needed:

I feel like all these different experiences shape me—who I am as a person—like relationships and being open to different kinds of people and challenging me to think about the world from different religious perspectives and the rest of the world's political perspectives. I think it's helped me as a person.

Sandy was very conscious of the processes involved in creating different socioeconomic structures and expectations. She recognized higher education as a place where adult identities were shaped to meet certain social and occupational behaviors and attitudes. Sandy understood her role in finding ways to create and adapt to the person she was becoming:

College is a great social filter as well. You can start over and rebuild that initial impression you want people to see in you. I think college gave me the blank canvas to build who I needed to be. Although I'd shared my past, it didn't define me anymore.

Even in the comfortable environment of intellectual interaction, Collin still had felt like an outsider. He believed that his circle of friends kept him at college at a time when he was ready to move on to more permissive atmospheres. In the end, he believed that his individual decision to stay and graduate helped him become the new person he was meant to be. He had never completely fit in with his family, his work atmosphere, or the strictures of a Christian college, but he had adapted to each in his own way while becoming confident in his adult beliefs and values.

Brandon was self aware in the face of overwhelming odds against him. He accepted the fact that he would need to experience the turmoil of great changes in his personal life to achieve his goal of success in the strange world of college. Of all the participants interviewed, Brandon had the steepest climb into academia. In fact, he had made the choice to start again from scratch after learning that his choice of a for-profit institution had left him with few work options and massive debt.

Marlo believed she would change during her college years, just as she had grown and changed in all the years leading up to then. In spite of that, she was surprised at the depth of the changes she experienced in her attitudes and expectations. A large part of those changes involved her experiences abroad encountering different cultures. She felt a change in her perspectives about who she was in the larger context of life:

I was very much aware of how my mind was shaping who I am, and what I think is good or true or right is due to the fact that I was raised in Indiana and the United States and the Western Hemisphere. It's things like that that are really important.

Donna had a desire to find a different life than the one her mother knew. In her youth, Donna had been painfully aware of the struggles her single mother had experienced, and she set her mind to living a new life that she could define herself. This plan included being self-employed instead of earning an hourly wage. Her dream was a radical change from her mother, who often held multiple low-wage jobs to hold the family together.

Meredith approached her personal evolution as a work in process that she could eventually define and feel comfortable with as she also developed the skills for a career. She treated her college experience not only as an academic learning environment, but also as an incubator to enrich and expand her awareness of herself and the community she inhabited.

Combined with Londa's awareness of her ability to change was a sense of wonder at her growth. She realized that, in order to become the new person she envisioned, many of the changes she experienced would be intellectual and that such changes might be at odds with religious and social training from her youth. She knew many adults who believed certain things because their families had always held those beliefs. It pleased her that she had changed and grown away from that concept:

When I went off to college, some things that my dad said were set in stone. So at college, learning what I believed for me—what it means to me—my views weren't as conservative as my father's. But they weren't as liberal as my mom's or even jumping on the way opposite end of the spectrum.

Robyn talked about herself as a work in process toward becoming someone she did not know yet. She described her college friends as temporary and she believed that they understood her only as the person she was to them when they knew her on campus. In keeping with the idea of constant personal change, Robyn was easily able to form friendships that were simply part of her college experience. “We had great friendships, but they weren’t as lasting as I had with some of my friendships that I had from early on, that lasted a little longer.”

Evan discussed many of the changes he experienced and continues to face as struggles to be fought and won. He knew he wanted to become a new version of himself. “You know, I’m 33 now and I still think I have a lot of growing up to do.” Evan easily described himself as mutable and unfinished. “I really try to understand how that made me into the person I am today and how that’s going to drive me to what I will be in the future.”

Sandy had specific mentors late in her undergraduate experience who had helped her go on to graduate school. However, she also had a strong sense of support from instructors she encountered during her early college years. Valuing Sandy’s potential for growth and change, these outside voices encouraged her potential and supported her search for a new identity:

I had to make some decisions and I needed to grow up and become an adult. It was to get me realizing who I could be, who I wanted to be, and how I wanted to get there. I don’t have to be just one person—I could have this whole big wide world open to me if I let it happen.

In keeping with Fluid Identity Theme 3, Collin anticipated changes in his world view and his place in it. Brandon described how he had felt locked into a certain future had

he stayed in the small farming community where he grew up. Brandon approached his college years as an adventure pointing to a new way of living and he believed that experience produced meaningful changes in him.

Fluid Identity 4: Reward

Participants found intrinsic value in attaining a college education. Their motives were not monetary or extrinsic. Graduates described education as something good in itself and they described their adult identity as it related to their level of education, not the profession or job they held. When describing themselves, they focused on being educated adults who were able to make good decisions about the lives they led. Several of them were even grateful that their parents had not pressed them to choose a major by how much money or prestige it would gain them.

Lily was poignant in her description of her mother's desire for her to get an education without reference to her potential income or career potential. This attitude was part of Lily's experience before she became a college student. She was brought up to believe in the value of being an educated participant in the community where she lived. Her mother dreamed of achieving that goal and instilled this value in her children:

I appreciate that both while I was at college and also from my family, the idea of me going to college was never focused on the idea of making more money, which is surprising, because my family was very low income—especially after my parents divorced.

Robyn sought to gain insight and solutions to life's problems through formal and informal education. She had experienced some harsh realities sooner than many of her peers and responded with intellectual analysis and inner discipline as she faced family

issues growing up. She relished the ability to openly discuss ideas and form new opinions. She carried that attitude into her adult life. Robyn placed particular value on becoming an educated person:

College pushed me to learn all these different things, especially different philosophies, different people's points of view and everything, so we learned science and religious perspectives. I think it pushed me into challenging things and it was a good environment to learn in.

Collin understood that he had always been someone who sought knowledge on his own. Subsequently, the college environment with its access to learned professors and structured classrooms had added depth to his knowledge. It had also fine-tuned his ability to challenge ideas and present well-formed arguments and conclusions.

Donna presented a mixed message about her desire to become a college graduate. She was upset that her parents had pushed her to college without listening to the details of her wants and desires. She felt obligated to meet their expectations, without being given directions on what to do or how to do it. On the other hand, Donna worried about students who did not complete college and missed out on the potential improvements in their futures. She also rejoiced that college had led her to a career she loved:

I thought college was going to be extremely hard—and it was very hard—and at the same time I thought it was very easy, because I guess I wasn't expecting to like my major as much as I did.

Meredith had received indirect recognition of the relative value of higher education in its own right. By implication, her credentials as a college graduate gave her the experience needed to teach abroad. She noted that “without my college degree, I wouldn't

have been able to go to Korea. The minimum for English teachers there was that you just need to have a bachelor's degree to teach English most places." This international government metric supported the importance of attaining a formal degree and exemplified the message found in Fluid Identity Theme 4.

Collin considered himself a work in process. He remained open and curious about his environment and the changes he made on it and the changes it made on him. He often reflected on who he had been compared to who he was and who he was becoming—all in context of continual learning. This learning brought him constant joy while at the same time causing frustration. He discovered there was always more to find, and he sometimes felt overwhelmed by the magnitude of information around him. He worked in a political environment and he felt comfortable in it because he never acquiesced to dogma:

I got to college and I got smacked by academia. I've kept so much of it with me that it informs my opinions and the way I look at things and the way I choose to do things. I never would have had that if I'd just gone to college and read all this stuff on my own.

Brandon believed that much of his attitude toward the intrinsic value of education came directly from teachers and professors he admired. They had taught him that he carried what he learned in spite of whether or not it led to employment. This was a great personal insight for Brandon and he was grateful for that knowledge. He was happy that in his own way he had escaped the dead-end life he saw many of his childhood friends live. He held hope that his excursion into higher education would produce tangible dividends eventually.

Marlo enjoyed that at college she had encountered different ideas and perspectives than those she grew up with. She had always been a good student, but she had not found opportunities to express her own ideas and observations about the world until she experienced seminar environments. She was happy that her undergraduate campus had exposed her to different people and ideas. She enjoyed these interactions, in and out of the classroom. Marlo concluded that she enjoys learning for learning's sake.

As though she carried a hidden side to herself, Londa had a sense that her college education would sneak up on her in different ways at different times. Fluid Identity 4 was expressed in subtle realizations of her new capacity to solve problems and express ideas. She realized that she could handle situations in a professional manner that she was not aware she had learned. She was amazed that these changes had happened without her being conscious of them during her years at college. "It surprised me that I didn't realize things I learned until well after I graduated."

For Londa, Theme 4 was expressed as a value-added commodity, acquired outside her major fields of study at college. She knew that her ability to negotiate certain professional environments were an indirect result of her education. These attributes helped Londa define herself as an adult.

Evan found employment not directly related to his degree major, but he did not see that as a setback. Expressing Fluid Identity 4, he believed that he was better equipped to handle adulthood because he graduated from college. He described friends and family members who could not fathom spending all that time in classrooms without a direct financial benefit, but he just listened and understood the experience as something of value

in itself. “I have a stronger realization of what my faith is and I feel better equipped and more mature to handle adulthood.”

Sandy joined her love of the work she had learned to do with joy in being able to do it. She believed that learning on its own could enrich experiences and she wanted to build a life that displayed that knowledge. Sandy had admired an instructor who lived an example of that philosophy. “She would just radiate this energy. Enjoy what you’re doing; find what it is that you love and you can’t wait to get up the next day to keep doing it.”

Collin valued his education at a small, private, liberal arts college. He believed that his curiosity about life and his place in the world could be given structure and meaning through the tools he had been given in classrooms and private discussions with professors. “One of my philosophy professors always said, ‘None of you will probably go into philosophy, but whatever you do you will do it better.’ I can’t define it, but knowledge-based intellectual ability that philosophy gives you improves everything.”

Collin carried this confidence in the value of education into his career goals. While currently employed in the partisan political arena, he planned to shift gears soon and move to Canada. He did not think he would look for work in the political sector, but he was sure he could find interesting and productive work. He had not gone to college to become one thing, but to get educated enough to do a range of things.

Brandon understood the intrinsic value of education and how that improved his daily life. While his degree seemed to have little value in his pursuit of employment, he treasured the lessons he learned on how to think about issues and people he encountered. He even reflected on the impact his education had on his ability to be a better citizen and member of an introspective community. “I’m a better person. I mean I’ve bettered myself

as a human. I've increased my intelligence and my knowledge of general studies of everything. I'm smarter now and with that I can contribute more to society.”

Kimberly her years in college helped her live a more reflective life than she might have done on her own. She challenged the why of events in her life, as well as the how of them. She believed that she had gotten permission to challenge the assumptions made by her family. Kimberly expressed the values and belief systems her parents held, but she also enjoyed her new perspectives as she drew conclusions about her own present and future life. She cherished her ability to think through situations and reach her own conclusions. She could even remember specific instances where these skills were honed with professors who challenged her to think. Her years on campus had provided a different vantage and process for making individual choices:

It was also formative in my personal, spiritual, and intellectual development as far as exposing me to new ideas and thinking more about things—very much just opening my world. So the experiences that I've had are not like the experiences everyone else has had and maybe I'm wrong in some ways. I love academia for academia and I want to get close to the truth.

Fluid Identity Theme 5: Fortitude

Many participants were motivated by rejection or disappointment. They told stories of individual struggles and hardship in pursuit of education. Their stories were both personal and institutional. They often complained of expenses associated with higher education. There were many issues of language and other class-generated codes of behavior.

Fortitude expressed itself within many different motives. Sometimes participants expected difficulties relating to their lack of experience and knowledge. In these cases, it was necessary to forge on and learn means necessary to succeed. They took it in stride and added these life lessons to their lists of academic challenges. At other times, they encountered issues of fairness and justice, where it was necessary to push forward in spite of the circumstances. They then sought recourse in appeals to authority or accepting punishment.

Donna scolded herself for succumbing to perceived laziness and directed her anger at her own shortcomings. In high school this negative motivation caused her to study hard and prove to teachers and herself that she was not lazy after all. Once she arrived in college, she believed she once again fell into old patterns of slack behavior and needed to be scolded back into better work habits. This specific message from respected instructors included references to her responsibilities as the first person in her family to go to college. For Donna, this practice was a useful tool to guide her to eventual academic success and graduation. “That kind of spurred me on because I had always in high school struggled to get good grades.”

Londa had endured personal attacks from family members for expressing her happiness at getting a college education. Confused by their apparent hostility, she used the experience to try to understand their vantage. Instead of holding a grudge, she tried to put herself in their shoes and critique how her words might have meant something different to them. Londa believed that professors were not sensitive to her financial struggles and her personal responsibility for payment of the education she received, so she spoke up and expressed these concerns. While her feelings had been hurt in the other injustices she had

faced, she had carried herself with dignity as she suffered the consequences. In this case of adversity, however, she believed that the professors should have been more sensitive to the hardships in her life and the burdens she carried just to be there. There was a level of anger added to her pain.

Londa had many stories of how she had to fight to stay at college and fit in with other students and maintain relationships with her family. She was put on probation her senior year because she had helped a friend in need and yet she went back to graduate the following year. While the punishment was reflective of Fluid Identity Theme 5, her reaction was one of perseverance in the face of hardship.

Michael felt rejection after graduation, when his teaching certificate failed to gain him employment in the field. "I got really frustrated and I even had to talk to some of the administrators there." His attitude was one of persistence and confidence in the face of defeat. While he felt extreme disappointment that he was not working as a teacher, he found some comfort in the fact that he had held a job as a pharmacy technician for many years.

Evan told horror stories from his childhood when he went to a private Catholic school and was punished for his differences. Diagnosed with ADHD, he also gripped his pencil in an awkward fashion. For both, he suffered disciplines that linger in his mind as torture. He remembered these incidents as motivation for change as he sought to improve himself over the years.

I went to a private Christian school pre-K through fifth grade. About the only thing I learned was fear, fear, and humiliation. I was a hyperactive child and they duct-taped me to my chair and students would laugh me. It was very devastating for me.

Evan also felt singled out by the financial aid office on the Midwest Christian College campus. Since he was both low income and Hispanic, he believed that he should have received scholarship opportunities. Although he applied for grant aid, he was turned away. Instead, he felt saddled with loans that will take him many years to repay. As a result he felt a difficult combination of love and resentment toward his alma mater.

Evan related several stories significant to Fluid Identity Theme 5. He was not able to participate in his graduation ceremony. A policy did not allow adult baccalaureate students to participate in the traditional ceremony. Instead they were offered a special ceremony for non-traditional students. Because he had lived on campus as a full-time student and took traditional courses toward a traditional degree, Evan felt left out and different than the friends he made as a student. "I still have dreams to this day that I haven't graduated."

Referencing Fluid Identity Theme 5 as an occasional presence in his otherwise fulfilling life, Collin stated that he hated it "when people tell me, or make it apparent, that I've disappointed them." Because of a strong sense of his academic and personal strengths from a young age, he would set out to prove wrong any feelings of disappointment in him. He developed a strong set of friends to avoid disappointing staff and faculty.

Robyn gave several examples of Fluid Identity 5. She was close to her grandparents who supported her in her quest for a college degree. Part of this special relationship traced back to her stepfather kicking her and her sister out of their home as teenagers. At that point Robyn was welcomed by her grandmother, whom she lived with again after graduation from college. Robyn saw such incidents as examples of social injustice and how hard it is for low income people to support their children's school needs. Robyn

remembered moments of injustice and humiliation as references for her future attitudes and behaviors toward people in similar situations. She was relatively philosophical about them as she continued to carve a path for herself with or without support from people or institutions. She could look at bureaucratic or authoritarian obstacles as problems to be solved, not as blockades to her progress.

Brandon's was angry because his options were limited from the time he entered school in his small town. Regular college recruiters overlooked his zip code and the for-profit recruiters had lied to him. He felt betrayed and sad that he had been led into this no-win situation. Trying to turn Fluid Identity Theme 5 into something productive, Brandon used his personal experience as an example to warn others who might consider the for-profit college he had selected. Although he was not always successful with his warnings, he still felt strongly that he needed to let other potential students know about his experiences and recommend alternative avenues to a college degree. He tried to remain philosophical about his history as he continued to create a new future.

CHAPTER 6

Discussion

Fluid Identity Model

The concept of Fluid Identity Theory is the result of research that uncovered five consistent themes in a series of 12 interviews with first-generation working-class graduates of a small Midwestern college. Participants' individual abilities to fundamentally change their identities during their years in college led to the description of these factors as *fluid*. The themes provided structure for participants' statements about their eventual success in graduating from college. They also fit well with their ability to be comfortable encountering new challenges in life. It is unclear if all the themes were necessary elements of their eventual success or if certain themes carried more influence toward attainment of their goals.

Fluid Identity Theory

Theme 1: agency. Individuals are bright confident risk takers who do not internalize messages of inferiority. They believe they have efficacy in their lives and they make conscious choices to succeed. They often express accomplishments and challenges with first person pronouns.

Theme 2: advocates. Individuals encounter experienced caring authority figures who believe in them. Advocates go out of their way to provide encouragement and

support. This support includes unsolicited observations, information and tools. As unofficial mentoring relationships, advocates provide external validation.

Theme 3: mutability. Individuals feel a need to break away from the past and create new selves. They are self aware at a young age. They have a sense of their ability to change and feel able to achieve it. Each carries a vision of a possible new, improved self. While Fluid Identity Theme 1 reflects risk-taking personalities, Fluid Identity Theme 3 involves outcome rather than process. Individuals do not feel threatened by becoming someone they have yet to meet. One feature of this fluid identity theme is the internal rather than external descriptions of these changes. It is not about assuming new roles in life, but about owning the changes as particular to themselves.

Theme 4: reward. Individuals find intrinsic value in success. The motive for setting a goal was not monetary or extrinsic. Individuals describe goals in and of themselves as something good. They describe their identity as it relates to personal accomplishments, not external rewards.

Theme 5: fortitude. Individuals are motivated by rejection or disappointment. They tell stories of individual struggles and hardship that they have overcome. Stories are both personal and institutional.

Theoretical Context

A number of researchers have defined the problem of retention for first-generation students in terms of identity formation and how students must establish themselves in context of the middle-class structure of higher education (Aries & Seider, 2005; Bufton,

2003; Ostrove & Long, 2001; Tett, 2000, 2004). This research placed Fluid Identity Theory in that milieu.

The model can be useful when approaching identity from a structural symbolic interaction perspective. As stated by Burke and Stets (2009), “The self originates in the mind of persons and is that which characterizes an individual’s consciousness of his or her own being or identity” (p. 9). Fluid Identity relies on individual consciousness to perform agency and anticipate mutability. Burke and Stets confirmed that identity carries both intrinsic and extrinsic values for an individual and the merit placed on each of these factors is specific to that person. This feature was expressed in Fluid Identity Theory in that participants in the study were most gratified by the intrinsic rewards of becoming educated adults.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reviewed research that confirms a multitude of developmental challenges for students encountering a new environment at college. These challenges hold true for all students, but first-generation working-class students are under special pressure to try to fit in with the middle-class values on college campuses. Fluid Identity Theory addresses this context in the theme of fortitude, which enabled participants in the study to acknowledge these hurdles and fight their way over them.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) described the process of unconscious modeling of class imperatives for individual behavior with the term *habitus*. While it seems difficult to change such patterned behaviors and attitudes, they believed individual agency was possible. It requires the ability to experience cognitive dissonance as an opportunity for change rather than a threat to identity (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Fluid Identity Theory addresses this facet of individual agency in that individuals express mutability as a positive

quality. Becker (2004) argued that cognitive dissonance is the result of a new cognitive structure rather than the cause.

In keeping with the language of Fluid Identity, Kaufman (2005) defined the process for working-class students who choose to enter college as one of *social transformation*, which involves the factors of associational embracement, associational distancing, and presentation of self. While Kaufman presented the process as sequential and cumulative, fluid identity is modeled on personal characteristics that may be present throughout an individual's life.

Implications for Practice

Student recruiting. Currently, many selective college recruiting practices for incoming freshmen include the use of zip code sorting to find the most promising students. This marketing tool is assumed to provide the best return for a school's investment of resources, including staff and dollars (Sacks, 2007; Stevens, 2007). When a college administration makes the determination to follow this pattern, an obvious outcome is the loss of good students from neighborhoods that do not make the zip code list. Rather than turn a blind eye to these students or assume that community colleges or other open access institutions will meet their individual needs, these campuses can make a conscious effort to be inclusive in its recruiting plans and practices.

In keeping with this conclusion, Brandon and Marlo both recognized the impact of their social environments and how access to educational resources affected their K-12 education. Brandon believed that the public school system he attended had turned its back on promising students. He felt left out because he thought he was in a school which did not prepare him or any of his peers for a future in college. He knew he wanted out of his small

town and college could do that, but he felt alone in his journey to get there. According to Brandon, his consolidated public high school was a catch-all of small farming communities without much to offer. Brandon believed teachers were indifferent and administrators did not see the point in exposing them to anything better. He remembered only one college coming to his high school to recruit. He believed that this for-profit college had lied and manipulated his ignorance of the system. Brandon recognized a perceived lack of educational support in K-12. He described life outcomes that were similar to problems in inner cities. He spoke of high unemployment, reckless behavior leading to early deaths, teen pregnancies, and a sense of hopelessness.

On the other hand, Marlo recognized that she lived in a zip code that had an upper middle-class public school environment. She recognized obvious differences in the privileged households of her friends and she was conscious from a young age that she benefited by her proximity. She was an anomaly—a low income student in a wealthy zip code. Like Brandon she lived in the country, but due to urban sprawl, there were subdivisions with doctors and lawyers just up the road. She benefitted by their proximity, including the cultural and financial assets they brought to her public school experience. Her lower income family used this good fortune to support her educational endeavors in gifted programs and extracurricular activities that her parents were able to support with participation and transportation. While both Brandon and Marlo were self aware enough to express these views, they each saw themselves as a pawn in someone else's game.

Advocacy. Institutions of higher learning cannot assume that learning takes place outside of social dynamics. Working-class, first-generation students are especially challenged by the middle-class ethos present on most college campuses. Although none of

the participants in this study anticipated a mentor relationship, all of them benefitted from caring advocates who took special interest in them. The experiences of the college graduates in this study underline the value of direct contact with instructors and advisors in a learning environment. They described the real value of their college educations as relational. They believed that their abilities to think and solve problems and become better people were intertwined with their experiences with caring, knowledgeable professors. In some cases, there were other professionals and caring adults who guided them as well, but the educational aspects of their experience focused largely on discussions in and out of classrooms with professors.

These insights support the findings of Salinitri (2005) who stated,

Mentoring is about creating an enduring and meaningful relationship with another person, with the focus on the quality of that relationship including such factors as mutual respect, willingness to learn from each other, or the use of interpersonal skills. Mentoring is distinguishable from other retention activities because of the emphasis on learning in general and mutual learning in particular. (p. 858)

Most participants had divorced parents and described financial hardship. They had specific stories of watching their mothers work too hard for too little return. Those whose parents were still married described a more cohesive support system for their college goals. While this support provided emotional encouragement, these graduates found structural guidance and help through relationships with outside mentors and advisors. Implications for practice include the intentional casual availability of interested, knowledgeable advocates for students:

[Integration of relationally-based theory and practice] is also relevant to educators seeking to enhance educational outcomes that rely in large part on the extent to which their students are interpersonally connected to the significant others in their academic lives. (Martin & Dowson, 2009, p 353)

Whether an advisor is assigned through a formal departmental responsibility or the interactions are indeed spontaneous, the perception of suddenly becoming visible to a respected insider mattered to these first-generation graduates. In spite of their need to improve their financial situation, these students relished the fact that they were not in it for the money. They believed that their college education was not primarily what they learned, but who they became. Mentors reinforced this understanding.

Curriculum. In planning programs and curricula for college-level courses, faculty and administrators must be prepared to introduce all students to courses that challenge students to incorporate critical thinking into problem solving. While students who have not encountered such demands may not feel comfortable with them, the reward for accomplishing this perspective is powerful and life changing, especially for first-generation students who may not have encountered such dynamics in their family lives or local schools.

The participants in this study expressed delight in the revelation that education was not about learning facts, but incorporating facts into a broader understanding of ideas and relationships in the world around them. They processed subjects through the filter of dialogue with learned professors and friends, and they felt confident in the conclusions they reached on a range of topics. Critical thinking involves going beyond the accumulation of identifiable facts to recognition of how those facts interact with perception to help students

solve problems. Abrami et al. (2008), in their meta-analysis of instructional interventions, stated that “critical thinking, or the ability to engage in purposeful, self-regulatory judgment, is widely recognized as an essential skill for the knowledge age” (p. 1103). Tsui (2003) argued that this new way of learning for working-class students represented how critical thinking skills are a form of unevenly distributed cultural capital in the United States. Her study concluded that “the American higher education system participates in reproducing social inequalities through its differential development of critical thinking skills in students” (Tsui, 2003, p. 328). While she noted that critical thinking skills should be taught throughout the K-12 curriculum, she concluded that colleges and universities should be committed to applying critical thinking to all majors by “incorporating a host of active learning techniques and teaching students to assess and scrutinize ‘knowledge’ prior to its consumption” (Tsui, 2003, p. 328).

At the liberal arts campus of Midwest Christian College, these graduates learned to become interested lifelong learners. These teaching methods in the context of a challenging program were a large part of the perceived value of their undergraduate educations. A curriculum based on such outcomes should be discussed in the context of quantitative measures of education. While faculty members from all disciplines are assumed to be experts in their fields, they are not always presumed to be excellent teachers. Geertsen (2003) concluded that instructors need to “make a more concentrated effort to integrate thinking habits with factual content” (p. 17). He went on to conclude that colleges and college instructors are responsible for creating the ability for students to “develop a disposition to think critically, reflectively, and inquisitively in a wide variety of situations” (Geertsen, 2003, p. 17). These skills are not easily measured in a quantitative context.

Human learning is not just about growing a personal database of facts to retrieve, but about asking questions of the facts and organizing the answers in meaningful ways.

Online learning. Today there are many different strategies being developed for producing online courses and programs (Allen & Seaman, 2010). While there are good reasons to move in that direction, including perceived demands by prospective students, it is important to note that most of the graduates in this study were surprised by the impact of their traditional classroom experiences. They continued to correspond online with favorite professors and they referenced the importance of their campus being current with technology, but classroom learning experiences held great weight in their descriptions of college. These descriptions were often in contrast to what they had known prior to college, and they believed that intellectual dialogue had given them tools for communicating ideas in their adult lives. This result may have special impact for first-generation students, who grew up in households without college-educated parents. Working-class households may not assume intellectual discourse as normal in family interactions. Therefore, college may be their first encounter with such dialogue and this interaction, which includes subtle cues such as body language and intonation, cannot be duplicated online.

There have been few studies to establish if online course outcomes are comparable to traditional courses (Anstine & Skidmore, 2005). However, since online learning is perceived to be a natural method for increasing access at lower costs, it is likely to continue to grow as a medium for instruction in higher education. Therefore, colleges must be deliberate and conscious of its limitations as well as its advantages. Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt (2006) suggested that

[educators] need to understand two things: first, that online education has evolved from previous conceptions of education; and second, that there are social, political, economic, and ethical assumptions and implications in what appear to be simple actions of design and instruction. (p. 567)

Most measures for learning continue to be quantitative and therefore misleading in context of the experiences of the students in this study. Relationships with real professors and advisors in real time and space made lasting impressions and changed these students' perspective of education and what it means to learn. Since online learning is a virtual medium by definition, it would seem to fall short of the demands for personal interaction expressed by participants in this study. College educators should be wary of easy online programming plans that meet the quantitative outcomes for commercial success without addressing the qualitative social needs of fully-educated persons.

Teacher/student interaction: Recognize working-class students in the classroom.

Before and during their years as undergraduates, participants referenced lack of educational system support in subtle ways. Most believed that they were off the radar because of their socioeconomic status, both in and out of the classroom. As higher education professionals encounter similar students, it may be important for them to recognize students' facility for agency and risk taking in order to achieve identity change. For many working-class, first-generation students, one of the biggest risks they take is when they assume the role of college student. They must actively create the impression that they can follow the rules of middle-class interaction in classroom and social settings. Collier and Morgan (2008) found that cultural disadvantages are cumulative and academic success alone is not enough to

overcome the shortfall. “Universities and colleges must ensure that the path to success depends on students’ academic abilities, rather than on their abilities to understand what professors expect of them” (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p. 445).

Community dynamics are often outside the realm of school system control and many factors are in front of school professionals each day. Students need advocates to make them and their attributes visible and worthy of appropriate support. Not all students have the innate personal confidence of these achievers. Weaver and Qi (2005) described the intricate interplay between assumed expectations within the classroom setting.

Classrooms are the workplace for instructors and student, where statuses are defined, goals and tasks are laid out, and rules are specified. As with all organizations, beneath this formal structure lies an implicit, informal one wherein actors conduct their daily activities while adhering to mostly unstated rules pursuing ill-specified goals that may deviate from or even undermine the stated ones. Students need to understand and negotiate between both the formal and informal systems to survive or thrive at all levels of their schooling. (p. 571)

Implications for Theory

Identity. The students interviewed for this study shared a personality trait of confidence and perceived efficacy in their lives. Their obvious use of first-person pronouns at strategic points in their memories indicated ownership of decisions about their lives. Identity was not something primarily ascribed to them by physical or geographical circumstances. Many of the graduates talked about being different or unusual from an early age and they accepted that description. The fluid identity themes fit their perspectives of life and their desire to change their identities as they matured. Identity is constructed

through both conventional and idiosyncratic means (Burke & Stets, 2009), and the idiosyncratic role took precedence as a key factor for the students interviewed in this study.

In a society where identity is often assigned at birth by zip code, skin color, gender, and income, it takes a great deal of personal awareness and fortitude to go against the grain of those parameters. The participants in this study did just that. Their identities were malleable and seemed fluid in comparison to many of their peers who did not make it to college graduation. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) suggested that such agency is necessary to overcome habitus and the strength of societal reproduction. These graduates understood they were in new territories as they explored the lives that they were creating and they were willing to accept the personal losses as well as cherish the gains. They no longer fit the old worlds they left behind and they were not yet fully chartered into the new worlds they were joining.

Retention. Issues of individual identity relate directly to the retention of first-generation college students. While none of the graduates mentioned conventional identity-group affiliations such as clubs or organizations that sought them out as first-generation students to make them feel more comfortable on campus, they each had individual stories of someone making them feel visible. The participants mentioned individual relationships with trusted staff and professors who engaged them in discussions of their future, including potential options that the students may not have investigated on their own.

Graduates in this study frequently referenced situations where they felt they had come upon important life skills information too late to act upon them, such as scholarships or available programs to enhance future careers. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) described development hurdles and stresses that all college students must learn to manage, but they

also emphasized that first-generation students are at a disadvantage in middle-class college environments. Campus language is middle-class and campus structures are based on middle-class ideals of form and function. These are puzzles for working-class students to solve before they get to the substance of the problems before them each day. Since social class distinctions are often less apparent initially than other minority groups, special effort must be made to recognize and address issues of social exclusion and possible alienation from campus resources.

Social mobility. Since income in the United States is directly related to levels of education, the findings of this study have ramifications for potential social mobility of first-generation college students. The five themes of fluid identity were pivotal for these students to achieve middle-class lives as adults. Mobility was hard work as participants took it upon themselves to learn new symbols, codes, and attitudes necessary to function comfortably in middle-class environments. These environments included classroom settings, social functions, and workplaces. In the end, they found they could not achieve such mobility on their own. Whether through formal relationships with staff and professionals on campus or casual relationships with friends or extended family, participants learned to trust people who believed in them as individuals. These people provided specific tools to help them reach their goals. Perhaps most importantly, these college graduates not only endured changes they faced but welcomed them. When Robyn stated, “I don’t know who I am considering where I came from,” it exemplified this energy of constant flux. She did not say it with sadness or remorse, but with anticipation and hope. Each of the five themes—agency, advocates, mutability, reward and fortitude—drove these participants forward to what they considered a new and better life. They spoke of the

intrinsic value of the educations they received as a reward for all their efforts, and they believed they would continue to change and grow as they matured.

If social mobility is often measured statistically by changes in annual income, then the metric easily overlooks other more qualitative measures in the lives of people moving through class structures. These participants testified to class markers they encountered in adapting to life on a middle-class college campus. Such middle-class markers were represented in language, childhood experiences, adult expectations, financial resources, and general attitudes of safety and security. These working-class students were frequently amazed at how easy life seemed for middle-class students who knew nothing of the various stresses within single-parent and low-income households. The participants sometimes shielded their middle-class friends from the realities of their personal histories. Many were not sure how they might really fit into the new neighborhoods and work environments they planned to inhabit. However daunting as it seemed, they all planned to follow the trail to class mobility in spite of the often lonely journey.

Pedagogy. It is very important for instructors to be aware of the classroom histories of many first-generation working-class students. Because public education resources are often distributed according to individual zip codes, many low-income students attend less than adequate schools. Teaching methods may serve to help them pass standardized state tests, but they may not have had access to advanced curriculum or teaching practices.

Once on campus, many of the participants in this study discovered discourse as a teaching tool for the first time. They mentioned the difference in learning for a student who gets to talk about subjects and form ideas through analysis and expression in real time. They compared this to their high school experiences where they were more likely to be fed

information on which they were then tested. An additional component was the impact of direct classroom interaction with instructors. Because of low student/teacher ratios, these graduates were grateful for their choice of colleges. They recognized that the method of instruction had meant a lot to their perceived quality of a course. Context seemed as important to them as content.

This method of instruction also led to a surprise outcome for several of them. They believed that even at a Christian college campus, their philosophical and political views had become broader and more liberal. One phrase used often to describe this pattern was, “I found out that just because my dad was a Republican, I didn’t need to be.” Many of them had been raised in households where being a Christian meant you held conservative political views, but at college they met respectable people who considered themselves Christian and liberal. They described this as a revelation.

Implications for Research

The stories of these successful graduates suggest questions for future research. If the five fluid identity themes indeed came together to support the efforts of the participants, is it possible to identify and train other first-generation students in the themes? Would it be possible to create a tool to screen for these factors as students progress through K-12, in order to instill the dynamic or to reinforce it? For instance, is agency an inherent personality trait or can it be created and taught? Mutability would also be such an individual characteristic, as well as the ability to find intrinsic values in objects or ideas, and fortitude. Advocates are external components, but the concept could be consciously applied to all learning environments for students who display the other traits.

If the United States really wants to build an educational system that supports merit achievement across all social classes, how many worthy students are being excluded from opportunity by systems of admissions recruiting that rely on Zip code sorting? Education systems in the United States purport to award merit, but actually reproduce class structures that limit access to poor and working-class students. If intelligence is distributed throughout the population in a relatively equal ratio, then how many bright children are being denied access to quality, publicly-funded schools?

Are professors, advisors, and college administrative staff being trained to recognize and support efforts of working-class, first-generation students as they navigate the middle-class structure at most college campuses? Because of social class differences in classroom behavior, instructors can misinterpret passive responses as lazy or disinterested instead of submissive to authority. Students from less adequate public school systems may be at a disadvantage in their abilities to produce written assignments or engage in dialogic interpretations of material. Students who seem tired and inattentive in class may not be showing signs of partying all night, but working the night shift at the local gas station. Are college faculty and staff being trained to recognize their assumptions and challenge them in context of working-class students' experiences?

As all higher education systems rely to some degree on online access to courses and programs, are the outcome measurements for success of online offerings including the need for improved critical thinking and interpersonal skills as part of an undergraduate experience? The need for personal interaction with faculty may be even more important for first-generation, working-class students than middle-class students. Higher level thinking skills are the result of intellectual exchanges in real time and space. Learning to think on

one's feet is an important component of succeeding in the workplace and in life. Middle-class students are more likely to come from households where such discussions are commonplace in daily life and they have honed these skills over time. Working-class, first-generation students are less likely to have been involved in such exchanges because the family dynamics in working-class households are more often authoritarian. In order to learn skills of negotiation and oral interpretation, adults need to experience dialogue at a high level. Online learning does not prepare college students for that arena. Therefore, it may be critical for first-generation working-class students to experience traditional college classroom environments.

These questions address issues pertaining to both structural and individual components of identity as first-generation students struggle to fit in on middle-class campuses. Structural changes become political quickly and individual changes are as complex as the people pursuing them. These are daunting issues, but understanding them is basic to the concept of true diversity and equal access. They are issues that must be faced if graduation rates are to become comparable across social classes.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of 12 first-generation, working-class college graduates. These were stories of success against the backdrop of personal and structural odds against it. What could they tell us about motivation and persistence? What made them tick? The study was designed to answer two general questions:

1. How would the graduates describe their college experiences?
2. What did those experiences mean to them?

As a researcher and first-generation college graduate, I had expected to hear stories of alienation and rejection from their families of origin. While there were indeed stories of stress and discomfort, the most prominent themes were of struggle and hardship leading to success in their adult lives. In fact, the most amazing features of the interviews were the common themes that I eventually described as features of Fluid Identity.

The first-generation college graduates who were interviewed for this study exemplified the courage, will, and intelligence necessary to succeed in the middle-class atmosphere of a traditional liberal arts college. They readily accepted the conversion experience necessary for success on campus. If identity is constructed through conventional and idiosyncratic means, these students represented the power of idiosyncratic action. The participants expressed an awareness of conventional boundaries that they encountered through childhood and adolescent experiences. Sometimes these were stories of personal victories and sometimes there were stories of pain and rejection. This set of students came back each time to pursue goals unfamiliar to family and childhood friends.

While the meanings of these experiences varied according to each individual, all of them placed great value on how becoming college graduates had profoundly changed them and their views of life. Indeed one of the strongest common patterns was how important it was that they be thought of as educated people. They believed that they were better community members and citizens than they would have been without their years in college. They believed that lifelong learning and education was not a means to an end but an end in itself. This seemed to be their definition of class mobility, not the new careers they found. Is this the real secret for retaining first-generation, working-class students?

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APPENDIX A

Consent to Participate in Research

What can first-generation college graduates tell us about their college experience?

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Janet Weirick, who is a doctoral student from the Education Leadership and Foundations Department at Indiana State University. Ms. Weirick is conducting this study for her doctoral dissertation. Dr. William Barratt is her faculty sponsor for this project.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You should read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a first-generation college graduate from a working-class background.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to discover if first-generation students felt supported by their decisions to create lives unfamiliar to their families and communities of origin, or if they experienced *crossroad* moments when they chose to stay on to finish their degree instead of dropping out of college.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in research interviews, lasting approximately 90 minutes.
2. Be available for follow-up interviews at the request of the researcher.
3. Provide feed-back to written transcripts of said interviews, to verify their validity.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

We expect that any risks, discomforts, or inconveniences will be minor and we believe that they are not likely to happen. If discomforts become a problem, you may discontinue your participation.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

It is not likely that you will benefit directly from participation in this study, but the research should help us learn.

This study does not include procedures that will improve your general health or well-being.

PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

You will not receive any payment or other compensation for participation in this study. There is also no cost to you for participation.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of a code number to let Ms. Weirick and Dr. Barratt know who you are. We will not use your name in any of the information we get from this study or in any of the research reports. When the study is finished, we will destroy the list that shows which code number goes with your name.

Information that can identify you individually will not be released to anyone outside the study. Ms. Weirick will, however, use the information collected in her dissertation and other publications. We also may use any information that we get from this study in any way we think is best for publication or education. Any information we use for publication will not identify you individually.

The audio transcripts that we make will not be reviewed by anyone outside the study unless we have you sign a separate permission form allowing us to use them. The transcripts will be destroyed three years after the end of the study.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether or not to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances at the time require such action.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact

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RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Indiana State University, Office of Sponsored Programs, Terre Haute, IN 47809, by phone at (812) 237-8217, or e-mail the IRB at irb@indstate.edu. You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Printed Name of Subject

Signature of Subject

Date

Indiana State University
Institutional Review Board
APPROVED

IRB Number:

Approval:

Expiration Date:

APPENDIX B**Participant Recruiting Letter**

Janet K. Weirick
Indiana State University
February 15, 2010
Dear Participant,

I am a doctoral candidate at Indiana State University, Terre Haute, in the Educational Leadership Department. As part of my dissertation research, I am conducting a study of first-generation college graduates. I am interested in what you think and feel about your experiences during college and afterward. I'm also interested in how achieving your goal of a college education has affected your personal life and career choices.

If you choose to participate, I will contact you to arrange for a personal interview. When I meet with you, we will spend about 90 minutes together and I'll have prepared open-ended questions based on the focus of my research. I may re-contact you for follow-up information or confirmation of our discussion. I will call you or contact you through e-mail at that time. I have acquired permission from the Institutional Review Board of Indiana State University and confidentiality will be a priority during the study.

In order to make an informed decision concerning participation in this study, I need to make you aware of your rights as a participant and explain to you how this study may be used.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from participation at any time during or after the study. You have the right to review all interview material and all or parts of your interview from my study. Please do not hesitate to contact me with concerns or questions about your participation. I can be reached by phone during daytime hours at 219.895.0178. You may also contact me via my email address at jkweirick@gmail.com.

Your identity will remain protected during and after the study. To ensure confidentiality, I will code all participant's names rather than using real names in my study.

If you choose to participate in my study, please complete the attached consent form and keep this letter for future reference. Thank you for considering participation in my study.

Sincerely,

Janet K. Weirick

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions

1. Describe what being a college graduate means to you.
2. What part did your college years play in creating the person you are now?
3. Describe some encounters with faculty and staff during your years at college.
4. How did your family and childhood friends respond to your college years?
5. Tell me about the friends you made in college.
6. What surprised you most about your years in college?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share about your college experience?

APPENDIX D

Participant Profiles

Name	Gr. Year	Age	Major	Occupation	Parents Marital Status	College Funding	Parents Occupation
Brandon	2008	25	Business Administration	Retail Sales	Married	Loans, Employment	Factory Hourly (F&M)
Collin	2005	27	History and Philosophy	Political Consultant	Married	Scholarships, Loans, Employment	F-Small Engine Repair M-Homemaker, Clerical-Elementary School
Donna	2007	26	American Sign Language	Sign Language Contractor	Divorced	Scholarships, Loans, Employment	F-Gen. Hourly M-Homemaker, Retail Clerk
Evan	2006	33	Ministry	Corporate Sales	Divorced	Scholarships, Loans, Employment	Misc. Hourly
Kimberly	2006	26	Business and Marketing	Human Resources	Married	Scholarships, Loans, Employment	F-Sales Rep. M-Customer Service
Lily	2006	26	Psychology	Non-Profit Administrator	Divorced	Scholarships, Loans, Employment	F-Photographer M-CNA, Clerical, Retail
Londa	2005	29	Education	5 th grade Teacher	Divorced	Scholarships, Loans, Employment	F-Computer Administrator M-Hair

							Stylist
Marlo	2008	26	Psychology	Graduate Student	Married	Scholarships, Loans, Employment	F-Photographer M-Clerk
Meredith	2008	24	Psychology	Unemployed	Married	Scholarships, Loans, Employment	F-Construction Contractor M-Homemaker
Michael	2007	26	Education	Pharmacy Tech	Divorced	Scholarships, Loans, Employment	F-Contractor M-Misc. Hourly
Robyn	2006	26	Psychology	Pre-Med Student	Divorced	Scholarships, Loans, Employment	F-Computer Support M-Misc. Hourly
Sandy	2007	26	Psychology	Graduate Student	Divorced	Scholarships, Loans, Employment	F-Mechanic M-Beautician

APPENDIX E

Interview Schedule

Interview complete	Location	Interview Date	Notes	Color	Pseudo
yes	Elkhart	8/24/2010	Interview in his home	Aqua Blue	Michael
yes	Elkhart	8/25/2010	Interview at her work: 5th-grade classroom	Br. Pink	Londa
yes	Chicago	8/26/2010	Interview at restaurant (Downers Grove)	Lime Gr.	Robyn
yes	Fort Wayne	8/31/2010	Interview in her home	Br. Orange	Donna
yes	South Bend	9/1/2010	Interview in her home	Lgt. Orange	Lily
yes	Niles, MI	9/12/2010	Interview in his home	Orange	Evan
yes	Granger	9/7/2010	interview at his work	Yellow	Collin
yes	Granger	9/7/2010	Interview in her grandmother's home	Lgt. Blue	Meredith
yes	Terre Haute	9/20/2010	Interview at Bayh Education Building ISU	Pink	Sandy
yes	South Bend	10/26/2010	Interview in her home	Purple	Marlo
yes	South Bend	11/2/2010	Interview at Starbucks	Dk. Blue	Kimberly
yes	Fort Wayne	10/12/2010	Interview at Fort Wayne Library	Red	Brandon

APPENDIX F**Participant Theme Frequency**

Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4	Theme 5
Donna	Donna	Donna	Donna	Donna
Lily	Lily		Lily	
Meredith	Meredith	Meredith	Meredith	
Londa	Londa	Londa	Londa	Londa
Robyn	Robyn	Robyn	Robyn	Robyn
Michael				Michael
Evan	Evan	Evan	Evan	Evan
Sandy	Sandy	Sandy	Sandy	
Collin	Collin	Collin	Collin	Collin
Brandon	Brandon	Brandon	Brandon	Brandon
Marlo	Marlo	Marlo	Marlo	
Kimberly	Kimberly		Kimberly	