

PICTURE THIS: PORTRAITS OF (BE)LONGING AND FIRST-GENERATION LOW  
INCOME STUDENTS' TRANSITION TO AND PERSISTENCE IN A  
POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTION

By

MARY-ANNE PRIMACK

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To my Mom, my first example of a social justice activist. I have the utmost respect for your tireless contributions to your family and to your community. I could not have done this without you.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	4
ABSTRACT .....	8
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION, RATIONALE AND PURPOSE OF STUDY .....	10
Introduction .....	10
Unique Characteristics of First-generation Students.....	11
Unique Characteristics of Low Income Students .....	12
FGLI Student Characteristics.....	13
Academic and Social Challenges for FGLI College Students .....	14
Rationale to Explore FGLI Postsecondary Outcomes.....	16
The Value of Postsecondary Education for FGLI students .....	17
The Value of FGLI Postsecondary Degree Attainment for Society .....	17
Purpose of Study .....	19
Research Questions .....	20
Scope of the Study .....	21
Implications of the Study.....	22
Chapter Summary.....	23
2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....	24
Student Engagement .....	26
Student Involvement.....	27
Student Integration .....	28
Academic Preparation.....	30
College Choice .....	31
Transition to College.....	34
Social and Cultural Transitions.....	34
Family Dynamics .....	35
Institutional Interventions .....	37
Orientation Programs .....	37
Financial Aid.....	39
Persistence in College .....	45
Campus Climate.....	45
Faculty Practice and Pedagogy.....	47
Learning Communities .....	48
Academic Advising .....	50
Implications of Institutional Interventions .....	51
Theoretical Framework .....	53
Chapter Summary.....	58

3	RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN.....	60
	Research Questions .....	60
	Qualitative Methods in Educational Research .....	61
	Institutional Context for the Study .....	62
	Sample.....	65
	Profiles of Study Participants .....	68
	Angel .....	68
	Anna.....	69
	Grace.....	70
	Alicia.....	71
	Franko .....	72
	Kermit.....	72
	Analytic Method .....	73
	Visual Methods in Educational Research.....	74
	Photo Elicitation .....	75
	Participant-driven Photo Elicitation Interviews .....	78
	Data Collection .....	80
	PDPE Protocol .....	81
	Interview Guide .....	82
	Data Analysis.....	84
	Interview Transcription.....	85
	Interview Coding .....	86
	Positionality, Bias.....	88
	Member Checking.....	90
	Trustworthiness .....	91
	Limitations.....	92
	Benefits for Participants .....	93
	Chapter Summary.....	94
4	FINDINGS.....	95
	Research Questions .....	95
	Transition.....	98
	Family Dynamics .....	98
	Reliance on High School Resources and Challenges Associated with Being a FGLI Student.....	104
	Financial Constraint and Challenges Associated with Being a First Generation Low Income Student.....	108
	Persistence .....	114
	Partnership Program Support for FGLI Students.....	114
	Peer Network Support .....	119
	Sense of Belonging.....	123
	Sense of Belonging for FGLI students.....	123
	Sense of Belonging, Identity and Culture .....	124
	Sense of Belonging and Support.....	126
	Chapter Summary.....	127

5	DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION .....	129
	Research Questions .....	129
	Summary of Findings .....	131
	Family Dynamics .....	132
	Reliance on High School Resources for College Enrollment and Participation.....	137
	Partnership Program Support for FGLI Students .....	140
	Peer Network .....	142
	Selected Institutional Initiatives: Orientation Programs and Financial Aid.....	144
	Orientation Programs .....	144
	Financial Aid.....	145
	Sense of Belonging.....	149
	Recommendations for Practitioners.....	153
	Practitioner support for Parent and Family Involvement.....	153
	Practitioner support for K-12 Collaboration and College Outreach Initiatives .	154
	Practitioner Support for the Development of Peer Networks among Students.....	156
	Limitations and Directions for Future Research .....	157
	Conclusions .....	159
	APPENDIX: DEDOOSE CODE APPLICATION EXAMPLE .....	162
	REFERENCES.....	163
	BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	177

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By

Mary-Anne Primack

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Cochair: Luis Ponjuan  
Major: Educational Leadership

Among college students nationwide, first-generation low income (FGLI) college students have lower rates of persistence to graduation. "Sense of belonging" is an important factor in the academic and social success of college students and further examination of this factor is needed to understand the transition and persistence experiences of FGLI students. This dissertation focuses on the perspectives of FGLI college students enrolled in a large, public, four year, PWI. Participants involved in this qualitative study describe and document their transition to, and persistence in, college through photo elicitation interviews. Through the presentation of interview data and participant photographs, family dynamics as well as financial constraints are discussed, academic and social support systems are identified and students' development of a sense of belonging to the campus community is examined. This study has implications for those who are concerned with the success of FGLI students, practitioners who provide direct services to FGLI students or other underrepresented students, students interested in taking an active role in assisting in the transition and retention of FGLI



students, and those who are concerned with postsecondary transition and retention issues related to FGLI students and other underrepresented student populations.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION, RATIONALE AND PURPOSE OF STUDY

### **Introduction**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics in 2008, 56% of children living in the United States ages 6 through 18 years resided with parents or guardians whose highest level of educational attainment was a high school diploma or less. That same year, out of the 35.2 million young adults, 15.5 million were from families living at, near, or below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008a). Despite these indicators that often are associated with disadvantage and deficit in education and economic standards, many of these young people demonstrate academic resilience, earn a high school diploma or an equivalent qualification and enter postsecondary education. For the purpose of this study, I will refer to these students as first-generation low-income (FGLI) college students. While some form of postsecondary education is accessible to U.S. citizens now more than ever before, not all students are equally likely to transition to college and to persist to degree attainment (Pike & Kuh, 2005). The segment of FGLI college students who persist beyond the first year of college and graduate are disproportionately lower than that of continuing-generation students (Chen, 2005; Ishitani, 2006). In particular, recent research highlights how low socioeconomic status can influence the educational success of first-generation students (Harper, Patton & Wooden, 2009; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Smith, 2011; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). Current inequities in educational attainment suggest that the problems of access and achievement in postsecondary education are influenced by income disparities, and other factors (e.g. race, immigration status), and additional

research is needed to understand this complex educational issue (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002; Bowen, Kurtzwell & Tobin, 2005; Perna, 2006).

While historically underserved students include low-income students who are from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, by no means does this suggest that these groups are only racial/ethnic minorities. Although not all economically challenged students are educationally challenged and not all those who come from families with lower levels of formal education are economically challenged, this collective group of FGLI students faces similar obstacles in gaining access to college, report similar kinds of experiences and levels of involvement while enrolled, and have similar outcomes after college (Walpole, 2007). In fact, we need to examine FGLI students as a heterogeneous group that reflects students from low-income families from all racial/ethnic groups to gain a detailed understanding of their common challenges. According to Walpole (2007) the research on “low-SES, low-income, first-generation, and working-class students clearly overlaps conceptually, if not operationally,” and the author proposes “creating a broader category to include all the research on this population” (p.14). Walpole suggests that referencing other studies’ definitions and findings, as well as viewing students’ experiences holistically, may provide new insights that will assist policymakers and practitioners.

### **Unique Characteristics of First-generation Students**

The small amount of research that does focus solely on first-generation college students typically examines statistical relations with other important variables related to college success (Orb, 2004). For instance, in their extensive study of first-generation college students, Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) found that these students (as compared to students whose parents had some college experience),

attended less selective institutions and had lower cumulative grade point averages. Additionally, first-generation college students perceived the college environment as less supportive and were found to be less engaged overall, in that they were less likely to participate in an honors program or in student organizations or interact with other students or faculty to the same extent as continuing-generation students (Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). While one of the studies cited here was conducted in the 1980s, their findings were corroborated by more recent longitudinal research conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (1998), which found that first-generation college students are less likely to complete any degree, even when controlling for age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (NCES, 1998). Moreover, Warburton, Bugarin, and Nunez (2001) observed that first-generation college students are less likely to remain enrolled in a four-year institution or be on a track to a bachelor's degree. Additionally, according to Bowen, Chingos and McPherson (2009) among first-generation college students in every income quartile, "more students graduated in more than four years than in four years or less" (p. 22).

### **Unique Characteristics of Low Income Students**

Socio-economics plays a significant role in the ability to go to college and research indicates that students from low families are disadvantaged in college preparation, application, enrollment, and degree completion (Cabrera, Burkum & LaNasa, 2005; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Walpole, 2007). Low-SES students disproportionately attend high schools that do not focus on preparing students for college and have fewer counseling resources (Walpole, 2007). In addition, low-SES and low-income students are more likely than high-SES and high-income students to lack

access to rigorous course work and to be tracked away from honors and advanced placement courses (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000a; Perna, 2006; Terenzini et al., 2001).

According to Thayer (2000), family income is the greatest predictor of college enrollment even when ability is considered. Bowen et al., (2009) report, “compared to students from families in the bottom income quartile, top-income students have high school graduation rates that are 23 percentage points higher, college enrollment rates that are 38 points higher, and college graduation rates that are 32 points higher” (p. 22). Even among students who make the transition to four-year institutions, Bowen et al., (2009) state that low-income students are substantially less likely than high-income students to earn a bachelor’s degree by age 26. In sum, low-SES students are not only less likely to enroll in and graduate from college, they also take additional time to complete their studies.

### **FGLI Student Characteristics**

There is a large body of research literature confirming that characteristics such as parental education and socioeconomic status are associated with educational outcomes (Oseguera & Astin, 2004; Bergerson, 2009, Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pike & Kuh, 2005). For example, Pike, Hansen, & Lin, (2011) report while their preliminary analyses found that “both first-generation status and low-income status were negatively related to grades, the combination of first-generation and low-income status was most strongly related to lower grades” (p. 14). The extant research on social class and first-generation student status has laid extremely important groundwork, yet the emphasis has not been on examining the FGLI college student experiences that mediate the relation between those characteristics and FGLI college student outcomes (Langout, Drake, and Rosselli, 2009). Understanding

FGLI college student experiences is paramount because “student experiences must be linked to the structures and cultures of higher education—not dislocated from them” (Langout, Drake, and Rosselli, 2009, p. 167). In short, both parental education and family income are strongly associated with graduation rates even when considered simultaneously and after controlling for related differences in student characteristics, particularly academic preparation (Bowen et al., 2009). Such an understanding is particularly important to higher education scholars, researchers, and practitioners because a college education is a crucial component of our nation’s opportunity structure (Bowen et al., 2005).

### **Academic and Social Challenges for FGLI College Students**

The research literature on FGLI college students consistently demonstrates that these students are at a disadvantage with regard to preparation for the rigor and culture of postsecondary institutions (Bowen et al., 2005; Thayer, 2000; Tinto, 2006; Watt, & Lozano, 2007). Compared to peers, these students tend to be not only academically underprepared but also often lack knowledge of college admissions and financial aid processes, and due to their differential access to resources students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds cannot engage in the college choice process in the same ways as their middle- and upper-income peers (Bergerson, 2009). These students may also lack support or the intergenerational benefits of information about college from within their families since knowledge about the college going experience is likely limited (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Perna, 2006). These limited experiences usually result in creating less than optimal learning environments for incoming FGLI students.

Once FGLI college students enroll, they are more likely to live off-campus, commute to campus, work part-time jobs while enrolled, and enroll on a part-time basis

(Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Compared to their peers, FGLI college students participate less in co-curricular activities, are less likely to develop strong relationships with other students and are less likely to engage with faculty (Kim & Sax, 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Collectively, these characteristics play a role in shaping the postsecondary experiences of FGLI college students and may impede them from being academically and socially successful. Overwhelmingly, FGLI students start college underprepared, enroll in more remedial college coursework than their continuing-generation peers, have difficulty in selecting an academic major, have lower first-year grade averages, lag behind in credit accumulation, and have lower graduation rates (Chen, 2005; Overton-Healy, 2010). These findings confirm the importance of understanding “how students manage the difficulties of transition to becoming part of the overall college community” (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 340). The outcomes of students’ sense of belonging may impact students’ behaviors that relate to their transition and persistence, such as the quality of students’ social interactions, students’ selection of academic programs, and their use of support services (Hurtado & Carter).

Bowman, Hurtado, Locks, and Oseguera (2008) have suggested that those concerned with social equity in higher education need to continue to work on gaining a better insight into the transition and retention of FGLI postsecondary students – particularly on the challenges these students may face at the 4-year institutions both in a social and academic capacity. The authors describe that “sense of belonging” in the college student literature, has been shown to be an essential outcome of students’ engagement, involvement and academic and social integration experiences on campus

(Bowman et al., 2008). In this study, I utilized Hurtado and Carter's (1997) notion of students' "sense of belonging" as their psychological sense of identification and affiliation with the campus community. According to Hurtado and Carter, additional studies are needed to validate the links among students' perceptions and experiences of their transition to and persistence in college and their sense of belonging. Therefore, further examination about how a sense of belonging facilitates college transitions and long-term success in college is critical in understanding how to improve transition into and graduation from college for FGLI students (Bowen et al., 2005; Bowman et al., 2008; Olivia, 2004; Perna, 2006).

### **Rationale to Explore FGLI Postsecondary Outcomes**

As argued by university presidents both past and present (e.g. William G. Bowen, past president of Princeton University and Bernard J. Machen, current president of the University of Florida), by scholars (Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009; Perna, 2006) and demonstrated in prior descriptive reports (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2002), a variety of economic and non-economic benefits are associated with higher education. High school graduates who attained a bachelor's degree by 2000, "appeared to benefit economically in terms of higher average incomes, greater likelihood of health insurance coverage, lower likelihood of receiving public assistance, greater job satisfaction, and greater perceived connection between higher education and employment-related benefits" (Perna, 2006, p. 44). Attaining a bachelor's degree rather than no postsecondary education was associated with greater non-economic benefits "in the form of lower rates of smoking cigarettes, more frequent attendance at plays and concerts, and greater civic involvement as measured by both regular voting and volunteering in a civic or community organization" (Perna, 2006, p.



44). The benefits of a completed postsecondary education make the lack of completion costly for individuals, families, communities, and society (Eitel & Martin, 2009).

### **The Value of Postsecondary Education for FGLI students**

Researchers argue the many ways in which higher levels of educational attainment produce economic returns for an individual, but also non-economic benefits in the realms of cognitive learning, emotional and moral development, family life, citizenship, consumer behavior, leisure, and health for an individual (Bowen et al., 2009). The research literature indicates that there are important differences between continuing generation students and FGLI students with regard to persistence characteristics, behaviors and experiences (Lofink & Paulsen, 2005). If FGLI students attend college, many times they leave with debt and no degree (Howard & Levine, 2004). Enrolling in postsecondary education and leaving without a degree has significant negative consequences (e.g. monetary, occupational) as students who fail to graduate from a four-year college are not as likely to have the same favorable conditions for gaining full access to our country's economic, political, and social opportunities (Perna, 2006). For high school graduates without postsecondary education, the job market has witnessed a decline in wages and the necessity of passing minimal competency tests as a condition for being hired (Haycock & Huang, 2001).

### **The Value of FGLI Postsecondary Degree Attainment for Society**

The value of higher education is evidenced in a form of governmental and societal investment. According to Leonhardt (2009), a college education helps society "leverage every other investment it makes, be it in medicine, transportation, or alternative energy" (p. 48). The annual differential in earnings associated with college

graduates compared to individuals with some college (\$45,221 as opposed to \$31, 936) helps federal and state governments to increase their tax revenues as the number of college-educated individuals increases (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006a). This disparity affects many given that 19.5% of the population of individuals in the United States who are 25 years and older attempted college but did not obtain a degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006b). In budget materials related to higher education which were released by the White House and which presented an overview of President Obama's 2010 fiscal budget, these disparities were acknowledged by noting that there is an "opportunity gap," as well as a shortfall in the overall number of college graduates (Obama, 2009b, p.1).

However, economic gains are not the only reason to assert the significance of increasing levels of educational attainment for the betterment of society. According to Bowen et al., (2009), disparities in educational attainment lead to "greater inequalities of all kinds, which in turn have multiple long-term effects" (p. 9). In writing about an unequal America, Gudrais (2008) noted that research indicates "high inequality reverberates through societies on multiple levels, correlating with, if not causing, more crime, less happiness, poorer mental and physical health, less racial harmony, and less civic and political participation" (p. 22-23). Not surprisingly, according to Gudrais there is evidence that "living in a society with wide disparities – in health, in wealth, in education – is worse for all the society's members" (p. 22-23). The struggle to improve educational attainment for FGLI students in higher education and to "reduce the marked disparities in outcomes that are so troubling" will mainly take place within the public

four-year universities (Bowen et al., 2009, p. 10). According to Walpole (2007), not only is this gap disturbing, but “its longevity is even more distressing” (p. 1).

### **Purpose of Study**

It has been over a decade since Hurtado and Carter (1997) first pointed out the omission of sense of belonging from most research on college student transition and persistence. Since then, a handful of studies examining sense of belonging in the university context have emerged, (Bowman et al., 2008; Hausmann et al., 2009; Ostrove & Long, 2007) however more research is necessary to clarify the role of sense of belonging in student transition and persistence. The current study investigates the significance of one factor that, although not traditionally emphasized in prevailing models of the college student experience, has recently been identified as an area needing increased attention in research on student transition and persistence: students' sense of belonging to their college or university (Bowen et al., 2005, Bowman, 2008; Hausmann et al., 2009;; Olivia, 2004; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Perna, 2006). This study extends the literature by examining the perspectives of FGLI college students and their transition to and persistence in college. Specifically, this qualitative study seeks to contribute to an understanding of how those students document, through participant-driven photo elicitation, their transitions to the university environment and how they have persisted in their academic pursuits, given the obstacles recognized by college access and retention scholars—e.g., Olivia (2004) and Perna (2006).

Towards that end, this qualitative inquiry relies on the visual method of participant-driven photo elicitation (PDPE) research. This method is based on the premise that using photographic materials during the interview process can increase the participant's feeling of involvement with the interview and research process, assist with

their memory recall, and enable them to provide more nuanced responses. In this study, the participants appeared to find the approach provided them with an opportunity to reflect, recollect, and represent their experiences. These elements of the photo elicitation approach can help the researcher create better interpretations of participant observations (Birnbaum, 2009).

### **Research Questions**

The qualitative research approach of PDPE will address the research questions: (1) How do FGLI undergraduate students document their transition into and persistence in a four-year higher education institution? (2) how do FGLI undergraduate students perceive their educational and social experiences in this institution? (3) to what factors do FGLI students attribute to their college aspiration, transition and persistence?

Ostrove and Long (2007) suggest that there are many ways in which people derive a sense of belonging, and multiple dimensions along which belonging can be structured. In their study of low income college students the researchers examined how social class impacted persistence in college through a sense of belonging. Other researchers have utilized this framework to help understand the higher education experiences of underrepresented and marginalized students. In a recent study, Welch (2009) explored the experiences of underrepresented and marginalized students' educational and social experiences. He found that these students developed a sense of belonging that facilitated their transition and persistence. Also, Winkle-Wagner (2009) asserts the need for more research that examines how students from underrepresented groups make meaning of their transition and persistence experiences. These scholars highlight the importance of exploring how FGLI students develop a sense of belonging on their campus.

## **Scope of the Study**

There are many populations of students requiring purposeful interventions to improve their academic outcomes; in this study, however, I will consider college access and success for traditional-aged, English speaking FGLI first-time and full-time enrolled college students due to the volume of research documenting their decreased academic achievement and other disparities in educational outcomes. In chapter three I provide a summary of the overall background characteristics of participants, followed by a more detailed demographic description of each participant I recruited and my relationship to them. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities and to maintain confidentiality throughout the study.

According to Bowen et al., (2009), approximately two-thirds of all full-time students pursue bachelor's degrees at public four-year colleges and universities. I located my study within a southeastern research extensive institution because of the prominent role four-year institutions play in developing the next generation of skilled leaders and workers. Additionally according to Bowen et al., (2009), the greater selectivity of flagship universities means a greater concentration of students from privileged backgrounds due to the correlation between academic preparation and family background and these institutions are typically considered predominantly White institutions (PWI). The positioning of this study in a PWI is significant as overwhelmingly research indicates that elements of the minority FGLI college student experience may inhibit students' development of a sense of belonging, especially at large, research extensive, PWI's (Hurtado and Carter, 1997; Thayer, 2000; Walpole, 2007; Welch, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, 2009) . Particularly salient for FGLI college students, according to Bowen et al., (2009), is evidence that suggests that having

additional family resources matters more in a setting such as a large, public university – and less in an intimate setting, such as a private college. In the more intimate settings, the authors speculate that the institutions themselves may provide “more of the support for students from all backgrounds that family resources help to buy for the more affluent students in the less intimate settings” (p. 205).

### **Implications of the Study**

Research suggests that first-generation students comprise over 20% of all college students, yet the majority of these students leave postsecondary institutions without ever earning a degree (Chen, 2005). This study provides new insights regarding the transition to and persistence in college as captured in interviews and images by a small, specific group of FGLI college students. Through photo elicitation and participant narratives, this study will explore first-generation low income students’ transitions to the university environment and how these students have persisted in their academic pursuits. By understanding FGLI student experiences with transition and persistence and the influence of their sense of belonging on campus, mentors, student services professionals, faculty, and others will be better positioned to successfully co-create strategies for their college attendance and success (Coffman, 2011). Findings may provide scholars and practitioners greater insight into the postsecondary experiences of first-generation low income students and a better understanding of how these students transition to and persist in higher education. Failing to improve the educational attainment for these students decreases the chances of cultivating an educated democratic society.

## **Chapter Summary**

First-generation low income (FGLI) college students tend to have a much lower rate of persistence to graduation than do continuing generation students, due to many factors such as parental education and socioeconomic status, and racial and ethnic group. These students are at a disadvantage in their preparation for the rigor and culture of college, and once enrolled tend not to be as involved in the campus activities and culture. “Sense of belonging” is an important factor in the academic and social integration of FGLI students on campus, and further examination is needed to understand the transition and persistence experiences of FGLI students. This qualitative study will focus on perspectives of FGLI college students and their transition to and persistence in college, as documented through participant-driven photo elicitation.

## CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Access to and successful persistence through four-year undergraduate programs remains limited for low-income students and those who are first in their family to graduate from college, referred to in the higher education context as first-generation low income or FGLI students (Chen, 2005; Stage & Hamrick, 2004; Lofink & Paulsen, 2005; Perna, 2006). Although researchers agree that FGLI students are less likely to attend or graduate from college, “there has been little cohesiveness in defining and examining these students’ experiences” (Walpole, 2007). For example, some researchers focus on first-generation students in higher education without a clear link to income or socioeconomic status (SES) (Choy et al., 2000; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004), while others create a composite variable combining the two (Bowen et al., 2005; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). However, some scholars disagree about whether using a composite measure of SES is appropriate (Walpole, p. 11).

Because this study contains terms that have multiple meanings throughout the research literature and within society it is important to explain the intended manner in which certain terms will be used in this paper. Creswell (199) notes, “Researchers define terms so that readers can understand the context in which the words are being used or their unusual or restricted meaning” (p. 106). Within the context of this research, a first-generation college student is defined as a student who is the first in his/her family (mother, father, or siblings) to complete a college education (Payne, 2007; Thayer, 2000) with an associate or bachelor’s degree. A student from a low-income background is defined by their Pell Grant recipient status as a student who had an Expected Family Contribution (EFC) low enough to qualify the student to receive Pell grant funding.



Federal grants such as the Pell grant heavily target the bottom half of the income distribution (Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009). This means that the Estimated Family Contribution or EFC was at a level to make the student eligible for non-repayable federal funds. These first-generation low income (FGLI) college students are compared to continuing-generation (CG) college students.

The purpose of this literature review is to examine research literature on FGLI students to understand their academic and social experiences with transition to and persistence in higher education. Moreover, this chapter explores notions of student engagement, involvement and integration and how these relate to FGLI students' sense of belonging on campus. In this study, I utilized Hurtado and Carter's (1997) notion of students' "sense of belonging" as their psychological sense of identification and affiliation with the campus community. The research problem of this literature review concerns how to improve the transition to and persistence in college for FGLI students.

The subsequent sections contain a brief overview of the concepts of engagement, involvement and integration. This is followed by a broad survey of the college student transition and persistence literature with a focus on FGLI students and several associated post-secondary practices that have potential for shaping the outcomes of these students. Issues concerning the transition to college are considered along with campus based support services such as orientation programs and financial aid. The college student persistence literature is reviewed along with the related institutional initiatives of faculty practice and pedagogy, learning communities, and academic advising. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the theoretical

framework that guides this study, Hurtado and Carter's notion of students' "sense of belonging" (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

According to Wolf-Wendel, Ward & Kinzie (2009), established theories and constructs long associated with student success, such as engagement, involvement and integration inform our understanding of research and practice in higher education, especially with regard to FGLI college student achievement. The authors describe that these theories have "rich histories in research and have effectively guided educational practice for decades" (Wolf-Wendel et al., p. 407, 2009). An important aspect of the research process is the clarification of terms to form a basis for the discussion of the research. I begin my review of the body of research related to FGLI students with an explanation of some of the associated theories, concepts and terms.

### **Student Engagement**

Student engagement is a concept that involves both what the student does and what the institution does. Student engagement occurs as a result of the "amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success" (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). The other component that can contribute to student engagement is the way in which institutions of higher education allocate their resources and organize opportunities and services to encourage student participation in and benefit from such activities. According to Wolf-Wendel et al., (2009), engagement is about "two parties who enter into an agreement about the educational experience" (p. 413).

Engagement is a broad phenomenon that encompasses academic as well as selected non-academic and social aspects of the student experience. High levels of student engagement result from a wide range of behaviors and conditions, including

purposeful student–faculty interaction, and pedagogical practices such as active and collaborative learning. Engagement also is associated with programmatic interventions such as first-year seminars, service-learning courses, and learning communities (Kuh, 2008). Additionally the educational environment impacts engagement. Institutional climate and culture that is inclusive and affirming, where expectations for performance are clearly communicated and set at reasonably high levels supports student engagement (Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Outcomes associated with engagement are persistence and educational attainment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). While the outcomes of engagement are typically positive for most students (Kuh, 2003), not all students equally engage in curricular and co-curricular activities. For example, FGLI students, compared to their peers, participate less in co-curricular activities (Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005), are less likely to engage with faculty (Kim & Sax, 2009), and are more likely to work and live off campus (Engle & O'Brien, 2007). Overall, FGLI students are less engaged and less likely to successfully integrate into the college environment (Pike & Kuh). This is problematic as low levels of student engagement may impede collegiate success whereas high levels of student engagement are necessary for, and contribute to, FGLI student college completion (Kuh et al., 2005, 2007).

### **Student Involvement**

Astin (1984) defined involvement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to his/her academic experience” (p.518). According to Wolf-Wendel et al., (2009) this involvement can be both academic and social, though a focus on extracurricular involvement has tended to dominate much of the research. These

researchers also argue that involvement accounts for the time and energy that students spend but also “acknowledges the contribution of the environment” (p. 411).

Activities such as living on campus, working on campus, interacting with faculty members, engaging with peers, and being a member of clubs are the types of involvement typically measured under this theory (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Several outcome measures, including satisfaction, grades, retention, and graduation have been linked to extracurricular involvement (Pascarella & Terenzini). However, although both extracurricular and academic involvement are important, “research shows that academic involvement (e.g., hours spent studying and doing homework, asking questions in class, studying with other students, completing homework assignments) has more significant effects than other types of involvement” (Wolf-Wendel et al., p. 411). Regrettably, first-generation students report studying fewer hours in addition to being less involved in clubs and other social activities, and this lack of involvement has a negative correlation to GPA (Ackerball, 2007).

### **Student Integration**

The term integration is used to explain the “extent to which students come to share the attitudes and beliefs of their peers and faculty and the extent to which students adhere to the structural rules and requirements of the institution—the institutional culture” (Wolf-Wendel et al., p. 414, 2009). To create membership in a community, Tinto, (1993) contended that individuals need to integrate themselves into the social system. In higher education, integration involves social (personal affiliation) and intellectual (sharing of values) connections (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

The theory of academic and social integration was developed by Tinto (1993) to explain voluntary student departure from undergraduate institutions. Social and

academic integration form the cornerstones of Tinto's work on persistence. Social integration refers to "students' perceptions of interactions with the peer group, faculty, and staff at the institution as well as involvement in extra- and co-curricular activities" (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009, p. 415). Academic integration refers to "perceptions of the experiences in the formal and informal academic system resulting from interactions with faculty, staff, and students inside and outside the classroom settings that enhance the intellectual development of the student" (p. 415).

In the study conducted by Próspero & Vohra-Gupta (2007), the researchers found that academic integration had the highest positive contribution to academic achievement, more than any other variable among FGLI students. The researchers report that although FGLI students are less likely to participate in extracurricular college activities, their levels of involvement with their social networks have strong positive effects on critical thinking, preference for higher-order cognitive tasks, scientific reasoning, writing skills, sense of control over their own academic success, and educational degree plans.

Once students are admitted, institutions can work to ensure that students make a successful transition to the campus academically and socially. Hightower (2007) found that FGLI students who transition to supportive institutional environments with specifically-designed programs for them compare equally as well and sometimes outperform their CG peers. Engagement, involvement and integration are key to FGLI students' transition to college and practitioners can work with these students to provide services and activities designed to engage them (Walpole, 2007).

## **Academic Preparation**

Researchers argue that students' high school experiences, academic achievement, engagement, and their entering expectations and attitudes, are important predictors of college success (Cole, Kennedy, & Ben-Avie, 2009). According to Bowen et al., (2005), the major determinant of variations in educational attainment is the "differential college preparedness of advantaged and disadvantaged young people" (p. 224). "Preparedness," is dependent on the effectiveness of secondary education, as well as all the co-curricular factors, that determine how well students partake of available pre-collegiate preparatory educational opportunities (Bowen et al., 2005). The research addressing pre-college differences between FGLI students and students from more advantaged backgrounds highlights the disparity in academic preparation in high school.

According to Acker-Ball (2007) the background characteristics of FGLI students are less likely to promote and support higher education aspirations and success. The academic preparation of FGLI students in high school is "central to their educational aspirations, access to higher education, persistence and success" (p. 20). Additionally, higher academic achievement in high school increases the likelihood of college enrollment and students who are prepared academically have a greater chance of persisting through college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001).

The greatest predictor of postsecondary educational attainment is participation in an effective academic high school curriculum. The completion of a rigorous curriculum is strongly associated with "achieving a college degree, more so than grades or class rank" (Watt, 2007, p. 188). Regrettably, a significant amount of research indicates that "first-generation college students from low-income backgrounds are less prepared than

other students for the academic rigor or the culture of higher education” (Smith, 2011, p. 1). Economically disadvantaged students with undereducated parents are less likely to enroll in and complete a rigorous set of high school courses and more likely to be tracked away from honors and advanced placement courses (Walpole, 2007; Watt). Low-SES students disproportionately attend high schools with more limited resources and less emphasis on preparing students for college (Walpole). Given the obstacles to college preparation for FGLI students, it is reasonable to assume that many of these students reach their senior year of high school underprepared to participate in the college choice process.

### **College Choice**

College choice is a complex construct that incorporates students’ college aspirations, their plans, and the steps taken to actualize those aspirations. Bergerson (2009) published a comprehensive monograph on college access and success that spans two decades and identifies some of the prominent literature associated with college choice and access. According to the author, “family background, parental encouragement, the context in which students grow up, academic ability, schooling experiences, family structure, and information about postsecondary options all contribute to this process” (p. 47). Parents’ education and income are often included as components of family background characteristics that impact educational aspirations. However, parents who themselves do not have a college education may be limited in their ability to adequately promote these aspirations and guide their children in accessing postsecondary opportunities. These parents may rely on often limited school resources to ensure that their children receive information, guidance and support in the college choice process.

Information is a significant element of the college choice process. All potential college students require information about college opportunities, yet higher education scholars agree that there is differential access to this information. High school resources are affected by the socioeconomic status of the student population, resulting in “inequitable access to information and coursework essential to college preparation” (Bergerson, 2009, p. 30). Perna (2006) explains that potential FGLI college students may be “particularly disadvantaged by this characteristic of higher education markets if they are unable to obtain relevant information from their immediate family, school, or community context” (p. 108). Because of their differential access to these and other resources, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly those with parents who did not attend or did not graduate from college, cannot engage in the college choice process in the same ways as their peers who come from middle- and upper-income households with a college educated parent.

When FGLI students enroll in higher education organizations, the type of institution they attend “clearly shapes their college experiences and subsequent outcomes” (Walpole, 2007, p.69). For example, some FGLI students attend community colleges, some attend highly selective institutions, and many attend public comprehensive universities. Each of these institutions has a “different mission, organizational structure, and resource base from which to draw, and these differences shape students, experiences and outcomes” (p. 69). FGLI student status influences the approach to college choice as these students face “particular uncertainties about the payoffs of attending college that strongly influence whether and where they decide to attend” (Bergerson, 2009, p. 13). The research documenting social class differences in



students' college choice processes, college attendance rates, and the types of colleges they attend, confirms that FGLI students are less likely to attend college and more likely to attend a less selective institution when they do enroll in college (Oseguera & Astin, 2004; Bowen et al., 2005; Cabrera et al., 2001; Tinto, 2003). The fact that FGLI students disproportionately attend less selective colleges has long-term consequences, "as these institutions have lower graduation rates and graduate school attendance rates than more selective colleges" (Walpole, p. 29). Such institutions tend to have fewer economic resources despite serving a higher proportion of students with greater academic and financial need (Engle & O'Brien, 2007). Even among students who matriculate at four-year institutions, "low-SES students are substantially less likely than high-SES students to earn a bachelor's degree by age 26" (Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009, p. 22).

While there are many examples in the research of obstacles that FGLI students face overall, it is also important to keep in mind that these students come to college with a variety of pre-college characteristics and experiences. FGLI students' experiences and outcomes are "a multifaceted, interrelated, and synergistic combination of structural factors and individual decisions" (Walpole, 2007, p. 27). However varied these individual factors may be, Ostrove and Long (2007) assert that the academic literature on the lives and experiences of working-class women and men of all racial backgrounds in the United States who attend college, especially as first-generation college students, "consistently demonstrates that such students are at a disadvantage with respect to what they know about postsecondary education, have a more difficult transition from high school to college, and are less likely to persist to graduation than their middle-class

peers” ( p. 366-367). It is worth examining the transition to college for FGLI students and how the college transition process relates to FGLI students’ persistence in college.

### **Transition to College**

In addition to typical adjustments while in college, FGLI students may face increased difficulty with their transition into the college environment. They may have to bear the burden of a greater sense of familial obligation and pressure resulting in dissonance, discomfort and disconnection from family. They may also suffer from inadequate preparation and lack of support (i.e. institutional, financial and psychosocial) and often are from environments where the pursuit of a college education is an unknown and intimidating experience (Winkle-Wagner, 2009; Overton-Healy, 2010). The transition to college requires a certain amount of adjustment on the part of any student but the intersecting and overlapping factors associated with low income students who are first in their family to experience postsecondary education suggests that these students face significant transitional challenges as they enter college (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004).

### **Social and Cultural Transitions**

In addition to the transitional challenges brought about by being more likely to be underprepared academically and more likely to be limited in the college choice process, FGLI college students also experience social and cultural transitions. According to Thayer (2000), when students enter an educational environment that is unfamiliar and unlike their previous experiences they may feel marginalized and unwelcome. Orbe (2004) describes that FGLI college students must negotiate issues of marginality as they attempt to learn an “alien culture” of academic and social rules, and as they work to bridge the worlds of their homes/families/neighborhoods and college life (p. 133).

Several scholars have documented the “cultural dislocation” FGLI students experience in college (Walpole, 2007, p.44). Researchers such as Rendon (1993) wrote about the challenges that first-generation Latino students experience in negotiating the cultural differences between their home environments, the college choice process and college environments. In their research, Rendon described her own difficulty in “maintaining their cultures of origin during the educational process and the pain of feeling caught between the two cultures” (Walpole, p. 66). According to Rendon (1993) the ongoing negotiation of home and college life results in “trying to live simultaneously in two vastly different worlds” (p. 56). Similarly, in her work involving FGLI college students, Winkle-Wagner (2009) describes that these students were “simultaneously caught between two worlds—their home/family/past and their campus/friends/professors/present” (p. 23). The author asserts that more research is needed to understand how students “successfully navigate this balancing act to tease out ways to alleviate the family/campus tensions” (p. 24).

Because of the conflicting roles and demands between family membership and educational mobility, FGLI students may encounter added stress when trying to reconcile these conflicts (Cole, 2009). The social and cultural experience of transitioning to college may provide a sense of gain among FGLI college students, but also may contribute to a sense of loss of cultural attitudes and perceptions manifested prior to attending college. As FGLI students enter the college system, they have the “added burden of negotiating new relationships and new cultural roles” (p.29).

### **Family Dynamics**

Family relationships influence students’ initial transitions into college and their continued college experiences (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Parents’ education and income

are frequently included as elements of family background characteristics that affect educational outcomes (Bergerson, 2009). Thayer (2000) noted families of FGLI college students are less likely to have knowledge about what is required to be successful in college. According to Cole (2008), many FGLI students are “delegated into a double bind as: they are selected to accomplish unfulfilled missions for their parents while simultaneously remaining loyal to them” (p. 30). Jehangir (2009) describes the journey of first-generation college students involves “crossing a particularly precarious bridge between the home world and the world of the university” (p. 44).

However, it is important to recognize that not all FGLI students enter college without significant support from their families. Some, as described by Orbe (2004), come from families with considerable cultural capital that, in the absence of a college education, still acts as meaningful support. Traditionally literature on the topic of FGLI college students places the parents of these students “as liabilities because of the lack of guidance they can provide” (Acker-Ball, 2007, p. 33). This deficit philosophy does not take into account the cultural assets students’ families and communities bring into the educational arena. According to Acker-Ball, although parents may not possess the education they do “guide their children by culturally nurturing them and connecting them to family history and values” (p. 33).

In sum, two contradictory arguments emerge from the literature about FGLI students’ prior relationships with their families and communities. According to the first argument, “students’ successful transition into college is predicated on their ability to individuate or separate themselves (at least in part) from their families, pasts, or communities” (Winkle-Wagner, 2009, p.5) in order to develop a sense of belonging on

campus and thereby increase their likelihood of persistence and degree attainment. However, the second argument states that FGLI students and other underrepresented groups are more likely to be successful if they maintain strong connections to their families and communities. While there is speculation among scholars regarding the extent to which certain family dynamics impact FGLI college student success, the literature does indicate that FGLI students often feel like outsiders on campus as well as at home and that this correlates with their transition and persistence experiences in college. FGLI students sometimes face conflicting demands between family membership, institutional culture and educational mobility.

FGLI students would benefit from rigorous academic preparation, increased college choice and help bridging the home/campus divide. Mitigating gaps in college success for FGLI students requires policymakers and practitioners to better comprehend the sources of such gaps and the programmatic interventions that can effectively address them. The next section of the chapter is dedicated to two institutional initiatives, orientation programs and financial aid which will also be discussed as structuring mechanisms shaping students' experiences and outcomes.

## **Institutional Interventions**

### **Orientation Programs**

Student success courses typically address issues such as “optimal use of campus support resources and time management, advising and career development, and skill development including goal setting” (Kuh, et al., 2006 p. 63). These programs are one solution universities have developed to address the gap in preparation and achievement levels and to “attract and retain underprepared students, most of whom are from low-SES or low income families or are the first in their families to attend

college” (Walpole, 2007, p. 77). Student success courses such as First Year Experience (FYE) programs or seminars are often designed to serve “at-risk” students as participating in this type of orientation directly promotes academic performance and fosters social and institutional integration (Overton-Healy, 2010). Studies show that participation in first-year programs is associated with a variety of positive educational outcomes, including a successful transition to college, higher grade point averages, and improved retention rates (Kuh et al. 2005; Pike, Hansen & Lin, 2011).

In college success courses that take place at the start of a college career, students often form relationships with faculty and other staff members, initiating a campus support network that may remain in place throughout their college experience (Yoder, 2011). Such programs could introduce students to faculty and staff familiar with FGLI student experiences who can serve as role models, especially as students are becoming acquainted with the university culture (Langhout, Drake, & Rosselli, 2009). Additionally, through participation in class activities and group projects, students associate with peers with whom they may form supportive relationships (Yoder). These interactions and activities can foster FGLI students’ adjustment to college and contribute to their sense of belonging on campus (Kuh, et al., 2006).

According to Reason (2009), research suggests participation in FYE programs or seminars and the academic skills students acquire as a result are powerful predictors of student persistence and success. When FGLI students do not participate in such programs they miss an important opportunity to learn about the programs and services the institution has to offer, “which only compounds the problems associated with their lack of exposure to college” (Engle & O’Brien, 2007, p. 44). Langhout et al., (2009)

suggest that these programs include making all of the rules of the academy visible for those who might not already know how to navigate this system. Institutional interventions, such as FYE programs have potential to support FGLI students through their transition to college. Thus, first-year orientation programs serve as an important institutional mechanism in efforts to retain FGLI college students.

### **Financial Aid**

Colleges offer financial aid, there is governmental aid, and there are loans that students can apply for from banks. Some states distribute aid “widely across students from different economic backgrounds, while others focus aid heavily on students from low- and moderate-income families” (Bowen et al., 2009, p.182). For FGLI students, the costs of college may strain already-stretched financial resources of the family. FGLI students by definition have fewer financial resources available to them, and several studies indicate that these students have more financial concerns than do their high-SES peers (Terenzini et al., 2001; Engle & O’Brien, 2007; Walpole, 2007). In the present study, the focus is on FGLI students who attend college full-time in their home state, and are classified as “dependent” on their parents for the purposes of determining their financial aid status. FGLI students who are dependent on parental financial support is an area of particular concern in part because the traditional parental financial safety nets are often not available to FGLI college students (Eitel & Martin, 2009).

Students’ background characteristics affect the kinds and amounts of financial aid they receive. FGLI student status may limit students understanding of the financial aid process, and result in a reluctance to apply for aid. Engle and O’Brien (2007) studied 14 public, four-year universities serving large numbers of low-income students and concluded that at these institutions FGLI students “financial aid literacy” was

particularly low (p. 44). The authors describe that some FGLI students fail to apply for aid because “they believe they will not qualify, they and their parents cannot understand the forms, or they cannot get their parents to provide them with the necessary information to complete the forms” (p. 44). In some instances, FGLI students do not apply for aid because they do not want loans and do not know they may be eligible for grant aid or they decline financial aid offered to them because they do not understand the difference between grants and loans (Engle & O’Brien). Others “assume credit card debt at much higher interest rates than traditional student loans simply because they don’t know how to navigate the application process” (Overton-Healy, 2010, p. 31). FGLI students may experience increased difficulty in the process of applying for financial aid. The processes by which institutions award financial aid can also pose problems that produce disproportionately negative consequences for FGLI students.

According to Engle and O’Brien (2007), most institutions have “need blind” admissions and financial aid is awarded on a “first-come, first-serve” basis (p. 48). This can be especially problematic for FGLI students, who are more likely than their CG peers to delay college application and enrollment, because students who apply and/or enroll early receive more grant aid and less loan aid than students who apply late (Engle & O’Brien). Additionally the institutional aid available at many universities is often awarded based on merit rather than need. In an attempt to competitively attract and recruit the academically highest performing students, increasingly institutions are placing an emphasis on offering more merit-based scholarship aid. This shift in aid policy decreases the aid available for the alternative strategy of providing better grant support for the neediest students. The persistence of FGLI students is particularly



threatened by the shift away from need-based grant aid to loans and merit aid as research indicates that FGLI students are far more likely to “drop out in the face of accumulated debt associated with loans” than CG students (Lofink & Paulsen, 2005, p. 421).

Financial hardship limits campus involvement. To help defray the cost of going to college, many FGLI students “live at home with their families and commute to campus, some traversing long distances on public transportation to get to class” (Engle & O’Brien, 2007, p.43). Most FGLI students work to support themselves financially and to pay for college while some also work to provide financial support for their families (Engle & O’Brien). Additionally, many FGLI students work over twenty hours per week and are more likely to work full-time jobs than part-time jobs, an indicator for attrition (Dillon, 2010). FGLI students compared to their peers are 20% more likely to work more than 20 hours a week in order to meet financial obligations (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Further, FGLI students are more likely to take on more hours or a full-time job in addition to a full course load because these students tend to be more averse to incurring debt than their CG peers (Dillon). FGLI students also rely upon financial aid more than their CG peers, which is also “an indicator for attrition” (p. 38).

However, certain types of employment may increase FGLI students’ connection to campus. Participation in work-study programs, as a form of financial assistance, brings students into direct contact with faculty and academic staff and exposes them to institutional practices and policies. These features may have particular importance with regard to FGLI student success. In addition to a steady income, the advantages afforded to the financial aid recipient from participation in an on-campus work-study

program may enhance students' chances to "acquire academically related skills from faculty that potentially spill over to academic work" (Nora, Barlow & Crisp, 2006, p. 1642).

One of the most important factors in persistence research for FGLI students is their engagement and integration or sense of belonging on campus. Adequate financial aid frees FGLI students to fully engage in activities on their campuses. In other words, financial aid can act as a mechanism to increase FGLI students sense of belonging as they are afforded the opportunity to become fully integrated into the their institutions with the time to interact with peers and participate in campus social functions (Nora et al., 2006). Concurrently, students are also able to more fully engage in academic activities, both in the classroom and on campus. Behaviors such as taking part in study groups, seeking tutorial assistance, or meeting with a professor after class are "many times impossible if the student is constantly worried about money or if the student feels that he or she must work to make ends meet" (p. 1642). Financial assistance allows time for the student to make use of academic resources that could have an impact on his or her academic performance.

Kuh, et al. (2008) found that student engagement in educationally purposeful activities during the first year of college had a positive, statistically significant effect on persistence, even after controlling for background characteristics. An adequate financial aid package reduces a FGLI student's financial burden and has the capacity to increase their social and academic integration on campus leading to an increased likelihood of persisting to degree completion. In addition, this type of assistance decreases the attractiveness of alternative activities common among FGLI students such as working

long hours at off-campus jobs, transferring to a university that is closer to home so that room and board are not an issue, or simply entering into the labor force and postponing college indefinitely (Nora et al., 2006).

According to Bowen et al., (2009), it makes good sense to link concerns about the cost of college to concerns about the enrollment and graduation rates of FGLI students. Financial aid policies that offset rising tuition costs offer one tactic that can be used by governments and universities to combat the generally lower matriculation and completion rates observed among these students. Pascarella et al. (2004) finds it reasonable to suggest that federal and state financial aid policies “be reexamined” in light of their potential effects on the extent to which they facilitate or impede the opportunities of FGLI students to “participate fully in the college experience” (p. 281). Bowen et al., (2005) stress the value of active programs and especially targeted efforts to “assist students from low income families, and those from families with no college experience, in navigating the ‘process’ of applying for financial aid” (p. 256). The authors describe that decisions concerning the allocation of institutional aid is one effort at the institutional level with potential to “achieve a greater degree of equity within higher education” (p. 253).

The steep declines in state funding for public higher education have contributed to tuition increases resulting in higher reports of unmet financial need among students attending public postsecondary institutions (Engle & O’Brien, 2007). Stagnant funding for federal aid such as the Pell Grant and Work-Study programs, as well as federal loan limits have “only exacerbated the problem by increasing the work burden on students” (p. 48). Indeed, the rising costs of tuition, the complexity of the financial aid application

process, the increased likelihood that FGLI students will to work over 20 hours per week to meet financial obligations during college and the decreased amount of aid being directed toward the neediest students collectively constrain the transition and persistence of FGLI students.

A recurrent theme in this review of literature is the obstacles FGLI students face making the transition to college. William Bowen and Derek Bok make this point in their book on underrepresented students in higher education, called *The Shape of the River*:

“We often hear of the importance of keeping young people moving through the ‘pipeline’ from elementary school to high school to college, on through graduate and professional schools, and into jobs, family responsibilities, and civic life. But this image is misleading, with its connotation of a smooth, well-defined, and well-understood passage. It is more helpful to think of the nurturing of talent as a process akin to moving down a winding river, with rock-strewn rapids and slow channels, muddy at time and clear at others” (p. xxi).

The authors’ words point to the need for a paradigm shift throughout higher education. To increase college persistence and completion, scholars, educators, and policy makers must take a harder look at the needs and circumstances of the students they are serving and discover what might be done to help them navigate more effectively the rocks and shoals of higher education. Students from low-income families whose parents did not attend college are less likely than their CG peers to enter the college pipeline and more likely to leave the pipeline at each step along the way (Choy et al. 2000). Therefore, efforts to help students prepare for and successfully transition to college through rigorous academic preparation, increased college choice, support for bridging home and college life, effective orientation programs, and need-based financial aid all have the potential to keep FGLI students in the pipeline. The largest payoffs will

come from helping students to enter the pipeline and persist to completion. The next section of the literature review concerns persistence in college for FGLI students.

### **Persistence in College**

According to Welch (2009), issues of student attrition and attainment have emerged as a central concern for colleges and universities across the country. Researchers have studied the dynamics of college student persistence and retention “from a variety of methodological practices and disciplines, making retention one of the most studied areas in higher education research” (p. 21). Much of the recent research on the subject of student persistence and retention underscores the significance of institutional characteristics and context in influencing student success (Kuh, et al., 2008).

### **Campus Climate**

Just as there are attributes individual students bring to colleges, universities themselves have specific characteristics and structures that create a campus climate (Welch, 2009). Higher education institutional climates shape rules, values, norms, and practices that can “dictate processes, shape understandings, and transmit culture” (Smith, 2011, p. 21). Institutional climate is an aspect of the postsecondary environment that may produce obstacles for FGLI college students. According to Welch, institutional climate is where “institutional characteristics of individual fit, personal validation, peer interaction, and campus involvement all converge to support or constrain belonging for underrepresented and marginalized students” (p. 25). Institutional climate can either lead to or impede academic and social integration for FGLI students.

FGLI students need to feel that their college is concerned about their individual achievement and be able to access support services to ensure their success.

Messages of expected success are particularly important to FGLI students and the college itself must be a place where these are communicated. According to Overton-Healy (2010) the campus climate must foster “a sense of confidence – an expectation – that these students can and will succeed ...the odds are stacked against first-generation students; therefore the campus climate must become a strongly optimistic force” (p. 37).

The climate of college environments has traditionally catered to “White students and those from wealthier backgrounds and therefore require minority, low-income, and first-generation students to negotiate myriad unfamiliar cultural norms, both in and outside of the classroom” (Green, 2006, p. 22). According to Welch (2009), “students of color and other marginalized students often feel like a guest in someone else’s home – never quite comfortable in the physical and emotional climates on campus” (p. 41). Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1999) call for universities to consider enacting diverse learning environments by reviewing campus practices through a historical legacy of inclusion/ exclusion, looking at campus demographics and attending to the campus climate. Additionally, the authors suggest reviewing the behavioral dimensions on campus (interaction, curriculum, etc.) that contribute to campus climate. The most significant impact on the behavioral dimension of campus climate comes from those on campus that have some of the most frequent and direct contact with FGLI students. Research has shown faculty characteristics and behaviors that contribute to a welcoming institutional climate and increase engagement within the classroom can increase persistence (Reason, 2009).

## **Faculty Practice and Pedagogy**

It is important to understand how the attitude and practice of faculty members toward FGLI college students may affect their academic success and to identify literature that relates to the faculty experience with these students. The findings from the study conducted by Kim and Sax (2009) reveal that compared to middle- or upper-class or non-first generation students, lower-class and first-generation students generally are more often excluded from faculty interaction whether it is research-related or course-related. The authors assert that FGLI college students tend to “less frequently assist faculty with research for course credit, communicate with faculty outside of class, and interact with faculty during lecture class sessions” than non-FGLI students ( p. 454). Kim and Sax recommend that faculty members, administrators, and student affairs professionals “pay particular attention to underrepresented student groups in terms of benefits of student–faculty interaction” (p. 453). The authors indicate that certain student subgroups benefit more as a result of student–faculty interaction.

Not surprisingly, the teaching methods and skills of faculty members impact FGLI student departure decisions (Braxton & McClendon, 2001). Active learning has been found to have differential impact on various student populations and in different disciplines. For example, according to Kuh et al. (2006) “first-generation students who report more participation in group discussion, presentations, performances, research projects, and group projects, and who more frequently discuss courses with other students, had higher probability of success” (p. 68). Additionally, active and collaborative learning seems to introduce opportunities for engaging in other effective educational practices and contribute to social integration, institutional commitment, and intent to return.

The faculty-student interaction in the classroom has important implications for FGLI student persistence. According to Lofink and Paulsen (2005), FG students are more likely to have a need for “validation” (p. 421). The authors describe that validation is most effective early on in the college experience and occurs “when faculty actively seek to reaffirm first-generation students” in their ability to perform academically and by communicating that their ideas and opinions have value (p. 421). Institutions can invest in training faculty to foster validation in the classroom and to foster validating experiences outside the classroom.

Kim and Sax (2009) suggest that revealing different patterns in faculty interaction that depend on a student’s social class and first-generation status, constitute another potential area where further study is needed by higher education researchers and more attention by faculty and student affairs professionals. That is, institutions and their members as well as higher education scholars “need to know more about how lower-class and first-generation students experience faculty contact differently from their counterparts” (p. 453).

### **Learning Communities**

An organizational response suggested by retention research in support of FGLI students is the adoption of learning communities. Learning communities are identified by common elements, including programing designed explicitly for first-year students, shared residential living spaces, the classroom as community building, and co-enrollment in two or more courses (Overton-Healy, 2010). According to Thayer (2000), learning communities represent a strategy for promoting “shared learning” and “connected learning” among students (p. 6). These communities have a demonstrably positive effect on academic outcomes as well as personal outcomes such as



encouraging the formation of supportive peer groups. This support often extends beyond the classroom and helps students merge into campus life and develop a sense of belonging (Overton-Healy).

According to Zhao and Kuh (2004) there is a significant body of research on the benefits of learning communities and peer group involvement with regard to increased persistence and learning communities have been cited as one of several effective practices for enhancing student engagement. Factors that impact persistence and engagement include “the creation of safe space, the building of peer networks, and access to an interdisciplinary multicultural curriculum, all of which foster a sense of belonging to the institution” (Jehangir, 2009, p. 34). Most recently, studies at 2-year colleges have revealed that FGLI students who participated in learning communities were more engaged and more likely to persist from freshman to sophomore year than comparison group students (Engstrom & Tinto 2008). However, Bowen et al., (2009) speculate that the amount of family resources available to a student may matter less in a relatively intimate setting, such as a community college, in which the institution itself provides more support for FGLI students. The authors indicate that students from “poorer families with less experience of higher education, may simply need more help and more nurturing in large university settings than do their classmates from families that are more experienced in dealing with the cultural, social, and academic challenges of college” (p. 219). One implication of their findings is that creating learning communities may be especially helpful for FGLI students attending large public universities.

Learning communities are not panaceas for FGLI students; but as Jehangir (2009) states, “we have had indications of the success and importance of creating learning environments that allow students to cultivate a sense of belonging and voice in the academy” (p. 47-48). While the outcomes of learning communities may benefit students generally, “learning communities should be among the primary strategies utilized by student support services programs and other programs serving students from first generation and low income backgrounds” (Thayer, 2000, p. 6).

### **Academic Advising**

Academic advising constitutes a major domain of institutional academic programming focused on improving student persistence and degree completion. Selecting an academic major is difficult “for many first generation students because of their parents’ uncertainty and inability to provide guidance” (Overton-Healy, 2010, p. 33). Results suggest that academic advising, in addition to other institutional practices, may have significant implications for the persistence of FGLI college students (Strayhorn, 2006). Findings indicate that advising positively affects retention and graduation when “advisors address the needs of first generation students, who may not have the same knowledge of how to successfully navigate higher education” (Kuh, 2006, p. 59). One way institutions can respond to this issue is to develop formulas and strategies for identifying “at risk” students who may be in need of academic advising or tutoring. Strayhorn suggests that “campus-based early warning or ‘alert’ systems, designed to identify students who are ‘at-risk’ of failure in college,” can be designed to include indicators such as first-generation low income status (p. 104).

From a logistical view, it may be a stretch for the same institution to offer students a range of structures to govern the declaration of an academic major and

options in terms of models of advising. However, providing students with a selection of advising structures and models equipped to serve a variety of student populations may be worthwhile to consider as a way to increase attainment (Workinger, 2011). Matching all students at an institution with “a need-specific option for selecting an academic major or academic advising model” may not be feasible from a logistical standpoint, but “focusing on the typically ‘at-risk’ student populations may be a starting point” (Workinger, 2011, p. 158). Institutional approaches to advising hold significant potential in addressing the persistence and retention of FGLI students. Bahr (2008) states that without exception these students “appear to benefit more from advising than do their college-ready counterparts” (p. 725).

### **Implications of Institutional Interventions**

The responsibility for student retention is campus-wide, according to Braxton (2001), and goes beyond the province of admissions and student affairs to include academic and non-academic administrators and faculty members. Hurtado and Carter (1997) indicate that early transition experiences that facilitate the formation of peer groups and adjustment to college can be facilitated by institutional intervention. Additionally, research suggests that support in certain areas such as “remedial education for academically underprepared students, learning cohorts and communities, advisement interventions, and other services,” can increase persistence and success for groups such as first-generation, low-income college students (Smith, 2011, p. 3). Furthermore, these students benefit from assistance in navigating unfamiliar and sometimes uncomfortable situations that can come with academic culture and faculty perceptions.

Given the numerous sources of influences, no single aspect can be isolated as providing the answer to increasing institutional retention rates for these students.

Thayer (2000) clarifies that while retention strategies that work for FGLI students are likely to work for the general population, by contrast, if these strategies do not account for the characteristics and circumstances common among FGLI students, the strategies will not be as successful with them.

Kuh et al. (2005) suggested that higher education must institutionalize student success, calling for a shift within the culture of higher education institutions. Moreover, these authors assert that programs designed specifically for students of individual racial groups, low-income backgrounds, and first generation college students are necessary. According to Goodman (2011) these programs can provide the guidance and support “that students of various backgrounds need in order to navigate the campus environment and make the greatest possible gains in college” (p. 107). By understanding FGLI students’ experiences with transition and persistence and the influence of their sense of belonging on campus, family, advisers, college professionals, faculty, and others will be better positioned to successfully co-create strategies for their college attendance and success (Coffman, 2011).

This chapter highlights some of the institutional features and programming that promote FGLI students’ access to, progress through, and graduation from higher education institutions. A central aspect of the FGLI student transition to and persistence in postsecondary education involves negotiating a sense of belonging. The increasing number of FGLI students on college campuses across the U.S. presents itself as a

valuable point of analysis for research that seeks insight into how sense of belonging is negotiated in an educational environment (Orbe, 2004).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Sense of belonging in the college student literature has been shown to be an essential outcome of students' academic and social integration experiences on campus (Bowman et al., 2008). Tinto's (1993) theory of integration was unique to the field of student development because it was "one of the first theories that focused on explaining voluntary departure from colleges and universities as an issue not just with the student but also with the institution" (Wolf-Wendel et al., p. 414, 2009). Tinto posited that the student's perceived level of integration (or what Tinto might now call "sense of belonging") involves a "reciprocal relationship between the student and the campus" and "greatly influences the decision to persist or depart" (Wolf-Wendel et al., p. 415). Integration or the sense of belonging that students develop is about "students forming relationships with peers, faculty, and staff" and is also a measure of student knowledge of campus cultural norms (p. 416). According to Tinto's model, persistence and eventual attainment are increased "when a student is socially and academically integrated into the campus community, strengthening both the institutional fit and the student's commitment to the institution" (Walpole, 2007, p. 41). However, the term integration "can mean something completely different to student groups who have been historically marginalized in higher education" (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 327). Sense of belonging, instead of integration, has been used by Tinto and others to avoid the "assumptions of conformity and assimilation that critics have aptly pointed out are not inclusive of the diverse experiences of historically marginalized groups in higher education" (p. 327). Thus, sense of belonging is intended to "capture the multiple communities on campus

and students' multiple affiliations without adopting a single or predominant set of norms” (p. 327).

Researchers have typically conceived of sense of belonging as part of the psychosocial processes involved with the adjustment and transition to college. Different types of social and academic interactions (e.g., memberships, specific peer interactions on campus) affect a student's sense of belonging. According to Wolf-Wendel et al., (2009), for a student to develop a sense of belonging, the student must understand and adopt some elements of campus culture, but the institution must also be receptive to certain aspects of the student's experience. Sense of belonging, in turn, also affects students' intention to persist. Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods (2009) relate that “when students become integrated into the social and academic systems of the university, they develop a psychological sense of belonging to the university community, which is an important precursor to desirable outcomes such as increased commitment and persistence” (p. 650).

Sense of belonging is one dimension of FGLI student transition and persistence in college. In order to achieve a deeper understanding of that dimension, “the outcomes of sense of belonging which past research shows are important to consider, should also be explored” (Locks et al., 2008, p. 279). In the present study, students' sense of belonging is defined as FGLI students' psychological sense of identification and affiliation with the campus community.

In the Hurtado and Carter (1997) study, the sense of belonging measure was a latent factor consisting of the extent to which students felt they were “part of the campus community,” “member of the campus community,” and had a “sense of belonging to

campus community.” Hurtado and Carter found that students who frequently discussed course work with other students outside class (in both the second and third years) had a higher sense of belonging in the third year of college. Additionally, the authors found that at large, research institutions underrepresented and marginalized students use peer organization membership to achieve personal goals, make sense of campus environments, and to engender a sense of belonging to campus communities. Thus, specific activities may foster “a broader sense of group cohesion and enhance an individual's sense of affiliation and identification with college” (p. 338). The authors urge further research is needed to determine whether a high sense of belonging is “evident in students with specific college majors or in various fields of study; in classrooms where faculty require study groups; and in other institutionally based structures, such as living-learning residential programs, that may enhance students' opportunities to discuss course content outside class” ( p. 338).

Sense of belonging among college students has been a key variable in other studies as well. For example, Krause and Coates (2008) describe the Beyond-class Engagement Scale (BES) they applied in their study of student engagement emerging from a large scale study of first year undergraduate students in Australian universities. The scale includes several items intended to gauge students’ “sense of belonging and social connectedness with other students beyond the classroom setting” (Krause & Coates, 2008, p. 502). The authors explain that the item with greatest loading in this scale is that focusing on whether students feel they belong to the university community. The instrument from which these scales were drawn was administered towards the end of the first year, however the authors argue for the need to monitor changing patterns

and dimensions of engagement throughout the first year and beyond, using a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures. The authors indicate that in order to be most useful for shaping policy and practice, it is important to understand how sense of belonging “varies across demographic student groups and how it changes over time during the first year and through the undergraduate years” (p. 504). According to Krause and Coates a sense of belonging and community on campus is a particularly potent indicator of engagement and intention to persist.

Ostrove and Long (2007) suggest that there are many ways in which people derive a sense of belonging and multiple dimensions along which belonging can be structured. In their study of low income college students the researchers examined how social class impacted persistence in college through a sense of belonging. The authors articulate that their primary goal was to “illuminate how social class informs students’ experiences of belonging at college and how belonging is related to academic and social outcomes” (p. 380). Their results demonstrated that social class background has important implications for students’ sense of belonging at and adjustment to college. Indeed, social-class background was strongly related to “a sense of belonging at college, which in turn predicted social and academic adjustment to college, quality of experience at college, and academic performance” (p. 380). The authors explain that their findings suggest that social class may have some of its most critical influence through a sense of belonging. However, the authors admonish “knowing that lower social-class position relates to poorer college outcomes is, in many ways, not a particularly useful finding, as we cannot change people’s class backgrounds” (p. 384). Knowing that its primary influence may be about belonging, in contrast, is very useful,



because according to Ostrove and Long we can “change the extent to which institutions of higher education are welcoming and inclusive with respect to social class” (p. 384).

Sense of belonging has been largely neglected in prevailing models of student persistence and involvement (Hausmann et al., 2009). Given the importance of sense of belonging for promoting student persistence and academic achievement, Locks et al. (2008) recommend that colleges and universities “find ways to facilitate these interactions with diverse peers that lead to positive educational outcomes” (p. 280). The authors go on to assert that “a deepened understanding about how a sense of belonging facilitates college transitions and long-term success in college is key” (p. 280). These scholars highlight the importance of exploring how FGLI students develop a sense of belonging on their campus. Therefore, further examination about how a sense of belonging facilitates college transitions and long-term success in college is critical in understanding how to improve transition into and graduation from college for FGLI students (Bowen, Kurtzwell & Tobin, 2005; Hausmann et al., 2009; Locks et al., 2008; Olivia, 2004; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Perna, 2007).

According to Bergerson (2009), “in addition to attempting to develop new models to explain the college choices process, researchers are employing different paradigms, allowing them to illustrate the societal and systemic inequities that shape students’ postsecondary decisions (p. 46). What better way to understand FGLI students, their choice to attend a four-year university, and the hurdles they have to overcome before graduating, than by having participants give voice to and visually represent their own experiences. My goal as a researcher and writer is to give my participants this opportunity.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an introduction to the FGLI student population, and the terminology and concepts utilized in the college student literature. To better understand how FGLI college student transition and persistence has been studied in the research literature, a review of the concepts of engagement, involvement, and integration was presented. The literature review highlighted issues concerning FGLI students' transition to college along with such postsecondary practices as first year orientation, remediation, and financial aid. The college student persistence literature is also reviewed with a focus on FGLI students and the areas of faculty practice and pedagogy, learning communities, and academic advising. In addition, this chapter presented the theoretical framework of sense of belonging that guides this study.

This study examines the perspectives of FGLI college students and their transition to and persistence in college, as documented through participant-driven photo elicitation. Sense of belonging provides a theoretical framework to better understand FGLI college students' transition to and persistence in college.

In highlighting the differences in college experiences for FGLI students, the negative implications for persistence and for students' post college opportunities become clear. The scholarship that examines the perspectives of FGLI students on their college experiences is an area of research that has received little attention and therefore is an area in which the opportunity for new research exists (Walpole, 2007). Through photo elicitation and participant narratives, this study will explore FGLI students' passage into higher education, both how they have prepared and the challenges they face as they persist.

FGLI college students tend to have a much lower rate of persistence to graduation than do continuing generation students, due to many factors such as parental education and socioeconomic status, and racial and ethnic group. These students are at a disadvantage in their preparation for the rigor and culture of college, and once enrolled tend not to be as involved in the campus activities and culture. For many FGLI students their social realities play an integral role in their academic success (Hendrix, 2009). Therefore, a better understanding of FGLI college student transition and persistence experiences is an important step towards the development of practices and pedagogies that enable students to acculturate into the academy and increases their potential for persistence and success. “Sense of belonging” is an important factor in the engagement, involvement and integration of FGLI students on campus, and further examination is needed to understand the transition and persistence experiences of these students.

The next chapter describes the methodology utilized in the study of FGLI college students. In particular, the chapter will present the sampling frame, a discussion of the participants and the recruitment methods used to locate them. I also address the analytic method, data collection procedures, data analysis, and my researcher bias. Using qualitative methods, this study seeks to understand the transition and persistence experiences of FGLI college students, as documented through participant-driven photo elicitation and open-ended interviews. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the limitations of this study and a chapter summary.

## CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

In this chapter I present the research design details for this qualitative study. In particular, I discuss the sampling frame and sample of students (i.e. FGLI first-generation low income students), and how I recruited and selected the participants. I also address the analytic method, data collection procedures, data analysis, and my researcher bias. Using qualitative methods, this study seeks to understand the transition and persistence experiences of FGLI college students, as documented through participant-driven photo elicitation and open-ended interviews. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the limitations of this study and a chapter summary.

### **Research Questions**

The current study investigates the significance of one factor that, although not traditionally emphasized in prevailing models of the college student experience, has recently been identified as an area needing increased attention in research on student transition and persistence: students' sense of belonging to their college or university (Hausmann et al., 2009). In this study, I utilize Hurtado and Carter's (1997) notion of students' "sense of belonging" as their psychological sense of identification and affiliation with the campus community. This study contributes to an understanding of how undergraduate FGLI students document, through PDPE (participant-driven photo elicitation), their transitions to the university environment and how they have persisted in their academic pursuits given the obstacles recognized by college access and retention scholars—e.g., Olivia (2004) and Perna (2006). The qualitative research approach of PDPE addresses the research questions: (1) How do FGLI undergraduate students document their transition into and persistence in a four-year higher education

institution? (2) How do FGLI undergraduate students perceive their educational and social experiences in this institution? (3) What factors do FGLI students attribute to their transition and persistence?

### **Qualitative Methods in Educational Research**

Qualitative researchers have attempted to define their work in many different ways, however, the methodology of qualitative research often implies interaction with participants, objects or situations being studied (Hatch, 2002). Several authors have indicated that qualitative research in particular is appropriate for the study of FGLI students in higher education. Bergerson (2009) describes that much of the research on these students is quantitative in nature and “weighs the predictive capacity of numerous variables in determining how and why students will make the postsecondary decisions they do” (p. 46). The author articulates that soundly constructed qualitative research is strongly needed. According to Bergerson (2009), this type of research would have the ability to fill in the ample knowledge gaps left by these quantitative studies, specifically related to how certain groups of students, such as lower socioeconomic students, engage in the process of deciding whether and where to go to college. Bowen et al. (2009) advocate the use of qualitative techniques saying that this type of data collection and analysis could have “a high payoff” to discover more definitive answers on how to narrow the disparities in college graduation rates between students who are underserved and underrepresented and those who are more advantaged (p. 56). Qualitative research has been found especially appropriate for educators interested in taking action and using their research to bring about social, political and/or economic change (Hatch, 2002).

The results of Strayhorn's (2006) study suggest that first-generation students may face unique challenges that "negatively impact their achievement levels" (p. 102). According to the author, additional research and specifically qualitative studies are needed to explore this issue in greater depth and detail and "unpack the significance" of results (p. 102). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) add that "quantitative approaches...are probably most useful in painting the broad outlines of the portrait" while the finer brush strokes characteristic of qualitative approaches can elicit "tone, tint, texture, and nuance" (p. 637). These attributes of qualitative research give the ability to delve deeply into the world of the participants and gather nuanced detail and engage in meaningful dialogues. Given the complex nature of FGLI students' decisions, experiences, and outcomes, qualitative approaches may be particularly well suited to research on these students (Walpole, 2007). The qualitative approach will assist in understanding how the participants in the study navigated their experiences with transition and persistence as FGLI college students.

### **Institutional Context for the Study**

I located my study within a large southeastern research intensive institution because of the prominent role four-year institutions play in developing the next generation of skilled leaders and workers. The institution will be given the pseudonym, Southeast University. At the commencement of this study, Southeast University enrolled an undergraduate population of over 32,000. Considered a PWI (predominately White institution), 58 % of entering students are White, 17.5 % are Hispanic, 10.5 % are African-American and 14 % are described as other. In regard to student persistence, the freshman retention rate of 96 % is among the highest in the

country. This institution is one of the five largest universities in the nation and thus enrolls a number of FGLI undergraduate students.

**Gatekeeper.** Gatekeepers within the research process “are typically described as the individuals, groups, and organizations that act as intermediaries between researchers and participants” (Clark, 2011, p. 486). However, my relationship with the gatekeeper organization at Southeast University, given the pseudonym the Partnership, was not simply as a researcher who hoped to gain access to “respondents.” Before I began this study I served as a graduate assistant in one of the Partnership offices. The Partnership is administered from Southeast University’s Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs. It comprises a scholarship program and a school-improvement partnership previously forged between the university, the College of Education and six high-poverty, low-performing high schools across Florida. The Partnership supports low-income students who are first in their families to attend college. The program provides scholarships or financial aid packages to first-generation-in-college freshmen who are Florida residents from low-income families. The program also provides peer-to-peer mentoring, fosters student leadership, and provides guidance and advising. As a graduate assistant, my work primarily concerned developing college success research and outreach programs and services for students from the six partner high schools in the state, an aspect of the program which is being phased out. My duties included the mentoring of FGLI undergraduate students over the course of several semesters, the coordination of outreach activities, hosting social events, facilitating financial aid and college success workshops for students and their parents and assisting with professional development and assessment of high school administrators and teachers.

Thus, through my work with the Partnership program over the course of several years, I was involved with the undergraduate students in the program in a mentorship capacity.

I initially identified three participants for this study, all of whom are associated with the Partnership program, and later recruited three additional participants who are also associated with the Partnership program. As a result, the three who were in the Partnership while I worked there interacted with me in ways quite different from a traditional research project where I might interview someone for an hour and then have them react to the transcripts some months later. I have had multiple opportunities to connect with the three participants originally recruited for this study. Being associated with the program led to accessing not only information about their experiences in college, but also about their lives. During our previous interactions, in addition to discussing registration, coursework and exams, many times discussions became more personal and involved topics such as intimate relationships, conflicts with family members, financial issues, employment, etc. While some of our interactions took place in the office assigned to me as a graduate assistant for the program, informal interactions occurred outside of the program at coffee shops, around the College of Education, on Facebook and at Partnership events. With the three newer participants I made a concerted effort to build rapport through such means as formal and informal contact using email and Facebook, by organizing and hosting a dinner for participants after data collection was complete and attending a performance of one of the participants. From the beginning of the identification of the research topic, through respondent interactions and in interpreting the results a concerted effort was made to make the study an interactional project. According to Gubrium and Holstein (2003), the



interviewer's ability to develop trust and rapport and establish relationships with interviewees "facilitates valid data collection" (p. 431).

To summarize, the participants in this research study are members of the Partnership Program. The Partnership Program is administered under a large, public, research intensive university within the State of Florida. The admission criteria for the program are limited to students who are considered first generation or low-income, as college students from families with low incomes and/or whose parents did not attend college are these students are less likely to attend or graduate from college (Walpole, 2007). The Partnership served as a gatekeeper organization, occupying an important position within the research process. As Clark (2011) states, gatekeepers "provide more efficient and expedient routes to participants that would otherwise be difficult to access" (p. 489). I feel my past professional and informal interaction with three of the FGLI undergraduate student participants through the Partnership organization assisted me in building trust in an effort to collect richer, deeper and more valuable data for this study, and also aided in locating and building rapport with the three participants who were recruited later.

### **Sample**

Qualitative research involves selecting people or sites that can help the researcher best understand a phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). For this study, I used a purposeful sampling procedure to create a participant pool to interview and participate in the photo elicitation data collection (Creswell; Patton, 2001). In purposeful sampling researchers "intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon" (Creswell, p. 206). As mentioned earlier, the sampling frame focuses on

FGLI college students who are enrolled in a public, four-year, research intensive institution.

I utilized a qualitative sampling strategy to create the sample for this study. The most useful strategy for this study utilizes the “snowball” approach that occurs “when the researcher asks participants to recommend other individuals to be sampled” (Creswell, 2012, p. 209). My original participants served as “key informants,” and provided insights into their perspectives as well as access to other potential participants that I could not obtain on my own (Spradley, 1980).

I decided to limit my sample size to six student participants. Creswell (2012) states that the overall ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture “diminishes with the addition of each new individual or site” (Creswell, p. 209). This smaller sample allowed me to study FGLI college student experiences in greater detail and with more depth.

**Student Sample.** In this study, I considered college access and success for traditionally aged, English speaking, first-generation low-income first-time and full-time enrolled undergraduate students, due to the volume of research documenting their decreased academic achievement and other educational outcomes. Below I have included a summary of the overall background characteristics of participants which is followed by a more detailed demographic description of each participant I recruited and my relationship to them. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities and to maintain confidentiality throughout the study.

Six program participants were interviewed for this research study and of the six participants, three were women and three were men. The age range of the participants

was from 20 to 22 years and all lived off campus at the time of the interview. All six participants were Florida residents and three of the participants had parents born outside of the United States (Honduras, Ghana, and St. Maarten). Of the three families with parents who were originally from outside the U.S., two families moved to this country prior to the participants' births.

The home life of the study participants varied, with some of the participants coming from two parent households, some of the participants coming from homes with single parents and one participant who was at first homeless, then placed in the foster care system and then eventually adopted. The majority of the participants were employed while in school, working 20 hours or less between work study and jobs off campus. All participants were enrolled in college full-time.

The interviews were approximately 80-120 minutes in duration and were comprised of multiple questions. The questions covered topics that ranged from extracurricular and engagement activities in high school and college, peer network and other forms of support, and family practices and expectations about education. The factors that facilitated students' transition to and persistence in higher education were documented by participants through PDPE and discussed in the interviews. Many of the photographs contained pictures of family members, peers, or mentors. The interview questions focused on three primary areas of interest which were family dynamics, systems of support for college transition and persistence and participants' peer network. Descriptions of participants' home lives and family interactions were explored, along with relationships with peers and mentors who impacted participants' decisions to pursue college. Additionally the role of the Partnership Program, which

participants attributed to helping to develop and sustain their connection to the campus community, was discussed. What follows are brief participant profiles that depict participants' upbringing and family life, specifically as it relates to their perceptions about education. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities and to maintain confidentiality throughout the study.

### **Profiles of Study Participants**

#### **Angel**

Angel is a 21 year old Hispanic male who is originally from Miami. He is a senior whose major is Elementary Education, with a self-reported grade point average (GPA) of 3.7. His parents moved to the United States from Honduras before any of the children were born. He has one older sibling and one younger sibling. Angel's mother works cleaning houses and his father works in construction. Both of Angel's parents stressed the importance of obtaining a college education although they did not complete high school. According to Angel, "my parents, they're really strict about education and they're so into education and making sure that we got good grades and always on top of us." Angel attended a competitive public middle school with an application procedure that required recommendations and nominations from his elementary school. Although Angel attended a high poverty, low performing high school he was highly engaged and held leadership positions in several clubs and organizations. He attributes a visit to the university during his ninth grade year, an outreach effort organized and paid for by the Partnership Program, as especially significant to his transition to the university. Angel's older sister enrolled in a community college school after she completed a certificate of attendance in high school. She has since dropped out with no plans to continue. Angel describes that his younger brother, who attends the same high school he did in Miami,

Florida is on track to graduate high school and has expressed interest in attending college.

### **Anna**

Anna is a 22 year old White female originally from Orlando, Florida. I have known Anna for about four years. I met Anna in May of 2008 when she started working as an undergraduate student assistant at the Partnership office. Since that time, we have maintained contact and she was eager to participate when I described the study to her. She is a junior majoring in Family, Youth & Community Sciences. Her self-reported GPA is 3.4. She was raised by her mother and father until her parents divorced in 2001. Her father was incarcerated when Anna was fifteen and was subsequently diagnosed with mental illness and alcoholism. Her mother engaged in several long-term relationships with live-in boyfriends after Anna's parents divorced and her father was incarcerated. Anna indicated she had a tumultuous upbringing with a significant amount of financial strain, mental health concerns, physical disability, and dysfunction in her home. Anna was often responsible for filling a parental role and helped to coordinate with medical staff for the care of two of her three siblings who suffered from severe physical disabilities. In high school Anna describes that she was shy and involved in AP courses and academic clubs at the high poverty, low performing high school she attended in Orlando, Florida. Anna received a great deal of support and assistance from her high school counselor and encouragement from her peers who were also FGLI students. Anna describes that she was able to gain the requisite knowledge about college admissions and college preparation mainly through personal initiative and by surrounding herself with college-going peers. She attributes much of her transition to and persistence in college to the support she received from her peers.

## **Grace**

Grace is a 22 year old Black female originally from Jacksonville, Florida. I have known Grace for about three years through our association with the Partnership program. She is majoring in Health Education and Behavior and is a junior with a self-reported GPA of 2.7. Grace was raised by both her mother and father. Her parents worked a great deal and both of them encouraged her to go to college. She has four older sisters and two younger sisters. Grace stated she also had a brother who was killed in a violent altercation in the neighborhood in which she grew up. The expectation communicated to her was to go to college even though none of her older siblings had. Grace explained the message from her parents was, "Go to school. You see what your sisters are going through and you see what is possible with a high school diploma. Go to school; there's nothing else." Grace attended a high poverty, low performing high school in Jacksonville, Florida. Most of Grace's high school years were spent working and participating in sports. Grace received a great deal of support and assistance from her high school guidance counselor, who encouraged her and provided the requisite knowledge about college admissions and college. As a result, Grace was able to obtain scholarships and grants to offset her college expenses, though her college options were still limited by financial considerations. Grace explained, "Because like my family, they don't have much money, so I knew I had to stay within, in state. So I just applied here; I didn't want to go out of state because I didn't want any expenses on my parents." Her desire to become a college graduate impacted her younger sister who is currently seeking a college degree as well.

## **Alicia**

Alicia is a 20 year old Black female. She described that during her childhood she and her mother were homeless for several years and she was then placed in the foster care system and eventually was adopted. After being adopted she was raised, along with her younger sister, in Tampa, Florida. She majors in Dance and her self-reported GPA is 3.0. She is a sophomore. Alicia's mother did not complete high school and stressed the importance of education in succeeding in life. According to Alicia, her mother took great strides to protect and provide for Alicia while they were homeless. At age seven she was separated from her mother by child protective services and entered the foster care system. Alicia and her sister were then eventually adopted and she completed her secondary education at a public magnet school for the arts in Tampa where she began her training in dance. She described that her adopted parents, neither of whom went to college, didn't discourage her from attending college, but did not encourage or expect her or her sister or any of their biological children to attend college. Alicia expressed that her desire to pursue higher education has at times put her at odds with her adoptive parents. However, Alicia's adopted aunt was a major force that helped develop her desire to earn a college degree. Alicia also received a great deal of support and assistance from her high school Student Government Association (SGA) advisor, who provided her guidance and the requisite knowledge about college admissions and college. She remains closely connected to her SGA advisor. She hopes that her desire to become a college graduate will impact her younger sister to seek a college degree as well.

## **Franko**

Franko is a 22 year old Black male who is a junior majoring in Industrial Engineering. His self-reported GPA is 3.1. He graduated from a high poverty, low performing high school in Miami, Florida that is affiliated with the Partnership. I have known Franko for about three years through our association with the Partnership program. He and his mother relocated to the United States from St. Maarten when he was fourteen and about to begin high school. According to Franko, "St. Maarten doesn't have as much opportunities as the United States has, so they made a decision for us to leave, my mom and myself, to come to the United States so that I could attend college for free, get scholarships so I wouldn't put too much strain on them." Franko's father stayed in St. Maarten and works as a tour guide but remains involved in Franko's life. Franko's mother works as a waitress and was very involved in his schooling prior to high school. She stressed the importance of obtaining a college education although she herself did not complete. Franko describes that he was very self-driven when it came to applying for and attending college. He researched his college options extensively and consulted national college rankings. His teachers in high school encouraged his college aspirations. Additionally, he attributes a visit to the university during his ninth grade year, an outreach effort organized and paid for by the Partnership Program, as especially significant to his transition to the university.

## **Kermit**

Kermit is a 21 year old Black male who is a sophomore majoring in Engineering. His self-reported GPA is 2.7. He was raised, along with two older brothers, by his mother, who is originally from Ghana. She worked as a caregiver and raised Kermit and his two brothers as a single parent mostly in Snellville, Georgia. They would



occasionally make trips to Ghana where they lived with an uncle until Kermit was a junior in high school and the family moved to Tampa, Florida due to a job transfer. Kermit's mother stressed the importance of obtaining a college education although she only had a high school diploma herself. Kermit stated that even though he was initially unsure of his plans after high school, his "mom was pushing college because coming from Africa she's never had that opportunity so she felt like it was necessary for me to go to college."

Kermit described that in high school he was shy and other than academics that included advanced placement courses, he was mainly involved in community service organizations. He attributes his participation in college preparation activities and his knowledge of college admissions requirements to his high school guidance counselor. She encouraged his community service throughout high school and helped him apply for scholarships. Both of Kermit's brothers went to college in Ghana but their degrees were not recognized by the postsecondary education system in the United States. Currently one of his brothers is attending a university and pursuing a master's degree. Kermit was inspired by his siblings' academic pursuits. Now that Kermit is in college at the same time as his brother, he is able to discuss his academic progress and consult with his brother about his major.

### **Analytic Method**

One approach to conducting qualitative research is the use of visual methods. Visual methods are described by Stanczak (2007) as having the potential to create "highly accessible connections between the everyday world that we take in through our eyes and the cognitive, analytic framework that we apply through our scholarship" (p.3). Before implementing this methodology it is important to understand and evaluate the

research landscape surrounding this approach. I begin this section of the chapter by providing a brief overview of visual methods in general and then the specific PDPE open-ended, in-depth interview process is addressed in detail. The following sections support visual approaches and specifically PDPE as a valuable lens for viewing the issues of educational access and success for FGLI students.

### **Visual Methods in Educational Research**

Education as a field of inquiry has tended to avoid visual approaches to research (Fischman, 2001). The general tendency of educational researchers to dismiss images “is generalized and crosses academic traditions, theoretical orientations, and research methods” (p. 28). However, Agbenyega (2008) proposes that visual approaches “play an essential role in educational research by encouraging researchers to test and improve their understandings of school places, processes, and practices that operate within individual elements of the school’s cultural system” (p. 54). The author explains that visual methodology can offer educators a way to “question routine school policies, identify gaps and design appropriate programs to address issues of exclusion and power imbalance in schools” (p. 54). While Agbenyega’s research is based in a K-12 setting, the present study incorporated a visual approach to offer scholars and practitioners improved understandings based on participant produced images of their transition to and persistence in college.

Moreover, according to Liebenburg (2009), visual media offers “marginalized groups an opportunity to reproduce and understand their own world as opposed to dominant representation” (p. 7). Involving the FGLI research participants of this study directly in the process of collecting, arranging and analyzing visual material situates them as authorities on their lives. This method has significant implications for improving

connections when the researcher is crossing boundaries such as age, race, socioeconomic status and education (Liebenburg). By granting interviewees an increased voice and a greater authority to interpret their own personal experiences as FGLI college students, photo elicited interviews provide a greater opportunity for participants to create their own sense of meaning and disclose it to the researcher (Stanczak, 2007).

Visual methods offer a more inclusive and interactive format for the exploration of issues of educational research than is possible with word-only interviews, especially for those who are historically marginalized such as FGLI college students. Through participant-produced images, this visual medium elicited relevant and meaningful responses from the FGLI college student participants' about their experiences of transition and persistence in higher education. As a result of the inclusion of visual methods, the relationship between the researcher and the participant was taken to a deeper level. The photo elicitation technique also seemed to contribute to establishing rapport with participants. An additional dimension of understanding was brought to the researcher/participant relationship; sight was added to voice. Through participant accounts and the images they provided, students, faculty, staff, administrators, and scholars can make more informed interpretations of what these FGLI college students see; and through this visual meaning making process, learn how to make the higher education experience better for this historically marginalized group of students.

### **Photo Elicitation**

Photo elicitation is based on “the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview” (Harper, 2002, p. 13). The contrast between interviews using images and text and interviews using words alone lies in the ways people react to these

two forms of symbolic representation (Harper, 2002). According to Harper, this has “a physical basis: the parts of the brain that process visual information are evolutionarily older than the parts that process verbal information” (p. 13). A photo elicitation approach incorporates photographs – alongside other qualitative methods such as narrative, semi- or unstructured individual or group interviews and participant observation, and can employ interpretative and participatory approaches. As well as talking about individual images, photo elicitation participants might undertake exercises such as “ranking sets of images according to particular criteria, engaging in dialogue with each other and/or the interviewer as they do so” (Bragg, 2011, p. 91). Alicia indicated she undertook a similar exercise in this study. She reflected on the photo elicitation process, “the structure revealed itself to me and it was obvious that [high school SGA advisor] was at the top of... she’s at the top of the chain or whatever you want to call it.”

Photo elicitation is a qualitative research approach based on the idea that using photographic materials during the interview process may increase a participant’s feeling of involvement with the interview and research process. Additionally this approach may assist with participant memory recall, and enable them to provide more nuanced responses. In this study, the participants appeared to find the approach provided them with an opportunity to reflect, recollect, and represent their experiences. This approach also allowed participants to employ symbolism, as visual images can be used to signify concepts. For example, Franko explained during his interview, “It’s a picture of me in front of my car. I use it as like a symbol – you can jump in a car and go anywhere you want to go, but without a destination you’re not really going anywhere.” These elements

of the photo elicitation approach can help the researcher create better interpretations of participant observations (Birnbaum, 2009).

There are two primary variants of photo-elicitation. The first is externally driven: subjects are asked to evaluate images that have been preselected and provided by researchers. Some researchers opt to produce photographs themselves and present the images they created to the research participants. As Clark-Ibanez (2007) points out, this option allows the researcher to “frame, select, develop, organize, and present the images to the interviewees” based on the research questions (Clark-Ibanez, 2007, p. 171).

The second variation is participant-driven: subjects choose and/or create the images that serve as the foundation of the interview. It has been argued that this version embodies photo-elicitation’s ability to break down barriers between researchers and subjects, creating opportunities for participants to be more meaningfully involved in data generation and in some cases is presented as empowering participants (Auken, Frisvoll, & Stewart, 2010; Chio & Fandt, 2007; Clark-Ibanez, 2007; Liebenberg, 2009; Packard, 2008; Prosser & Loxley, 2008; Stanczak, 2007; Sweetman, 2009).

In recent years multiple methods have arisen that can be categorized under the broader realm of photo elicitation techniques. They go variously by the name of ‘photo-novella’ or ‘photo-voice’ (Wang & Burris, 1994; Wang et al., 1998), ‘photo interviewing’ and ‘visual narratives’ (Epstein et al., 2006; Packard, 2008; Welch, 2009). These variations all share a tendency to be participatory, indicating that the interview is driven by the participants who took the photos; this technique has also been termed native image-making, participant generated, and participant driven (Guillemin & Drew, 2010).

As Packard points out, these methods are almost always followed up with a photo-interviewing technique of some sort “where the participants and the researcher examine the photographs together as a way of both explaining the images and generating information that would not have been captured without the photographs as a prompt” (p. 65). As such, Mishler (1986) advocates more open-ended questions, minimal interruption of participant accounts, and the use of participants’ own linguistic articulation in the presentation of the data. Consequently, in the PDPE interview, the researcher must be open to participants’ stories in an effort to understand their experiences, in, and on, their own terms, leading to less formal control in the interview process.

### **Participant-driven Photo Elicitation Interviews**

Stanczak (2007) stated that “images help the researcher ask what we know about the social world and how we know it” (p. 9). Images are interwoven “with our personal identities, narrative, lifestyles, cultures, and societies, as well as with definitions of history, space, and truth” (Pink, 2001, p. 17). Pink, building on the work of numerous other social researchers who incorporated visual techniques (Collier & Collier, 1986; Wang & Burris, 1994; Wang et al., 1998), argued that “photography can potentially construct continuities between the visual culture of an academic discipline and that of the subjects or collaborators in the research” (p. 50). In the PDPE interview, the issue of participant empowerment is particularly important. The aim of this method is to bridge the researcher/participant divide and bring the respondent more fully and actively into the research construction and analysis. Photographs taken by participants are likely to reflect their world more accurately, and thus, using them “is better suited to

bridging the culturally distinct worlds of the researcher and the researched” (Stanczak, 2007, p. 199).

A distinctive aspect of this study is that photography was used as a means for data collection. Photographs provide a good source of data, can vividly capture the setting for others, and can be creatively used to study the perspectives of people (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Alicia articulated how she constructed meaning out of the approach. She stated, “basically what I did was I collected as many photos as I could that I thought fit into transition and retention, and then from there I kind of put them in a sub categories and I ended up not using two of the pictures. I let the process speak to me; I let it tell me what was important and it ended up being very true and very accurate.” In this study, the participants produced photographs to visually represent their transition and persistence experiences in a four-year institution and participated in photo elicitation interviews to describe their experiences. The participants in this study provided photographs that illustrated their transition and persistence experiences, which constitutes an important complement to word-only interviews as these photographs visually document what participants find meaningful about their experiences.

The incorporation of PDPE is inspired by the PDPE interviews of inner-city youth conducted by Clark-Ibanez (2007) and the work of Dawoud Bey in his series “Class Pictures” (2002-2007), in which the artist photographed urban high school students and accompanied the photographs with single-page descriptions written by the subjects themselves. The images captured by participants in this study serve as a visual representation of the stories the participants voiced through the interview process (Robison, 2012). The results of this study add to the growing body of research linking

sense of belonging, social integration and student persistence. The images captured by the research participants in this study assisted in building connections between the experiences they verbally expressed in interviews and the images they captured. Unfortunately, some of the participants were unable to complete the photo consent forms that required signatures of everyone pictured in the photographs. These consent forms were provided to participants in print and in PDF form over the course of a semester, with reminder emails sent out during the Thanksgiving and Christmas break. To maintain the anonymity of the participants and their family and friends and in adherence with the photo consent form requirements, the photographs provided by participants will not be included in the publication of this dissertation.

### **Data Collection**

In this section, I first briefly address the IRB approval process. I then discuss the PDPE protocol and the open-ended, in-depth interview guide in detail. Data collection consisted of engaging the participants in PDPE open-ended, in-depth individual interviews, audio recording and transcribing those interviews and collecting accompanying photographs and image descriptions.

Before data collection, all participants received a letter of informed consent which I as the researcher created. The letter of informed consent described the study, identified me as the researcher, addressed potential risks associated with participation in the study and informed participants of the approximate amount of time expected to participate. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study with the opportunity to quit the study at any time with no consequences. Individuals who volunteered to participate in the study signed the letter of informed consent as



acceptance of the terms and returned the letter of informed consent prior to participating in the study.

### **PDPE Protocol**

Prior to conducting open-ended, in-depth interviews I asked participants to take or select previously taken photographs. These participant-derived sets of photographs focused first on the student's transition and next on their persistence. Specifically, I instructed participants to provide photographs of persons, places, objects, etc. that they believe impacted their transition into and persistence in their postsecondary institution. In the first set of pictures, participants created a collection of photographs that depicted people, places or things that were important in their transition to the university and selected five to eight of the photographs to discuss in an interview. Next, participants were asked to provide photographs that depicted people, places or things that were/are important in their continued persistence at the university and select five to eight to discuss in an interview. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to write brief captions (one or two sentences) describing each of the photographs in each collection. The purpose of the captions was to provide some context and to clarify who was included in the photograph.

I met with each participant to discuss the pictures in two separate individual interviews –one focused on transition and one focused on their persistence. These meetings took place either in the office assigned to me as a graduate assistant or enclosed rooms at one of the university libraries, as these locations were ideal for interviewing. I offered each participant the location of my office or the library or the option to meet in a place designated by the participants. Creswell (2002) stated that an

interview location should be selected that is free from distractions and lends itself to using audio equipment, and I followed that guideline.

Using the participants' photographs as the foundation for the interviews, I relied on the theoretical framework of "sense of belonging," to explore participant's descriptions of their transition and persistence. Each participant was interviewed for approximately 80-120 minutes using the PDPE open-ended, in-depth interview guide. Use of the interview guide facilitated participant discussion about their college transition and persistence experiences.

### **Interview Guide**

Qualitative interviewing provides an open-ended, in-depth exploration of an aspect of life about which the participant has substantial experience, often combined with considerable insight (Charmaz, 2006). According to the author, in-depth qualitative interviewing fits grounded theory methods particularly well. Charmaz explains that a grounded theory interviewer's questions need to define and explore processes. As such, the interviews began by requesting that the participants talk in detail about why the photograph was taken and what the image meant to them. Following this guide, I asked students through PDPE open-ended, in-depth interviews to discuss how a particular picture impacted their decision to attend and persist in college using questions such as:

- 1) What is the image of and why did you take it?
- 2) Why is this image important to you as a member of the campus community?
- 3) What does the image say to you about your transition to (or persistence at) this university?

The PDPE open-ended nature of the interview process allowed “the flexibility to probe deeper in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the stories told and images captured by the research participants” (Robison, 2012, p.43). For example, the last question in the interview invited the informant to try to address how the image he or she selected reflects something salient to the experience of transitioning to (or persisting in) higher education. It should be emphasized that this question was asked in a general manner. I informed participants that there are “no right or wrong answer(s),” and I that I am “interested in their experiences” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 115). Qualitative research is often strengthened as the respondent “assumes control of the interview process and adds a new perspective, of which the researcher may not have been aware” (Gubrium & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005, p. 697).

However, in cases where schools, teachers, family dynamics, peers, college outreach initiatives and neighborhood context were only briefly discussed by the participant, I asked him/her whether any of those impacted his/her experience and to what degree. Rubin and Rubin (2005) state that “probes are used to signal the level of depth you are looking for in an answer, and once the interviewee has understood that providing depth and detail are okay, you have accomplished that goal” (p. 139). I wanted the participants to know that I was looking for “deep understanding that moves beyond superficial meaning to a more intimate understanding of the stories they share” (Robison, 2012, p. 43). According to Gubrium and Holstein (2003), interviewers’ questions, cues, prompts and probes actively contribute to the contexts in which experiences are narrated. In this way, both interviewer and interviewee actively co-

construct meaning, in this instance to increase understanding of the FGLI participants' experiences of postsecondary transition and persistence.

Interviews began by focusing on the images which the participants captured, utilizing PDPE techniques. I audio recorded each interview and used memoing to record initial ideas and thoughts. My notes taken about the interview also included facial expressions, voice tones, or body movement, and the physical and emotional environment of the interview. In sum, data collection consisted of engaging the participants in PDPE open-ended, in-depth individual interviews, audio recording and transcribing those interviews and collecting their photographs and image descriptions.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the “process of bringing order, structure, and interpretation to the mass of collected data” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 150). A variety of data was collected as a part of the research process including memos, participant interviews, audiovisual data and brief image descriptions written by participants. Once data were collected, the next task was to make meaning out of the memos, interview transcripts, images, and image descriptions. According to Gubrium and Koro-Ljungberg (2005), the interview and the data seemingly “feed off one another as each influences and bolsters the other in the negotiation of meaning; both empirical and theoretical spaces work together in the final production of meaning” (p. 624). Thus, the meaning that is documented in the final stages of the research process has been negotiated throughout the research process. In other words, meaning making occurred during and after interviews, while contemplating the images produced by participants, through my various readings of the interview transcripts and the presented document and also through participants reading of the transcript and parts of the document.

I analyzed the memos, interview transcripts, images and participant descriptions for patterns, relationships, clusters, and theme. In grounded theory, generalizations are induced from “systematic analyses of data that take the form of searches for patterns” (Hatch, 2002, p. 15). When potential patterns are discovered, deductive processes are used to verify the strength of those patterns in the overall data set. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) call this interpretive work “bricolage” and describe that the researcher must employ multiple strategies to represent the meaning and knowledge produced in the research project. Crotty describes that the grounded theory research process seeks to “ensure that the theory emerging arises from the data and not from some other source” (p. 78). Crotty (1998) explains that the researcher-as-bricoleur emphasizes the researcher’s ability to employ unconventional interpretive paradigms and rely on his or her inventiveness, resourcefulness and imaginativeness. Such research invites an approach to data analysis in the “radical spirit of openness” (p. 51). The open and potentially inclusive lens of the camera offers the participant and the researcher “a wide range of possibilities in terms of what and how they may wish to explore and express their experiences and concerns” (Chio & Fandt, 2007, p. 488).

### **Interview Transcription**

I first listened to each interview, memoing to record initial ideas and thoughts. The interview was then transcribed verbatim and in its entirety in preparation for coding. During the reviewing of the transcript, I continued to memo, noting major themes that stood out, and later I used these notes to develop codes and compare with other data from the interviews. According to Schram (2006), memo writing can “inform, spur systematic reflection, and provide reality checks throughout the course of inquiry” (p. 27).

## Interview Coding

Charmaz (2006) maintains that coding is the pivotal link between “collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data” (p. 46). I implemented a line-by-line process of coding, reading segments of the data carefully word-by-word, line-by-line, searching for repeated words or phrases. According to Charmaz, for many grounded theorists, line-by-line coding is the first step in coding. Using Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software, I created 20 thematic codes which emerged out of multiple readings of the data, 14 of which had sub codes with some of those sub codes further reduced into a second tier of sub codes. The software program assisted in identifying patterns based on word frequency within transcripts. After having identified the frequency of key words, I was able to select several of these to identify their contextual use. After repeated readings of each transcript, I developed codes and sub codes and applied these to excerpts I created from each participant’s transcript. The software enabled me to identify the frequency of codes applied within and among the transcripts. After several weeks, data saturation or the awareness that no new information is emerging, was reached. Subsequently, codes were consolidated and arranged into major thematic components.

In addition to line-by-line coding, I implemented in vivo coding, a coding style that uses the exact words of the participants in the study. In vivo coding techniques help to preserve participants’ original meanings as participants discuss their own experiences and actions as they relate to the research (Charmaz). In vivo codes “serve as symbolic markers of participants’ speech and meanings” (p. 55). For example, one code was entitled, “there is no turning back.” This was developed from Franko’s statement,

“When I got the acceptance letter I knew that there’s no turning back; I had to graduate no matter what.”

Using both line-by-line and in vivo coding assisted me in ensuring that the data gives voice to my participants, decreasing the possibility that my voice as researcher dominated the analysis process. From these codes, the major themes and core concepts contained in the data became apparent just as the literature had suggested they would. An example of this technique from the literature is in Gofen’s (2005) study of FGLI college students, where three themes appeared: “making their dream come true,” “a path out of poverty,” and “education for the purpose of education.” Gofen describes that “the first two themes excluded each other; the third theme sometimes accompanied the first theme and sometimes occurred by itself” (p. 110). In Smith’s (2011) study of FGLI college students themes were “identified fairly early in the research proposal development process as topics that would likely be explored or surface when asking a first-generation, low-income college student about their experience” (p. 80). From the initial phases of research, grounded theory researchers collect data and analyze it simultaneously.

Grounded theorists must also attend to the quality of their data and ensure that the themes highlighted do, in fact, arise out of the data and are not imposed on them (Crotty, 1998). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) elucidated the role of the researcher’s “personal biography” in influencing decisions made throughout the research act (p. 21). They argue that personal biography permeates all aspects of research. As such, in the following section I attempt to make explicit the influence of my own biography. While

engaging in the research process I constantly reflected on my subjectivity in the negotiation of the co-construction of the data.

### **Positionality, Bias**

As a researcher and teacher, I have developed a social constructionist orientation that assumes that social phenomena develop in societal contexts. As a social constructionist, my aim is not to accurately reflect a static reality, because social constructionists operate under the assumption that “individuals continually construct and modify their realities according to their own particular social locations and situations” (Gubrium, 2006, p. 72). Researchers whose work is informed by a more constructionist ontology “see their respondents as active subjects who piece their experiences together before, during, and after the interview” (p. 72). Furthermore, from the social constructionist perspective, if researchers do not “relinquish some control during the interview, they limit their data and research process” (Gubrium & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005, p. 697).

In my role as bricoleur, I bring multiple, unique experiences that inform my decisions regarding the portrayal of the content of the photographs and interviews used in this research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). For the purpose of this study, I positioned myself as a female researcher from a White, middle class, two-parent household in which each parent held graduate degrees. Also I am a graduate student, well past undergraduate studies, which puts me “outside of the experiential field” of the participants I interviewed (Cole, 2008).

In defining my own role as the reporter of research findings, I also must establish my position as a former middle and high school teacher for programs designed to serve economically and educationally disadvantaged students, embracing my own experience



as part of the writing process. I will not attempt to maintain a distanced objectivity in creating this representation of the data. Instead, I will use my practitioner judgment to discern which pieces of the interview transcripts not only best convey the essence of the participant, but also allow for greater understanding of the dynamics of FGLI college students' experiences of transition and persistence (Bensimon, 2005).

Winkle-Wagner (2009) asserts the need for more research, particularly qualitative work that explores how students from underrepresented groups, make meaning of "home/campus tension" (p. 5). She describes that many of the first generation participants in her study felt that they "didn't fit in at home after attending college" and experienced a sense of homelessness (p. 11). Her use of qualitative data analysis techniques linked to social justice allowed her to "uncover oppression where it exists" in addition to exploring border crossing issues as a "White woman doing research with African American women" (p. 6). I appreciated the author's discussion of her subjectivity and her attempts to disrupt the White privilege and researcher / participant power paradigm in her role as a White female researcher working with mostly minority females. Issues of subjectivity and power dynamics are of concern to me in this study as well.

Although I have never personally experienced college as a FGLI student, my positions as a former middle and high school teacher for programs designed to serve economically and educationally disadvantaged students and as a former graduate assistant working with FGLI college students has afforded me first-hand knowledge of this population. In addition, my knowledge of the theory and best practices for serving these students is bolstered by my work as a graduate research assistant for two

professors of Educational Administration with research concentrations in college access and success. I asked participants for their personal photographs and educational stories to privilege their voice and deeply understand their experiences of transition and persistence. While inserting photographs into the interview process often elicits more information from the participants, I found that one of the benefits of PDPE was that I was able to privilege to a greater degree the perspective of the interviewee. For example, if I had used my own photographs to explore college transition and persistence I would likely have discounted or minimized the ceremony commemorating the participants' graduation from high school. When I graduated high school I didn't even attend the graduation ceremony. The completion of my secondary education and the successful transition to a postsecondary institution was almost an assumed accomplishment. However, each participant chose to include a photograph of themselves and their family members at their high school graduation ceremony. In this study, I purposefully engaged my own experience and beliefs about my obligation to participate in work that demonstrates my commitment to education with a focus on traditionally underserved communities. The PDPE method helped to limit bias and led me to reevaluate some of my own assumptions and conceptions about the process of transition and persistence for FGLI college students.

### **Member Checking**

After transcribing and coding each interview, I conducted a member check in which I emailed each participant his or her transcribed interview and met with each participant individually to discuss the study findings. In addition to monitoring and acknowledging one's own voice or subjectivity, a key element of maintaining trustworthiness is crosschecking data with respondents to validate or clarify the

intended meaning behind certain statements. This process gave respondents an opportunity to comment on the overall adequacy of the interview transcription and subsequent analysis. I gave participants access to all transcriptions of their specific interviews and checked with them for confirmation as I drew conclusions from images reviewed and interviews conducted. In addition, I checked back informally after meeting individually with each participant by hosting a dinner for participants, giving an interval of time in which they could reflect on the process and what had been said, and I encouraged them to contact me with any comments or concerns regarding meaning of their previous input or the interview process itself. This served to strengthen the social construction of the analysis. The understandings gleaned from member checking helped me to recognize themes and touchstones and to ensure a more thorough and robust data collection (Guba & Lincoln, 1998).

### **Trustworthiness**

The member checking process increases reliability “as conversations post-interview are likely to provide insight into the meaning making and data analysis process” (Robison, 2012, p. 51). Because the data sets were modified according to these interactions, the reliability of the data obtained derives not only “from their correspondence to meanings held within the respondent, but from their ability to convey particular social realities and experiences in terms that are locally meaningful” (Gubrium, 2006, p. 72). Accordingly, the goal of this research study is to identify the truth of the real world at a specific point in time as captured in interviews and images by a small, specific group of FGLI college students, three of whom I have acknowledged I knew prior to the start of this study. I acknowledge the meanings of these interviews and images are subjective and are presented as an essence distilled from subjective

accounts of experience, forming a “total picture synthesized from partial accounts” (Crotty, p. 83, 1998). Given that this is a qualitative study, the data collection and analyses processes were geared more to identifying, understanding and describing the subjective experience of the selected FGLI study participants in an attempt to approximate the truth rather than make claims of certainty. At best, the outcomes reported in the study are suggestive rather than conclusive.

### **Limitations**

The use of photographs for socially oriented research presents several important issues for consideration (Birnbaum, 2009; Clark-Ibanez, 2007; Collier & Collier, 1986; Epstein et al., 2006; Harper, 2002; Liebenburg, 2009; Packard, 2008; Prosser & Loxley, 2008). One such issue is the very act of photography. Photography can be conceived of as a multi-stage endeavor requiring a combination of technical skills and decision-making to produce a photograph or a series of images. Framing subjects, capturing images, editing, printing and the selection process are each acts which may be studied for their influence. A second issue concerns how the photographs under study were generated and how they are representative of or meaningful to the subject being considered (Birnbaum, 2009).

Finally, the researcher’s role in analyzing photographs needs to be considered. My position as a researcher has been shaped and limited in multiple ways. First, due to my interactions with some of the participants before the interviews, I came to the interview process with assumptions and previous notions about these participants (Gubrium & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005). I also acknowledge that these relationships may have contributed to shaping the data collection and analysis process in my expanded role as the researcher in co-constructing data. Moreover, when presenting data, there is

a question of whether or not the participant's voice is lost in the final report. According to Creswell (2002), "it is possible for the report to reflect the researcher's story and not the participant's story" (p. 532). I addressed the latter weakness in this research study by using images produced by the participants in addition to extensive participant quotes, infusing the language of the participants.

### **Benefits for Participants**

According to Creswell (2002), "careful attention to reciprocity or giving back to the participants will maintain 'gains' for both the researcher and the participant" (p. 532). The participants of this study received short-term and long-term benefits. An example of a short-term benefit is that the confidence of the students will be enhanced as a result of serving as an "expert" on a major research project. Additionally, the students may have gained a greater understanding and hopefully an appreciation of their own experiences and the experiences of other FGLI students enrolled in four-year institutions. Kermit stated, "Don't stop doing this; do it again, take it and make it more broad...people would benefit a lot from participating in this study and from sharing these stories with first generation students."

The long-term benefit from participation in this study may be that the documented experiences of the students will serve as the impetus for implementing or enhancing policies or services that ensure the success of FGLI college students enrolled in four-year institutions. Additionally, through the interpretation of the findings from the study, these students may have been able to provide university scholars, practitioners and administrators with implications for policy recommendations based on their personal experiences.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter includes a thorough description of the data collection process I used followed by a breakdown of the data analysis process which I implemented. Finally, I discussed how my research has maintained trustworthiness through the process, as I continually acknowledge my own subjectivity and incorporate various research practices such as member checking. Through the use of extensive participant quotes and by infusing the language of the participants the next chapter highlights the voices of those who made this research possible, six FGLI students enrolled at Southeast University. The next chapter will include excerpts from individual interviews. The themes derived from the findings relate to participants' parental and peer interactions, their reliance on high school resources, and how they were able to transition to college and persist with the support of the Partnership Program. Another theme discussed in the next chapter concerns financial constraint and challenges associated with being a FGLI student. Additionally the chapter will discuss the importance of peer network support to participants' transition to and persistence in college. The final portion of the chapter provides a discussion of themes related to participants' sense of belonging. Embedded in the discussion of the findings, is a larger discussion of how these findings are reflected in the literature.

## CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

How we perceive what has happened in our lives guides and shapes our outlook as well as what has objectively happened to us. This meaning building process is evident in the stories FGLI participants in this study have shared about their lives and the photographs that document their experiences of transition and persistence. Using qualitative methods, this study sought to understand the transition and persistence experiences of FGLI college students, as documented through PDPE (participant-driven photo elicitation) and open-ended interviews.

### **Research Questions**

This study asked participants about their experiences of college transition and persistence, from which emerged themes and meanings, both within and between groups of FGLI students. In order to more fully understand their educational journeys, the current study investigates an area needing increased attention in research on student transition and persistence: students' sense of belonging to their college or university (Hausmann et al., 2009). At the onset of this research project, the goal was to gain an understanding of how FGLI college students navigate belonging in a university setting. PDPE interviews were conducted as a way to understand participant's experiences of higher education transition and persistence and how this related to their sense of belonging to the campus community. It is within relational and institutional interactions that belonging and connectedness form and flourish. Retention literature has empirically shown that feelings of belonging at an institutional level are markers of student persistence and retention within a college/university setting (Astin, 1984; Swail et al., 2003; Tinto, 1993). The question that is yet unanswered is how is

belonging created on college and university campuses, particularly for FGLI students? In this study, I utilized Hurtado and Carter's notion of students' "sense of belonging" as their psychological sense of identification and affiliation with the campus community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). This study sought to contribute to an understanding of how undergraduate FGLI students document, through PDPE interviews, their transitions-to and persistence-in the university environment, given the additional obstacles recognized by college access and retention scholars—e.g., (Olivia, 2004; Perna, 2006). The qualitative research approach of PDPE addressed the following research questions: (1) How do FGLI undergraduate students document their transition into and persistence in a four-year higher education institution? (2) How do FGLI undergraduate students perceive their educational and social experiences in this institution? (3) What factors do FGLI students attribute to their transition and persistence?

This chapter is organized into two major sections: transition and persistence. The transition section begins with participant descriptions of higher education related exposure and parent expectations for higher education in the home which both fall under the theme of family dynamics. This theme consists mainly of participant accounts of family dynamics, and how interactions with family members, especially parents, shaped participants' attitudes and behaviors towards transitioning into college. The family attitudes and family behaviors that the participants revealed during our PDPE interviews link directly with their intentions to pursue and receive a college degree. Parental influence on college going was evident for the participants of this study and family expectations about higher education is a theme that permeated throughout the interviews and played a significant role in most of the participants' accounts. This theme



will be explored first; it will lay the foundation and set the tone for discussing participants' insights into family dynamics, family attitudes and family behaviors, particularly as they relate to higher education.

The second factor that largely impacted participants' transition to college was parents and participants reliance upon high school counselors, teachers, and college outreach programs to provide the necessary guidance for getting into college, including college and scholarship applications, college tours and information about college in general. Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) suggested that high school resources, including teachers and counselors, are of particular importance for low-income, first generation students. The participants of this study indicated the significant role high school resources played in their transition to college. Accordingly, this segment of the transition to college section addresses the assistance participants received from high school guidance counselors, other school personnel and the early college outreach initiatives of the Partnership Program that participants described as influential to their decision to transition to college.

Another factor that largely impacted the participants' sense of whether higher education was possible for them was the role of finances and the level of education achieved by their parents. The third theme discussed in the section on participants' transition to college concerns financial constraint and challenges associated with being a FGLI student. Participants were from low SES homes and the lack of family finances as well as decreased familial familiarity with academic discourse and college-going culture were quite evident throughout participants' college preparation and application/enrollment processes. There was a continued impact of varying degrees as

to the role of finances and the lower levels of educational achievement by parents on the persistence of the participants. Economic need and parental lack of postsecondary experience shaped participants' thoughts, attitudes and actions regarding higher education and degree attainment. In this way, the section on financial constraint and challenges associated with being a FGLI student spans both transition and persistence.

In addition to family dynamics, reliance on high school resources and challenges associated with being a FGLI student, themes emerged from the participant interviews concerning their persistence experiences with the Partnership Program and their peer network. The findings reported in the section on persistence convey the support participants received from the Partnership Program and their peer network and how these factors contribute to their persistence toward degree attainment. Each of the above mentioned areas connect and have a propensity to impact a students' sense of belonging on campus. The final portion of the persistence section provides a discussion of themes related to participants' sense of belonging. According to Tinto (1993), sense of belonging and connection to the university is a tested marker of student persistence toward degree attainment. Greater understanding of the perceptions and experiences of FGLI students' sense of belonging on campus could lead to a research agenda for creating greater institutional commitment on the part of these students through deepening their sense of belonging.

## **Transition**

### **Family Dynamics**

Family dynamics influence students' initial transitions into college and their continued college experiences (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Being equipped with the expectation and aspiration to attend college and the information about what occurs on a

college campus within and outside the classroom can largely be influenced by family. A significant finding that permeated throughout the interviews and the photographs participants provided was parental expectations about education and their aspirations for their children to succeed. It appeared that regardless of family educational background and SES, the expectation for participants to receive a college education was expressed within the majority of homes. Coupled with the expectation for a college education were family patterns, attitudes and behaviors that reinforced or hindered aspirations to seek higher education. This section will first examine the manner in which parents evoked this expectation in their children and how participants responded to the pressure of parental postsecondary expectations. Though parents of most of the participants held the expectation of postsecondary attainment, in all cases participants were not able to rely on their parents for college preparation. The section follows with findings related to participant accounts of the college preparation experience given that their parents had no exposure to the postsecondary environment and limited postsecondary knowledge.

Most participants indicated that their parents espoused the need for college during their childhood and that it was an expectation that they would go to college. The first picture discussed in the PDPE interview with Anna on college transition was a picture of her family. Anna described that she began our interview with that picture because her mother has always, from an early age urged, "You have to go to college; you've got to make good grades and you've got to go to college, you got to go to college." Similarly Grace stated, "Not going to college was not an option for me in my family, even though I'm the first to go... My mom and my dad expected so much out of

me; they just knew I was going to college.” The general sense from the participants was that their parents wanted more for them and realized that education was an important factor in being successful. However, there was a shared sentiment amongst the participants that once they reached high school there was little that their parents could do to assist them academically. Anna admitted, “I didn’t really go to my family for help with homework or stuff like that. It was more friends and teachers.” Participants indicated a desire for their parents to provide the necessary encouragement and advice about college-going although they had no postsecondary experiences. Kemit commented, “I just wish she knew more about it, you know, so she could like support me when it comes to picking classes and my major, because I haven’t declared my major yet so I’m still in that process. And yeah, I just wish she knew more about it but I can’t blame her because it’s not her fault. So I’m kind of coping with it.” While the transition experiences of all college students can be stressful and involve social, emotional and academic adjustments, it may be especially challenging for students from low-income backgrounds or those who are first in their families to attend college.

First-generation students may receive little guidance from their parents in regard to preparing for, transitioning into and persisting in college because their parents have no direct experience with the process (Ackerball, 2007). When asked about conversations regarding school or education in general, most participants replied that although their parents emphasized the importance of a college education, they rarely had specific conversations about plans for college-going or discussions of how to choose an institution. Franko indicated that this was the case for him. Franko described, “my mom and dad didn’t go to college so they don’t really know much about

college; it's just they'd say, "We just want you to go to college," that's it. They didn't really know much about it and stuff. They were just like, "Just go to college," and that was it." All the participants expressed that their parents lacked basic knowledge of college application procedures. Kermit explained, "My mom honestly does not know the schooling system here so she just goes based on what I tell her in terms of registering and financial aid, applying for it, you know. She just files her taxes and I'd fill out the forms with her and when it comes to like taking classes she doesn't really have any idea how that works, so I have to explain it to her and let her know." Grace described that her parents were definitely interested in what she needed to do to prepare and apply for college, even though they didn't have much understanding of the college-going process. Grace made the comparison between herself and fellow students attending Southeast University when she noted, "people I've gotten to know at the university, they definitely have a leg up when it comes to their families. My family can't supply me with anything." Angel admitted, "My parents didn't know what college was, they didn't know about financial aid."

Conversations that involved strategies to gain college admission were not evident in the participants' homes; however, the majority of participants reported their parents did discuss the importance of attending college with their children throughout their upbringing. Although the conversations were not extensive, based on the findings from this study, it is apparent that the dialogue that was held made an impact with the participants. It motivated the participants to want to go to college. Only one participant (Kermit) noted that he did not think seriously about going to college until the 12<sup>th</sup> grade and he was from a home where college was given considerable encouragement.

Kermit stated that he began to consider college during the last year of high school. For Kermit, his mother was a positive force that pushed him during his senior year towards pursuit of a college degree. He attributes his mother's expectations and aspirations regarding his transition to college for his decision to eventually attend. Kermit stated, "My senior year when it was time for me, I guess, almost time for me to graduate. That's when I actually focused on college. I had college in the back of my mind the whole time but it was not solely college; I just did it just because you know my mom expected me to do well in school, so I just tried to pass all my classes, maintain my GPA, boost it up."

Although most parents imparted the importance of college to the participants, not all parents took an active role in encouraging the participants to seek a college education. Alicia seemed especially impacted by what she perceived as a lack of active involvement by her adoptive parents in her college preparation. She described, "it was a struggle for me because like I said I'm adopted and so I just kind of feel like I'm the black sheep of the family because they don't really... the majority of them have their GED, so I don't feel like they have the experience of what it's like to really study hard; you're taking AP classes, you're getting prepared for these standardized tests and you're constantly studying, and so I would always get picked on because my head was always in a book..." She reflected during our interviews, "I think for me it would have been nice if I'd had my mom and my dad to help me a little more but instead I had to spend time explaining to them this process and what I was doing and just letting them know what I needed." Alicia admitted as a FGLI student, "you're negotiating a lot more than the vast majority of people in your transition to the university and you're dealing with the family dynamic, so that's a lot." However, Alicia revealed that since she has

made the transition to college, her parents are becoming more interested in her college experience. The majority of the participants reported that since they transitioned to college their parents have been verbally supportive and the support they receive helps them persist toward degree attainment. All participants reported that their families want them to complete their degrees, even Alicia, whose adoptive parents were initially less expressive about college.

As a result of their parents' insistence, the majority of participants were motivated to pursue a college degree and most had been convinced, by their parents, that it was a necessary credential that would aid in their social mobility. This segment of the transition section focused mainly on what happened in the homes of the participants that reinforced or hindered their transition to higher education. However, while the influence of family dynamics was most salient to participants' transition to college, this factor also had implications for participants' persistence. Parental encouragement did seem to have an impact on participants' persistence decisions in some cases, fostering their sense that they needed to persevere in part for themselves and in part for their families and communities. Angel indicated that his parents were a significant factor in his decision, not only to enroll in college but also to persist. He describes, "they empowered me more ...It's like I'm doing what I want to do but also giving back to my parents." The college expectations of the parents of participants in this study were often related to a "pressure" to make them proud. Kermit explained, "my mom was a single mother; she never got that college experience so it definitely makes me want to do more to make her proud. I know she went thru a lot." He included a photograph of his mother at his high school graduation party in our interview. He described, "She had more

friends there than I did at the party and she was happy, so I was just happy for her and myself, just because I made her proud I guess, but that's not enough; I've got to graduate from college too." This pressure was a motivating factor for many of the participants, including Franko. He stated, "you have to continue going; you have to make your mom proud. You've worked this hard, you have to keep going." Similarly, Anna added, "I'd like to make my family proud. I really want to make [my brother] proud and show him that anything is possible, that [he] can do it, too." Grace described a perceived need to represent her family while she was in college. She explained, "Like it's a bad pressure because if I let up or if I do something from the slightest... that's the slightest disadvantage to my family it's bad. I do appreciate the pressure but at the same time... it gets kind of stressful but I look at it as they just want better for me, so that's why they're hard on me." This suggests that, while the expectations were stressful, they also created a reason to persevere. All of the participants whose parents expressed college expectations acknowledged that this provided motivation integral to their success, not just to aspire to and transition to college, but to also persist.

The next section of the chapter will address the assistance participants received from high school guidance counselors, other school personnel and the early college outreach initiatives of the Partnership Program. Participants described these pre-college support mechanisms as critical to their aspirations and ability to transition to college.

### **Reliance on High School Resources and Challenges Associated with Being a FGLI Student**

According to Horn & Nunez (2000), first-generation students are less likely to consult with their parents about how to go about preparing for college while in high school and are more likely to work with teachers or counselors. The parents of the



participants in this study appeared to rely more upon school counselors, teachers, and college outreach programs to provide the requisite guidance for college and financial aid applications, college tours and information about college in general. For example, Alicia revealed “I didn’t have anyone in my family necessarily to depend on; all the people that I depended on were from school.” Grace reported that her parents would tell her to go talk to her guidance counselor and “get involved in school and figure out what I needed to do.” Grace described that her guidance counselor was “definitely hard on a lot of seniors...she made sure that we took our SATs, or ACTs.” In terms of college scholarships, a form of financial assistance that every participant in this study received, Grace reminisced that her guidance counselor gave out “a whole folder at the beginning of our senior year, a whole folder full of scholarship applications, filled with deadlines and dates and everything, and if you wanted it, and if you really wanted to go to college and you had the ambition you would go through that packet every single day.” Grace referred to her guidance counselor as “the person that definitely got me thru the transition from high school to college.”

Anna indicated that her mother wouldn’t know what to do to help Anna or her siblings to prepare for college “unless someone in the school tells her.” Anna admitted that when filling out the FAFSA she told her mother that she would fill in the part of the form meant to be completed by parents or guardians. According to Anna her guidance counselor was instrumental in terms of providing her with recommendations about college-going, assistance with paperwork and information about scholarships and their requirements. Anna described her guidance counselor “really helped getting me documents or giving me things that I needed to do for scholarships and stuff like that.”

Anna felt her guidance counselor, “really helped, pushed... she’s probably one of the reasons why I have the scholarships; she pushed for that.” Kermit, who provided a photograph of his guidance counselor in his interview, mentioned that he completed 182 community service hours during his senior year of high school. When probed as to why he said, “I did it because of the scholarship that I was trying to get; that’s the reason why I did it and my [guidance] counselor told me about it, too. She told me about how important community service was so I just did it.”

For Alicia, her high school Student Government Association (SGA) advisor “played a big role” in Alicia attending college. For her PDPE interview about her transition to college, Alicia chose the picture of her SGA advisor as the photograph most important to her transition to college. Not only was this advisor significant to Alicia’s transition but she continues to provide support to Alicia even in college. During her involvement in this study, Alicia was diagnosed with cancer. She describes that other than the support she receives from her peer group and her adoptive father, her SGA advisor is the most significant source of support for her continued persistence. Alicia emphasized her SGA advisor is “not someone who’s going to support you and be in your corner just through your high school career. She continues to be that to this day. So I still call her, we still talk to each other.”

Research by Engle & O’Brien, (2007) revealed that programs and practices aimed at assisting FGLI students’ transition to college can benefit them and influence their educational trajectories. Southeast University administers a number of academic achievement programs to aid students in need of support during college however most of these programs initiate their support efforts once students arrive on campus. One

program in particular, the Partnership Program provides assistance to FGLI college students. In many instances the participants in this study had assistance from early college outreach efforts of the Partnership Program. Angel described what the program meant to his transition to college saying, “They supported me, they were there for me; it wasn’t my parents, it was them, it was that program.” Angel stated that without the Partnership Program, “I would have never done a college tour or anything because then again my parents, they just couldn’t take me somewhere.” Angel, who was born and raised in Miami, described his visit to Southeast University in the ninth grade as his first time ever setting foot on a college campus. He enthused, “it was just like so cool to be on an actual college campus which I’d never gone to, ever – not even to UM or Miami or FIU or like even Miami-Dade College so it was just like... it was my first time on a campus.”

Franko, who relocated from St. Maarten to Miami, Florida with his mother for greater postsecondary opportunities expressed, “when I got to the United States the first thing I got to do in my freshman year [of high school], I got to do a tour of [Southeast University] thru the [Partnership] because my [high] school is [affiliated with the Partnership Program], and once I saw [Southeast University] I knew that I have to go to college, and this is the college I want to go to.” Parents, relatives and school personnel encouraged and assisted the participants with their pursuit of higher education; however, involvement in the college success initiative, the Partnership Program, further contributed to participants’ transition to and persistence in college. Unfortunately, the scope of the Partnership Program has been reduced and no longer includes campus visits and other pre-college outreach activities. Angel expressed that he only had

knowledge of Southeast University because of his involvement in the Partnership Program. When asked about his reaction to the discontinuation of the Partnership Program involvement in his high school he responded, “It’s really sad and it gets me mad that we’re not going to have this support anymore...What about those kids, especially in my high school? We’re all low income.” However, while the discontinuation of the pre-college outreach component is disturbing, institutional interventions once students arrive on campus are also vitally important for FGLI students.

Many of the participants conveyed that their membership in the Partnership Program did reinforce their aspirations to attend college and assisted them in their transition. The impact of this program on participants’ persistence in college will be discussed further in subsequent sections.

### **Financial Constraint and Challenges Associated with Being a First Generation Low Income Student**

Socio-economics plays a significant role in the ability to go to college (Cabrera, Burkum & LaNasa, 2005; Walpole, 2007; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001). In this study, participants acknowledged that their status as FGLI students was a significant factor in the manner in which family instilled an expectation in their children to pursue higher education. Anna implied this was the case stating, “My grandfather was always pushing, just like my mom, so we’re not in that same poverty cycle, and I would be the first of all the grandchildren to graduate.” Parents expressed ideals in the home that helped to form participants’ perspectives of their social class. Anna insinuated that her mother’s influence shaped her desire to achieve upward social mobility through higher education. Anna described her mother’s desire for Anna to make a better life for herself and that she and her mother associated higher education with affluence. Anna voiced,

“she’s only a high school graduate. She doesn’t want me to struggle like she does like having to live week by week or month by month or whatever with bills and stuff like that, so she wants me to live a comfortable life and the only way you can do that is if you get a degree.”

Numerous factors influence students’ transition to college, however family socioeconomic status is a key factor in college-going. For many students who aspire to a postsecondary education, financial concerns present a barrier to the fulfillment of those aspirations (Bergerson, 2009). The participants aspired to go to college and knew that it was an expectation of their parents; however, there was still a matter of how it would be paid for. For Grace, the transition to college was made more difficult due to the stress of financial constraints during high school. Grace stated, “My parents didn’t really have too much money and they would live from paycheck to paycheck. My senior year all I can remember was them talking about bankruptcy so I was just like ok, everything’s going bad, they don’t have no money, I have to work; I can’t work, go to school, play sports and try to get into college. It’s too stressful. So my mom put in a lot of extra hours [at work] but even still that wasn’t enough.” Financial concerns repeatedly appear in the literature as playing a part in students’ postsecondary choices .

Often families from low-income neighborhoods have multiple distractions (poverty, crime, lack of educational resources, etc.) that may impede their ability to achieve academically. However, participants revealed that the financial struggles of their families at times motivated them to go to college and make a better way for themselves. For some of the participants in this study, getting out of their neighborhood and into a higher education institution served as a motivational factor aiding their

transition to college. Grace revealed, "I don't want to go back to that neighborhood because anything can happen. Every time I turn around somebody's dying, and I don't want that to happen to me or anybody in my family." Tragically, Grace did lose her older brother to neighborhood violence. She reported that this event initiated and cemented her decision to pursue a postsecondary degree. Grace stated that for her, the motivation to attend college "all started with the death of my brother because like I didn't think about school or like going to college or just being successful until I realized ok, I need to be because I had to get out of the situation I'm in. And that was a huge eye-opener for me." The impact of the violence she experienced in her neighborhood continued to influence her postsecondary experience and contributed to her persistence. Grace confided, "I just get the thought in my mind that if I fail that's where I'm going to end up; I'm going to end up back in the same situation that I don't want to be in. So that's the drive I work off every day. When I go and I take an exam I'll be like ok, if I don't pass this exam what's going to happen to me? I cannot go back to Jacksonville; I can't, that's just like not an option."

A prominent storyline in Anna and Grace's interviews was the movement away from a background of poverty and what they considered an unfavorable lifestyle. The impetus and urgency for Anna and Grace to make college-going a reality was based on seeing something in their home and family context that they did not want to repeat. Distancing was a strategy for moving them out of a bad situation and the distancing vehicle was education. For Anna and Grace, college was their ticket out.

Participants were from low SES homes and the lack of family finances and the decreased familiarity with academic discourse and college-going culture were quite

evident throughout participants' college preparation and application/enrollment processes. Kermit compared his transition experience to continuing generation students when he emphasized, "It would have been different if my mom had gone to college because she would have personally forced me, put me in the car and we would have gone to college visits. I just think because she didn't go to college she didn't know enough information about any colleges here I guess she didn't push me to do any college visits."

Financial planning for college is a complex process. For low income students the ability to secure financial means for college is essential. Often FGLI students may want to attend college but are caught between their desire to attend college, and their ability to afford it (Cole, 2008). All participants received financial assistance to pay for college and in all cases their families were unable to make financial provisions to pay for college. The responsibility for the costs associated with applying for and attending college was left to the participants. Between scholarships, grants, loans and work study, and other forms of employment the participants are able to pursue their education. Kermit stated, "if I did not have those scholarships I would probably not be here because you know I was financially stressed because of college because I didn't know how I was going to survive here without money, so the scholarships definitely helped out a lot. If I didn't have scholarships I would probably not do the whole college thing." Participants admitted that a primary factor in their selection of Southeast University was based on the availability of the Partnership Program Scholarship. Franko stated, "from my freshman high school year to my senior year I worked super hard. I didn't work hard to get into [Southeast University], but I worked hard... I worked harder because I

wanted the [Partnership Program] Scholarship and I knew that if I got the [Partnership Program] Scholarship that means that I'm admitted to [Southeast University]. So that's what I really worked hard for, to get the [Partnership Program] Scholarship.”

Since most of the participants came from high poverty high schools and all of the participants received scholarships while enrolled in college, their economic need shaped many thoughts, attitudes, and experiences about their transition to higher education. This segment of the transition section focused mainly on the financial constraints and the challenges participants faced as FGLI students during their transition to college. However, while the influences of these economic and educational factors were most consequential to participants' transition to college, these elements also had implications for participants' persistence. For instance, once she entered college, Anna's mother frequently would request that Anna provide the family with financial assistance from the grants, loans and scholarship money Anna received to cover school and living expenses. Anna admitted, “I always give my mother money at the beginning of the semester, but I'm kind of easing away from that because it's getting down to the wire and I know I need to save money and fix myself up.” Tragically, during the beginning of Anna's junior year, one of her younger brothers became ill and fell into a coma. Though her mother had been unemployed for a few years, for several months after her brother became comatose, her mother was unable to continue her search for employment. Anna explained that this meant that her mother was forced to live off “SSI for the kids and that's it. She doesn't have a job and it's kind of hard now.” After several months on life support, her brother died. Anna describes, “When my mom was really stressed in the beginning of this year about losing the house and stuff like that she



didn't know where to turn to and she just wanted to kill herself." There was a continued impact of varying degrees as to the role of finances and the lower levels of educational achievement by parents in regard to participants' persistence toward degree attainment. For example, Anna described, "I know that staying here and getting a degree and going on to either graduate school or finding a career will enable me to save money so at some point I can help my mom so she doesn't have to struggle as much or make them feel more comfortable in their living situation or even move them out of the area so they can be in a better place."

Overall, parents of participants were dissatisfied with their economic and social standing and wanted their children to fare better in life. Parents of all but one participant conveyed that higher education was the best path towards greater opportunities and advancement in life. Participants witnessed their parents working jobs with little to show for their labor; moreover, several participants indicated their parents did not enjoy their line of work or profession and had few job opportunities available to them. Franko stated, "my mom didn't graduate college and... she was placed in that situation where she took a job that she didn't want to take but she had to take and that's the only reason we're low income," Angel stated that while he admired his parents and didn't want to disparage them, "I definitely don't want to end up as a construction worker or a housekeeper, so that's what keeps me pushing." Swail et al., (2003) maintained that when academic goals go unfulfilled, career realities such as lower pay, less security, fewer opportunities and dreams deferred or abandoned, unfortunately result. In this study, participants indicated that their status as FGLI students impacted their transition into college and they acknowledged the need for support not only during their transition

to college but also persisting toward degree attainment. Penrose (2002) notes that there is a greater risk of departure from college prior to degree attainment for students who come from low income home environments where parents have not earned college degrees and there is no exposure to academic programs that promote education. Programmatic solutions have been developed to address the challenges which FGLI students face in accessing an equitable opportunity to transition to college and to persist (Gandara, 2002; Walpole, 2007). The Partnership Program is an example of one such programmatic initiative.

## **Persistence**

### **Partnership Program Support for FGLI Students**

In addition to facing impediments to college access such as decreased knowledge of admissions and financial aid processes, FGLI college students who transition to postsecondary institutions encounter certain challenges within those environments that affect their persistence and retention. While early educational experiences, parental educational attainment and income clearly shape the college transition process, institutional factors such as campus support systems also influence students' transition to and persistence in postsecondary education. As discussed previously in the transition section, the participants indicated that they were successful in their transition to college life, in part due to the Partnership Program. Although the participants expressed many educational and economic obstacles, the combination of parental encouragement, high school resources and the support and guidance of the Partnership Program assisted them in their transition to the college environment. The following section will examine participants' involvement in the Partnership Program once they arrived on campus and how the program supports their continued persistence.

Developing resources and providing support for first-generation college students from low-income backgrounds is an important consideration for higher education institutions. Colleges and universities who are hedging about the importance or value of targeted access programs should take into account the statements obtained from the participants of this study. Kermit affirmed, “It’s very important because being a first generation student is not easy, I guess. You don’t have that support because you don’t have anybody to lean on. Your mom never went to college... put it that way, your parents never went to college; they never had the college experience so they can’t really say much and you basically fend for yourself. So just having that support program, having [the Partnership Program] definitely helps.”

Many studies have looked at the concept of formal and informal campus involvement and its relation to retention. According to Reid & Moore (2008), FGLI students need information about the types of academic and social support systems in place on the campus such as math labs, writing centers, counseling centers, and the like. The authors convey that it is essential that first-generation students be identified and be offered opportunities to participate in groups with other first-generation students where they feel comfortable in asking questions. In addition to granting scholarships, the Partnership Program offers academic and social engagement opportunities and college success workshops. Alicia stated, “I think without [the Partnership Program]... besides the financial compartment of it, that is important but it’s so much more than that for me because they have all these other resources like these workshops for us to go to that I probably wouldn’t go to on my own or maybe I would but it would probably take me a little longer, or other opportunities, research opportunities, or telling me how I can

do this and how I can do that and the ins and outs of college or university that I probably wouldn't know because I wouldn't really know how to... I'd be a little lost; I'd probably be a little lost. It's like [the Partnership Program] is my guide to like the business side if you will of being in college.”

In addition to the aforementioned support for FGLI college students transition and persistence provided by the Partnership Program, other initiatives of the Partnership Program include orientation activities, mandatory college success workshops, access to a virtual community environment (e.g., web communications), enrollment support, and a mandatory semester long college orientation course. Research suggests that interventions specific to the Partnership Program such as required enrollment in a college orientation course can positively affect academic performance and persistence for FGLI students participating in the program (Kuh et al., 2005; 2008). When asked about the significance of being enrolled in a college orientation course with other FGLI students, Kermit responded that it helped him to know he was “not alone, because there are other students just like me, so it made me comfortable, I guess, just knowing the fact that I'm not the only one, the only first generation student I guess. It made me feel good about myself.” He went on to say that the college orientation course was, “definitely important; it's important so you get to know the people on campus, and plus I made a lot of friends just from that class so it's definitely good.”

Walpole (2007) recommends that creating a supportive environment with peer groups and mentors smoothes FGLI students' college transitions and contributes to their persistence. The Partnership Program offers mentoring and participants indicated that this was a significant source of support. Anna stated, “all the support and the

mentoring that they've given me along the way, support or advice from dealing with classes and dealing with family situations or dealing with friends and social life, and just helping me grow professionally they've been a huge part of my life here." Angel admitted, "Yes, I feel like my mentor, she knows my family really well and I've spoken to her – like my [Partnership Program] mentor – so she knows my family and we've spoken about family."

Peer mentors can serve as institutional academic and social navigation guides and this type of support can be particularly important for first-generation students (Nora & Crisp, 2007-2008; Rendon, 2006). Reid & Moore (2008), suggest that connecting entering first-generation students with first-generation juniors and senior level students as mentors would be beneficial. Peer to peer mentoring is another component of the Partnership Program. Alicia chose to include a picture of her peer mentor in her PDPE interview on persistence. Alicia shared, "This is a picture of me and Sasha, my [Partnership Program] mentor and she's also a first generation student. She is really good about checking in... well we check on each other because it's become more than a mentor and a mentee type bond; it's become more to a friendship and just really checking on each other, and she has advice for me and I have advice for her. So it's just like she's pretty much been thru it already and now she's at this point of getting ready to graduate." Alicia explains that it is particularly important, "to see someone who's a first generation student and who's pretty much been thru this journey and who can share her experiences about being here. And she's a reminder – she just reminds me especially about continuing to keep going and what I can do to help me keep going and reminding me of all the different resources and reminding me that she's here to

support me if I need anything. So she contributes to that support system. She's nice." Peer mentoring was an avenue for the participants to gain access to information and emotional support. Peer mentoring also provided an outreach opportunity for participants. Kermit acted as a peer mentor for a FGLI student. He stated, "I was really happy that I applied to be a mentor because I just don't want to keep all this experience that I had to myself; I just want to share it." These statements by participants are echoed in the literature, which indicates peer mentors serve as connecting links to help less experienced students get connected to their institution both in and out of the classroom.

The persistence of the participants in this study is in contrast to research that has found that FGLI students who attend college are less likely to persist to graduation (Walpole, 2007). Many researchers have studied how social class relates to college enrollment, but more work is needed on the "immediate college continuation trends of underrepresented students served by educational opportunity programs" (Pitre, 2009, p. 108). Measuring the effectiveness of college access and success initiatives is critically important for those who are investing in programs and interventions, "during a time of dwindling resources and increasing public interest" (Smith, 2011, pg. 10). While this study did not attempt to provide empirical evidence of the efficacy of the Partnership Program, the statements made by participants indicated that their involvement in the Partnership Program positively impacted their transition to and persistence in Southeast University. In addition to the financial assistance, the college success workshops, the college orientation course and the mentoring provided by the Partnership Program appeared to support participants' persistence toward degree attainment.

Another turn toward higher education for the participants of this study occurred when they were able to meet influential peers who could act as supports to help them into college and/or to continue there. These individuals often had a dramatic influence on how or if a student would be able to pursue the path to college and persist. Angel stated, "I feel like my friends are contributing to my persistence in college. They're the ones who support you...when you need something they'll be there for you." Some of the participants admitted that seeing their peers transition to and persist in college further spurred them on. Grace admitted, "I need them because if they weren't here I don't know how I would keep my grades up." Although the seed had already been planted by their parents, and supported by the Partnership Program, their desire to pursue higher education was further reinforced by their classmates.

### **Peer Network Support**

Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that at large, research institutions underrepresented and marginalized students use peer organization membership to achieve personal goals, make sense of campus environments, and to engender a sense of belonging to campus communities. All participants expressed enthusiasm for college as a way to become immersed within different social and intellectual worlds. Perhaps because of this, none of the participants described social aspects of college as peripheral to their lives. Alicia reflected retrospectively on the photographs of friends she brought to our interview. She surmised, "I've met a good group of my friends, so it was nice to see that and our growth even though it's just been a year and a semester."

As seen in the literature on persistence, students who form connections with peers early in their college career have a higher likelihood to persist in their attendance (Tinto, 1993). Anna describes that when she first gained admission to Southeast

University she was scared but then she learned a peer was also accepted at Southeast University. Anna states that her friend reassured her stating, “Girl we’ll be roommates; we’re going to make it together. You don’t have anything to worry about; we’ll get thru it together.” Anna describes that it was “a real comfort to know I knew somebody, we were going to be together... and we did, basically that first semester, first year we did everything together.” Franko stated that when he transitioned to Southeast University it helped to know a fellow first generation student from his high school was joining him in the College of Engineering.

“I have a friend that’s in the College of Engineering with me, from my high school. The cool thing about our relationship is he thinks I’m smarter than him, and I think he’s smarter than me. There’s some stuff that I do better than him and some stuff that he does better than me, and we always challenge each other. When we were in math class we used to make math into a game, like ok, let’s see who can do it the fastest, and that has helped so much.”

According to Hurtado and Carter (1997), studies have found that transition experiences that encourage the formation of peer groups and adjustment to college can be facilitated by institutional intervention. At times participants’ success at finding an engaged social experience had to do either directly or indirectly with their involvement with the Partnership Program. Kermit stated, “I met people thru [the Partnership Program] and I met some people thru my organization, the organizations that I am in now and just going out and talking to people at different events. And I made friends thru classes, too.” Kermit included a picture of himself with his friends gathered at a common space on campus. He described, “I used to hang out with a couple [Partnership Program] students there. And I have this friend named Dominique; Dominique is a really close friend of mine; he’s a [Partnership Program] student, too, and we hang out over



there and meet people over there, so definitely it added to me transitioning here and making friends.”

Kermit indicated that the peer network he developed and the messages about the importance of involvement conveyed by the Partnership Program did impact his early attachment to the campus community. Kermit reflected, “I guess the friends that I made and the stuff that I heard about involvement and academia...I was rooted, you know. I was not fully rooted but I was somewhat rooted in the Fall.” Kermit also stated that relationship building took time and depended on being part of particular spaces on campus that were conducive to social interaction. In his PDPE interview on transition, he stated, “the second picture on the fourth row to the right is a picture of me at [a building on Southeast University campus]. Yeah, I was just sitting out there. That’s where everybody hangs out. I saw a couple of my friends there and I just sat there with them. I didn’t have class, you know, so I just felt like seeing what’s happening to socialize, so I just sat there and talked to people and it was fun.”

Tierney and Venegas (2006) suggest that peers have the potential to create what the authors define as fictive kin, and in this role, “peers play a social support role that helps create a culture of success” (p. 1688). The authors describe that when fictive kinships exist in educational settings, the relationship pertains to matters such as “the social dynamics that take place in school, access to college, the interactions of specific groups within a school, and the like” (Tierney & Venegas, 2006, p. 1691). For the participants of this study, Tierney and Venegas (2006) notion of kinship as contributing to college-going extends beyond college access to include persistence. Alicia shared that among her peer group college-going was, “the choice we made and we stuck to it

and we've been keeping each other accountable and checking on each other and seeing how we're doing." Grace admitted to a similar sense of accountability among her friends. Grace provided a picture of an influential friend who she quoted as saying "You can make it, girl. We got to just make it because you don't want to fail; you don't want to be like all our other classmates back in high school." Angel also expressed a similar dynamic of accountability and support for college persistence among his peers. He remarked of his photograph of himself with a group of friends, "we go have fun, like on Monday we have our little fun, but tomorrow we're like no, we're going to the library; we need to get our grades."

Participants described their peer network as central to their transition and persistence in college. Students sought an engaged social experience in college and found it. Kermit explained developing a peer network is "a process; you have to get involved, you have to go out there, talk to people, because if you keep to yourself it's not going to be... you're not going to really experience as much as you should in college." Although the findings from this research implicate parents and involvement in the Partnership Program as a primary influence for participants to seek a college education, it also demonstrates that many of their successful college transition and persistence experiences were promoted by their network of peers. For the most part, the parents of participants provided the foundation for aspiring to attend college, but much of the support needed to transition into and persist in college came from the Partnership Program and participants' peers. Peer network connections is where sense of belonging plays out on a day to day, person to person level. In the final segment of

the persistence section I will present the findings of this study associated with participants' developing a sense of belonging within the campus community.

### **Sense of Belonging**

Researchers have typically conceived of sense of belonging as part of the psychosocial processes involved with the adjustment and transition to college. Different types of social and academic interactions affect a student's sense of belonging. In the present study, students' sense of belonging is defined as FGLI students' psychological sense of identification and affiliation with the campus community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

#### **Sense of Belonging for FGLI students**

Langhout, Drake, and Rosselli (2009) reported that undergraduates who identified as low income or poor had "lower levels of a sense of belonging compared to their peers who identified as middle class or upper-middle class" (p. 167). Some researchers assert that the primary distinction between first and continuing-generation students is the perceived alienation from their families, from their peers, and from the campus community (Ishitani, 2006; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Penrose, 2002). Alicia indicated that the circumstances of her childhood, specifically her experience of homelessness, did have bearing on her sense of belonging. She stated,

"I think I'm just going to always feel different. I'm always going to feel a sense of like separated and not really belonging...I came from like being homeless to now I'm a student at [Southeast University], like that is bananas. That doesn't happen to... that doesn't happen to people. So my beginnings are really like... they really drive me to be better."

Participants in this study rarely reported alienation because they felt intimidated, inadequate, and devalued due to their social class backgrounds and first-generation

status. However, Kermit described that becoming connected on campus and developing a sense of belonging could be challenging as a FGLI student. He disclosed,

“it’s not no knowledge but it’s like your parents don’t have that experience, so that’s a setback first of all and you’re coming in and trying to connect with these advisors sometimes they expect you to know certain stuff about college and just being a first generation student you don’t have all the knowledge about college like you should, so it definitely is a barrier sometimes.”

The participants all displayed a sense of achievement and accomplishment for not only being enrolled and persisting in college but for also accomplishing what research might indicate as unlikely. They understood that many students from similar backgrounds and circumstances often did not fare as well when it came to postsecondary transition and persistence.

### **Sense of Belonging, Identity and Culture**

Student affairs research calls for the investigation of student niche creation and points of belonging, particularly for underrepresented and marginalized students. Practitioner writings often suggest specialized spaces where identity and culture can be explored and celebrated (Welch, 2009). Southeast University hosts several cultural centers for students. Angel indicated this space was significant to his sense of belonging. He stated, “finding other people that are almost the same as me, like being Hispanic on such a big campus and just finding the Hispanic Student Association was like ... wow, I’m finding my niche.” Angel included a photograph depicting his involvement in the Hispanic cultural center on campus. He stated, “I think it was for Hispanic Heritage Month that year. The Hispanic Student Association has been a really big part of my involvement here on campus which was interesting.”

However, the notion that often FGLI students feel socially isolated from peers who have been exposed to the culture of higher education was not substantiated by the participants in this study. Angel indicated a sense of kinship with all his fellow students when he stated,

“I feel like we all have that one goal in mind to graduate from college; it’s our future. They wouldn’t be at [Southeast University] if they didn’t have those goals, so I feel like we all have the same goals; we’re all [Southeast] University students... I want to be around good people, people who have goals in mind.” In fact, some participants indicated that they went out of their way to expose themselves to students who did not share similar experiences.

Angel stated, “I think it was midway when I ran for senate, for student government senate here I started meeting new faces and I was like yeah, I need to give up my home, Miami, just being about Miami, Miami, Miami...I was like it’s time to meet new people and start learning new things about other people and their cultures.” Alicia stated, “I don’t feel like it’s necessary for me to be involved with the Black community because I came to [Southeast University] for diversity and so I don’t think it makes sense for me to run straight to something that I know and I feel comfortable with and I can get at home.”

Researchers have reviewed interaction and differential impacts of academic and social experiences across groups (Antonio, 2001; Nora, Cabrera, Hegedorn, & Pascarella, 1996). Antonio found that frequent interracial interaction among students may be more important in developing cultural knowledge than involvement in more formal activities such as cultural awareness workshops (p. 593). The statements included above by participants indicate that these participants actively pursued interactions with peers who did not share their racial or ethnic background. These statements also indicate these participants entered the university with some

understanding of complex issues of diversity. Honoring individual histories and cultures while at the same time developing programs and services that help students become involved offers a strategic way to increase belonging for FGLI students.

### **Sense of Belonging and Support**

According to Hurtado and Carter (1997) it is the early experiences of college transition (“getting in” and “getting to know”) that are key in determining how and whether students find their place in the campus community. Franko attested to the impact the Partnership Program had on his sense of belonging. He indicated that this sense of belonging initiated through his involvement with the Partnership Program. Franko summarized that this program allowed him to be “on the inside” versus “being on the outside.” He speculated, “I felt like if I was on the outside probably [Southeast University] wouldn’t be something that I would choose. I chose it because all my friends that are here now from my high school, they were in [the Partnership Program] for four years with me.” He went on to state that “The ones that were on the outside, they’re not at [Southeast University] right now, so I think it made a big difference.” Franko emphasized the importance of having a home away from home and a feeling of family for FGLI students on campus. He stated, “most first generation students miss their family back home, so having a family here, you know, that would help you; it’s important.” In the above statements, Franko describes his sense of belonging as connections created through relationship building and his personal involvement in the Partnership Program. Photographs provided by him and the other participants supported this perspective as well. Overall, participants did not express difficulty finding their home on campus.

## Chapter Summary

Researchers know from qualitative studies that the context of college going experiences is of particular relevance for FGLI students who cross socioeconomic and educational barriers to finish college. This study does two things to advance current research. First, it seeks to add to our understanding about the specific population of FGLI students for whom college transition and retention efforts are most needed. Second, unlike previous studies, this research asks students in open-ended PDPE interviews what factors were most salient in making their transition to college and the decision to persist. Knowing all of the risk factors associated with being a FGLI college student does not provide a complete understanding of the phenomenon of their decreased educational attainment. For that, we must go to the students for answers.

Although research has provided scholars and practitioners with several ideas about what variables are associated with the decreased educational attainment of FGLI students, such as individual demographic factors, certain patterns of enrollment and attendance, and a lack of social and academic integration, there is still not enough information about the transition and persistence of those FGLI students who stay in college. It is not enough to assume that FGLI students simply lack the economic and educational resources needed to succeed in college, or experience certain barriers that make college transition and persistence difficult for them. This is too simplistic, because lives cannot be understood separate from the rich contexts. The purpose of this research is to describe and understand the perspectives of FGLI college students and the decisions they make about their education. Through in-depth engagement with these students in PDPE interviews the educational life paths and the meanings they ascribe to their transition and persistence experiences can be more fully understood. In

Chapter five I will discuss in detail the implications of these findings, the limitations of the work and the impact these findings will have for educational practice.



## CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The six participants in this research study were FGLI college students who were enrolled in an academic achievement program (Partnership Program) at Southeast University, a research extensive, large, public, PWI. The Partnership Program is designed to increase first generation student participation in postsecondary study. The purpose of this study was to examine the participants' experiences with college transition and persistence in order to understand their attitudes and perceptions about postsecondary education, and the ways in which they developed a sense of belonging to the campus community.

This research study used the qualitative visual research method of PDPE and employed purposeful sampling and in-depth, open-ended PDPE interviews to collect data from the FGLI college student participants. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and then coded using Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software. Codes were developed based on the research and interview questions, and once each interview was coded reports were generated and general themes were compiled.

### **Research Questions**

The qualitative research approach of PDPE will address the research questions: (1) How do FGLI undergraduate students document their transition into and persistence in a four-year higher education institution? (2) How do FGLI undergraduate students perceive their educational and social experiences in this institution? (3) What factors do FGLI students attribute to their transition and persistence?

The themes that were developed from the data collection first explain the background of participants' family dynamics and how postsecondary aspirations were

initiated and sustained. The central themes explored in this study concern the participants' ability and desire to transition to, and persist in college. The data revealed substantive information about participants' perceptions of family dynamics and peer interactions, in addition to the support mechanisms that impacted their transition to college and their continued persistence.

This chapter begins with a review of the findings. The themes derived from the findings relate to participants' parental and peer interactions, their reliance on high school resources, and how they were able to transition to college and persist with the support of the Partnership Program. The following sections will convey how family dynamics and the involvement and assistance from high school counselors and advisors, along with the support of the Partnership Program shaped the participants' attitudes, perceptions and abilities to pursue a college degree. Additionally, the review of findings will discuss the importance of peer network support to participants' transition to and persistence in college. Embedded in the discussion of the findings, is a larger discussion of how these findings are reflected in the literature.

The next section of the chapter is dedicated to a discussion of two selected institutional initiatives reviewed in chapter two that were found to be significant to the transition and persistence of the FGLI college student participants of this study; orientation programs and financial aid. Subsequently, an overview of the literature on the theoretical framework of sense of belonging is presented along with a summary of the findings of this study related to sense of belonging. The implications for FGLI students' sense of belonging are also discussed. The conclusion of this chapter will convey the implications that this study can have on practice, policy and future research.

## Summary of Findings

The following is a summary of the findings that were determined to be the primary themes that were both articulated by the study participants and reflected in photographs they provided for the study. Information gathered from the participants implied that parental and peer network interactions significantly impacted their transition to and persistence in college. In addition, data collected for this study demonstrates how certain support mechanisms have assisted the participants on the path towards postsecondary degree attainment. Throughout their upbringing, and particularly when they were young, most participants confirmed that the prodding and constant emphasis on studying, performing well in school and going to college that they received from their parents firmly shaped their attitude about education and earning a college degree. The findings also revealed that due to the struggles that the participants saw their parents undergo and that they themselves experienced, they internalized the need to be successful and do better in life than their parents. This was reinforced by their parents as well. The participants and their parents determined that obtaining a college degree could benefit the participants economically, socially and professionally. All of the participants transitioned to postsecondary education and have persisted beyond the first year of college.

None of the parents of participants provided the participants with supplemental college preparation activities, such as study skills workshops or SAT prep courses. However, most parents did encourage the participants to attend college. School counselors and teachers and the college outreach initiatives of the Partnership Program provided support critical for college going as well. Many participants expressed that their parents could not provide college preparation support to them because they were not

familiar with the college going experience and did not have the requisite skills to assist them. High school counselors and teachers and the college outreach initiatives of the Partnership Program did however provide academic and college going assistance to the participants. Primarily, the actions and assistance of the participants' high school counselors and teachers and the support of the Partnership program impacted the participants' ideas and attitudes about postsecondary education. Parents' insistence about working and studying hard and earning good grades provided the needed support and encouragement that further reinforced the participants' aspirations to go to college. Parents, in particular, espoused the need for higher education and although they became less involved (with school work and the college preparation process in particular) as the participants grew, they continued to express the importance of a college education. The constant reinforcement by the parents of most participants and the support from high school counselors and teachers and the Partnership Program appeared to inspire the participants with a vital level of motivation and instill the tools necessary to pursue a college degree. Without this reinforcement and support participants may not have pursued higher education. The following sections will theorize from the data how family dynamics and the involvement and assistance from high school counselors and teachers, along with support from the Partnership Program, shaped the participants attitudes, perceptions and abilities to pursue a college degree. The final summary of findings section will discuss the importance of peer network support to participants' transition in to and persistence in college.

### **Family Dynamics**

Parental expectations and definitions of success vary with the economic and educational attainment of parents and mediate students' aspirations (Walpole, 2007).

Research reveals that parental support positively influences students' aspirations to go to college (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001). The majority of the participants knew from early ages that a college education was expected by their parents. Walpole (2007) found that family support can develop a foundation for FGLI students to be successful in college, which appears to have also happened with the students in this study. She further argues that because FGLI students are challenged academically, socially and financially and also may face family resistance, their sense of belonging in the college environment is often stifled. These students' transition to and success in higher education are important because obtaining a bachelor's degree is seen as a critical component of social mobility (Bedsworth et al., 2006; Bowen et al., 2005; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 2006). However, obtaining a bachelor's degree is an achievement built on previous educational attainment and experiences and is also dependent on successful college transition and persistence. Differences have been found in students' educational attainment, college transition and college persistence based on their SES, on whether their parents attended or graduated from college, and on their social class (Walpole, 2007).

In this study the majority of the participants acknowledged the impact their parents had on their desire and ability to go to college. This study demonstrated that parents and family provided encouragement and this promoted the college transition success of the participants. Expectations for a college education were constantly advocated by the parents and families of the majority of participants. Understanding that ingenuity was necessary in acquiring the knowledge, skills and dispositions to gain college admission, parents' primary approach in providing support for their children was

to express the need for college during the participants' childhood and as they grew. By providing early encouragement for college going, the parents were contributing to the participants' postsecondary aspirations that assisted them in gaining college admissions. Previous research has indicated that low-SES parents are more likely to view a high school diploma as the norm for their children than are high-SES parents, to whom a bachelor's or advanced degree is considered the norm (Lareau, 1987, 1993; McDonough, 1997). More recent research indicates that while FGLI parents often aspire for their children to attend community college, high-SES parents articulate postsecondary expectations for their children as not only earning a bachelor's degree but increasingly as graduation from a prestigious college (Bowen et al., 2005; Walpole, 2007). However, in this study, the participants expressed postsecondary aspirations that went beyond community college. Angel clarified his postsecondary aspirations involved getting out of Miami and attending a four-year university. He compared himself to his older sister, who attended a community college for a couple semesters and then dropped out to work full-time. Angel admitted, "I love my sister and everything but I don't want to be that person...I do need to go to college, not just stay at home and go to community college for one semester and then start working." The findings from this study demonstrated that the majority of the participants thought about going to college at an early age and fared well in their academic studies, making them eligible for entrance into a four year, research extensive university such as Southeast University.

Although parents of most participants were highly supportive of their children's pursuit of postsecondary education, there was no strategic planning about college going. The participants acknowledged that their parents' constant insistence that they

maintain good grades in order for them to go to college had a significant impact on how they performed academically; however, there was no dialogue about approaches on how to get to college. Many parents did not have exposure to information that promoted college, but knew that good grades were an important factor in being able to go to college and pushed their children to perform well in school. Penrose (2002) acknowledges that there is a lack of exposure and familiarity with the postsecondary experience in most FGLI students' homes. In contrast, parents who are college educated are viewed as a source of information and students are more likely to seek information from parents who earned college degrees (Horn & Nunez, 2000; Ishitani, 2005). As a result, first-generation students are less likely to consult with their parents regarding course selection and the college admissions processes (Horn & Nunez, 2000; Ishitani, 2005). This research was supported in part by the participants who acknowledged that although their parents encouraged them and expressed the importance of a college education, they rarely had specific conversations about plans for college going or discussions of how to apply for and choose an institution. There was a shared sentiment amongst the participants that once they reached high school there was little that their parents could do to assist them academically or in the college preparation process. Kermit explained, "being a first generation student is not easy. You don't have that support because you don't have anybody to lean on. Your parents never went to college; they never had the college experience so they can't really say much and you basically fend for yourself." Similarly, Angel stated, "My parents didn't know what college was, they didn't know about financial aid; I had to figure it out for myself."

Research (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001) has also demonstrated that when support is provided by parents, teachers, administrators, peers and the community, students are more likely to become aware of, and enroll in college. A student's eventual ability to pursue and obtain a college degree is multifaceted and the aspiration to attend college can begin early in life when there is parental and school based support for college going (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001). Overwhelmingly, families provided support to the participants and appeared to assist them as best they could. Simply reinforcing the need to attend college was all that many families could do to support their children. Most of the parents of the participants came to know and appreciate the value of a college education and consistently promoted the need to have one.

The relationship between socioeconomic level and parental involvement appears to have a significant impact upon a student's educational aspirations, achievement and ultimate enrollment in a post-secondary institution (Lareau, 1987). The results from this study do not support the conclusions that low SES families don't support post-secondary education. Most of the families of the participants did articulate the value of pursuing higher education; and although the parents could not contribute financially and did not fully understand college life and educational strategies, they did value a college education and understood its importance. This was apparent through the interviews with participants and in the photographs selected by participants for inclusion in this study. Every participant included a picture of their parents in their PDPE interview. For all but one participant support for college going was consistently communicated by parents.

Parents of participants and the participants themselves were reliant on the school's resources for college preparation. This was communicated by the FGLI college



student participants in dialogue during the PDPE interviews on their transition to college and evidenced by the photographs they provided, many of which included high school teachers and guidance counselors. Parents of participants did not discuss specific course selection or assist with homework once the participants were in high school. The parents entrusted their children's postsecondary preparation to the school counselors, teachers and advisors and the college outreach efforts of the Partnership Program. The parents of participants and the participants themselves relied on these resources to assist them in making choices about college selection, navigating the college application process, applying for financial aid and scholarships, and college visits.

### **Reliance on High School Resources for College Enrollment and Participation**

FGLI students disproportionately attend high schools that do not focus on preparing students for college and have fewer counseling resources (Walpole, 2007; Watt, 2007). In addition, FGLI students are more likely than higher SES students to lack access to rigorous course work and to be tracked away from honors and advanced placement courses (Adelman, 2006; Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000; Perna, 2006; Terenzini et al., 2001). Due to their access to rigorous coursework and by using several supplemental college preparation strategies, students without economic and educational challenges tend to gain access to universities, and particularly to elite institutions, at higher rates than their FGLI peers (Bowen et al., 2005, 2009; Karabel, 2005; Martin et al., 2005; Walpole, 2007). These supplemental strategies include "hedging their admission bets by applying to large numbers of colleges, using test preparation services to improve their entrance exam scores, and employing private consultants to assist with admissions packaging" (Walpole, 2007, p. 31). All of these

strategies require college going savvy and consume considerable investments of money, neither of which FGLI students possess in abundance.

Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) suggested that high school resources, including teachers and counselors, are of particular importance for low-income, first generation students. The authors indicated that parental involvement in conjunction with school curricular policies that support students' obtaining college qualifications are critical in helping FGLI students complete a college preparatory curriculum in high school and enroll in college. Parents who are college-educated are viewed as a source of information and students are more likely to seek information about college going from parents who earned college degrees (Ishitani, 2005). In this instance, the participants did not have their parents as resources and knew that they needed to seek information elsewhere. Because of this lack of information in the home, and a lack of financial resources to afford supplemental college preparation strategies, FGLI students are less likely to pursue a college degree and are at a greater risk for not persisting to degree attainment than their continuing-generation counterparts. As previously noted, often parents of FGLI students do not believe that they can significantly contribute to their children's postsecondary preparation because they do not have the educational background to assist them. The parents of the participants in this study and the participants themselves appeared to rely more upon school counselors, teachers, and college outreach program initiatives to provide the requisite guidance for college and financial aid applications, college tours and information about college in general. The support participants received from parents and the college going assistance they were

able to obtain via resources in their high schools promoted postsecondary education and guided them in the process of transitioning into college.

Although research (Bui & Khanh, 2002; Cole, 2008; Walpole, 2007) reports that students from low-SES backgrounds have lower educational aspirations, persistence rates and educational attainment than their continuing-generation peers, many of the participants in this study realized that if they challenged themselves in school and interacted with influential peers and high school personnel, they were positioning themselves for gaining college admissions and increasing their ability to manage a college curriculum. They prepared themselves by enrolling in advanced placement and honors courses in high school, by seeking support from high school resources and by participating in a college outreach program.

Participants relied on postsecondary preparation assistance from school counselors, teachers and advisors and the college outreach efforts of the Partnership Program. Typically, the goal of early college outreach programs for FGLI students is to provide these students with the skills, knowledge, and general college preparation needed to enter and succeed in college. Pre-college programs are designed generally to increase college enrollment rates of underrepresented students and specifically to provide underrepresented students with the opportunity to develop the college-related skills, knowledge, aspirations, and preparation that are required for postsecondary enrollment and attainment (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002; Perna, 2006). The high school outreach component of the Partnership Project was significant in that several of the participants were exposed to Southeast University on a college tour sponsored and organized by the program. The Partnership Project also provided resources related to

navigating the college application process and applying for financial aid and scholarships. The following section will examine participants' involvement in the Partnership Program that has in many ways facilitated their transition to college and supports their continued persistence.

### **Partnership Program Support for FGLI Students**

Penrose (2002) notes that there is a greater risk of departure from college prior to degree attainment for students who come from low income home environments where parents have not earned college degrees and there is no exposure to academic programs that promote education. Programmatic solutions have been developed to address the challenges which FGLI students face in accessing an equitable opportunity to transition to college and to persist (Gandara, 2002; Walpole, 2007). Several authors (Bergerson, 2009; Langout, Drake, and Rosselli, 2009; Perna and Titus, 2004; Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2007) focused on the gap between the aspirations and achievement of FGLI students. One finding of this line of research was the lack of access to mentors who came from similar backgrounds and for whom college provided increased economic opportunity (Bergerson, 2009). Walpole recommends that creating a supportive environment with peer groups and mentors smoothes FGLI students' college transitions. The Partnership Program offers peer mentoring and participants indicated that this was a significant source of support. Reid & Moore (2008), suggest that connecting entering first generation students with first generation juniors and senior level students as mentors would be beneficial. Peer counselors can answer questions about a school that the administration may be more hesitant to state explicitly, such as the institutional norms, and can also provide guidance about "academic adjustment, academic skills deficiency, course scheduling, and financial need" (Trippi & Cheatham,

1989, p. 40). Peer to peer mentoring is a component of the Partnership Program that participants reported was instrumental in their college transition and persistence. Like their high SES peers, when first-generation students have access to support such as mentoring they too are more likely to successfully transition to college and persist to degree attainment.

The persistence of the participants in this study is in contrast to research that has found that FGLI students who attend college are less likely to persist to graduation (Bowen et al., 2005, 2009; Walpole, 2007). The verbal accounts of participants and the photographs they provided during the interview process suggests that involvement in the Partnership Program positively impacted participants' transition to and persistence in Southeast University. According to Lohfink and Paulsen (2005), helping students discover and understand opportunities for success in terms of the academic, the social, and the financial dimensions of higher education institutions are important and mutually reinforcing. The Partnership Program initiative was designed to support the higher education success of FGLI students by intervening in issues such as financial hardship, lack of college knowledge, and reduced engagement on campus that are perceived as key barriers to the college transition and persistence of FGLI students. In addition to the financial assistance and college success workshops, engagement opportunities and peer mentoring provided by the Partnership Program created upward movement in the participants' life trajectories towards the completion of their a degrees. Another positive factor that led toward higher education engagement for the participants of this study occurred when students were able to meet influential peers who could act as supports to help them into college and/or to continue there.

## **Peer Network**

Tierney and Venegas (2006) suggest that peers have the potential to create what the authors define as fictive kin, and in this role “peers play a social support role that helps create a culture of success” (p. 1688). Participants described their peer network as central to their transition and persistence in college. The relationships that the participants built with college going peers appeared to promote their persistence to degree attainment. In general, participants reported that their peers often had a dramatic influence on how they pursued the path to college and persisted. Some of the participants admitted that seeing their peers transition to and persist in college further spurred them on. Although these student’s college aspirations were encouraged by their parents, and supported by the Partnership Program, their desire to pursue higher education was further reinforced by their college going peers. Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that FGLI college students who frequently discussed course work with other students outside class (in both the second and third years) had a higher sense of belonging in the third year of college. Additionally, the authors found that at large research institutions, underrepresented and marginalized students use peer organization membership to achieve personal goals, make sense of campus environments, and to engender a sense of belonging to campus communities. The participants in this study described that they engaged in a substantial amount of peer interaction and that these interactions were both academic and extracurricular. These activities suggest a merging of students’ social and academic interactions that may contribute to their development of a sense of belonging in college.

At times participants’ success at finding an engaged social experience had to do either directly or indirectly with their involvement with the Partnership Program. The

FGLI students in this study appeared to have a sense of community with other groups of FGLI students. As seen in Chapter Four, several participants noted the comfort they feel just seeing someone they know from the Partnership Program out in the general university environment. Research indicates that FGLI college students are likely to feel more comfortable in sharing their experiences with other FGLI students than with non-FGLI students (Orb, 2004). The participants described ample opportunities for formal and informal interaction with other FGLI college students as a result of their involvement in the Partnership Program.

Personal support systems and peer relations have an influential effect upon the college experience. According to Hsiao (1992), as FGLI students begin to “take on the symbols of the college culture...first-generation students often sense displeasure on the part of acquaintances, and feel an uncomfortable separation from the culture in which they grew up” (para. 3). Lack of peer support can be a barrier to the successful college transition and persistence of FGLI students (Hsiao). The notion that often FGLI students feel socially isolated from peers who have been exposed to the culture of higher education was not substantiated by the participants in this study. Participants described that for the most part they felt surrounded by students who valued going to college, much like they did. The combination of encouragement from the parents of participants and the assistance of high school resources formed the foundation for aspiring to attend college, but much of the support needed to transition into and persist in college came from the Partnership Program and participants’ peers. The participants indicated that financial aid and college orientation efforts were additional factors that promoted their success.

## **Selected Institutional Initiatives: Orientation Programs and Financial Aid**

Mitigating gaps in college success for FGLI students requires policymakers and practitioners to better comprehend the sources of such gaps and the programmatic interventions that can effectively address them. The next section of the chapter is dedicated to two institutional initiatives that were found to be significant to the transition and persistence of the FGLI college student participants of this study: orientation programs and financial aid.

### **Orientation Programs**

It is important that postsecondary institutions have programming in place to help students become familiar with campus that are easily accessible to FGLI students. Activities can include orientations and transition programs that serve to bring FGLI students together and promote awareness of campus resources. Langhout, Drake, & Rosselli (2009) suggest that these programs should include making all of the rules of the academy visible for those who might not already know how to navigate this system. Such programs could introduce students to faculty, staff, and peers familiar with FGLI student experiences who can serve as role models and mentors, especially as students are becoming acquainted with the university culture. These types of student programs can facilitate the development of social support networks, which may decrease FGLI students' sense of alienation. Researchers suggest that a well-designed first-year seminar or college orientation course can serve this purpose (Kuh et al., 2005; 2008).

In addition to the aforementioned support for FGLI college students transition and persistence provided by the Partnership Program, other initiatives of the Partnership Program include orientation activities, mandatory college success workshops, access to a virtual community environment (e.g., web communications), enrollment support, and a



mandatory semester long college orientation course. Research suggests that interventions specific to the Partnership Program such as required enrollment in a college orientation course can positively affect academic performance and persistence for FGLI students participating in the program (Kuh et al., 2005; 2008).

According to Reason (2009), research suggests that participation in orientation programs or seminars and the academic skills and social networks students acquire as a result are powerful predictors of student persistence and success. When FGLI students do not participate in such programs they miss an important opportunity to learn about the resources and services the institution has to offer, which “only compounds the problems associated with their lack of exposure to college” (Engle & O’Brien, 2007, p. 44). Institutional interventions, such as orientation programs have potential to support FGLI students through their transition to college. Thus, orientation programs serve as an important institutional mechanism in efforts to retain FGLI college students (Braxton, 2001).

### **Financial Aid**

Financial aid packages for many incoming students are often a combination of federal and state governmental grant aid, and subsidized and unsubsidized student loans. Some states distribute their aid “widely across students from different economic backgrounds, while others focus aid heavily on students from low- and moderate-income families” (Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009, p.182). For FGLI students, the costs of college may strain already-stretched financial resources of the family. FGLI students by definition have fewer financial resources available to them, and several studies indicate that these students have more financial concerns than do their high-SES peers (Engle & O’Brien, 2007; Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2007). In the

present study, the focus is on FGLI students who attend college full-time in their home state, and are classified as “dependent” on their parents for the purposes of determining their financial aid status. FGLI students who are dependent on parental financial support is an area of particular concern in part because the traditional parental financial safety nets are often not available to FGLI college students (Eitel & Martin, 2009).

Students from families with higher family incomes tend to be more knowledgeable than their FGLI peers about the costs of college and financial aid and are more likely to select schools that have higher tuition costs. Low-SES students by definition have fewer financial resources available to them, and several studies found that they have more financial concerns than do their high-SES peers ( Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2007). Terenzini and colleagues noted that low-SES students reported that financial aid was an important part of their postsecondary decisions more often than did their higher-SES peers at two-year and public four-year colleges. They also reported that low-SES students’ enrollments were very sensitive to tuition increases and found that financial aid was one of the most important reasons low-SES students cited when asked why they chose to attend a particular institution (Terenzini et al., 2001).

Financial constraints and challenges associated with being a FGLI student were factors that influenced the participants’ experiences with their transition to and persistence in college. Participants discussed the obstacles they faced throughout their childhood as a result of limited financial resources and parents’ lack of educational attainment. Family income is the greatest predictor of college enrollment even when ability is considered (Thayer, 2000). The participants aspired to go to college and knew that it was an expectation of their parents; however, there was still a matter of how it

would be paid for. All participants received financial assistance to pay for college and in all cases, their families made no financial provisions to pay for college; the responsibility for college finances was left to the participants. Participants all were recipients of financial aid, and were awarded scholarships and received support from college success initiatives to promote their transition and persistence. Between scholarships, grants, loans, work study, and other types of employment the participants are able to pursue their education. Based on the findings of this study, aid has positively affected the persistence decisions of the participants. Without it, many would not be able to continue and they articulated its significance in their ability to attend and graduate from college.

The participants often obtained the information they needed about college and aid through their school counselors, teachers, and college outreach program initiatives. Little information was obtained by way of their parents. Providing aid, and information on aid, is critical for FGLI students (Walpole, 2007). Bowen, Kurtzweil & Tobin (2005) stress the value of active programs and especially targeted efforts to “assist students from low income families, and those from families with no college experience, in navigating the ‘process’ of applying for financial aid” (p. 256). The authors describe that decisions concerning the allocation of institutional aid is one effort at the institutional level with potential to “achieve a greater degree of equity within higher education” (Bowen et al., 2005, p. 253).

As mentioned earlier, one of the most important factors in persistence research for FGLI students is their engagement and integration or sense of belonging on campus. Adequate financial aid frees FGLI students to fully engage in activities on their

campuses. In other words, financial aid may act as a mechanism to increase FGLI students sense of belonging as they are afforded the opportunity to become fully integrated into the their institutions with the time to interact with peers and participate in campus social functions (Nora, Barlow & Crisp, 2006). Concurrently, students are also able to more fully engage in academic activities, both in the classroom and on campus. Behaviors such as taking part in study groups, developing a network of peers, or meeting with a professor after class are “many times impossible if the student is constantly worried about money or if the student feels that he or she must work to make ends meet” (Nora, Barlow & Crisp, 2006, p. 1642). Financial assistance allows time to make use of academic resources and develop a sense of belonging to campus that could have an impact on FGLI students’ academic performance and degree attainment.

Kuh, et al. (2008) found that student engagement in educationally purposeful activities during the first year of college had a positive, statistically significant effect on persistence, even after controlling for background characteristics. An adequate financial aid package reduces FGLI student’s financial burden and has the capacity to increase their social and academic integration on campus leading to an increased likelihood of persisting to degree completion.

This chapter has reviewed and summarized the findings reported in chapter four and highlighted some of the institutional features and programming that promote FGLI students’ access to, progress through, and graduation from higher education institutions. A central aspect of the FGLI student transition to and persistence in postsecondary education involves negotiating a sense of belonging. The increasing number of FGLI students on college campuses across the U.S. presents itself as a

valuable point of analysis for research that seeks insight into how sense of belonging is negotiated in an educational environment (Orbe, 2004). With an eye toward investigating the college transition and persistence experiences of the FGLI college student participants and how they developed a sense of belonging in a large, public, research extensive university setting, this next section proceeds first by providing a basic overview of the theoretical framework of sense of belonging and related research. The section follows with a summary of the findings of this study related to sense of belonging and discusses the implications for FGLI students' sense of belonging.

### **Sense of Belonging**

Sense of belonging in the college student literature has been shown to be an essential factor of students' academic and social integration experiences on campus (Bowman et al., 2008). Researchers have typically conceived of sense of belonging as part of the psychosocial processes involved with the adjustment and transition to college. Different types of social and academic interactions (e.g., memberships, specific peer interactions on campus) affect a student's sense of belonging. A sense of belonging contains both "cognitive and affective elements in that the individual's cognitive evaluation of his or her role in relation to the group results in an affective response" (Hurtado and Carter, 1997, p. 328). Thus, studying a sense of belonging "allows researchers to assess which forms of social interaction (academic and social) further enhance students' affiliation and identity with their colleges"( p. 328).

Specific activities may foster "a broader sense of group cohesion and enhance an individual's sense of affiliation and identification with college" (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 338). The authors urge further research is needed to determine whether a high sense of belonging is "evident in students with specific college majors or

in various fields of study; in classrooms where faculty require study groups; and in other institutionally based structures, such as living-learning residential programs, that may enhance students' opportunities to discuss course content outside class" (p. 338). Hurtado and Carter convey "it would be helpful for researchers to develop the concept of membership further by identifying activities that bring about a greater sense of affiliation with campus life" (p. 327). This research study answers the call made by Hurtado and Carter, adding to the body of research by closely examining the activities that produced a sense of belonging and affiliation in student participants. Statements made by participants showed that membership within the Partnership Program increased feelings of belonging for students.

London (1989) noted that the transition from the participants' home lives to college provided a sense of loss as well as a sense of gain. Researchers conveyed that first-generation students often manifest confusion and conflict as a result of the cultural attitudes that are associated with college by their families and the need to remain included and associated with the culture from which they came (London; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996). Rendon (1993) wrote about the struggles that first-generation Latino students faced in negotiating the cultural differences between their home environments and the college choice process and college environments. Rendon described her own difficulty in maintaining their cultures of origin during the educational process and the pain of feeling caught between the two cultures. It is interesting to note the overwhelming research indicating that elements of the minority experience may inhibit students' development of a sense of belonging, especially at large, research extensive, PWI's (Hurtado and Carter, 1997; Thayer, 2000;

Walpole, 2007; Welch, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, 2009) . According to Welch, “students of color and other marginalized students often feel like a guest in someone else’s home – never quite comfortable in the physical and emotional climates on campus” (p. 41). One reason for the disparity in educational outcomes for FGLI students could be negative experiences that students are having on college campuses, particularly at predominantly White institutions (Winkle-Wagner). The statements given by participants during interviews indicate that participants did not perceive Southeast University as a hostile racial environment and that they actively pursued interactions with peers who did not share their racial or ethnic background. The navigation of these boundary spaces for students can be seen as opportunities for crossing borders and increasing interaction among students. The Partnership Program was created to bridge these borders, to increase opportunities for interaction and to create spaces of home for FGLI students.

A one-size program or event does not fit all students equally. Based on this study’s findings, the participants did not experience significant difficulty adjusting to college life, in part due to the Partnership Program which is designed to assist in their transition and persistence. Although the participants faced challenges as FGLI students, the combination of their parent’s expectations, support from peers and the academic and social guidance and financial assistance of the Partnership Program provided the necessary foundation for them to successfully transition and persist within the college environment.

In this study the majority of the participants did not reveal challenges with developing a sense of belonging on campus. The findings from this study do not support the conclusions that were made by the aforementioned researchers. None of

the participants expressed confusion or conflict about leaving home for college because of negative attitudes of their family. Their experiences were in contrast to those of students who experience this home/campus tension, such as in the study conducted by Winkle-Wagner (2009). She describes that the participants in her study grappled with immense expectations from their families or home communities to succeed in college. Winkle-Wagner suggests that in part, these expectations stemmed from the fact that most of her participants were first-generation students. Regardless of the reason for these expectations, Winkle-Wagner emphasized that the participants in her study experienced these expectations as an almost crushing “pressure” and, simultaneously, as a motivation to lift up their families and to care for them even while they were away. While the participants of this study acknowledged the pressure of parental expectations and other pressure brought about by family circumstances that could at times be a negative influence, it often provided a motivation to persevere. Many of the participants echoed Bui’s (2002) research which demonstrated that first-generation students often take pride in bringing honor and respect to their families and being the first to earn a college degree.

Once students are admitted, institutions can work to ensure that students make a successful transition to the campus academically and socially. Hightower (2007) found that FGLI students who transition to supportive institutional environments with specifically-designed programs for them perform equally as well and sometimes outperform their CG peers. Moving belonging from being viewed only “as a feeling construct to a tangible, organizing principle” can help practitioners design nuanced interventions for student success (Welch, 2009, pg. 142).



## **Recommendations for Practitioners**

Given the numerous sources of influences, no single aspect can be isolated as providing the answer to increasing institutional retention and graduation rates for FGLI students. Thayer (2000) clarifies that while retention strategies that work for FGLI students are likely to work for the general population, by contrast, if these strategies do not account for the characteristics and circumstances common among FGLI students, more universal strategies will not be as successful with them.

### **Practitioner support for Parent and Family Involvement**

Penrose (2002) notes that there is a greater risk of departure from college prior to degree attainment for students who come from low income home environments where parents have not earned college degrees and there is no exposure to academic programs that promote education. Programmatic solutions have been developed to address the challenges which FGLI students face in accessing an equitable opportunity to transition to college and to persist (Gandara, 2002; Walpole, 2007). For example, practitioners interested in strategies serving FGLI students could focus on implementing programmatic efforts designed to “balance familial expectations to succeed and communal expectations of uplift with the expectations of academic success on campus” (Winkle-Wagner, 2009, p. 24) . Additionally practitioners could provide support for students that would enable them to successfully navigate their family responsibilities (Winkle-Wagner). Some campuses have incorporated parents into campus activities, asking them to serve on advisory boards or to serve as volunteers for campus events (Wartman & Savage, 2008). Practitioners could also organize parent training sessions where parents could learn more about the norms of campuses. Those interested in serving FGLI and other groups of underrepresented students should also “undertake

seriously the responsibility of understanding the communities from which students come” (Winkle-Wagner, p. 25).

### **Practitioner support for K-12 Collaboration and College Outreach Initiatives**

Practitioners can and should create partnerships with area schools “to create clearer articulation between high school and college and provide information about choices, requirements, time lines, and financial aid” (Walpole, 2007, p. 87). College preparation experiences and activities that practitioners could collaborate with principals and school leaders to provide might include college field trips, college student shadowing experiences, encounters such as information sessions on the college campus, college student panels, and activities that partner students with university students and staff in various community outreach projects (Pitre, 2009).

Practitioners can also seek out partnerships with the K-12 educational system through college readiness initiatives. The Partnership Program is an example of one such initiative. Retention strategies for college students should be designed with the special circumstances of first generation and low-income students in mind. Strategies designed to primarily meet the needs of the general student population do not consider the characteristics of first-generation and low-income students (Thayer, 2000). College outreach and success initiatives such as the Partnership Program are designed with the special circumstances of first-generation and low income students in mind. The Partnership Program is equipped to provide the requisite financial support and guidance through orientation activities, mentoring, social engagement opportunities and college success activities for students as they matriculate through their freshman to their senior year at Southeast University. The program also provides information and resources to assist students in gaining graduate and professional school admission. Kermit provided

an example of his experience with these support services. He stated, “The workshops that they hold are very informative because they talk about stuff that I actually need to know about campus, about my major, and about stuff that I need to do like community service; the stuff that I basically need to graduate and stuff that I need to know to get into graduate school. I heard about graduate school through [the Partnership Program], through the workshops they have for us.” The Partnership program helps FGLI students’ transition to Southeast University and helps retain these students who have historically departed from college after their first year. The current resources offered by the Partnership Program are available to FGLI students once they have successfully been admitted to Southeast University; however, additional outreach efforts are needed for those FGLI students who are still in high school and developing aspirations toward attending college. Therefore, if practitioners want to improve educational access, experiences, and outcomes for FGLI students they can work to develop initiatives with similar elements of support and ensure these resources extend into K-12 schools. Angel advocated that these initiatives begin as early as middle school. He stated, “We do need it in schools and we do need to start as early as middle school. We need to start getting students into the mindset that college does exist...[and that the] goal should be college, getting through high school and then just going straight to college.” Participant involvement with the Partnership Program has illustrated the potential impact these types of initiatives can have for FGLI students in terms of both college preparation and in creating a sense of belonging and connection for students once they arrive on campus. Initiatives aimed at helping FGLI students to develop a sense of belonging on campus need to “employ people who have the tools and skills to develop and grow

internal communities as well as skills and tools to interface with the larger university structures” (Welch, 2009, pg. 47). Practitioners who facilitate these interactions might be better able to structure intervention to assure that a sense of belonging is attainable for all university students. Ultimately, a paradigm shift to a focus on the multitude of the variables that impact belonging may prove useful to researchers as well as practitioners (Welch). This holistic view will assist researchers, practitioners, and policymakers as they seek to assist underrepresented populations of students. (Walpole). This project has shown that explicit organizational initiatives, such as the Partnership Program, which have demonstrated a commitment to FGLI students’ success through a multifaceted approach, helped to facilitate college transition and persistence for these students.

### **Practitioner Support for the Development of Peer Networks among Students**

This research project has shown that for the FGLI participants, support from peers has significantly contributed to their sense of belonging on campus. According to Hurtado and Carter (1997), transition experiences that encourage the formation of peer groups and adjustment to college can be facilitated by institutional intervention. Because peers are very influential to FGLI students’ transition to college and to their persistence, institutions must harness and shape this influence to the extent possible so it is educationally purposeful and helps to reinforce academic attainment (Kuh et al, 2005, 2008). Exposure to certain resources that supported the transition to and persistence in college for the students in this study appeared to make a difference in whether they were able to socially integrate with other members of the college community. Practitioners can provide resources for students to fully participate in the social aspect of college. Practitioners that structure peer network support opportunities

for FGLI students can make a difference in students' connectedness to the university and their desire to be a part of it. This connectedness is integral to "a student's ability and aspiration to remain at that university and obtain a college degree" (Acker-Ball, 2007, p. 145).

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Faculty and staff must use effective educational practices throughout the institution to help compensate for shortcomings in FGLI students' college knowledge and create a culture that fosters student success (Kuh et al., 2008). How and why many of these practices work in different institutional settings with different types of students are discussed by many researchers cited in this study (Kuh, et al., 2006, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Walpole, 2007; Watt, 2009). Whatever the reasons, research has consistently found that FGLI students are less likely to aspire to, apply to, be prepared for, or enroll in postsecondary education than higher-SES continuing-generation students.

Winkle-Wagner (2009) asserts the need for more research, particularly qualitative work that explores how students from underrepresented groups, make meaning of "home/campus tension" (p. 5). Future research should also consider the ways that FGLI students and those from other underrepresented groups form connections on campus and how their "sense of responsibility for community and family may provide motivation to persist in college" (Winkle-Wagner, pg. 25).

Bedsworth et al. (2006), found although parental involvement was important, having a peer group that was planning on attending college was more important than parental encouragement. The findings of this study similarly indicate that while parent support for college going was significant for participants prior to enrolling and attending

college, peer interactions have important influence on college going and persistence, in terms of both personal and intellectual growth. Determining the indirect ways in which peer networks shape the college transition and persistence experiences of FGLI students as well as their influence on students' social networks and interpersonal experiences is an area for future research.

Ostrove and Long (2007) suggest that there are many ways in which people derive a sense of belonging and multiple dimensions along which belonging can be structured. The authors describe that feeling that one does not belong may affect students' "extent of participation in class, willingness to seek help as needed, and other critical behaviors that influence college success" (p. 381). The authors indicated that it is important for future research to examine the processes by which a sense of belonging affects the college experience for FGLI students.

While the research findings and suggestions of this study offer new ideas for other campuses and universities to explore and implement, this study emerged out of a specific time and context that must be acknowledged. The Southeast University student participants were from particular FGLI circumstances and in an institutional context where specific college success support features were offered, therefore generalizing these findings may not be applicable to other settings. Within the study, only a small sample of FGLI students were interviewed on their transition and persistence experiences and their photographs portrayed. These interviews and photographs proved extremely instructive, but different participants and observational times might have garnered different results. Also, studying the phenomenon of interaction and belonging was a complex undertaking that one study could likely not fully capture.

As a practitioner, researcher familiarity with some of the participants was also a study limitation addressed in Chapter Three. These limitations were addressed throughout the research project in numerous ways. By using multiple interviews and photographs provided by participants in the analysis process, and by making use of member checking, limitations were addressed within data collection, analysis, and the final write up of the study.

### **Conclusions**

Economically and educationally challenged students face significant structural impediments and often lack the resources to become prepared for college and to make informed decisions about college going, yet there are many FGLI students who do manage to surmount the barriers and make decisions that result in persistence and attainment. As educators, we must learn from the successful students “in order to minimize the obstacles and advocate for and assist students with their decisions all along the educational pipeline” (Walpole, 2007, p. 88). Kuh et al. (2006) suggested that higher education must institutionalize student success, calling for a shift within the culture of higher education institutions. Moreover, these authors assert that programs designed specifically for students of individual racial groups, low-income backgrounds, and first generation college students are necessary. According to Goodman (2011) these programs can provide the guidance and support “that students of various backgrounds need in order to navigate the campus environment and make the greatest possible gains in college” (p. 107). By understanding FGLI student experiences with transition and persistence and the influence of their sense of belonging on campus, mentors, student services professionals, faculty, and others will be better positioned to

successfully co-create strategies for their college attendance and success (Coffman, 2011).

Research has consistently found that FGLI students are less likely to aspire to, apply to, be prepared for, or enroll in postsecondary education than higher-SES, continuing-generation students, and are less likely to persist to graduation. However, previous research and this study have shown that there are remedies for this, such as programs beginning in high school and continuing through the college years, and that FGLI students can and do succeed in transitioning to college and persisting to graduation. The participants all displayed a sense of achievement and accomplishment for not only being enrolled in college, but also for persisting. They understood that most students from similar backgrounds and circumstances often did not fare as well when it came to college transition and persistence. At the time of the study, all participants had made it past their second year of college and according to research (Braxton, 2000; Ishitani, 2005) conducted on first-generation students, they were beating the odds, since most do not make it past the first year of study (at the time of this study's publication, three participants had graduated).

Institutional, state, and federal policies are all driven to some extent by research related to the issues of interest to policymakers. In the area of college transition and persistence and in particular those studies examining issues of access and equity in this process, additional research is needed to guide future policy decisions. A number of studies cited above provided suggestions for the direction of future research, many of which focus on generating a better understanding of the college transition and persistence experiences of FGLI students (Bergerson, 2009). This study attempts to



draw attention to FGLI students, showing their special needs and their potential, and integrates literature on how social class, socioeconomic status, parental income, and first-generation status affect educational achievement and attainment on the postsecondary level. It is the author's hope is that this study and future research and action will help to support FGLI students' transition to and persistence in college and thus help inspire future generations into postsecondary attainment.

## APPENDIX DEDOOSE CODE APPLICATION EXAMPLE

	Family emotional support	Family financial support	Family resiliency	Family sacrifice for education c	Financial hardship	High expectations for student	Mother as reason for attending	Pressure to make family proud	Pressure to stay home	Sibling as reason for attending	Teen pregnancy	High school demographics	Lack of college going culture	Students from low income fam	Non academic high school engagem	High school peer network sup	Parent involvement with college pro	Parent lack of knowledge about	Quotes about peers	Quotes about the study/research pr	Quotes on being an FG student	College aspirations	Obstacles related to being FG	Quotes on being low income	Quotes on belonging/becoming/stz	Quotes on college aspirations	Quotes on college going	Quotes on persistence	He/She would have persisted i	He/She/They didn't have the o	I don't want me/ my kids going	I'm doing this for him/her/then	Social support among FG stud	There is no turning back	To dream the impossible drear	What is there besides school?	Quotes on transition	Deciding not to drop out	Department/college support fi	Going to college is the only op	High school graduation	Peer network support for trans	Totals		
							1			1		1	1	2					2		9	1	1	5	5	2	1															1	140		
1	1					1	2					2	1	1					1		5		1	2	1	2	1	7		2		1												103	
3				3		1		3	1						2	1		1			6			4				1	1																122
								2											1						3																				56
5	1								1						1	1	5	4	3	1	14	1	1	2		7	5																	219	
2					1	1			1						1				5	1	6			1	3		1	6		1														121	
7	1			4	3	4	1			1							4	1	1							2	2		1		1													171	
3				2								1		1							1						5																	90	
			1	2				1							1	1	2	2	5		6				6	1	4	1																134	
3	1			1		2	3												3	1	5			1	2		2	5															106		

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ms. Mary-Anne Primack earned her Doctoral degree in Educational Leadership from the University of Florida in April, 2013. Her dissertation research focused on college access and success for first-generation students from economically challenged backgrounds. As part of her degree program, she had the opportunity to train with educational researchers and leaders focused on understanding the challenges many students face while navigating their educational journey. For example, as a graduate research assistant for Dr. Bernard Oliver, professor of Education Administration at the University of Florida and Dr. Luis Ponjuan, associate professor at Texas A&M University, she worked on research focused on college access and success for under-served students. Additionally, during her time as a graduate student, she worked for a college access and success program targeting first-generation students from high poverty high schools throughout Florida. Prior to her graduate training, she taught in two secondary school settings designed to increase the opportunities of economically and educationally under-served students. These educational training opportunities gave her extensive experience to critically understand and evaluate the complex social challenges that shape how institutions, families, and students work together. Her commitment to social justice issues in education is clearly reflected in her academic pursuits, teaching experience, and professional work history. In particular, her educational career highlights a commitment to education with a focus on under-served students and their communities.