


2017

Persistence of First-Generation Graduates of a Community College Healthcare Program

Tennie Rene Sanders-McBryde
Walden University

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Walden University

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Tennie Sanders

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Walden University
2017

Abstract

Persistence of First-Generation Graduates of a Community College Healthcare Program

by

Tennie Rene Sanders-McBryde

MS, Troy University, 1994

BA, Auburn University Montgomery, 1990

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education

Walden University

December 2017

Abstract

Many first-generation students (FGS) succumb to challenges and barriers and ultimately give up on their educational goals. Little is known about FGS who graduate and are successful in their discipline. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore factors that influenced the persistence of FGS who graduated and are employed in the healthcare field. The theoretical framework consisted of experiential learning, identity development and environmental influence, and social cognitive career theories. The research questions focused on how FGS made decisions to graduate, interpreted their academic learning experiences, and perceived academic support received in the college environment. Data was collected from questionnaires designed by the researcher and emailed to 12 participants, and from college retention, enrollment, licensure, and safety and security reports. Data analysis involved open and axial coding and application of the NVivo software package, whereby 8 themes emerged. Findings indicated that (a) family support, mastering a skill, and challenges and academic successes supported FGS' decisions to graduate; (b) inspiration, vocational interest, and self-awareness defined and described FGS' academic learning experiences; and, (c) faculty and student engagement and environmental support revealed the academic support FGS received in the college environment. The study suggested ways in which the persistence of FGS in community college healthcare programs can be improved. Implications for future research into variables that influence the persistence of FGS were discussed. Improving the retention of FGS and widening the pool of community healthcare workers can impact positive social change by contributing to social welfare and economic development.

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Dedication

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11 NIV). I dedicate my dissertation to my awesome family. To Lee, my darling husband, thank you for providing more support than I could have ever imagined and for ensuring that I was not distracted during this significant journey. I enjoyed how you prepared my meals, coffee, and tea so I could focus on my research.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The number of first-generation students (FGS) enrolled in postsecondary institutions varies from 40% to 54% in the United States (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). Many FGS attend community colleges to obtain an Associate of Applied Technology degree, Associate of Science degree, or certificate of completion to meet identified workforce needs in their specific vocation (Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011). FGS face various challenges, difficulties, and setbacks as they embark on their college education. This population of students toils over their academic abilities, vision of higher education, aspirations, student engagement, college experience, family and financial obligations, and career opportunities (Collier & Morgan, 2008). FGS have been attending community colleges since the early 1900s (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). More knowledge about their persistence toward academic achievement and career endeavors is essential as community colleges provide academic support services to assist in their matriculation (Hirschy, Bremer, & Castellano, 2011, 2014; Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011; Yeager & Walton, 2011).

Providing support for this population at community and technical colleges continues to be an essential area for exploration. A large body of literature (Bahr, 2012; Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010; Crisp & Nora, 2010; Roska & Calcagno, 2010; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson & Covarrubias, 2012) reported that FGS are academically underprepared, do not persist, and withdraw from classes for various reasons. However, many FGS enrolled in community and technical colleges do attain an Associate of Applied Technology degree, Associate of Science degree, or certificate of completion

despite the data reported in literature reviews (Engberg & Hurtado, 2011; Gross, 2011; Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014; Shaw & Barbuti, 2010; Sung-Woo & Karp, 2013). Although many FGS do not persist and succumb to the challenges they face in pursuit of their degrees, some FGS are able to succeed because of the academic and emotional support they receive while enrolled in college.

This study added to the body of existing literature that supports the educational and career experiences of FGS enrolled at community and technical colleges. Additionally, this study provided resourceful data on methods for community colleges to provide student academic support services for FGS while enrolled in 2-year colleges and impact positive change. Finally, this qualitative study reported the academic learning experiences revealed by FGS who persisted toward academic achievement and obtained gainful employment in their career field.

Community colleges were established in local areas to provide affordable tuition and offer vocational education to a diverse population, which includes FGS (Ayers, 2015). This diverse population includes individuals from various ethnic communities, different socio-economic status, levels of cognitive abilities, and physical disabilities. In addition, community colleges were created to provide educational and vocational opportunities in science and technical proficiencies customized to regional economic needs as well as personal growth and development to a diverse body of students (Levey, 2010). Two-year institutions, therefore, provide students with the opportunity to plan a quality life by acquiring specialized skills training. As community and technical colleges grew throughout the nation, students and parents demanded affordable college

opportunities (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Stakeholders and constituents expected to pay low-cost tuition for their education at 2-year colleges. Business and industry supported community and technical colleges out of a commitment to the equality of educational opportunities and a desire for trained employees (Thompson, 1973). Postsecondary institutions were poised to fulfill the needs of the workforce with a mission to serve the community (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Dougherty (2001) indicated that community colleges provide educational opportunities, train middle level employees, and preserve the academic excellence of higher education. In an effort to meet individuals' personal and socioeconomic demands, leading educators designed community colleges to offer an array of 6-month vocational diplomas, 1-and 2-year certificates, and 2-year programs in general and liberal education leading to an associate degree (Dougherty, 2001).

Because postsecondary institutions are vital in advancing the progress of the nation, 2-year colleges serve as valuable vehicles through which FGS persist, achieve academically, and become productive members of the workforce (Mamiseishvili, 2010). Additionally, examining FGS' academic learning experiences and goals, and connecting FGS' perceptions to community colleges' systems and programs, may improve 2-year colleges' academic support services to FGS.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction and background to the study and includes several aspects of the study. Additionally, Chapter 1 identifies the research problem, provides the focus or the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the theoretical

framework. Other major sections in Chapter 1 entail definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, as well as the significance of the study.

Background

The academic learning perceptions of FGS who attend community colleges are salient and should be understood and researched to a great degree in order to effect positive social change. Existing studies (Bahr, 2013; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Hirschy et al. 2011; Lester, 2010; Rood, 2009) have highlighted FGS' experiences, characteristics, barriers, persistence, academic achievement, and career opportunities. The transition to community college is challenging for FGS. Establishing faculty-student relationships on campus is complex when FGS work several hours and have family responsibilities that prevent them from building relationships on campus with faculty (Calcagno, Bailey, Wachen, Kienzl, & Leinbach, 2008). Several studies (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Dika & D'Amico, 2016; Olson, 2014; Portnoi & Kwong, 2015) ascertained that degree completion rates are lower for FGS and provided data regarding persistence behavior of FGS and their timely graduation rates.

Mehta et al. (2011) reported that FGS are less involved, have little financial or social support, and are not concerned with student engagement, which includes reasons why FGS fail in postsecondary institutions. Gross (2011) and Shaw and Barbuti (2010) examined critical factors regarding FGS' academic expectations and intellectual development while attending postsecondary institutions. In addition, Gross and Shaw and Barbuti posited that FGS lacked academic preparation. This population of students does not use their secondary school education and take rigorous coursework to prepare for

postsecondary education (Gross, 2011). This lack of preparation by FGS affects their academic performance in community colleges. Therefore, many FGS who attend community college enroll in at least one remedial or transitional course.

Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin (2014) specifically concentrated on the importance of interconnectedness of educational and academic student services to best support FGS. Academic and student support services involve the development of a strong affiliation with the community college academic environment both inside and outside of the classroom through interactions with FGS, staff, peers, and faculty (Deil-Amen, 2011). Participation in campus-sponsored events and student organizations is low for FGS who attend community colleges because of family responsibilities, lack of time, and want of encouragement from faculty to become involved. FGS were also likely to leave community colleges and not return the following semester (Fike & Fike, 2008). Consequently, academic support and student support services must provide combined initiatives to encourage persistence among FGS.

Furthermore, Mamiseishvili (2010) investigated the effects of employment on FGS' persistence at a postsecondary institution. FGS face challenges related to their family and employment circumstances during their educational journey at community colleges. Many FGS must work full or part-time to pay their tuition and take care of their families (Domina, 2009). FGS who attend community colleges and work off campus face barriers to persist at postsecondary institutions. The need to work interferes with academics and cocurricular activities.

Vuong, Brown-Welty, and Tracz (2010) mentioned FGS bring unique characteristics, needs, and expectations, which impact their persistence toward academic achievement. Community college faculty, staff, and administrators should collaborate and create partnerships to plan and implement strategies to address the needs of FGS. Some of the strategies encompass first-year student orientation courses, early alert initiatives, intrusive academic advising, mentoring, and various psychosocial and psycho-educational seminars for FGS (McKay & Estrella, 2008).

Historical perspectives provide insight into the characteristics, beliefs, setbacks, and motivations of FGS. Vuong et al. (2010) analyzed self-efficacy, retention, human development, and identity development theories which provided knowledge of FGS' transition to community colleges.

In view of the literature on the characteristics, challenges, academic unpreparedness, life experiences, and behaviors that contribute to attrition of FGS, this study explored the gap in the research literature by investigating the persistence of FGS who graduated from a healthcare program at a community college in the southern region of the United States and were gainfully employed in their specialized career fields. This study is requisite as it adds to the body of existing literature, which supports a dearth of research on the perceptions of persistence, academic achievement, and gainful employment in FGS' specialized career fields.

Problem Statement

The number of FGS enrolled in postsecondary institutions in the United States varies from 40% to 54% (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). Community

colleges are attractive to many students for several reasons. Tuition and fees are much lower at the participatory community college than at 4-year universities. According to the site college for this study, the general education courses are transferable to any university. The class sizes range from 20-25 students. Each student has the option to study a specialization and enter the workforce in 18-24 months. Community colleges offer a variety of support services to assist students in improving their reading, math, writing, and study skills (Bahr, 2012). Additional support services include tutoring, academic advising, counseling, career placement, and special accommodations for students with disabilities (McKay & Estrella, 2008). However, little information is available to ascertain the factors that propelled FGS to persist and graduate from a community college in a healthcare field.

For the purpose of this study, FGS are ages 18 and above and who are the first in their families to attend colleges or universities. In addition, those studied were students who attend colleges or universities with parents who did not graduate from a higher education institution. Many FGS attend a 2-year college to obtain an associate degree or certificate of completion to meet the identified workforce needs of a specific vocation (Mehta et al., 2011). Providing support for this population at community and technical colleges continues to be an essential area for exploration.

A large body of literature (Bahr, 2012; Bailey et al., 2010; Crisp & Nora, 2010; Roska & Calcagno, 2010; Stephens et al., 2012) reported that many FGS are academically underprepared, do not persist, and withdraw from community colleges for various reasons, and do not attain an Associate of Applied Technology degree, Associate

of Science degree, or certificate of completion. However, little research has reported on FGS' persistence, academic achievement, and gainful employment in specialized career fields (Mamiseishvili, 2010). This qualitative study explored the existing gap in the research literature by acknowledging the persistence of FGS who persevered academically and achieved their educational and career endeavors at a community college in the southern United States.

Although much of the literature reports the challenges, difficulties, and setbacks faced by FGS, investigating their perceptions on persistence in higher education may prove worthy for postsecondary institutions' planning, assessment, and effectiveness (Nichols & Nichols, 2000). Because postsecondary institutions are vital in advancing the progress of the nation, community colleges serve as valuable vehicles through which FGS persist, achieve academically, and become productive members of the workforce (Mamiseishvili, 2010). But, it is still difficult to locate sufficient literature that supports the perceptions of FGS who earn an associate degree in a healthcare program from a community college and are gainfully employed.

Without the benefit of scholarly attention and contribution to existing literature, ineffective support for FGS may emerge (Hirshey, Bremer, & Castellano, 2011; Stephens et al., 2014). This study furnished additional information to support the educational and career experiences of FGS enrolled at a community college. Additionally, this study provided resourceful data on methods for community colleges to deliver academic student support services for FGS while enrolled in 2-year colleges and impact positive change. Therefore, this basic qualitative study reported the motivations, educational

learning experiences, and academic student support services revealed by 12 FGS who were committed to academic achievement and obtained gainful employment in their career field.

Purpose

The overall purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the persistence of 12 FGS who graduated from a healthcare program at a community college and obtained gainful employment. One step in understanding the persistence of FGS' academic learning involves discovering situations that generate their decisions to achieve their academic and career goals. Many important dimensions to FGS' educational experience relative to persistence may not be sufficiently documented. Much of the population of 2-year college students may be comprised of those who are the first in their families to attend college. This study provided evidence to help understand the persistence of FGS.

Few institutions have in place a clear, well-articulated practice for assisting FGS to succeed and continue to find ways to help the students achieve their academic and career goals (Davis, 2010; Stephens et al., 2014). This basic qualitative study explored the challenges, persistence, academic achievement, and career opportunities encountered by FGS during their educational journey at a community college in the southern region of the United States. Additionally, this research presented valuable data on how administrators can provide student support relative to academic learning and encourage FGS who enrolled in 2-year colleges, which ultimately impact positive social change.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How did FGS make decisions to graduate from a community college?
2. How do FGS describe their academic learning experiences of being first in their families to graduate from a healthcare program?
3. How do FGS describe the support they received in the community college environment in relation to their academic learning experiences?

Theoretical Framework

This basic qualitative study included a theoretical framework, which informed the investigation of persistence, academic achievement, and career opportunities of FGS.

Theories such as transformative learning, andragogy, achievement goal theory, emotional intelligence, motivation, general systems theory, and adult learning theories interconnect perspectives on FGS' persistence, academic achievement, and career opportunities. The theoretical works of Freire (1996) (transformative learning theory), Goleman (1995) (emotional intelligence), Knowles (1980) (andragogy theory), Thorndike (2004) (achievement goal theory), and the perspectives of Herbart, provided exceptional data on adult learning and motivation (Cross, 1981; Ewen, 1998; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Miller & Woock, 1970). Additionally, von Bertalanffy (1968) pioneered the foundation for general systems theory, which illustrates a framework for visualizing internal and external environmental factors as an integrated whole. Chickering (Cross, 1981) also contributed to the learning theories by focusing on identity development and environmental influences among students. Consequently, the combination of these

theories added depth and richness to the exploration and understanding of the perseverance, academic learning, and pursuit of specialized workforce skills of FGS.

While each perspective offers unique components, the interconnectedness of theories and perspectives provided insight into the persistence, academic achievement, and career opportunities which underline the experiences of FGS at community colleges for this study. However, an examination of each theory will be too extensive; therefore, I included experiential learning, identity development and environmental influence, and social cognitive career theory as the theoretical framework on which to base this study.

Nature of the Study

According to Merriam (2009), a basic qualitative inquiry is designed theoretically from constructionism, phenomenology, and symbolic interaction and used by investigators who are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. A basic qualitative investigation does not focus solely on beliefs, opinions, attitudes, or ideas about events. A basic qualitative inquiry can also be applied to explore strategies, techniques, and practices of participants. Characteristics of a basic qualitative study include participants' subjective stance (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015) on experiences or an investigation of the meaning the participant attributes to their knowledge. For example, I inquired about how FGS describe the support they received in the community college environment in relation to their academic learning experiences.

Furthermore, Caelli, Ray, and Mill (2013) noted that basic qualitative studies in education, developmental psychology, or sociology typically illustrate concepts, models,

and theories, which provide the framework for the inquiries. The primary objective of this basic qualitative inquiry was to comprehend how FGS viewed and assigned meaning to a situation or event (Merriam, 2009) such as their motivations, academic learning, and student support services. In presenting this basic qualitative study, I aimed to discern and identify important aspects such as beliefs, views, inspirations, strategies for educational achievement, techniques for persistence, and career attainment of 12 FGS who attended a community college.

I examined themes that emerged from questionnaires regarding the persistence of FGS while enrolled at a community college in the South. This study was exploratory to gain an understanding of the central phenomenon of persistence of 12 FGS. Basic qualitative research, consistent with understanding a central phenomenon, was the focus of this study (Creswell, 2005). Although various historical theories and perspectives added richness to this study, I relied on perceptions, views, and responses of the 12 FGS to discover emerging themes from their responses to a questionnaire which contained open-ended questions and two email follow-up questionnaires. I used a coding process of text and data to illuminate how themes materialized from this study.

This study reflected a homogeneous purposive sampling of 12 FGS from a community college. Access to individuals and the site was gained through the president's administrative assistant, who facilitated permission to enter the college and recruit participants. Data collection entailed a questionnaire, two email follow-up questionnaires, and college documents. I collected the results to ascertain patterns and emerging themes

and to interpret and understand the persistence of FGS at community colleges (Creswell, 2005).

Background data for this study included college documents on the healthcare programs, such as retention rates, licensure rates, enrollment reports, and safety and security reports for the 2012, 2013, and 2014 academic years. The documents were converted to text to help understand the persistence of 12 FGS enrolled in the community college. I also collected admissions criteria for diagnostic medical sonography, medical radiologic technology, and practical nursing healthcare programs from the community college.

Data analysis of the responses from the open-ended questionnaire, the two email follow-up questionnaires with the 12 FGS, and the documents established triangulation to increase the validity of the study. The data analysis also employed a qualitative computer software program to store, organize, code, and facilitate searching through data (Creswell, 2005).

Definitions

This basic qualitative inquiry explored the persistence of 12 FGS' perceptions of their academic learning at a community college. Relevant concepts, for the purpose of this study, included academic achievement, achievement goal theory, andragogy, emotional intelligence, FGS, gainful employment, systems theory, identity development and environmental influence, motivation, perception, persistence, self-efficacy, student engagement, and transformative learning.

Academic achievement: The level of education FGS have completed and the ability to attain and complete their desired educational goal (Wlodkowski, 2008).

Achievement goal theory: The motivation of FGS contingent on their desire to achieve certain results, and is reliant on their belief in themselves to accomplish their endeavors (Ewen, 1998).

Andragogy: A learning theory for adults, which highlights the process more than content (Knowles, 1980). Andragogy assumes adults need to know why they should learn a subject or task. Adults may learn experientially, approach learning as problem-solving, and learn best when the topic is of immediate value (Knowles et al., 2005).

Attitude: The expression of pleasure or discontent toward academic learning, persistence, motivation, decision making, motivation, and involvement in the collegiate environment (Knowles et al., 2005).

Career opportunities: The process through which FGS enrolled in their programs of study and matriculated, which led to employment in recognized occupations (Brown, 1996).

Emotional intelligence: An aptitude to motivate internally and persevere while simultaneously experiencing barriers and challenges (Goleman, 1995). Emotional intelligence is the capacity to delay instant gratification, demonstrate rational thinking, have compassion, and be optimistic (Cross, 1981).

First-generation students: These are students who are the first in the families to attend colleges or universities; students who attend colleges or universities and their parents did not graduate from a postsecondary institution (Davis, 2010).

Identity development and environmental influence: Identity evolves through a process of discovering the self within the various influences of a personal history, societal history, and social contexts (Cross, 1981).

Motivation: Motivation encompasses various aspects such as interest, drive, incentive, efforts, perseverance, and purpose of accomplishing a task or goal (Wlodkowski, 2008).

Perception: Perception is a multifaceted term. For the purpose of the current inquiry, this word characterizes experience, which leads to FGS' beliefs, prior experience, knowledge, and personal characteristics related to awareness (Davis, 2010). This term is associated with FGS' reality for most practical purposes and guides FGS' behavior in general, demonstrates an understanding of expectations, desires, academic abilities, and student support services (Knowles et al., 2005).

Persistence: Moving or progressing to achieve a goal despite the odds of success or opposition (Wlodkowski, 2008).

Self-efficacy: A personal assessment and belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required for academic achievement; situation specific for FGS (Ewen, 1998).

Student engagement: Occurs when students develop feelings about their peers, instructors, and the college that provide a sense of connectedness, affiliation, and belonging while receiving opportunities for learning and development (Knowles et al., 2005).

Systems theory: According to von Bertalanffy (1968), general systems theory provides a framework for visualizing internal and external environmental factors as an integrated whole. It allows recognition of the proper place and function of subsystems in which 2-year college administrators should operate.

Transformative learning: An ongoing process where FGS become increasingly aware of various challenges and opposition in their lives and eventually demonstrate positive changes through learning in higher education (Miller & Woock, 1970).

Assumptions

The assumptions in this study are believed to be accurate. These assumptions are essential for the purpose of this qualitative study. Additionally, awareness of these assumptions and belief enabled me to diligently explore and provide an in-depth understanding of 12 FGS' perceptions regarding persistence, academic achievement, and career opportunities. Moreover, this awareness helped me to determine themes and patterns that described the 12 FGS' motivations, academic student support services, and academic learning experiences.

I assumed that the 12 FGS who graduated from a community college were cognizant of issues regarding faculty perceptions of FGS persistence, academic achievement, and career development. According to Jackson, Stabelton, and Laanan (2013), faculty members desire to promote academic achievement and social engagement for students. Additionally, instructors design their curriculum to promote innovative methods to enhance experiential learning for students. Likewise, Mesa (2012) mentioned that students aim to obtain academic skills, exhibit confidence in their ability to excel in

courses, and have a positive self-concept. Additionally, I assumed that the community college has effective and appropriate academic student support services to increase persistence, improve academic achievement, and prepare FGS for career opportunities.

Heller and Cassady (2015) stated that the community college environment might be significant in predicting student success. Correspondingly, Tovar (2014) illustrated how various academic student support services such as study skills, tutoring, academic and financial counseling, career counseling, cultural events, student activities, and academic advising contribute to student persistence and academic achievement. Also, I assumed that FGS who graduated from a community college understood how motivation and self-efficacy enhanced their desires to persist, excel academically, and become gainfully employed. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are significant predictors of students' academic achievement (Prospero, Russell, & Vohra-Gupta, 2012) and are vital to educational attainment. Similarly, Sparkman, Maulding, and Roberts (2012) mentioned that there is an association between FGS' academic achievement and persistence and students' motivations, learning style, study habits, curriculum design, and environmental influences.

Scope, Delimitations, and Limitations

I addressed the persistence of FGS who graduated from a community college regarding their perceptions, academic achievement, motivations, and career development. I chose this focus to explore the gap in the research literature, acknowledge these variables, and add to the body of existing studies on FGS in community colleges. The analysis may prove worthy for postsecondary institutions and stakeholders, increase

retention, and improve student support services regarding academic learning for students, which ultimately results in positive social change.

This study is delimited comparatively to a mixed-methods inquiry. Also, delimitations of the current study did not address all types of community college students, such as traditional students, nontraditional students, or non-FGS. Another delimitation of this study involved data collection from the participating community college. Documents such as safety and security reports, retention rates, licensure rates, and enrollment reports are unique to this community college.

Although this study could make numerous contributions to understanding the persistence of 12 FGS who obtained an associate degree in a healthcare field from a community college, this study was limited in certain aspects. Limitations for this basic qualitative inquiry included a homogeneous purposeful sampling due to the knowledge and perceptions of 12 FGS and it was appropriate for the focus of this inquiry. Since this was not a random sample, the results of the current inquiry are not generalizable to a larger population or to all FGS who attended a community college or a higher education institution. I developed an open-ended questionnaire for this study, which may be a limitation because I did not evaluate statistical data, such as grade point averages (GPA) and the number of semesters enrolled through college completion. I did not explore gender differences or focus on the ethnicity of the participants. Finally, my analysis relied on data collected from 12 FGS who completed their educational and career goals. However, this data may limit an understanding of challenges and obstacles of FGS who temporarily withdrew from a postsecondary institution or changed their program of study.

Significance of the Study

The richness of this study was revealed through the voices of 12 FGS' perceptions, views, and interpretations of persistence while enrolled in a healthcare program at a community college. The importance of this research may inspire postsecondary educators to examine their systems for accountability to stakeholders, constituents, and ultimately contribute to societal change. More FGS are attending college than ever before, and policymakers agree that increasing enrollment of FGS in higher education is a matter of priority (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2013). Given that FGS comprise over 40% of incoming first-year students (Cohen & Brawer, 2008) at postsecondary institutions, exploring and understanding the persistence of 12 FGS could improve 2-year colleges' overall retention, graduation rates, and effectiveness, which could impact positive social change.

Although the literature has reported several characteristics of FGS, this study enhanced documented research that revealed important dimensions to FGS' experiences regarding persistence in a community college. This research could stimulate discussion among higher education administrators to reevaluate their commitment to meeting the needs of FGS. Additionally, this research can provide data to advance strategies and practices to promote persistence, academic achievement, and career attainment for FGS. Postsecondary institutions that acknowledge the perceptions and experiences of FGS who enroll in colleges, and align those with the institutions' visions and strategic initiatives may yield not only a positive economic impact but also effect positive social change.

Summary

Many FGS attend community and technical colleges to obtain an Associate of Applied Technology degree, Associate of Science degree, or a certificate of completion in a specialized vocation (Mehta et al. 2011). This population of FGS face barriers, challenges, and difficulties regarding persistence, academic achievement, and career opportunities as they embark on their educational journey. There is a lack of research reported on the persistence of FGS who graduated from a healthcare program at a community college and became gainfully employed in their specialized career fields (Mamiseishvili, 2010). Therefore, there was a need for additional and continued research to add to the body of existing literature that supports the educational and career experiences, and provides resourceful data on the persistence of 12 FGS who graduated from a community college.

Consequently, Chapter 1 identified studies that examined the persistence, academic achievement, career opportunities, theories, and barriers experienced by FGS and non-FGS. Higher education institutions are vital in advancing the progress of the nation; therefore, 2-year colleges serve as valuable vehicles through which FGS persist, achieve academically, and become productive members of the workforce (Mamiseishvili, 2010).

In Chapter 2, I present an understanding of the literature and related research, which explores the persistence, academic achievement, career opportunities and perceptions of FGS. Additional studies evaluated in Chapter 2 include degree completion

rates, characteristics of FGS, academic student support services implemented by higher education institutions, employment, and historical perspectives.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A large body of literature (Bahr, 2012; Bailey et al., 2010; Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Burns, 2010; Crisp & Nora, 2010; Roska & Calcagno, 2010; Stephens et al., 2012) reported that many FGS are academically underprepared, do not persist, and withdraw from community colleges for various reasons and do not attain an Associate of Applied Technology degree, Associate of Science degrees or certificate of completion. However, a dearth of research exists on FGS' persistence, academic achievement, and gainful employment in specialized career fields (Mamiseishvili, 2010).

Therefore, there was a need for additional and continued research to add to the body of existing literature supporting the educational and career experiences and glean resourceful data on methods for community colleges to provide academic student support services for FGS students enrolled at a community college. More specifically, this basic qualitative study explored the gap in the research literature by acknowledging the persistence of 12 FGS who persisted academically and achieved their educational and career endeavors at a community college in the southern United States.

The number of FGS enrolled in postsecondary institutions varies from 40% to 54% in the United States. (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Wladis, Hachey & Conway, 2015). For the purpose of this current study, FGS included students ages 18 and above and who are the first in their families to attend colleges or universities.

Additionally, the definition of FGS includes students who attend colleges or universities with parents who did not graduate from a postsecondary institution. Many FGS attend a 2-year college to obtain an associate degree or certificate of completion to meet identified

workforce needs in a specific vocation (Mehta et al., 2011). Providing support for this population at community and technical colleges continues to be an essential area for exploration.

The overall purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the persistence of 12 FGS while enrolled at a community college. More specifically, this study provided insight on how 12 FGS perceived their learning skills, involvements, and encounters in their program of study. The intent of this inquiry was to present the views and experiences that 12 FGS encountered while they pursued their degrees to become productive citizens in their area of formal educational training. Likewise, this research revealed 12 FGS' perceptions of collegiate support, which enabled the participants to persevere academically and prepared them for the workforce. Lastly, the current investigation illuminated 12 FGS' reasons for resolving to complete their educational intentions. One step in understanding persistence of FGS involves discovering situations that generate decisions to achieve their academic and career goals. Many important dimensions to FGS' experiences are not documented sufficiently. Much of the population of 2-year college students might be comprised of those who are the first in their families to attend college.

Few institutions have in place a clear, well-articulated practice for assisting FGS to succeed and continue to find ways to help these students achieve their academic and career goals (Davis, 2010; Stephens et al., 2014). In this qualitative study, I explored the persistence, challenges, academic achievement, and career opportunities encountered by 12 FGS who enrolled in healthcare programs, such as practical nursing, diagnostic

medical sonography, or medical radiologic technology during their educational journey at a community college in the southern United States.

A review of literature focused on FGS ages 18 and older who are the first in their families to attend colleges or universities. I examined FGS' persistence in community colleges, academic achievement, and employment and career opportunities in their field of study. Furthermore, I analyzed the experiences and perceptions of 12 FGS enrolled in institutions of higher education. Additionally, the literature review consists of essential research from scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles and books.

I used a literature search strategy to investigate FGS persistence, academic achievement, experiences, perceptions, and career opportunities. The theoretical framework included experiential learning, identity development and environmental influence, and social cognitive theories. Furthermore, I examined key variables, which are related to the literature review. The databases included: Academic Search Complete, Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health (CINAHL Plus), Education Research Complete, Elton B. Stephens Company (EBSCOhost), Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC), Expanded Academic ASAP, ProQuest Central, PsycInfo, and Sage Premier. The search engines included Google Scholar and Walden University's library. The literature search process is shown in Table 1.

I also used numerous key concepts and combinations of pertinent terms in the literature search. These terms included *FGS*, *community colleges*, *postsecondary education and mission*, *FGS and persistence*, *achievement goal theory*, *FGS and academic achievement*, *FGS and career opportunities*, *transformative learning*,

experiential learning, workforce development, learning communities, retention and FGS, characteristics and FGS, and FGS versus non-FGS. Additional terms that are significant to the scope of the literature search were *emotional intelligence theory, FGS and college, nontraditional learners, motivation and FGS, learning theories, adult learning and college, FGS and intrinsic and extrinsic factors, and self-efficacy.* As shown in Table 1, I did not limit my key search terms to specific FGS topics as I wanted to get a richer understanding of what causes FGS to persist.

Table 1

Literature Search

Key Search Terms	Library Databases
Achievement goal theory	Academic Search Complete
Adult learning theories	Academic Search Complete
Community Colleges	Academic Search Complete
Emotional Intelligence	EBSCOhost
Experiential Learning	EBSCOhost
First-Generation Students	Education Research Complete
First-Generation Students and Academic Achievement	ERIC
First-Generation Students and College	Expanded Academic ASAP
First-Generation Students and Intrinsic and Extrinsic	ProQuest Central
First-Generation Students and Workforce Development	Sage Premier
First-Generation Students Characteristics	Sage Premier
First-Generation Students versus non-First-Generation Students	Sage Premier
Learning Communities	Sage Premier
Motivational Theories	Sage Premier
Nontraditional Learners	Sage Premier
Postsecondary Education	Sage Premier
Retention and First-Generation Students	Sage Premier
Self-efficacy	Sage Premier
Transformative Learning	Sage Premier
Workforce Development Alabama	Sage Premier

From the literature search process shown in Table 1, I found over 364 articles and 47 books relevant to the scope of this study. I examined approximately 167 peer-reviewed journal articles to determine the relevance to the scope of this research. I used 46 peer-reviewed journal articles because of their significance to this study. I perused four recent dissertations because they explored topics related to experiences of FGS' persistence, academic achievement, and the workforce. I used 18 books and cataloged the articles based on commonalities, subject, and content.

Theoretical Foundation

This qualitative study explored and provided an in-depth understanding of 12 FGS perceptions of persistence, academic achievement, and career development at a community college. For the purpose of this study, FGS are ages 18 and older, the first in their families to attend college and have parents who did not graduate from a 2-year or a 4-year institution. The theoretical framework for this study is an interconnected approach. I explored several theories and evaluated them collectively to understand FGS' persistence, academic achievement, and career development in community colleges.

In conjunction with research on FGS, I based the theoretical foundation for the research on three perspectives:

- Kolb's experiential learning theory (Wlodkowski, 2008)
- Chickering's identity development and environmental influences (Cross, 1981)
- Brown's social cognitive and career theory (Packard & Babineau, 2009)

While each perspective offers unique components, the interconnectedness demonstrated a deeper understanding of the persistence of 12 FGS' academic achievement and career opportunities for this study.

Experiential Learning Theory

Kolb (2015) popularized experiential learning based on contributions of Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget. According to Kolb, experiential learning is a cognitive process that involves constant revision, transaction of knowledge, creating knowledge, processing skills, and engagement in formal and informal educational settings (as cited in Wlodkowski, 2008). Experiential learning emphasizes performing the task to become skilled at the task (Kolb, 2015). FGS not only create knowledge from formal instruction, but also from experience. Kolb's experiential learning theory also involves reflection, action, thinking, and feeling. FGS experience a holistic process, which results from synergy, involvement, and decision making (Wlodkowski, 2008).

According to Wlodkowski (2008), Kolb's experiential learning theory demonstrated that FGS are engaged mentally, physically, and emotionally during their learning experience. Kolb (as cited in Wlodkowski, 2008) added that experiential learning for FGS entails skills training, vocational preparation, simulation, and academics. However, experiential learning is a continuous process grounded in experience for FGS in higher education. Subsequently, this perspective and its applications helped the participants acquire knowledge and skills through experience.

Identity Development and Environmental Influence

Identifying historical perspectives and incorporating the concepts in the learning environment are essential for educators to assist FGS with persistence, academic achievement, and career attainment. According to Cross (1981), Chickering focused on identity development and environmental influences that FGS faced in college.

Chickering's assumptions of identity development and environmental influences gained popularity among student affairs professionals (as cited in Cross, 1981).

According to Cross (1981), Chickering proposed several stages of identity development, which presented a comprehensive representation of psychosocial development during FGS' college years and contribute to the formation of identity. Chickering (as cited in Cross, 1981) noted that these comprehensive stages encompass (a) developing competence, (b) achieving physical, manual, and interpersonal skills, (c) acquiring the ability to manage emotions, as well as (d) expressing and controlling reactions. Actions identified in identity development theory are comparable to components in emotional intelligence theory, discussed further in the current chapter. As FGS discover their self-direction and problem-solving abilities, they begin moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, and establishing identity (Cross, 1981). Additionally, FGS begin creating clear vocational goals, determining personal, meaningful commitments, and developing purpose and integrity. Thus, Cross's perspective provided the background for comprehending students' growth in areas such as academic, emotional, and social development.

Chickering also posited that educational environments influence FGS' development in higher education (Cross, 1981). Environmental influences, synthesized with systems theory, is explored further in this chapter. Institutional objectives, the number of students enrolled, the number of employees, student-faculty relationship, curriculum, instruction and teaching, friendships, and student communities, as well as student development programs and services, are interconnected factors that contribute to FGS learning and development (Knowles et al., 2005).

Cross (1981) expanded on Chickering's assumptions. FGS may participate in postsecondary education classrooms with preconceptions about how the world operates (Cross, 1981). Many FGS need a foundation of factual knowledge, an understanding of facts and ideas in the context of a conceptual framework, and organizational skills (Behar-Horenstein & Niu, 2011). FGS acquire strategies that allow them to monitor their understanding of progress in problem-solving.

Additionally, Merriam and Bierema (2014) noted that classroom environments also influence adult learning and development. Merriam and Bierema advocated that 2-year colleges must be learner-centered with attention given to the subject matter and outcomes. Ongoing assessments should be designed and implemented to enhance FGS' cognitive skills and be visible to both teachers and FGS. Furthermore, learning should be stimulating in fundamental ways by the context in which it occurs. These practices and assumptions provide a detailed understanding of how FGS gain knowledge and skills in their desired vocation.

Social Cognitive Career Theory

Social cognitive career theory has its underpinning in self-efficacy theory (Brown, 1996). Social cognitive career theory proposes that the relationship between people and the environment is critical for career attainment (Packard & Babineau, 2009). Three interconnecting models describe career development: (a) academic and vocational interest, (b) how individuals decide on educational and career goals, and (c) educational and career performance and stability (Packard & Babineau, 2009). More specifically, these three models concentrate on self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals (Packard & Babineau, 2009). Consequently, experiential learning, identity development, and environmental influence have discrete assumptions, research bases, and applications (Cross, 1981; Kolb, 2015). These perspectives overlap in assessments within the postsecondary education environment. Finally, the social cognitive career theory perspective illuminates how FGS determine, seek, and work in their desired career field.

Previous research reported that many FGS are academically underprepared, do not persist, withdraw from classes for various reasons, and do not attain an associate degree or certificate (Behar-Horenstein & Niu, 2011; Tinto, 2012a). However, other studies (Friedman & Mandel, 2009; Gibbons & Borders, 2010; Mamiseishvili, 2010; Wright, Jenkins-Guarnieri, & Murdock, 2012) reported academic learning experiences and incorporated theories or perspectives on college-ready FGS with the cognitive ability for college-level courses, persistence, and gainful employment in their specialized career field. Providing support for this population at community and technical colleges continues to be an essential area for exploration. Therefore, this study explored the gap in

the research literature by acknowledging experiences of FGS enrolled in healthcare programs, such as practical nursing, medical radiologic technology, and diagnostic medical sonography, who persisted toward academic achievement and pursued their educational and career endeavors at a community college in the southern United States.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts

A body of literature (Bahr, 2012; Bailey et al., 2010; Crisp & Nora, 2010; Roska & Calcagno, 2010; Stephens et al., 2012) reported that many FGS are academically underprepared, do not persist and withdraw from classes for various reasons or do not attain an associate degree in applied technology, associate degree in science, or certificate of completion. Furthermore, Mamiseishvili (2010) has reported the experiences of college-ready FGS with the cognitive ability for college-level courses, persistence, and gainful employment in their specialized career field. Additionally, examining FGS experiences and goals, and connecting those to postsecondary institutions' systems and programs, may improve 2-year college retention efforts.

I structure the following quantitative and qualitative studies by universities, community and technical colleges, academic achievement, persistence, and career opportunities. Each section describes methodologies, findings, and analyses that are related to FGS in higher education institutions.

Community and Technical Colleges

Several studies (Ghosh & Githens, 2011; Jehangir, 2010b; Sauer, Crawford, Cumberland, & Wilson, 2014; Skolnik, 2011) have explored how the mission and goals of community and technical colleges support academic achievement, persistence, and

career opportunities for a diverse population of students. Among this population are FGS who may experience many challenges while they pursue degrees, certificates, and personal enrichment to develop avenues, contribute, and transform their communities.

According to Cohen and Brawer (2008), the evolution of community colleges came from several sources of educational innovation, including universal secondary education, the professionalization of teacher education, and the vocational educational movement. Community and technical colleges opened their doors to students during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Nichols and Nichols (2000) posited that the significance of most postsecondary education institutions is to provide vocational, technical, academic, and lifelong educational opportunities for a diverse population of students.

Community colleges aimed to provide affordable, accessible educational and vocational opportunities in science and technical proficiencies customized to regional economic needs, as well as personal growth and development. Industries and businesses needed skilled practitioners. In an effort to meet students', industries', and businesses' economic demands, leading educators designed community colleges to offer certificates, associate degrees in science, applied technology, and arts along with 2-year programs in general and liberal education leading to an associate degree (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). According to von Bertalanffy's (1968) general systems theory, community colleges are complex institutions with many structures, personnel, students, and environmental components. Von Bertalanffy's general systems theory provided insight into the dynamics of these higher education institutions.

Further, the intricate mission and goals in the majority of 2-year colleges emphasize student progress, general education, outreach, workforce development, community service, transferability, and accreditation. Their charge and indicators combined, embrace expectations about what most community and technical colleges should do and the results they should produce (Ayers, 2015; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Crisp & Delgado, 2014; Dougherty, 2001; Nichols & Nichols, 2000; Wang, 2012).

Archibald and Feldman (2008) conducted a quantitative study that examined how colleges and universities measure performance by graduation rate and support provided to students. Institutions report graduation rates to evaluate their input and output. Archibald and Feldman researched raw graduation rate data from several institutions to determine the effectiveness of support provided to students. Although Archibald and Feldman's findings considered frontier analysis as effective, their graphs did not reflect services offered to students. The investigators did not report data on curricular and cocurricular activities, financial aid resources, student characteristics, or services to increase student involvement. A qualitative exploratory study should be conducted to ascertain additional variables, such as student support services that may contribute to persistence.

Organizational structure in community colleges demonstrates patterns and processes of behaviors exhibited by educators. There are several studies (Berger & Milem, 2000; Ghosh & Githens, 2011; Henderson, Fynewever, Petcovic, & Bierema, 2012; Sauer et al., 2014; Skolnik, 2011) that examine how organizational structure affects student learning outcomes within the educational environment. Perin (2011) examined 27

quantitative studies that focused on the effectiveness of integrating basic skills instruction and disciplinary instruction. The seamless link of students' remedial courses and vocational courses has been associated with improved academic ability and enhanced learning skills.

Perin (2011) suggested that assimilated instruction has the probability to accelerate the advancement of academically underprepared college students. This study is evaluated in this literature review since the author investigated how instructors can facilitate student learning by embedding developmental courses in occupational courses because basic-skill demands are unique across disciplines. Perin found that integrating developmental courses with programmatic courses that relate to the students' desired interest, has the potential to promote student-faculty engagement and involvement in the academic learning process, which is analogous to the findings of Archibald and Feldman (2008). A qualitative case study should be conducted to understand students' perceptions of their campus environment and explore ways in which each component in the campus structure is perceived to support their academic and career goals.

Calcagno et al. (2008) indicated that postsecondary institutions measure their effectiveness by student persistence and student outcomes. The investigators found that institutional characteristics correlate with student outcomes. In this quantitative study, Calcagno et al. examined which institutional characteristics correlate with positive community college outcomes for students who attend multiple colleges and the probability of students completing a degree or transferring to universities. Calcagno et al. found there was an inverse relationship between the college and students' likelihood of

completing or transferring to a university. Additional analyses revealed that a professional atmosphere and personalized services, full-time faculty, and academic support services benefit most students. Moreover, Calcagno et al. posited that academically and socially prepared students with economic resources are likely to persist in colleges. Finally, instructional design, successful guidance, academic counseling efforts, faculty and student engagement, and organizational characteristics are influential in student learning and outcomes (Calcagno et al., 2008). Several factors, including curriculum design, counseling, and student-faculty relationships, promote academic achievement. A qualitative study can provide further insight into how the relationship between college environment or institutional characteristics and institutional effectiveness increase student persistence and academic achievement at community colleges.

O’Gara, Karp, and Hughes (2009) indicated that many community college students face a variety of barriers to degree completion including the need to work, family obligations, and academic unpreparedness. The statement above is similar to Calcagno et al. (2008). O’Gara et al. indicated that the knowledge students acquire regarding college campus, classes, study skills, time management, and faculty interaction in student success courses contributes to student persistence. O’Gara et al. found that the students gained information about the college, developed skills and techniques to assist them in their academic endeavors, and created important relationships with peers and staff. The student success courses prepared students to excel academically. O’Gara et al. also discovered that academic student support services could increase student academic

achievement and persistence toward a degree by providing additional resources and opportunities to help students become integrated into the collegiate environment. These services such as tutoring, writing assistance, departmental assistance, career fairs, and extracurricular activities contribute to the persistence of FGS. College administrators must work diligently via email, the colleges' website, and syllabi to inform students that these services are available.

O'Gara et al. (2009) conducted an exploratory qualitative study of student persistence at two community colleges. O'Gara et al. did not explore other variables, such as academic advising or other course activities, or compare part-time and full-time students who enrolled and participated in the student success courses. Further qualitative research should examine these variables to interpret how the student success course is a vital factor for student persistence toward degree completion.

Additional variables to consider include the interconnection of academic affairs and student affairs (Gulley & Mullendore, 2014). Few colleges have effectively incorporated general systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968) to identify strategies and programs to support FGS in achieving their academic and career goals. Gulley and Mullendore (2014) reported how three community colleges reevaluated and recreated the relationship between academic affairs and student affairs. The researchers interviewed two participants (the academic affairs officer and the student affairs officer) from each community college. Gully and Mullendore emphasized that the three community colleges achieved their initiatives by linking student affairs and academic affairs to better serve students and contribute to student learning. Although Gulley and Mullendore provided a

case study of three community colleges, further research was done to understand how community colleges can provide a seamless cultural environment that interconnects student affairs and academic affairs to support FGS with matriculation and employment in their specialized area of study.

Community colleges have open admissions policies and attract a diverse population of students. One such population is FGS who warrant a college environment that encourages and motivates students to excel academically, persist toward degree completion, and obtain their employment goals. McKay and Estrella (2008) employed quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the role of faculty and student interaction in service learning courses to engage students in projects, which will influence persistence toward degree completion. McKay and Estrella's purposeful sample consisted of 43 students at a large metropolitan southwestern U.S. university. McKay and Estrella found that faculty-student interaction inspired students to accomplish their academic goals. Additionally, faculty-student interaction promoted positive and constructive communication regarding coursework. Furthermore, McKay and Estrella noted that student-faculty interaction outside the classroom provided students the opportunity to resolve issues, seek ideas, ask questions, and discuss goal achievement. Instructor-student interaction promoted occasions for faculty to share their educational experiences, which were beneficial to students' intrinsic values.

McKay and Estralla (2008) conducted quantitative and qualitative inquiries to ascertain the quality of faculty-student interaction in service learning courses. The responses yielded significant positive data for higher education administrators. However,

further qualitative inquiries should be explored to gain an in-depth understanding of how andragogy can motivate FGS to achieve their academic and career endeavors.

First-Generation Students

Few inquiries have explored the persistence of FGS who strive for academic achievement, persevere in 2-year colleges, and gain employment in their specialized discipline after completion of their postsecondary tenure. Faculty and staff in community and technical colleges see FGS on their college campuses. Many of the students enrolled in community and technical colleges are usually older than traditional age students, married, of low-income status, and are likely to be parents. Numerous FGS enroll in remedial or transitional courses during their first semester in postsecondary education. FGS enrolled in community and technical colleges usually work full-time or part-time and depend on some type of financial aid to supplement tuition costs (Smith, 2008).

According to Smith (2008), FGS attend community and technical colleges because of low tuition costs and open-door admissions to pursue various technical programs, gain personal enrichment, enhance a skill, earn an associate degree in science, associate degree in applied technology, a certificate of completion, training for business and industry, or transfer to a university. Among the many exhaustive challenges, issues, and barriers faced by FGS, many of these students still may have intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, aspirations, and goals to excel personally, academically, and professionally. Smith found that families or culture can influence college choices of FGS. Additionally, the findings in Smith's qualitative study indicated that FGS and their families benefit from information on financial aid resources distributed to students while planning their

educational goals. Moreover, Smith found that FGS were encouraged to persist because of family support and the college environment support. These factors enhanced FGS desires to pursue higher education beyond the parents' level of education and strive for academic achievement.

Findings from Smith (2008) contribute to the current inquiry address factors that promote academic achievement and persistence of FGS enrolled in community and technical colleges. Smith documented the experiences of FGS and their college choice. However, Smith only interviewed three participants, and further qualitative research should be explored to include a large sample and to interpret the experience of persistence and career attainment acquired by FGS enrolled in postsecondary institutions.

Padgett, Johnson, and Pascarella (2012) conducted a longitudinal quantitative study with FGS who enrolled in higher education institutions. Padgett et al. provided quantitative longitudinal evidence on cognitive and psychosocial outcomes of FGS compared to their counterparts. The sample included 19 postsecondary institutions and 3,081 participants. Padgett et al. found that many FGS are at a disadvantage in academics and their social environment compared to non-FGS. Findings also revealed that FGS' parental higher education level influenced academic and college choices of students. Additionally, statistical evidence indicated that student engagement among peers and faculty affected FGS persistence in contrast to their counterparts. These findings support this study. The collegiate environment, which includes student affairs and academic affairs, must collaborate to provide individualized educational plans to support academic achievement and persistence for FGS in community and technical colleges. This

population could require intensive academic and cocurricular services to persist and achieve academically in postsecondary institutions. Rigorous services for non-FGS may not be warranted because they could very well be equipped with necessary resources to matriculate to higher education institutions. Padgett et al. presented a detailed analysis of FGS; however, further studies to explore how community colleges contribute to academic achievement and employment for FGS who are commuter students are needed.

Knowing the background and characteristics of FGS can benefit higher education institutions as they create programs and activities to serve FGS best. Similarly, Mehta et al. (2011) examined the dissimilarity between FGS and non-FGS. Understanding perspectives on identity development and environmental influences are vital as college personnel respond and provide services for FGS. Awareness of the needs, attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions of FGS are paramount for college administrators to provide valuable programs and services to FGS (Mehta et al., 2011). The investigators found that FGS are less involved on campus, are not socially engaged, have little financial support, usually demonstrate stress in academic settings, and have low GPAs compared to non-FGS. This study is evaluated in this literature review because the Mehta et al. presented characteristics and obstacles faced by FGS enrolled in higher education institutions. Although Mehta et al. provided some information on the background and challenges faced by FGS, the experiences of being a FGS single parent, head of household, college graduate, and achieving productivity in the workforce are missing in the literature. Additional investigation is necessary to understand the academic learning experiences of

FGS who received a degree in the healthcare field from a community college and obtained gainful employment.

Comparable to Smith (2008), investigators Chen, Wang, Wei, Fwu, and Hwang (2009) asserted that FGS are motivated and influenced by their culture to achieve academically while enrolled in postsecondary institutions. Community and technical colleges can render assistance to FGS as higher education administrators understand societal expectations and norms of FGS from East Asian countries (Chen et al., 2009). Chen et al. employed achievement goal theory to substantiate how Taiwanese students are motivated to achieve academically. Chen et al. investigated Taiwanese students' self-attributions for achieving goals based on autonomous interest and social expectations. Chen et al. focused on patterns of causal ascription for personal success or failure to self-attribution of academic achievement.

Chen et al. (2009) presented two quantitative research investigations, which included two hypotheses for each study. The first study examined self-attribution styles in pursuit of vertical and personal goals for East Asian FGS college students by applying four simulations. Chen et al. used this method to manipulate the sources of goal construction. The participants included 153 undergraduates and graduate students in Taiwan. Data collection involved results from scenarios and closed-ended survey questionnaires. Chen et al. analyzed data and tested their hypotheses by conducting a three-way ANOVA, pair-wise comparison. The results indicated that FGS tended to ascribe their achievement to intrinsic values, motivation, transformative learning, and emotional intelligence.

Chen et al.'s (2009) second research investigation also included two hypotheses. The participants involved 154 students randomly assigned to one of four scenarios. Chen et al. did not manipulate the source of goal construction. Data collection included results from the scenarios and responses from closed-ended survey questionnaires. Chen et al. postulated that Taiwanese use autonomous interests and self-enhancement in self-attributions of goal achievement to maintain and enhance positive self-regard. Chen et al. credited FGS vertical goals to social expectations and role obligations. East Asians often attribute achievement of personal goals to internal factors and ascribe failure to external factors. Additionally, East Asians attribute failure to achieve vertical goals to a lack of effort. Different sociocultural values enhance or inhibit certain forms of motivation.

Findings from Chen et al. (2009) impact the existing investigation. FGS are not only residents of the United States but also international students. Higher education administrators must think globally, consider its diverse population and implement services that promote academic achievement and persistence. Although the investigators conducted two quantitative studies, future qualitative research should be explored to understand what motivational factors contribute to academic achievement and persistence of FGS in community colleges. Higher education officials can incorporate results of the data with colleges' initiatives to improve learning and development for diverse populations.

According to Collier and Morgan (2008), not all FGS graduate from college. An understanding of factors that attribute to FGS' academic and career achievement is essential for higher education administrators. Collier and Morgan conducted a qualitative

investigation of 63 FGS and eight faculty members at a large western University. The authors explored student-faculty expectations for classroom activities and assignments. Emerging themes from faculty and students' perspectives included workload and priorities, detailed assignment instructions, and communication. Collier and Morgan presented strategies for faculty, staff, and administrators to promote persistence, academic achievement, and career opportunities. Collier and Morgan asserted that faculty must provide students with information regarding the goal, purpose, and learning outcomes of their classes. These efforts will inform students of expectations, which can lead to heightened academic commitment and persistence. Parallel to faculty, FGS shared similar perspectives on faculty expectations.

Collier and Morgan (2008) noted that FGS experienced various roles and challenges that interrupted the suggested amount of time to study and prepare for coursework. Many FGS lacked necessary social skills to convey concerns of learning and academic deficiencies to faculty. Additionally, some FGS lack emotional intelligence (Cross, 1981) to handle demands of coursework (Collier & Morgan, 2008). The researchers found that faculty expectations and FGS' expectations are not interrelated, and faculty-student engagement should be cultivated to increase persistence. Results from Collier and Morgan inform this study because FGS' awareness of their learning outcomes and faculty expectations will encourage persistence and academic achievement. In addition, faculty acknowledgment of FGS' expectations may inspire faculty to adjust their teaching style to accommodate FGS learning styles. Appropriate teaching methods,

in conjunction with students' learning experience, will compel persistence and academic achievement of FGS.

Collier and Morgan conducted their investigation at a large western university. Further research to replicate Collier and Morgan's study should be explored at a community college to inform discussions about the importance of faculty-student expectations and how their roles influence academic achievement and persistence.

Bryan and Simmons (2009) noted that family involvement is a critical ingredient for the social and academic achievement of FGS, which parallels Smith's (2008) findings. The investigators conducted a qualitative study of 10 Appalachian FGS and the impact of family involvement. The college experiences of these students are similar to most FGS from various backgrounds. The personal narratives and rich oral histories of Appalachian FGS are viewed as evidence because their experiences will provide insight for postsecondary administrators. The research site was a southcentral university.

Bryan and Simmons (2009) asserted that the support of immediate family and extended family increased retention and persistence of Appalachian FGS. Although each participant in the study expressed characteristics of identity development (Cross, 1981) or reported feelings of being a different person at home than at school, their collegiate experience magnified their behavior to achieve academically (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). Early interventions regarding college applications and financial aid from relatives were vital for participants in the study. These factors enhance FGS' desires for persistence and academic achievement. Additionally, each participant expressed a sense of dedication to achieve for both their families and communities. Further narratives of returning home and

poverty in their communities influenced Appalachian FGS to persist toward graduation, obtain employment, and effect positive social change in their communities (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). Findings from Bryan and Simmons address my exploratory study because identity development, environmental influence, moral and family support are foundational for students' perseverance while enrolled in community and technical colleges. Future investigations into the experiences of FGS who enrolled and matriculated at 2-year colleges are necessary to increase understanding of the motivational factors that contribute to FGS academic achievement, persistence, and employment.

A sufficient amount of research highlights many challenges, failures, disadvantages, and attrition that FGS face throughout college while in pursuit of their college degrees. Reid and Moore (2008) provided students' perspectives on college attendance and matriculation. The researchers conducted a qualitative investigation of narrated perceptions and attitudes of 13 FGS' preparation for postsecondary education. The research occurred at a Midwestern university.

According to Reid and Moore (2008), academic rigor in secondary education is critical for FGS' academic achievement in postsecondary institutions. Additionally, college exploration activities and career fairs are essential throughout secondary education, to prepare FGS transition to colleges and universities. Collaboration among secondary schools and postsecondary colleges is a prime example of how educational officials apply general systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968) to their missions and

goals. Therefore, high school administrators and higher education officials must collaborate to support FGS academic achievement and persistence.

Reid and Moore (2008) used semistructured interviews and questionnaires to collect data and from which themes emerged. Reid and Moore found that academic rigor and advanced placement courses were instrumental in preparation for college success. FGS involvement in extracurricular activities, scholastic aptitude, financial aid workshops, federal TRIO programs, leadership organizations, and college tours were also essential for college readiness. These findings add to my existing investigation. Teacher-student and counselor-student relationships which focus on the college environment and academic challenges may have prepared students for higher education. Reid and Moore (2008) presented useful data for secondary and postsecondary administrators. However, a longitudinal mixed-method study should be explored to understand how secondary and postsecondary institutions collaborate to provide a seamless transition to higher education institutions for FGS and examine their academic achievement, persistence, and job placement rates.

A college education provides FGS with an opportunity to advance socially, financially, and become productive citizens in their communities. Despite their challenges, many FGS enroll in college and aspire to complete their educational and career goals. However, FGS must feel a sense of belonging and a connection to their academic environment to matriculate at postsecondary institutions (Jehangir, 2010a).

Jehangir (2010b) explored learning communities comprised of multicultural curricula to demonstrate how instructional design and learning styles connect FGS

experiences with their academic environment, which influence matriculation through educational activities. Jehangir (2010b) conducted a qualitative study with 25 FGS enrolled in the multicultural learning community at a northern U.S. university. The participants provided narratives of their lived experiences at the beginning of the semester and reflected on their college experiences at matriculation.

FGS lived experiences are methods used to explain and understand meaning in their lives. The experiences include work, identity, multiple life roles, student, and as a community member. Jehangir (2010b) asserted that FGS expressions of their lived experiences in learning communities allow students to be facilitators and to participate in sharing knowledge. Additionally, the author found that FGS with barriers to academic achievement were motivated to become engaged and active in the learning process when they participated in learning communities. Jehangir (2010b) affirmed that learning communities are viable avenues between personal and educational environments of FGS. Additionally, learning communities can serve as an environment that invites diversity and opportunities for FGS to share educational, personal, and professional experiences. Findings from Jehangir's (2010b) study are significant for this investigation because learning communities impact students' academic and social skills. In addition, extracurricular activities that are inclusive of a diverse population may motivate FGS to not withdraw from college. Further qualitative inquiry is warranted to explore how learning communities or the college environment provide academic and persistence support for FGS while they attend rural community colleges.

Many FGS experience cultural challenges in relation to their self-perception, academic achievement goals, and navigating the culture of college life (Yeager & Walton, 2011). There is little research that has explored the aspirations of these students who strive for academic achievement in higher education (Olive, 2010). Olive (2010) conducted a phenomenological study of five undergraduate Hispanic FGS enrolled at a university in Texas. The author examined the structure of why the five FGS Hispanic FGS were motivated to excel in higher education institutions.

Olive (2010) noted that encouragement and support of relatives and friends contributed to FGS' desire for advancement in higher education. Comfort and enjoyment of the college environment were integral for FGS' desire to achieve a college degree. Additional variables included socioeconomic benefits and economic growth. Moreover, FGS affirmed that the variables are interrelated parts of the whole foundation to support FGS' aspiration for higher education (Olive, 2010). The investigator addresses the holistic psychological meaning of lived experiences of FGS. The results of Olive's (2010) study support the focus of this study. FGS' intrinsic and extrinsic values motivate them to experience higher education and persevere academically. Understanding this population's reasons for enrolling in postsecondary institutions may enhance higher education administrators' intervention and retention strategies. Further research is necessary to understand how these variables must be interrelated to influence persistence, academic achievement, and career opportunities for FGS at community colleges.

According to Means and Pyne (2016), statistics on college access, academic achievement, and college completion of FGS remain low when compared to non-FGS.

Matriculation deficiencies in higher education institutions are probably due to academic, social, and economic readiness. Means and Pyne investigated underrepresented students' postmatriculation perceptions of college access programs. The investigators conducted a longitudinal qualitative study of 10 participants at a midsize private university in the southeastern United States.

Means and Pyne (2016) noted several themes emerged from the qualitative inquiry: requisite academic skills, psychosocial strength, knowledge of admissions process, a sense of belonging, self-perception, and academic and social development illustrated underrepresented students' college readiness skills to meet the demands and persist in postsecondary institutions. Additionally, family support, career motivations, knowledge of financial aid and scholarships, and precollege preparation contributed to matriculation in college. Findings from Means and Pyne's study affirmed that identity development, life experiences, self-concept, and the college environment are essential to FGS' persistence in college. Further investigation with a larger sample is needed to gain a deeper understanding of FGS college readiness and assist in student services support for FGS.

Academic Achievement

FGS who attend postsecondary schools face innumerable academic challenges, which can negatively affect their academic development and student engagement (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Furthermore, Soria and Stebleton (2012) mentioned that there is little known regarding how FGS' college experiences affect their academic achievement. According to Winkle-Wagner (2015), first-generation African American women have

shown resilience in college participation. Winkle-Wagner conducted an integrative, interdisciplinary review of 119 studies of identity development, college environmental support, and student-faculty relationships that pertain to African American women's academic achievement in college. Winkle-Wagner presented Chickering's identity development and environmental influence perspective and Habermas's communicative action perspective.

Trends in the literature (Winkle-Wagner, 2015) averred that individual psychological and sociological characteristics, persistence, self-efficacy, self-esteem, student-faculty interaction, and family emotional support contributed to African American women's ambition toward educational accomplishment and college success. The findings of Winkle-Wagner (2015) are relevant to my study regarding the persistence of FGS' academic learning experiences in community and technical colleges.

Matriculating at a college and graduating can be a significant accomplishment for college students as they experience many challenges to achieve their academic goals. Factors such as adjustment stressors, campus size, and self-efficacy influence college students' academic progress (Vuong et al., 2010). Vuong et al. (2010) highlighted Chickering's identity development theory (Cross, 1981) to provide insight into intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and self-efficacy of FGS, which are related to Winkle-Wagner's (2015) review. Vuong et al. conducted an analysis of the effects of self-efficacy on the academic success of five FGS who attended a university in the western United States. Self-efficacy beliefs affect the academic achievement and persistence of FGS (Vuong et al., 2010). The authors explored the relationship between self-efficacy, GPA, and the

persistence rates of FGS. Vuong et al. (2010) mentioned that FGS experienced emotional stress and challenged with multifaceted barriers and obstacles. FGS live through struggles and face a desire to achieve their educational goals, the need to make choices, identity development, and the campus environment.

Vuong et al. (2010) conducted a quantitative study on five campuses in California. The sample included 91 FGS who completed an online College Self-Efficacy Inventory. The authors found that self-efficacy beliefs affect GPAs and persistence rates of FGS. Vuong et al. noted that postsecondary institutions should have an understanding of sound predictors of academic persistence and attrition for FGS. The results revealed that academic achievement was influenced by self-efficacy as FGS developed interdependence and integrity. Moreover, Vuong et al. asserted that FGS' perceptions influenced their academic performance, persistence, and matriculation. Outcomes from Vuong et al.'s study are important to my research because FGS' self-efficacy beliefs encourage them to be involved in the learning process and strive to complete their educational objectives. Additional mixed-methods research should be explored to understand how self-efficacy impacts FGS' academic achievement at 2-year colleges.

Akin (2010) asserted that college students are unique in terms of their academic achievement behavior because of their emotional, motivational, and cognitive levels, which are consistent with two other studies (Vuong et al., 2010; & Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Many higher education students with an internal locus of control engaged in positive activities and took responsibility for their academic successes or failures. Additionally, students with an internal locus of control are more effective in interpersonal

relations, exhibit positive attitudes in coursework assignments, determined to persist, and easily adjust to the college environment.

Akin (2010) conducted a quantitative investigation to examine the correlation between academic locus of control and achievement goals of higher education students. Akin employed the Academic Locus of Control Scale, the 2X2 Achievement Goal Orientations Scale, and used SPSS/13.0 to analyze the data. The sample included 627 students with a mean age of 20 who attended a university in Turkey.

Akin (2010) asserted that students with academic locus of control directly affects their achievement goals. Moreover, Akin posited that college students with an internal locus of control focused on maintaining their knowledge and skills, comprehension, and completion of coursework materials. Furthermore, the students engaged in self-development to enhance their skills. The results from Akin's study include FGS' perceptions, intrinsic motivation, and aspiration to complete their educational goals, which are significant to my investigation. Additional mixed-methods research should be explored to analyze first-generation and nontraditional community college students, ages 18 and older to understand how academic goals and academic locus of control contribute to persistence, academic achievement, and career attainment.

The academic achievement of first-generation and continuing-generation students is dependent on the students' intentions, parental support, peer support, and the type of support received (Purswell, Yazedjian, & Tocus, 2009). These variables of academic achievement are self-reported by first and continuing-generation students, according to Purswell et al. (2009). The perspectives derived from Chickering's identity development

and environmental influence (Cross, 1981) and adult learning theories guided the inquiry. Purswell et al. highlighted noncognitive variables, such as academic intentions behaviors, parental support, and peer support to ascertain academic achievement of FGS and continuing generation first-year students who self-report instead of focusing on cognitive variables.

The participants in Purswell et al.'s (2009) longitudinal study included 329 FGS and continuing-generation college first-year students who completed an online Freshmen Assets Survey. Additionally, the researchers used regression analysis to include a series of *t*-tests and an analysis of variance to predict the participants' academic behaviors. Purswell et al. asserted that intentions, such as study skills and completion of coursework, are critical to determining FGS and continuing-generation students' specific academic achievement behaviors. Purswell et al.'s (2009) investigation consisted of a longitudinal study of first-generation and continuing-generation first-year college students.

Results of Purswell et al.'s (2009) study provided valuable information for my inquiry regarding different factors that increase FGS' potential to become involved in the learning process and accomplish their endeavors. Further qualitative inquiry should be explored to provide insight and contribute to the existing literature on how factors are interdependent. These include parental support, peer support, student intentions, and GPA's influence academic achievement of FGS in community colleges.

Although there is discussion of precollege characteristics in the literature (Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Pike, Hanson, & Childress, 2014; Tyson, 2011), several other variables influence FGS' ability to achieve academically in higher education institutions. Prospero

et al. (2012) investigated the effects of motivation on educational attainment among Hispanic and non-Hispanic first-generation students. Comparable to Akin (2010), Prospero et al. (2012) noted that intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation are factors, which ultimately enhance FGS' determination to strive for academic achievement, enhance their desires for persistence, and work to become gainfully employed.

Prospero et al. (2012) employed motivational approaches to evaluate the persistence and academic achievement of participants. The participants consisted of 315 FGS who completed an academic motivation survey, attended high school, and enrolled in colleges in the southern region of the United States. The investigators sought to explore the relationship of educational motivation with age, ethnicity, high school, or college. Prospero et al. incorporated three statistical analyses using the SPSS/13.0 to perform correlational analysis, multiple regression, age comparison of means, and ethnic comparison of means to evaluate the data.

Prospero et al. (2012) asserted that intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivation were essential variables that enhanced participants' academic achievement and persistence. However, the study found that extrinsic motivators or amotivation drove first-generation Hispanic college students. Prospero et al. posited that FGS who attended community colleges were focused on skills to attain increases in salary and status. Findings from Prospero et al. apply to this study regarding career opportunities. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation influence FGS' desire to obtain formal educational training and become gainfully employed. Prospero et al. provided quantitative analyses to determine the

effects of motivation on participants. Further qualitative research is warranted to explore how degree aspirations among FGS enhance their educational and career goals. A qualitative study could provide an in-depth understanding of mentoring roles and the transition to college within diverse populations that promote degree attainment.

Despite the obstacles encountered in college, many FGS persist toward achieving their goal of graduation. Kopp and Shaw (2016) evaluated the differences between students dismissed from college for insufficient academic performance compared to students in good standing who left by choice. The Kopp and Shaw conducted a quantitative study of 110 higher education institutions in the United States. The participants included 97,523 first-time college students. Kopp and Shaw asserted that the participants' demographics revealed no significant impact on student departure. However, the results indicated that FGS with lower parental incomes are likely to be dismissed due to poor academic performance, which were comparable to Prospero et al. (2012). Thus, FGS may remain enrolled if educational interventions focus primarily on resources to improve FGS' academic performance. Additionally, student engagement, motivation, self-efficacy, and social and academic integration are contributing variables to students' retention (Kopp & Shaw, 2016).

Findings from Kopp and Shaw (2016) contribute to this my research regarding variables that promote academic achievement for FGS. Although Kopp and Shaw acknowledged that the participants in the study exhibited poor academic skills in college courses, while other students excelled in academic learning, an awareness of FGS' self-efficacy, motivation, academic needs, and disposition may inform best practices for

higher education administrators who serve FGS in community colleges. Further investigations are necessary to explore how FGS' beliefs and values influence their persistence and matriculation in college. Qualitative studies will extract data on how and why self-efficacy, student involvement, and educational interventions impact academic achievement among FGS.

FGS' academic achievement encompasses all components of the college. FGS' persistence and retention intertwine with their personal experiences, relationship with student services, and faculty-student rapport. Student academic achievement, persistence, and matriculation must be a collaborative process, prioritized by all segments of the community college (Fontana et al., 2005). Incorporating general systems theory is paramount to achieve desired student outcomes (von Bertalanffy, 1968).

Fontana et al. (2005) noted many FGS exude optimism regarding academic excellence, as reflected in their intent and goals when they apply for college. Due to time constraints, financial issues, family obligations, and academic transcripts, attending community colleges may be a suitable option for FGS. This population may view 2-year colleges as an educational environment that will complement their educational and career goals (Fontana et al., 2005).

Fontana et al. (2005) provided a strategic model, implemented at Broward Community College to increase FGS' academic achievement and matriculation. The model focused on student success, which required collaborative and interactive relationships and a holistic approach to FGS' academic achievement. The theoretical framework presented in the study consisted of aspects of identity development and

environmental influences and learning styles. These facets, according to Fontana et al., are holistic approaches to assess student-faculty relationships and evaluate student support services. Findings from this study contribute to this present inquiry regarding these interconnected approaches. This model could be incorporated into higher education institutions to promote academic achievement for FGS. Further case studies are necessary to ascertain how results from student, employer, and faculty surveys are incorporated into community colleges' initiatives to promote student achievement.

As students enroll in community colleges, many of them bring experiences that shape their aspirations and perceptions about their academic environment. Mesa (2012) posited that many students have an internal locus of control, are motivated, confident, and believe they can handle academic challenges. Mesa ascertained that identity development and environmental influence are foundational to understanding how students will persist, achieve academically, and matriculate in community colleges. Mesa conducted a mixed-methods investigation of students' achievement goal orientation and how instructors perceive those goals.

The participants in Mesa's (2012) study included 777 students enrolled in a developmental and a college-level mathematics course at a community college in the Midwest and 25 of their instructors. The survey highlighted student mastery, student performance, teacher mastery, teacher performance, academic self-efficacy, self-handicapping behaviors. The student related responses were collected using a 5-point Likert scale. Additionally, instructors completed semistructured, open-ended questionnaires. Mesa posited that factors such as motivation, self-efficacy, and self-

concept cm students to reach their goals to master the mathematics course content and strive for academic achievement. Moreover, Mesa contended that participants believed in their academic ability and avoided self-handicapping behaviors. Mesa focused on one community college. Data collection did not include participants' final grades for the mathematics course and did not include participants' academic transcripts.

Findings from Mesa (2012) inform the focus of my study because these aspects provide insight into faculty's and students' disparate perceptions. Faculty perceived students as having a lack of motivation to excel in coursework. Students believed that they have the desire and eagerness to do extremely well in their coursework. Additional qualitative inquiries at two or three community colleges are warranted to explore factors that impact student withdrawal and how colleges' strategic initiatives can affect academic achievement.

Persistence

According to Jaggars (2014), community colleges provide opportunities for FGS to enroll in online learning courses because of their flexible and open access admissions policies and courses in which online learning can flourish. However, due to this population's various backgrounds, multiple jobs, family responsibilities, and personal conflicts, online learning course dropout rates are increasing for FGS. Russo-Gleicher (2013) conducted a qualitative study of 16 faculty members who teach online courses at a community college in the Northeast. Russo-Gleicher ascertained that students' academic behaviors contributed to withdrawal from online courses in community college.

Highlighted in the literature are an analysis of strategies and best practices to reduce attrition and curricula design models for online instruction.

Russo-Gleicher (2013) asserted that the use of student support services for online students at risk significantly contributes to persistence in online learning and academic achievement in distance education courses. Factors that promote FGS persistence include psychological readiness, the possession of technological skills, and exuding sociological keenness. Additionally, internal locus of control, self-efficacy, self-directed learning, motivation, intrinsic goal orientation, time management, and organizational skills are essential to persistence in online learning. Furthermore, Russo-Gleicher found that early identification, effective intervention, advising and counseling, providing timely technical support, and developing social and learning communities support persistence in online learning courses for FGS. Findings from Russo-Gleicher address aspects that prevent student withdrawal from courses. Faculty support and communication, psychological awareness of student academic behavior, and technological and social factors are critical elements that play a role in student persistence in online instruction.

According to Fike and Fike (2008), postsecondary institutions market their programs, services, and missions to recruit new students and assess interventions to increase retention. Fike and Fike illustrated the characteristics of general systems theory by examining predictors of first-year student retention in community colleges. Understanding why students choose to leave or choose to remain until degree completion is essential for administrators who strive to make a difference in students' lives (Fike & Fike, 2008). Fike and Fike conducted a quantitative, retrospective study that assessed

predictors of student persistence for first-time college students in a community college. The sample included 9,200 students who first enrolled in the fall semesters of 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2004 at an urban Texas community college. The theoretical framework included components of Tinto's persistence model and Astin's student involvement theory to explore how students and colleges interact with one another and experience events to engage persistence. The focus was the impact of online courses, developmental education, financial aid, and FGS' participation in Student Support Services, a federally funded TRIO program. Fike and Fike discovered that students who successfully completed developmental courses had a greater probability of persistence to graduation than those who enrolled in developmental courses and did not successfully complete those courses. Furthermore, the investigators asserted that the availability and flexibility of internet classes, interaction with faculty, and participation in Student Support Services programs are strong predictors of student persistence.

Results from this study are pertinent to my research concerning retention and degree completion. Higher education administrators must implement effective measures that support persistence and retention. Assessing students' academic skills for online courses and providing them with instruction and support services that are appropriate to their skills promote persistence. Additional research is warranted to compare the persistence of those FGS who participate in a Student Support Services program to those who persist and do not participate in a federally funded TRIO program.

There is little research (Maramba & Museus, 2014; Soria, Stebleton, & Huesman, 2013) that focused on the relationship of persistence and academic and social integration

regarding underrepresented students in 2-year colleges. Deil-Amen (2011) conducted a qualitative study of 14 postsecondary institutions to include a total of 125 students and 113 faculty members and staff. Deil-Amen aimed to understand the dynamics of persistence for FGS at 2-year colleges.

The theoretical framework for Deil-Amen's (2011) study included Astin's theory of student involvement and Tinto's (2012b) theory of persistence. Emile Durkheim's conceptual theory of belonging and social congruence reinforced this theoretical framework. Deil-Amen's emerging themes included commitment, belonging, integration, connection, disconnection, motivation, support, self-perception, and social integration. These emerging themes are foundational for identity development and environmental influence and adult learning perspectives. Additionally, the author asserted that academic integration and social integration are interconnected, indistinguishable in postsecondary education settings and promote FGS' persistence and academic achievement. Furthermore, Deil-Amen noted that integration with faculty and instructors also support persistence. Instructors who extended themselves to assist students with academic achievement, and career attainment increase FGS' persistence in postsecondary institutions.

Findings from Deil-Amen (2011) are important to this inquiry. Colleges can proactively connect students with faculty, mentors, and advisors early in the enrollment process or during the first few days of the semester. This interaction will affirm FGS' sense of belonging and help them navigate the college environment. These efforts will promote persistence and degree completion. Future qualitative research should be

explored to provide a detailed understanding of the link between FGS behaviors, integration in the college environment, and a sense of belonging.

Another study, by Hirt, Amelink, McFeeters, and Strayhorn (2008), explored the relationship between students and student affairs personnel on college campuses. Hirt et al. conducted a qualitative study to examine how the relationship between student affairs administrators and students at 25 Historically Black Colleges and Universities encouraged persistence through student engagement. The study employed purposeful sampling of 70 administrators from Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Hirt et al. (2008) utilized a culturally conceptual framework of guardianship found in African American feminist literature. The researchers employed the perspectives of general systems theory and Astin's student involvement approaches to assess a climate of peer interactions and the collegiate experience. Hirt et al. found that the relationship between student affairs administrators and students promoted persistence and graduation rates among students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The relationship between the two entities created a shared moral responsibility to encourage cultural advancement. The researchers noted that administrators created an inclusive environment, which promoted connectivity, integration, academic achievement, and persistence among students.

Results from Hirt et al. (2008) are paramount to this my investigation. Forming meaningful relationships with students in order to be fully integrated into the college experience helps to retain students. Likewise, student-focused relationships in higher education institutions encourage connectionism and also promote persistence. Future

investigations are necessary to gain an understanding of FGS' perceptions and experiences with student affairs personnel during their continuance and quest in persistence and matriculation at community colleges.

A sufficient amount of studies (Dika & D'Amico, 2016; Lightweis, 2014; Longmire-Avital & Miller-Dice, 2015) have examined factors and presented challenges faced by FGS to explain why this population may not persist to graduation. Rood (2009) conducted a qualitative study to interpret the narrated experiences of FGS who attended a private college and persisted to graduation. Rood (2009) employed interviews and focus groups to extract emerging themes from the data. The author highlighted responses that contributed to persistence and degree attainment of FGS who participated in the study. According to Rood, Grice, and Grice (2008), and Deil-Amen (2011), the academic support and social support provided by faculty were essential to FGS persistence and satisfaction at college. Additionally, Rood mentioned that smaller class size increased students' motivation to succeed. Rood found that commuter FGS were also determined to persist in academics at the college. Furthermore, Rood asserted that faculty, faith, and family were emerging themes that must work synergistically to compel FGS to complete college.

Findings from Rood's (2009) study are essential because all participants were motivated to attend college and perceived higher education as an opportunity to accomplish their educational goals and improve their livelihood. Further qualitative studies should be conducted to interpret the experiences of commuter FGS who pursue academic excellence and who persevere at 2-year colleges.

Career Opportunities

Owens, Lacey, Rawls, and Holbert-Quince (2010) indicated that many FGS experience obstacles as they pursue their career goals. This population of students needs effective strategies, services, and extensive support to persist toward degree completion and to aid in their career growth. Owens et al. noted that career counselors need to understand the experiences of FGS on college campuses to support FGS' career objectives. Career counselors should administer and interpret career interest inventories to ensure FGS become involved and participate in campus-wide job fairs. Moreover, Owens et al. asserted that career counselors must be keenly aware of FGS' short-term and long-term educational and career goals. Results from Owens et al.'s research are vital to this my investigation because they shed light on how career counselors can listen to the perspectives of students. Job placement officers have to educate FGS on the importance of networking and participation in professional organizations. These efforts provide support for FGS in their career development process.

According to Levey (2010), community and technical colleges prepare students for the workforce in which occupational earnings are below employment wages for students who attended 4-year universities. Levey compared the 1979 cohort of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to compare the occupational attainment of students from 2-year colleges and students from 4-year universities.

Levey (2010) asserted the gap between community college students and university students were not significant because many students who enroll in 2-year colleges attend classes to upgrade their skills, lack academic preparedness, and face

barriers to meet the demands of 4-year universities. Furthermore, Levy stated that community college students embark on vastly different career paths with different opportunities for advancement. Therefore, employment which these participants held during their mid-20s may not determine their career advancement.

Students who earned degrees in health professions from community colleges received higher wages than some students with bachelor degrees (Levy, 2010). Results from Levy (2010) are applicable to my investigation. Constituents and stakeholders perceive community and technical colleges as providing skilled individuals for the workforce. Instructional design is necessary for students to gain the technical skills to meet the demands of the labor force. Further research should compare the current detailed employment outlook for healthcare, information technology, and business services professions because these programs are available at 2-year and 4-year colleges.

According to Torracco (2008), curricula are designed to prepare college students for the workforce. Students enrolled in occupational programs receive classroom instruction and participate in learning experiences such as workshops, labs, internships, and clinical experiences. Torracco investigated how effective occupational programs prepare students to continue learning after matriculation. The participants included 39 program graduates and 10 supervisors at two Midwestern U.S. community colleges. The qualitative inquiry, (Torraco, 2008) asserted that labs, hands-on experiences, and work-based learning formats were most beneficial for students. Additionally, Torracco noted that graduates had the knowledge and skills needed to meet the demands of the workforce or their specialized jobs. Torracco affirmed that graduates were encouraged to continue

professional development after they are employed and to stay abreast of current trends and developments in their specialized fields. Findings from this study are relevant to this existing inquiry. Program coordinators and faculty can share their knowledge of employment trends and technical skills that are required for specific jobs to help FGS with their career endeavors. Further research is warranted to explore graduates' and supervisors' narratives, which could detail how soft skills, general education courses, and technical courses incorporated in curricula design at community colleges promote persistence and prepare students for the workforce.

Stuart, Rios-Aguilar, and Deil-Amen (2014) indicated that many FGS may be determined to persist in community colleges because of the job market and their career aspirations. Stuart et al. discussed the role of job opportunities, and how family responsibilities influence FGS' desire to persist and obtain employment in their specialized fields. Stuart et al. presented social involvement and socioacademic integration methods to demonstrate how interrelated notions of persistence impact workforce opportunities for FGS.

Stuart et al. (2014) affirmed that findings from the National Center for Education Statistics and the Labor Statistics data revealed that students consider cost, tuition, and the value of their degree, compared to student support services, extracurricular activities, and student engagement. Moreover, community colleges have implemented various programs to offset tuition costs. Additionally, career counseling, job fairs, and career exploration courses were designed to prepare students for occupations that meet their interests and goals (Stuart et al., 2014). Findings from Stuart et al. (2014) contribute to

this study regarding career placement strategies that assist students with employment. Colleges that offer student assistant jobs and work-study positions should align eligible students for work in departments based on their career goals. These efforts encourage persistence and allow students to develop work experience. Further research is warranted to evaluate employers' perceptions of community college students' occupational preparedness and how soft skills enhance students' work performance. The data can add to community colleges' initiatives for measuring student success.

Many FGS reenter postsecondary education institutions to regain skills and knowledge after being displaced from their previous employment (Ghilani, 2008). Ghilani (2008) conducted a qualitative study of 25 employees who were dislocated from their jobs and enrolled in a community college for retraining and skills enhancement. Ghilani sought to ascertain how these participants obtained employment, their satisfaction, and barriers while searching for employment. The participants completed a detailed survey regarding employment, starting salary, length of time to become employed, hours, and benefits. Ghilani asserted these participants were probably successful in obtaining new employment because the participants found their programs of study interesting and exciting. Additionally, the author indicated that the participants knew their program of study was in demand.

Findings from Ghilani (2008) are relevant to this study as they address how FGS choose their program of study. Furthermore, the results are important because community colleges must stay abreast of business and industry demands. Collaboration among college job placement officials and workforce development is a critical factor to assist

FGS with obtaining employment. Additional qualitative research is warranted to explore how displaced FGS obtain employment after matriculation at a rural community college and how community college services provide FGS with the necessary tools to meet the demands of the workforce.

Packard and Babineau (2009) incorporated social cognitive career theory to provide insight on how FGS' environments may influence career decisions. The researchers conducted a longitudinal multiple case study of eight FGS in community colleges. The participants were parents and worked in semiskilled jobs. Packard and Babineau asserted that time, money, personal responsibilities, academic readiness, and the employment outlook influenced the career choices of FGS. Additionally, Packard and Babineau affirmed that social cognitive career theory supported the belief that FGS' experiences, mentors, and self-efficacy contributed to their career options. Findings from Packard and Babineau's study support this inquiry because many FGS make career compromises and sacrifices to achieve their career goals. Community colleges have to provide FGS with access to mentors, who may assist with networks and encourage motivation and validation towards career attainment. The strategies may benefit FGS in community colleges. Further qualitative longitudinal case studies are warranted to examine how the workplace provides support, self-esteem, and eliminate barriers to professional growth in FGS' places of employment.

Mamiseishvili (2010) emphasized that postsecondary colleges are vital to economic development and serve as valuable vehicles through which FGS persist, achieve academically, and become productive members of the workforce. FGS who are

productive in the workplace and enrolled in academic courses at 2-year colleges are deemed most likely to persist in college. This population of students may be motivated and engaged in college activities to ensure they excel in academics and progress in the workforce (Mamiseishvili, 2010). Mamiseishvili explored the effects of employment of FGS enrolled in higher education institutions, by employing a longitudinal study that incorporated student aid surveys. The variables included persistence, employment, and characteristics of FGS. The data analysis incorporated logistic regression. Mamiseishvili (2010) conducted a quantitative inquiry by employing the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study data set, which identifies transfers students, dropouts, students who persisted, and completers. The sample included 1140 FGS whose annual income was not greater than \$25,000.

Mamiseishvili (2010) noted that FGS who work more than 20 hours a week, enroll in academics or technical programs with unique priorities, goals, additions, and motivation. However, working and pursuing educational opportunities, simultaneously, are recognized as potential factors that affect FGS' academic achievement and persistence. Mamiseishvili indicated that faculty and college officials must enable FGS to balance personal and collegiate roles. Mamiseishvili affirmed that FGS who are motivated, determined to persist, and view higher education as a valuable investment in the learning process will accomplish their academic and career aspirations. Findings from Mamiseishvili's study are important to this research because FGS who perceive higher education as their priority are more likely to persist and obtain employment. Faculty and administrators have to view students' lives holistically and acknowledge factors that

promote FGS' matriculation and career opportunities. Additional research is necessary to educate college administrators on the vitality of FGS' persistence and career endeavors in rural community colleges.

Gaps in the Literature

Even though this literature review has been expansive, it is still difficult to locate a sufficient amount of literature that supports the perceptions of FGS' academic achievement, persistence, and career opportunities who graduated from a healthcare program at a community college.

Academic Achievement

Little is available regarding FGS' college experiences and the ways those experiences compare to the experiences of students who have college-educated parents. Winkle-Wagner (2016) examined college experiences of underrepresented students to illustrate how their experiences affect their learning, identity, and intellectual development. Additional studies are needed to understand the connections related to the academic success of FGS. Equally, Vuong et al. (2010) examined the connection between academic achievement, persistence, and self-efficacy. A scarce amount of research exists that explores how FGS' internal resources, such as self-esteem and self-efficacy, may be related to academic performance, persistence, and college adjustment (Kopp & Shaw, 2016).

Akin (2010) expanded the research and investigated the relationship between academic locus of control and achievement goal orientations of FGS in higher education institutions. A dearth of information in the literature highlights the development of

educational motivation of FGS, underpinning self-determination theory and including intrinsic and extrinsic values or amotivation factors (Prospero et al., 2012). Future studies should be explored and tested on FGS and nontraditional community college students to investigate the relationship between academic locus of control and their achievement goals.

In addition, further examinations should explore the effects of motivation on degree attainment of FGS enrolled in community colleges. A qualitative study will provide a detailed understanding of non-precollege variables that influence academic achievement, persistence, disciplines, and degree attainment.

Purswell et al. (2009) added to the body of literature and analyzed students' academic intentions, parental support, and peer support as predictors of their self-reported academic behaviors. Additional mixed methods studies should be conducted to examine other factors that could have an impact on the academic behavior of college students. A scarce amount of data reported in the literature examined students' goal orientations and how instructors perceived those students' goals. Therefore, qualitative inquiries at two or three community colleges are warranted to explore how motivation and self-efficacy enhance FGS' desire to excel academically in an environment where instructors support student academic achievement and master course content (Mesa, 2012).

An insufficient amount of literature addressed a collaborative process by which student retention becomes an institutional priority. More specifically, initiatives and strategies developed to mobilize all segments of a community college in an effort to address student persistence and attrition must be studied collectively. Extended case

studies or inquiries are necessary to ascertain how results from the student surveys, employer surveys, and faculty surveys are incorporated into community colleges' initiatives to promote student achievement.

Persistence

The academic community should understand factors that contribute to FGS persistence and success in higher education. More specifically, it is critical for faculty and staff to acknowledge the unique needs of FGS (Rood, 2009). Many FGS who work and commute to class may not feel a sense of belonging and will not establish student-faculty rapport. This study adds to the body of literature regarding retention or persistence theories. Additional research should be conducted to understand FGS' experiences of cocurricular activities and their relationship with faculty at 2-year colleges (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008).

Comparably, a deficient amount of research explores relationships between students and administrators on college campuses (Hirt et al., 2008). Research is limited that expounds on FGS persistence and social integration at community and technical colleges (Deil-Amen, 2011). Advanced research is merited to gain insight on FGS' perceptions of experiences with student affairs personnel during FGS' quest toward degree completion at community and technical colleges. It is also necessary to understand what the impact of FGS' self-concept, academic identity, and sense of belongingness has on promoting student persistence.

All systems in higher education institutions must operate interdependently to facilitate student persistence (von Bertalanffy, 1968). If the areas perform independently,

all activities and efforts undertaken in support of retention will meet challenges and delays.

Career Opportunities

Research that connects how employment data, benefits, and costs link to FGS' choice of which discipline to study is scarce. An insufficient amount of literature has investigated strategies and student support services to align FGS' community college experiences with their career aspirations and employment outlook (Stuart et al., 2014). Advanced research is also warranted to evaluate employers' perceptions of community college students' occupational preparedness and how soft-skills enhance students work performance. The data can add to community colleges initiatives to measure student success.

Many FGS compromise their career aspirations due to their lifestyle, family responsibilities, and their environment. Extended qualitative longitudinal case studies are essential to examine how the workplace provide support, build self-esteem, and eliminate barriers to the professional growth of this population.

An insufficient amount of literature explored the learning experiences of FGS who completed occupational programs and entered the workforce to demonstrate their acquired skills. Further research is crucial to explore graduates' and supervisors' narratives that detail how emotional intelligence and curricula design at community and technical colleges prepared students for the workforce. Earning potential for first-generation African American students with associate degrees and certificates may seem promising. However, this population has low completion rates and do not obtain

employment relative to their specialized credentials (Owens et al., 2010). It is critical to explore strategies that promote first-generation African American students' persistence and career development. Ancillary qualitative research is important to explore how mentoring, identity development, and social integration can influence this population of students to persist and enter the workforce.

Based on the significant literature review, this study contributes to one of the gaps in the research. Because FGS comprise over 40% of incoming first-year students (Cohen & Brawer, 2008) at postsecondary colleges, exploring and understanding the determination of FGS will improve 2-year colleges' overall retention, graduation rates, and effectiveness. The voices of FGS' collegiate experiences of persistence contribute to the richness of this study.

Although the literature reports several characteristics of FGS, this study enhanced documented research, which revealed important dimensions to 12 FGS' academic skills and involvement at a community college. Moreover, this research may stimulate discussion among 2-year college educators to reevaluate their commitment to meeting the needs of FGS. Additionally, this research enhances initiatives to improve practices and strategies to promote persistence, academic achievement, and career attainment for FGS. Postsecondary institutions that acknowledge the experiences of its FGS and align those with the colleges' visions and strategic initiatives may yield not only a positive economic impact but also effect positive social change.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the characteristics, challenges, academic unpreparedness, life experiences, and behaviors that contribute to the attrition of FGS as reported in the literature. Additionally, I explored the gap in the research literature by examining the academic learning experiences of 12 FGS who persisted in academic achievement and became employed in their specialized career fields. Without the benefit of scholarly attention and contribution to the existing literature, ineffective support for FGS may emerge (Hirshey et al., 2011). This study is requisite; it adds to the body of existing literature that supports a dearth of research on the experiences of persistence, academic achievement, and gainful employment of FGS who attended a community college.

What is scarce in the literature in terms of understanding diligence and steadfastness is a qualitative study to explore and gain an understanding of the central phenomenon of persistence, academic achievement, and career opportunities encountered by FGS enrolled at a community college. This study is relevant to the research questions because the responses provided an understanding of FGS collegiate experiences of persistence, academic achievement, and career attainment.

Community and technical colleges are a catalyst for contributing to first FGS who desire a personalized, challenging and nurturing college experience regardless of their academic and career goals. Two-year colleges serve the social and cultural needs of their communities. Community colleges incorporate academic and technical instruction to afford FGS an opportunity to acquire occupational and hands-on skills, in addition to

improving their academic competencies. Therefore, integrated efforts and activities for workforce development, academic instruction, student services, and student persistence are imperative for community colleges to effect social change.

Salient theories and perspectives of academic achievement, persistence, and career development provide the foundation to understand the persistence of FGS who attend community and technical colleges. Higher education administrators, faculty, and staff must integrate the following perspectives: experiential learning, identity development and environmental influence, and social cognitive career theory to promote the successful collegiate experience of FGS. Interdependence of the aforementioned theories exists because the variables from each perspective are linked when FGS persist, achieve academically, and obtain employment in their specialized field.

A wealth of data, which highlighted academic achievement, persistence, and career opportunities for students who attend community and technical colleges, is documented in the current literature. Additionally, significant themes emerged in the current literature review, which overlap and provide an awareness of FGS collegiate experiences of academic achievement, persistence, and career opportunities. The linked themes include motivation, self-esteem, self-concept, emotional intelligence, identity development, self-efficacy, intrinsic and extrinsic values, and student support services. Additionally, these factors, if interconnected, promote positive collegiate experiences of FGS.

FGS are unique in terms of their academic achievement behavior because of their emotional, motivational, and cognitive levels. Their persistence and retention

interconnect with their personal experiences, relationship with student services, and faculty-student rapport. Student persistence and student involvement are two theoretical views that inform how students matriculate in 2-year colleges (Deil-Amen, 2011; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). FGS who persist are motivated and view higher education as a valuable investment in the learning process to accomplish their academic aspirations (Mamiseishvili, 2010; Russo-Gleicher, 2013).

Career counselors must be aware of FGS' short-term and long-term educational and career goals. An assessment of FGS' career interests is vital to promote career attainment. Time, money, personal responsibilities, academic readiness, self-efficacy, expectations, and goals influence FGS' career choices.

Consequently, higher education administrators must utilize a holistic approach to understand characteristics of FGS to improve FGS' academic achievement, promote persistence, and enhance curricula to meet workforce demands. These efforts may produce students who effect positive social change.

I turn now, to presenting my rationale for choosing the study's research design. Following this, I discuss my role as a researcher, the methodology I used, including the sample group, how I selected and recruited the participants, and the data collection instruments. Additionally, I review my plan for data analysis and describe my strategies to ensure trustworthiness. Finally, I review any ethical considerations concerning the treatment of the participants and data.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

The overall purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the persistence of 12 FGS who graduated from a healthcare program at a community college and obtained gainful employment. One step in understanding the persistence of FGS involves discovering situations that generate these students' decisions to achieve their academic and career goals. Many dimensions of FGS' academic learning experience in relation to persistence may not exist in the literature. Much of the population of 2-year college students may be those who are the first in their families to attend college. These students are perceived as at risk and do not complete a postsecondary education degree, such as an associate degree or a certificate (Fike & Fike, 2008). Yet, many FGS achieve their educational and career goals notwithstanding life challenges.

Few institutions have in place a clear, well-articulated practice for assisting FGS to succeed and continue to find ways to help them achieve their academic and career goals (Davis, 2010; Stephens et al., 2014)). This basic qualitative study explored the academic learning experiences FGS who graduated from a community college and obtained employment.

In this chapter, I describe the basic qualitative inquiry to gain an understanding of the persistence of 12 FGS' academic learning experiences during their tenure at a community college. I present the research design and rationale, as well as my roles as the researcher. Next, I discuss the methodology used in this study, including the sample group, how I chose the sample, and the research site. I include an explanation of the data collection instruments, data analysis, and validity and any ethical considerations. The

current inquiry is a basic qualitative study to understand a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009) of 12 FGS. These results may reveal how FGS achieved their academic and career goals to effect positive social change in their communities.

Research Design and Rationale

I chose a basic qualitative framework for the current inquiry because it supports my focus to explore the complexities of 12 FGS' thoughts, processes, feelings, perceptions, and motivations (Maxwell, 2013). A basic qualitative study is resultant from the perspectives of constructivism, phenomenology, and symbolic interaction. Researchers can explore how individuals interpret their experiences of persistence, how participants construct their reality and describe the meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Basic qualitative research is appropriate for investigators to obtain an in-depth understanding of effective academic processes (Hatch, 2002). Basic qualitative inquiry is well suited for this study because the participants provided interpretations of their academic learning experiences while enrolled in a postsecondary college and in an academic setting. I examined and presented an in-depth understanding of the persistence of 12 FGS' academic learning experiences during their tenure at a community college in the southern region of the United States. I highlighted noncognitive data, personal effectiveness, and the academic tenacity of the participants' collegiate encounters at the community college level.

A phenomenological approach was not appropriate for this study because the purpose of phenomenology is to describe the lived experiences or inner essences of the cognitive processes of participants (Creswell, 2005). The objective of phenomenological

inquiries is to illustrate the common meaning or shared experiences of a concept or phenomenon, such as loneliness, grief, insomnia, love, or anger experienced by participants (Merriam, 2009). To that end, I chose not to describe the shared phenomenon of what it means to be a FGS in higher education.

Additionally, I chose not to focus on generalizable data relative to cause and effect relationships or ask specific structured questions to extract numerical data, which is consistent with quantitative research (Creswell, 2005). A quantitative or empirical study may not extricate comprehensive, rich, descriptive data or provide a deeper understanding of FGS' experiences in the community college environment. Although much data exists about FGS, the outcome of this qualitative methodology may prove valuable and provide significant findings for higher education institutions' planning, assessment, and quality enhancement plan. Furthermore, my personal and professional experiences in the community college setting also influenced the qualitative approach.

I chose to conduct the basic qualitative study (Merriam, 2009) for this inquiry because an abundance of data is mentioned in the literature about the challenges FGS face in higher education institutions (Domina, 2009; Jinkens, 2009; Mehta et al., 2011; Rood, 2009; Smith, 2008). But, it is still difficult to locate sufficient literature that supports motivations, the academic learning experiences, and educational student support services of FGS who earn an associate degree in a healthcare program from a community college and are gainfully employed. Merriam (2009) elucidated that the objective of a basic qualitative inquiry is to understand and interpret how FGS construct meaning about their academic learning experiences while enrolled at a community college, gain

knowledge and skills in a healthcare program, and achieve gainful employment. I reported patterns and themes (Patton, 2015) that emerged from the data I collected and analyzed from the questionnaire, as participants revealed their perceptions and interpretations of their academic learning experiences at the community college. The following research questions guided this basic qualitative inquiry:

1. How did FGS make decisions to graduate from a community college?
2. How do FGS describe their academic learning experiences of being first in their families to graduate from a healthcare program?
3. How do FGS describe the support they received in the community college environment in relation to their academic learning experiences?

Although various historical theories and perspectives added richness to this study, I also relied on the experiences, interpretations, perceptions, views, and responses of the 12 FGS to discover emerging themes from a questionnaire. I illustrated the stories of the participants. I used a questionnaire to ask participants open-ended questions. Each question elicited detailed responses of how each participant constructed and created meaning from their experiences while attending the community college. The questionnaire provided me an opportunity to gain a meaningful and in-depth understanding of FGS' academic learning experiences who enrolled in a community college in the southern region of the United States. Moreover, I provided a detailed understanding of 12 participants who shared interpretations of their experiences and motivations while they embarked on their educational journey, received academic advising, participated in student activities, and obtained job placement services.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I was the primary instrument to collect and analyze data. Collection of secondary data encompassed several internal statistical reports, relative to students at the community college. I serve as the director of admissions and records and have a professional relationship with the program directors at the community college. I selected this research site because of the college's mission, strategic initiatives, values, and goals. I purposefully chose the participants because they possessed similar characteristics, could best provide useful information and had a detailed understanding of their persistence as a FGS who graduated from a community college.

I submitted the purpose of this study, the data collection process, and how to protect the participants, a letter requesting permission to conduct the study (Appendix A), a letter of cooperation from the research partner (Appendix B), and a letter of informed consent to Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to obtain ethical approval before recruiting participants for the current study. Walden University's IRB approval number is 09 28 16 0067916. This study included 12 participants who are former graduates of their program of study, such as diagnostic medical sonography, medical radiologic technology, or practical nursing programs. I maintained integrity and ethical principles during this study. Each participant signed an informed consent to participate in the current study. I maintained the confidentiality of the participants' responses to avoid harm to the participants. Additionally, I did not demonstrate any deceptive practices and gave each participant the right to withdraw from this study. I did not offer any monetary gifts or incentives to participants in the current study.

I did not have power over the participants at the research site. Although I am specifically involved with the community college, the selected participants are graduates in their respective disciplines. Furthermore, I presented specific details of illustrations and descriptions of the phenomenon to include supporting references from the literature. Also, I identified beliefs and highlighted how views shaped the data collection and analysis to address any biases. Finally, I included my reflections in the current study.

Participant Selection Logic

I obtained referrals from program coordinators for diagnostic medical sonography, practical nursing, and medical radiologic technology programs. The referrals included each of the 12 participant's emails for the current study. Likewise, each participant received an invitation via email to answer the web-based questionnaire via the SurveyMonkey software tool.

The participants have similar characteristics, such as they identified as a FGS at a 2-year college, age 18 or older, enrolled in a selective admission program, and matriculated in a healthcare program. The participants are FGS who are the first in the families to attend colleges or universities or are FGS who attend colleges or universities, and their parents did not graduate from a postsecondary institution. The research questions for this study are specific to the uniqueness of the participants. The participants' responses provided rich data, which provide an in-depth understanding of the persistence of FGS' experiences at a community college.

A nonprobability sampling, commonly referred to as purposive sampling (Merriam, 2009), was appropriated for this study. I incorporated data analysis to address

qualitative issues such as discovering what occurs, implications of experiences, and the relationships connecting the events (Merriam, 2009). Researchers should select a sample to ascertain, comprehend, and gain insight into issues of vital significance to the purpose of the inquiry (Merriam, 2009). This study consisted of a purposive sampling of 12 FGS from a community college. The type of purposive sampling for this study is also homogeneous (Creswell, 2005). I identified FGS who obtained associate degrees in the healthcare field and who graduated from a community college in the southern region of the United States.

Several scholars presented their rationale for actual sample sizes. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) reported that most qualitative studies entail 30 to 60 interviews, with 15 the minimum size for qualitative research. Creswell (2005) suggested a minimum of five to 25 interviews for a qualitative study, but the researcher can continue until to interview until they reach saturation. Creswell mentioned that data saturation occurs when the researcher has identified essential themes, and no new data can contribute to the category of themes or to the information for existing themes. The inquirer makes a subjective decision that new data will not provide any different information or insights for the developing categories. The researcher should sample until a point of saturation is attained (Merriam, 2009). If the aim is to provide in-depth data, the sampling may be determined when no original material is impending from new participants. Patton (2015) indicated the minimum sample could be 12; however, as fieldwork unfolds, the researcher may add to the sample. The number of participants depends on the research purpose, the research questions, and the analysis. I began analyzing data when the first

questionnaire was completed and submitted; the data analysis continued until I determined the essential patterns and themes, and that no new information was likely to be presented by participants. I continued data analysis until I achieved data saturation. This study sample included 12 FGS. I achieved data saturation when data became redundant, and no new significant themes emerged.

The sample for the current study was a small group, consistent with homogeneous sampling. A homogeneous sampling is useful when the aim of the investigation is to understand and describe a particular group in-depth (Creswell, 2005). The purposive sampling strategy allowed me to develop an in-depth exploratory inquiry of the persistence, academic achievement, and career opportunities of 12 FGS who matriculated at the community college level. The sample encompassed 12 FGS students from a postsecondary college in the southern region of the United States. The 12 FGS were from the selective admissions healthcare programs, such as practical nursing, diagnostic medical sonography, and medical radiologic technology. These healthcare programs are perceived to be effective in providing student support services and job placement assistance for its graduates.

I chose healthcare programs for this study because of their admissions criteria. Selective admissions programs are established to ensure that students demonstrate required aptitude, motivation, and emotional intelligence to achieve desired outcomes and program or discipline results (as cited in the participatory college's catalog). The number of students accepted in selective admissions programs is usually limited. Students enrolled in selective admissions programs are required to take additional assessments for

admissions and excel in certain criteria (according to the site community college for this study). The diagnostic medical sonography, medical radiologic technology, and practical nursing program have additional similar features. Each healthcare program has high retention rates, successful licensure passage rates, and has strong job placement rates. Furthermore, these students may acquire similar experience and perceptions of persistence, academic achievement, and career choices during their educational journey.

Instrumentation

Merriam (2009) mentioned that interviews are an optimal method to gain an understanding of how individuals construct their lives and how they interpret the meaning of their worlds. In this basic qualitative inquiry, I used a questionnaire to obtain an in-depth understanding (Merriam, 2009) of a purposive sample regarding the persistence of 12 FGS' academic learning who obtained a degree in a healthcare field from a community college and became gainfully employed. A large amount of literature highlights group interviews, face-to-face interviews, and online questionnaires as data collection instruments in qualitative studies (McDermott & Roen, 2012; Stacey & Vincent, 2011; Synnot, Hill, Summers, & Taylor, 2014; Wiles, Crow, & Pain, 2011; Wilkerson, Iantaffi, Grey, Bokting, & Rosser, 2014). I chose to use an email questionnaire instead of focus groups or face-to-face interviews in my investigation for several reasons. I decided it was not feasible to conduct these types of interviews for my study because many of the participants, who graduated in 2014, lived in other counties. Also, as healthcare professionals, their employers required them to work different schedules comprised of 10-hour shifts. The participants' travel time to an interview or to

participate in a focus group would have been an inconvenience for them; therefore, I determined that it would have been impractical to schedule a focus group or a face-to-face interview with them.

As discussed in Chapter 2, FGS are defined as students whose parents did not graduate from college. My participants faced struggles and barriers while enrolled in college (discussed in Chapter 4). I decided to use an email questionnaire instead of face-to-face interviews or focus groups because the information that my participants shared was sensitive and I needed to maintain the integrity and confidentiality of their responses. The participants did not have to discuss their responses or perceptions with other participants. Additionally, other participants did not influence the participants' responses. As a researcher, I wanted my participants to feel comfortable and relaxed and to respond in detail to my questionnaire and the two email follow-up questionnaires. Also, I wanted the participants to be at ease and provide rich responses to help me understand their views, perceptions, and academic learning experiences of persistence in their healthcare program. The emailed questionnaire and the two email follow-up questionnaires provided the participants an opportunity for privacy, convenience, and reflection on their typed responses. The participants' typed responses eliminated transcribing.

Several studies used emailed interviews or online questionnaires as data collection instruments. James and Busher (2009) featured several studies that employed online interviews as data collection tools. Addrianssens and Cadman (1999) used email interviews in an asynchronous focus group to explore the promotion of an online market share-trading platform. McCoyd and Kerson (2006) utilized email interviews to capture

the experiences of women who terminated a desired pregnancy due to gynecological complications. Bampton and Cowton (2002) incorporated email to interview faculty regarding their experiences of providing instruction in management accounting in higher education. Beck (2005) employed email interviews for participants to provide their experiences on birth trauma. O'Grady and McFerran (2012) employed email interviews for participants who described how and why they used music performances in their therapy practices. The participants described the outcomes, advantages, and their experiences regarding the therapeutic sessions. According to Cisnervos-Puebla, Faux, Robert, May, and Gunter (2004), email interviews allowed the participants to answer questions in the comforts of their environment. Merriam (2009) mentioned that email interviews might have the same verbal content as one accomplished in person. Thus, email interviews and online questionnaires allowed participants an opportunity to respond to sensitive topics and reflect on their thoughts and experiences so they might provide rich responses.

Data collection for this study entailed 12 FGS' responses to a questionnaire. I emailed a link to the questionnaire to the participants who have knowledge (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) of the research problem. In the present inquiry, the purposive sampling included 12 FGS who graduated from a community college. The results were collected to ascertain patterns and emerging themes to interpret and understand the persistence of 12 FGS at community colleges (Creswell, 2005). I developed the questionnaire. I sent the questionnaire and the two email follow-up questionnaires to the participants who live in different geographical areas. Participants' responses to the questionnaire occurred

asynchronously, which is appropriate for this inquiry. The asynchronous environment of their responses to the questionnaire provided opportunities for participants to reflect on their responses and articulate their answers in writing.

Moreover, the participants had time and space to expand and develop their responses and present thoughtful, detailed answers. The asynchronous environment of the questionnaire also afforded participants opportunities to read and reread information that they have written. The participants may have reflected on their answers to provide rich responses. The transcripts were more likely accurate since the participants' responses were in writing, which also eliminated the use of a recorder. I was not able to make face-to-face contact and had to rely on the asynchronous environment to receive participants' responses from the questionnaire. This method enhanced anonymity for participants because the topic of FGS may be personal and sensitive to respondents. Hence, observation was not a form of data collection for the current inquiry.

The questionnaire was effective as a data collection tool because the participants had the opportunity to respond and submit their responses to the questionnaire via SurveyMonkey. Each participant received an email; and embedded in the email was the web link to access the web-based open-ended questionnaire via SurveyMonkey, (Appendix D).

Responses to the questionnaire via SurveyMonkey might have created a comfortable environment and ease for participants to formulate their responses. SurveyMonkey.com is compatible with all types of research designs. Honeycutt and Praetorius (2016) utilized a web-based questionnaire that incorporated the

SurveyMonkey tool. The participants, who were survivors of suicide, responded to the email interviews via SurveyMonkey. I employed the tool, which contains an encrypted Secure Socket Layer, a protocol developed for transmitting private documents or information via the Internet. This web-based, interactive, object-oriented database software application allowed me to use the questionnaire and provided easy access for participants. The questionnaire focused on each of the overarching three research questions for the current inquiry.

The questionnaire consisted of 19 open-ended questions, which the participants accessed via email with a link to SurveyMonkey. Each participant received the link, individually, to ensure the privacy of each respondent. Because I did not include the participants in a group email, it took 5 to 7 minutes to email each questionnaire. Each questionnaire should have taken approximately 80-90 minutes to complete. I asked each participant to respond and submit their answers to the questionnaire within 7-14 days. The responses from the questionnaire were in-depth and allowed me to explore the persistence, views, and perceptions of 12 FGS at a community college. I sent two email follow-up questionnaires per participant.

The first email follow-up questionnaire (Appendix E) occurred approximately 14 days after the initial questionnaire, to allow time for data analysis to begin. The primary focus of the first email follow-up questionnaire was to provide the participants and me with more options to explore additional thoughts, insights, and attitudes that may have been critical as I reflected on the participants' responses from the initial questionnaire. The second email follow-up questionnaire (Appendix F) should have taken

approximately 30 minutes to complete. Finally, the second email follow-up questionnaire occurred approximately 10 days after the first email follow-up questionnaire, which afforded opportunities for me and the participants to clarify the written responses and perform member checking (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Participants' responses to the second email follow-up questionnaire should have lasted no longer than 20 minutes. Moreover, the multiple questionnaires allowed me to establish rapport with the participants and increase data triangulation (Seidman, 2013).

According to Merriam (2009), one form of data triangulation using multiple sources of data as a means of comparing and cross-checking information collected from follow-up interviews with the same people. The multiple email follow-up questionnaires, to include follow-up and member checks, increased my ability to understand the participants' responses regarding their perceptions, accuracy of their responses, and trustworthiness of this study.

According to Patton (2015), documents provide the researcher with information regarding several facets he or she cannot observe. Documents and records illuminate things that have occurred before the start of an inquiry. Additionally, documents are valuable because of the information they present and because they stimulate avenues of inquiry, including interviewing. I collected relevant documents that included enrollment data for healthcare programs from the 2012, 2013, and 2014 academic years, retention rates and licensure reports for these healthcare programs for the 2012, 2013, and 2014 academic years. Additionally, I collected and examined additional relevant documents such as the college catalogs, and the college's safety and security reports for the same

academic years. I obtained information about each healthcare program and the admissions requirements from the program coordinators and the college's website. Data collection from these documents provided valuable information to facilitate a deeper understanding of persistence regarding 12 FGS' academic learning, student support services, academic achievement, and career opportunities. Furthermore, I addressed limitations or problems in the data collection and questions that were not answered by participants.

Data Analysis Plan

I established a questionnaire that contained a number of web-based open-ended questions to focus on research questions 1, 2, and 3 for targeted participants to generate insight regarding the persistence of academic learning of 12 FGS who graduated from a healthcare program at a community college and became gainfully employed. I organized and analyzed the participants' responses from the questionnaire. I began the data analysis process by producing multiple copies of each participant's responses, copying the responses on a flash drive, and printing paper copies. I stored the original documents in a fire-proof file cabinet in addition to saving a copy on my personal computer. As I collected, read, refined, and reexamined the initial responses to the questionnaire, the data was read carefully as each participant submitted their responses to the questionnaire (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I organized excerpts from each participant's responses into categories.

I searched for related threads and patterns among the passages within those categories to identify themes. I presented the demographics of the participants.

Additionally, I read, marked, and highlighted the participants' responses. I repeated this process so I could ascertain a word or passage that suggested a category or classification for coding (Seidman, 2013). I used manual and computer coding to analyze data. I also used NVivo, a software package, to perform mechanical tasks, such as managing, analyzing, and reporting data. The software stored, organized, coded, and facilitated searching through data (Creswell, 2005).

Additionally, I examined statistical documents, such as enrollment reports, retention rates, licensure rates, and selective admission criteria, from the three healthcare programs. These documents supplemented my study. I analyzed these data and documents for the current basic qualitative study design to gain an in-depth understanding of 12 FGS' perceptions of persistence while they attended a community college in the South. Identifying and analyzing discrepant data were essential for this basic qualitative design. I reported data that did not correspond to this inquiry. I examined the supporting and inconsistent data. The discrepant data were reported in the current study to allow the reader to formulate an opinion.

Trustworthiness

During the process of data collection and analysis, I ensured that findings and interpretations were trustworthy. I established trustworthiness by illustrating credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility suggests that the outcomes are descriptive of the respondents' perceptions. Credibility occurred with data saturation. Strategies such as triangulation, member checking, reflexivity, and peer review were also used to increase the trustworthiness of

the study (Creswell, 2005). I was able to triangulate data among various information sources to enhance the trustworthiness of the current study. I corroborated evidence from each participant, such as participants' detailed responses from the questionnaire, email follow-up questionnaires, and themes in the current research. I verified, via email, the participants' responses to ascertain whether my comprehensive interpretations were accurate. This process of member checking (Creswell, 2005) also augmented trustworthiness of the current basic qualitative study. I communicated with the respondents and verified that my interpretations of the participants' responses, such as descriptions, experiences, perceptions, and motivations, were accurate and fair. Additionally, member checking ensured that the views of participants were not misrepresented or misinterpreted.

In this study, I incorporated reflexivity, a third strategy to improve credibility and dependability. I provided a critical self-reflection of worldviews, biases, theoretical orientation, and disposition to the current inquiry. According to Merriam (2009), such a clarification allows the reader to understand better how the individual researcher might have arrived at the particular interpretation of the data. I also enlisted the assistance of a colleague to serve as a peer reviewer. I asked the colleague to review some of the data and to establish whether the results are credible based on the data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) mentioned audit trails help establish confirmability. I used the participants' verbatim responses from the questionnaire to highlight emerging themes and patterns and verified these with participants to ensure valid interpretation of FGS' perceptions. Correspondingly, I applied an audit trail to detail the data collection process and how

patterns and themes formed. I maintained a journal (Appendix H) with an in-depth account of how I conducted the investigation and analyzed the data (Merriam, 2009).

Transferability of this inquiry was limited to the background in which I conducted this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Shenton, 2004). The participants included 12 FGS who obtained a degree in a healthcare field from a community college in the southern region of the United States. The data were collected and analyzed from a questionnaire, two email follow-up questionnaires, and documents over a 6 to 8-week timeframe. I provided a detailed description of the results, illustrated in quotations from the participants' responses to the questionnaire and results from my analysis of the documents from the community college.

Ethical Procedures

This study explored and provided a multifaceted understanding of the persistence of 12 FGS' knowledge, perceptions, views, and encounters at a community college, to include reasons and context for the participants' beliefs and actions. I gained access to participants and the research site through the gatekeeper. I adhered to Walden University IRB's criteria, ethical principles, and regulations while I conducted research. I obtained a signed data use agreement letter from the president of the community college. I approached the potential participants via email invitation and asked them to read and sign an Informed Consent Form before participating in this investigation. The participants were not coerced to contribute to this study. After each participant had consented to participate in this study, they received a link to access and responded to the questionnaire. I did not reveal any identifying information about the participants in this study. I treated

the data in a confidential manner. Moreover, I informed the participants about the nature of this study. If the participants decided to withdraw their participation, they would not be penalized, and their responses would not be included in the current investigation.

Furthermore, I was the primary instrument for data collection and analyses (Merriam, 2009).

I protected the anonymity of the participants by assigning an alias to each participant in the process of analyzing and reporting their responses. Participants completed the questionnaire via SurveyMonkey. The data, which I stored on my personal computer, is password protected. The published documents and statistical documents were scanned on a CD and also stored on the personal computer, which is password protected. All data, paper and electronic (flash drive and or CD) are kept in a fireproof locked file cabinet and shredded after 5 years. I will maintain the electronic data on my password-protected personal computer and delete it after 5 years.

Summary

One step in understanding the persistence of the 12 FGS' views, perceptions, and thoughts regarding academic learning involves discovering situations that generate decisions to achieve their academic and career goals. This study is a basic qualitative study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the persistence of 12 FGS who earned a degree in a healthcare field from a community college and are gainfully employed. Data collection included a questionnaire with open-ended questions, two email follow-up questionnaires, which were completed by 12 FGS enrolled in selective admissions healthcare programs, such as practical nursing, diagnostic medical sonography, and

medical radiologic technology. I was the primary instrument to collect and analyze data. Additionally, I collected documents that included admission criteria and statistical documents, such as rates, retention rates, licensure rates, and enrollment reports for the 2012, 2013, and 2014 academic years for the three healthcare programs.

This study reflected a homogeneous purposive sampling of 12 FGS from a community college. The participants received an email; embedded in the email was the link to access the web-based open-ended questionnaire via SurveyMonkey. I organized and analyzed the data from the basic qualitative study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the persistence of 12 FGS. I used manual and computer coding to analyze data and establish emerging and interconnected themes to provide insight into a phenomenon. I ensured credibility, dependability, and transferability for this study. I adhered to IRB criteria, ethical principles, and regulations while conducting research.

Having considered the methodology of this study, in the following chapter, I provide my findings of the data collected and analyzed. I describe the setting for the current study, and participant demographical data and categories. Additionally, I identify how I collected the data, explain my systems for maintaining the data, and discuss how data analysis revealed major emerging themes. Moreover, I explain evidence of trustworthiness for this study.

Chapter 4: Results

Many FGS who enroll in a community college do so to acquire knowledge and workforce skills so that upon graduation they are better prepared for employment opportunities (Mehta et al., 2011). The number of FGS enrolled in postsecondary institutions varies from 40% to 54% in the United States (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). Despite these enrollment numbers, FGS experience numerous challenges, difficulties, and setbacks as they embark on their college education journey. This student population often struggles with their academic capabilities, and many have significant family and financial obligations during their time enrolled in higher education (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). Campus experiences, including engagement with faculty and the learning environment, also play a role in the decisions of FGS to persist until graduation. Finally, their aspirations, visions of higher education, and desire for new and better career opportunities affect this student group (Burns, 2010).

More information regarding FGS' persistence toward graduation and employment in their field of study is essential as community colleges provide support services to assist in their matriculation (Hirschy et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2011; Yeager & Walton, 2011). As I reviewed the literature, I determined there is a lack of research that addresses the experiences of FGS regarding their persistence, academic achievement, and gainful employment in specialized career fields.

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the explanations of 12 FGS who graduated from a healthcare program at a community college regarding their

persistence, academic achievement, and career opportunities. The following research questions guided the data collection and analysis:

1. How did FGS make decisions to graduate from a community college?
2. How do FGS describe their academic learning experiences of being first in their families to graduate from a healthcare program?
3. How do FGS describe the support they receive in the community college environment in relation to their academic learning experiences?

In this chapter, I present the setting and demographics of the study. Following a description of the data collection, I present the data analysis procedures that I used to determine my findings. After the evidence of trustworthiness, (i.e., credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) I discuss the results of this study by research question.

Setting

My research took place at a community college in the southern region of the United States. I chose a community college setting because of its characteristics, mission, values, and goals. The community college I selected has provided excellence in academics, technical education, and workforce development for over 50 years. The community college is a 2-year, associate degree-granting institution. The college's mission is to provide accessible educational opportunities, including credit and noncredit courses for career preparation and lifelong learning, to promote economic growth and enhance the quality of life for residents in the community. The community college used in this research ensures access to quality instruction in current and emerging fields for a

diverse population. Moreover, the college received regional accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. Finally, the college used in this study offers over 25 programs with selective admissions criteria. Three of these programs are in the healthcare field and are significant to the study: diagnostic medical sonography, medical radiologic technology, and practical nursing.

The admissions criteria for diagnostic medical sonography includes completion of all prerequisite courses with a minimum 2.5 cumulative GPA, a minimum composite score of 19 on the American College Testing assessment, verified absence of drug and alcohol use, proof of vaccinations, CPR certification, and a physical examination. The participants who studied diagnostic medical sonography met these requirements and enrolled in the diagnostic medical sonography program during the 2012, 2013, or 2014 academic years.

The selective admissions criteria for medical radiologic technology consist of completion of the medical radiologic technology program application, a minimum 2.5 cumulative GPA, completion of all prerequisite courses, verified absence of drug and alcohol use, background screening, proof of a completed American Registry of Radiologic Technologists examination, verified completion of CPR training, a physical examination, and proof of insurance. Participants met these requirements and enrolled in the medical radiologic technology program during the 2012, 2013, or 2014 academic years.

The selective admissions criteria for practical nursing or nursing education include a completed application for the nursing program, a minimum 2.5 cumulative

GPA for the last 24 hours of college credit, and ACCUPLACER assessment scores, which identified placement in English Composition I and college algebra. The ACCUPLACER is an integrated system of computer-adaptive assessments designed to evaluate students' skills in reading, writing, and mathematics (College Board, 2017). The ACCUPLACER has been used to verify student preparedness for introductory credit-bearing college courses. Completion of the Test of Essential Academic Skills (TEAS V) is another admission criteria for practical nursing. The TEAS V is a computerized, standardized, multiple choice exam for students applying to nursing school in the United States (Assessment Technologies Institute, 2016). The TEAS V is used to assess the academic ability of a participant's reading, mathematics, science, and English. Additionally, selective admissions criteria for practical nursing include the verified absence of drug and alcohol in the applicant and verification of physical and mental capabilities to function as a nurse. Participants met these requirements and enrolled in the nursing program during the 2012, 2013, or 2014 academic years.

Demographics

In this section, I discuss not only the participant selection process but also participant characteristics. The participants were selected because they could provide rich responses to my research questions. The participants' characteristics are also essential to this study because of their qualities and attributes.

Participant Selection

I gained access to the site and the participants through the administrative assistant to the president of the college via email and included a letter that requested permission to

conduct the study. The letter provided an overview of the study and asked whether the community college administrators would agree to the college serving as the research site. I obtained permission to conduct this study and received a signed letter of cooperation (Appendix B) from the college's president.

After receiving approval from Walden University's IRB, I emailed an overview of the study to each healthcare program coordinator at the community college and asked them to provide me with a list of the graduates from the diagnostic medical sonography, practical nursing, and medical radiologic technology programs. Specifically, I requested a list of graduates from the 2012, 2013, and 2014 academic years and who identified themselves as FGS on the college admission applications. The coordinators for each healthcare program at the community college provided a list meeting my criteria along with the students' email addresses. The list of graduates included 14 FGS who graduated from the diagnostic medical sonography program, 43 who graduated from the practical nursing program, and 27 who graduated from the medical radiologic technology program. I selected, in random order, 12 graduates from a total of 84 potential participants.

Once the selection of participants was complete, I individually emailed each potential participant an invitation asking them to participate in the study. The email also included an overview of the study and the consent form, which requested that the participants respond to the email with the words "I consent." After I had received an email with this confirmation from each participant, I emailed the link to SurveyMonkey for the participants to access the open-ended questionnaire. One participant indicated on

the questionnaire that she was not a FGS, making her ineligible for this study; therefore, I replaced her with another graduate.

Participant Characteristics

The 12 participants in this study were the first in their families to attend a college and graduate from a healthcare program. I selected the first member of the family to attend college as participants because these individuals have unique challenges compared to families who have members who attended college. Table 2 shows the demographic data requested in the questionnaire including age, gender, and ethnicity. I assigned pseudonyms to the participants to protect their identities and assure confidentiality.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Program of Study
Stephanie	33	Female	Caucasian	Medical Radiologic Technology
Jacqueline	26	Female	Caucasian	Diagnostic Medical Sonography
Tracie	32	Female	African American	Practical Nursing
Michelle	38	Female	African American	Medical Radiologic Technology
Miah	33	Female	African American	Medical Radiologic Technology
Mollie	55	Female	Caucasian	Medical Radiologic Technology
Tabitha	35	Female	African American	Practical Nursing
Melanie	34	Female	Caucasian	Diagnostic Medical Sonography
Heather	27	Female	Caucasian	Diagnostic Medical Sonography
Ashlyn	38	Female	African American	Practical Nursing
Kellie	22	Female	African American	Diagnostic Medical Sonography
Noah	60	Male	African American	Practical Nursing

According to the demographics and characteristics of the group, all participants are in the healthcare field and are FGS. Of the 12 participants, the ages range from 22 to 60 years, and all work in the healthcare field. Eleven participants are females, and one is male. Five of the participants are Caucasian, and seven are African American. Finally, the graduates include four diagnostic medical sonography students, four medical radiologic technology students, and four practical nursing students.

I made an observation regarding the personal characteristics and ages of the participants in this study. One participant, Kellie, who was much younger than the others, displayed the same level of persistence and determination to complete her program of study as the other participants.

Despite the age variation, these participants all attended college during the same timeframe, and they all graduated in 2014. This may be why there was similarity in the participants' response. I will elaborate on this observation in the results subsection.

Data Collection

The participants' responses to the questionnaire provided data for this basic qualitative study. I sent follow-up emails to the participants. I also collected and reviewed college documents, which contained relevant information on participants in the study.

Number of Participants

I individually emailed 12 participants, an invitation which described the study and invited him or her to participate in this research. Following their agreement to participate, I asked each participant to type the words "I consent" and email me their agreement. After receiving their consent, I emailed a link to the questionnaire via SurveyMonkey. One of

the participants indicated that she was not an FGS. I discarded her questionnaire and invited another FGS to participate in my research. The participant agreed to participate.

Location, Frequency, and Duration

During the months of November – December 2016 and January 2017, I collected the participants' responses from the emailed questionnaire. I did not use any published instrument to collect the data; I created the questionnaire for this study. To ensure credibility and dependability of the instrument, I conducted a literature review and determined that many scholars use online questionnaires as data collection instruments in qualitative studies (McDermott & Roen, 2012; Stacey & Vincent, 2011; Synnot et al., 2014; Wiles et al., 2011; Wilkerson et al., 2014). Therefore, I performed the following activities:

1. Developed a draft questionnaire because no surveys currently exist for this specific type of study.
2. Emailed the draft questionnaire to two Ph.D. colleagues so they could identify ambiguities, difficult questions, and repetitiveness.
3. Edited the draft questionnaire based on suggestions from the two colleagues I consulted.
4. Emailed the draft questionnaire to three faculty members at Walden University for input.
5. Completed revisions of the questionnaire based on Walden University's faculty feedback.

6. Emailed an invitation and the questionnaire to six classmates in my Advanced Qualitative Research Methods course to respond to the questions. I asked volunteers to complete the questionnaire if they were FGS and email their responses within 7 days upon receipt of the questionnaire.
7. Collected the responses from the three classmates who responded to the questionnaire in my Advanced Qualitative Research Methods.
8. Revised the questionnaire after feedback, modifications, review, and further consideration of credibility and dependability.
9. Finalized the questionnaire based on feedback from colleagues, cohorts, and faculty members.
10. Considered the instrument to have credibility and dependability with the specific notation that further and similar research is needed to establish the credibility and dependability of the questions better.

After finalization, I emailed the questionnaire (Appendix D), consisting of 19 open-ended questions, to the 12 selected participants. After accessing the open-ended questionnaire, each participant had time to review their answers to each question. The participants had the option to save, resume, and complete their answers to the questionnaire in intervals. Consequently, the asynchronous, time-delay nature of the online questionnaire facilitated thought and reflection for the participants.

Next, I prepared two follow-up email questionnaires. I sent the first email follow-up questionnaire (Appendix E) to participants approximately 20 days after the initial questionnaire, which allowed time for me to begin data analysis, clarify, clarification, and

ensure the accuracy of each participants' responses (Creswell, 2005). I sent the second email follow-up questionnaire (Appendix F) to the participants approximately 14 days after they received the first email follow-up questionnaire. This afforded each participant an opportunity to clarify the written responses and assisted me with further member checks (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Moreover, the initial questionnaire and the two email follow-up questionnaires allowed me to establish rapport with the participants and achieve data triangulation.

Participants submitted their responses in approximately 20 days. The emailed follow-up questionnaires were sent accordingly, depending on when the participants submitted the initial questionnaire. All 12 participants completed the questionnaire, resulting in a 100% response rate.

How the Data Were Recorded

I copied the participants' electronic responses to a single flash drive where I previously saved their informed consent documentation. Next, I input the responses into NVivo to manage, analyze, code, and report the data. In addition, I printed copies of each participant's responses so I could begin manual coding. Afterward, I deleted the responses from SurveyMonkey and deleted the informed consents from the computer server.

Other Data Collected

I collected documents from the three healthcare programs (diagnostic medical sonography, medical radiologic technology, and practical nursing) at the community college. These documents included enrollment reports, admissions criteria, retention

rates, licensure rates, as well as safety and security reports from the 2012, 2013, and 2014 academic years. College documents supplemented this study and provided insight into the students' persistence. The documents were scanned onto a compact disc and stored on my password-protected personal computer. I kept the paper and electronic data in a fireproof locked file cabinet.

Variations in Data

With the exception of having to drop one of the participants, I did not vary in the plan outlined in Chapter 3 regarding data collection.

Unusual Circumstance

I emailed an invitation to a potential participant on the list provided to me by the program coordinators. The participant consented to participate in my study. She completed the entire questionnaire and indicated that she was not a FGS student. After this discovery, I discarded her information; therefore, she is not included in the 12 participants studied.

Data Analysis

As I began my data analysis, I used bracketing to set aside personal experiences to form a clear or different perspective, to prevent bias as recommended by Creswell (2005). Also, as suggested by Patton (2015), I attempted to move away from my personal experiences to interpret and analyze each participant's responses objectively. Since the participants' responses were rich, I used an inductive approach for the data analysis, including open coding and then axial coding of the data. Additionally, I entered each participant's responses into the NVivo, a qualitative analysis software package, to

perform mechanical tasks such as manage, analyze and report data. The software analyzed stored, organized, coded, and facilitated searching through data (Creswell, 2005). Next, I examined supplemental college documents because they complemented the data. Below is a discussion of my coding process, as well as the themes that emerged, followed by a discussion of discrepant cases, and as my analysis of college documents.

Coding

Reviewing the participant's responses to the questionnaire, I organized and analyzed each, making notations and comments in the margins of the printed copies and highlighting relevant words and phrases. Using the open coding, I began the data analysis process, identifying the participants' perceptions and interpretations regarding their persistence in a healthcare program at the community college. I marked passages that were significant to the study or that the participant identified as important and assigned codes to excerpts from each participant's response. I searched for related codes and established categories and themes among the responses, then grouped the open codes, which Patton (2015) described as axial coding, to form categories or themes. Finally, I marked the categories and determined how they were connected. I repeated the process if a word or passage helped identify themes (Seidman, 2013).

The responses to this questionnaire helped me triangulate the data and perform member checks, which increased the trustworthiness of this study. First, I highlighted sections of the questionnaire that needed clarification for accuracy. For example, I identified codes such as a word or short phrases from each participant's responses. Second, I grouped the codes to form categories. Third, I identified each category to

develop themes or concepts (Appendix G). I sent the first email follow-up questionnaire to each participant because I determined their responses required additional explanations or clarifications.

As themes emerged, I reviewed initial notes written in the margins and bracketed any thoughts, assumptions, and preconceptions I had about FGS. Each participant's response was transferred into NVivo to manage, analyze, and report the data. The use of NVivo demonstrated links and connections among different aspects of the participants' responses. Several themes emerged as I repeated the process of advancing inductively from coded units to larger representations, including categories and themes.

Themes

As recommended by Merriam (2009), I examined supplemental documents received from the college (i.e., enrollment reports, licensure reports, retention rates, and safety and security reports). Things that I considered in my analysis of the documents included their authenticity and accuracy, reliability, as well as author, place and date of publication, purpose, and context.

Although theory and the literature formed the basis for this study, I relied on the responses of the 12 FGS to discover emerging themes from the questionnaire and its 19 open-ended questions (Appendix D). I used open and axial coding of the data to identify emerging themes. From the initial questionnaire and subsequent email follow-up questionnaires, significant themes emerged that helped provide an in-depth understanding of the participants' perceptions.

Open and axial coding revealed eight themes which were synonymous to the participants' views and perceptions of their decisions to graduate and their academic learning experiences. The key themes illustrated the support that the participants received in relation to their academic learning environment. The themes included family support, mastering a skill, challenges and academic successes, inspiration, vocational interest, self-awareness, faculty and student engagement, and environmental support. Detailed descriptions of these themes follow.

The participants were very descriptive in their responses regarding how they made decisions to graduate. While each of the 12 FGS is unique, their responses were similar and formed the emerging themes. The data analysis revealed family support, mastering a skill, and challenges and academic successes were essential themes that influenced the participants' choices to complete college.

Family support. Family support was the first theme to emerge from the data analysis and included times when parents and friends encouraged the students to apply to college, assisted with childcare, or purchased food when they lacked funds. Family support emerged as a theme because each participant consistently described the emotional and financial support they received from family and friends. One hundred percent of the participants indicated that they made their decisions to graduate due to the support they received from family and friends. Stephanie stated, "My parents never let me quit once I had started something. [I] didn't want to let my husband down either. He was my financial support." Another participant, Michelle, explained, "My husband and kids helped with chores. My parents helped by picking up or dropping off kids from

school when I had to be to clinic early or late. Everyone pitching in eliminated stress.” Jacqueline noted, “I no longer worked and went to school full-time. I had great support and encouragement during my time at College.” The influence and support of family members affected their decisions to graduate from a community college. Emotional involvement and provisions from family members and friends contributed to the 12 FGS’ persistence and decision to graduate from a healthcare program.

Mastering a skill. The second theme to emerge from the data analysis was mastering a skill. This included observations and actions by the students as to how to be proficient in their chosen healthcare field and demonstrations of adeptness with an instructor as a guide. Eighty-three percent of the participants stated that gaining knowledge and skills in the healthcare field motivated them to earn their degrees or certificates. One participant conveyed, “I had an interest in nursing and sonography and had to make a final decision. I had a family member who let me job shadow sonography and that was my final choice.” The remaining 17% of the participants indicated that they were motivated to obtain a good job with good pay. Tabitha reflected this in her response: “In order to find a good job with great pay, you have to have a college degree. I needed a good job. Practical Nursing was it. I enrolled in college to get a great job with benefits.” The participants explained that they made decisions to graduate from a community college by knowing that mastering a skill to acquire work in a healthcare profession would provide them with good benefits for their families and improve their economic status.

The participants willingly demonstrated their dedication and commitment to gain

a skill in three ways: (a) they acknowledged the requirements needed to gain knowledge and skills in the healthcare field; (b) they observed presentations, demonstrations, and instruction on methods and procedures in the healthcare setting; and (c) they performed their required tasks on simulators and demonstrated that they were academically prepared to complete the curriculum, with the approval of their faculty. The participants indicated that their cognitive, academic ability, interests, and intrinsic desires were instrumental in their decision to work in a demanding field and therefore affected their decision to graduate with a healthcare degree. The participants also stated they persisted because they wanted to gain skills in a challenging field with good benefits, become independent, and provide for their families. Developing competence supported the participants' desire to persist in college.

Challenges and academic successes. The third theme to emerge from the data analysis were challenges and academic success. Challenges are those barriers that include lack of finances for college, the responsibilities of being a single parent, unreliable transportation, illness, failure to adjust to the rigor of academic courses, or difficulty with acclimating to the college environment. Tracie stated, "I was a single mother with two daughters. Therefore, I had [to] help them with homework, projects, attend PTA meeting [*sic*] and still complete my school work. I could not work full-time and I had very little finances." Noah faced challenges with transportation: "I had to take public transportation to school. The buses did not run late in my neighborhood. In the fall and winter months I walked in the dark or rain to get to class and clinical site." Thirty-three percent of the participants stated that the experience of overcoming challenges helped them make their

decisions to meet the requirements of the healthcare program and graduate from a community college.

Remarkably, one participant's challenges did not affect her academic successes, reflected in her statement. For example, Tabitha stated, "I made Dean's List. I obtained a job at a clinical site. I had transportation problems. When my son was sick while I was at school I had to call a family member picked [*sic*] up my child." Ninety-nine percent of the participants discussed their experiences of academic successes. Forty-one percent of the participants reported that they earned Dean's List and President's List awards. One participant served as the college ambassador; another participant earned a place in the National Honor Society. Academic successes are positive educational achievements such as earning a 3.5 to 4.0 cumulative GPA and recognition for academic excellence in student organizations. I discovered that the participants encountered many challenges, life experiences, and difficulties as they pursued their degrees or certificates in a healthcare program. Their joy, excitement, and desire motivated them to persist and graduate from the community college, regardless of obstacles.

The data analysis revealed additional themes. The participants were amazingly expressive in disclosing their academic learning experiences. Upon rereading the participants' responses, however, I learned that inspiration, vocational interest, and self-awareness were also key themes revealed during the data analysis.

Inspiration. The fourth theme to emerge from the data analysis involved inspiration. Ninety-nine percent of the participants mentioned they felt a sense of pride, excitement, joy, and empowerment regarding their academic learning. The participants

explained their beliefs and feelings that prompted them to achieve an educational goal to help heal and comfort individuals who are ill. All 12 of the participants conveyed that they could achieve their goals, wanted to make a better life for their families, and expressed a desire for self-sufficiency. The FGS in this study expressed feelings of elation, happiness, and excitement at this achievement. Miah explained, “I feel excited knowing that even though the education journey was not easy, I was able to overcome obstacles that were set before me.” Another participant, Kellie, said, “It is a really good feeling. I made my family proud and proved to myself that I can accomplish my goal, no matter how many times I got frustrated. It was all well worth it.” These participants expressed gratification that their families were proud of them.

Each participant gained inspiration through their academic learning experiences of being first in their families to graduate from a healthcare program, by their desire improve the lives of their families, and the belief they could achieve their goals. The participants were cognitively stimulated to complete a task and motivated because of their interests and purpose for accomplishing their objectives. For example, Stephanie stated, “I love helping people heal. I learned hands-on skills at an internship at health clinics. I learned from great instructors. I participated in labs [and] gained hands-on skills using CPR manikins.” Inspiration was important to the academic learning experiences of the participants and helped keep them focused on academic learning in their healthcare programs.

Vocational interest. The fifth theme to emerge from the data was the participants’ vocational interest in their fields of study: practical nursing, diagnostic

medical sonography, and medical radiologic technology. Vocational interest are those tasks that FGS find appealing and useful and led them to enroll in a postsecondary institution to increase their knowledge and skill levels. One hundred percent of the participants discussed they wanted a job that was secure.

Each participant discussed their motivation for selecting a healthcare program. Stephanie reflected, “I wanted a job that was secure with insurance. Helping sick people made me feel good. I knew the radiology department at the hospitals were understaffed. I knew with training I could get a job anywhere.” The participants expressed that learning how to take care of sick people and fascination with the human body were appealing and useful, which led them to increase their knowledge and skill levels in either practical nursing, diagnostic medical sonography, or medical radiologic technology. Miah stated, “I knew from a young age that I would be involved in a healthcare field. I was amazed about the many aspects of the body and how different medications alter or correct function of various systems of the body.” Likewise, Melanie indicated, “I have always been interested in healthcare. I started researching the various areas in healthcare, I chose ultrasound technology.” The participants revealed that they based their vocational interest on circumstances that occurred in their lives, internal or external factors, and their social environment. Tabitha said this in her statement: “Since high school I knew the nursing field would always need a healthcare professional because people were always becoming sick, experiencing childbirth, and need medical care. There is a high demand for nurses.” Their thoughts and attitudes reflected their vocational interest as they described their

academic learning experiences. Vocational interests were instrumental in the participants' academic learning experiences.

Self-awareness. Self-awareness, the sixth theme to emerge from the data analysis, was a significant factor in the 12 FGS' academic learning experiences while enrolled in community college. Amazingly, the participants understood their behaviors, motivations, and characteristics during their academic learning experiences of being first in their families to graduate from a community college. Stephanie said, "I needed to complete the process and deal with personalities during clinical setting. So I stayed focused and did not get too overwhelmed. It was kind of bitter sweet since none of my siblings didn't experience the feeling." Eighty-three percent of the participants explained their self-awareness affected their decision to not participate in extracurricular activities (Student Government Association or National Society of Leadership and Success) due to demands of class schedules, studying, and meeting coursework deadlines. Sixteen percent of the participants participated in extracurricular activities. All of the participants indicated they wanted to learn how to provide for the sick and elderly. Fifty percent of the participants mentioned they needed to work while in school and to support their families as well as obtain on-the-job training with pay during their academic learning experiences.

Self-efficacy and self-esteem evolved from these participants' ability to discover the self through life experiences before and during their enrollment at the community college. This awareness reverberated with three participants. For example, one participant said she felt inadequate while sitting in the classroom amongst her peers. Another

participant felt like dropping out because she had difficulty grasping radiology concepts. Amidst barriers and feelings of inadequacy, the participants adjusted to the academic learning requirements and did not withdraw from college.

Finally, in using open coding and axial coding, I also found that faculty and student engagement and environmental support were important themes that were revealed from the data analysis. Interaction with faculty and provisions for a safe and student-centered learning environment were important to the students. I discuss faculty and student engagement and environmental support below.

Faculty and student engagement. The seventh theme to emerge from the data analysis was faculty and student engagement, which involved academic relationships between FGS and instructors where faculty provided encouragement, assistance, and support. All 12 of the participants described faculty and student engagement as the support they received in the community college environment in relation to their academic learning experiences. The participants explained how faculty interacted, supported, and encouraged them academically in their efforts to complete their educational goals. This support resonated in one participant's response. Miah said, "Faculty had open door policy and [were] always willing to help. Every tool for success was at our fingertips. We always [had] individual sessions with instructors. My instructor informed me of areas of concern." Each participant received extensive academic advising within their healthcare program.

The participants were required to complete internships in the hospitals, clinics, and nursing homes as part of their academic learning experiences. Engagement between

faculty and the participants was essential for each FGS and contributed to their persistence to graduation. For example, Jacqueline noted, “I feel they did their best on teaching, they provided any assistance we needed. I think the curriculum was challenging, we learned the tools needed for sonography. My instructor encouraged me to ask her for help when I needed assistance.” The participants were able to progress in the academic learning process because they felt comfortable with communicating any needs and concerns to their instructors or advisors. Michelle said, “Teachers were well experienced and very knowledgeable. They provided additional learning material and equipment that I would use in the healthcare setting. My teachers discussed my curriculum with me so I would graduate on time.” Faculty and student interaction encouraged productive communication regarding participants’ coursework and persistence to graduation.

One-hundred percent of the participants noted that they enjoyed the hands-on experience in the healthcare facilities. All of the participants indicated they experienced advising, communication, support, or guidance from their instructors. Each respondent described their views and perceptions of communication with faculty while enrolled in the community college.

Environmental Support. The participants described their views and perceptions regarding environmental support, the eighth theme to emerge from the data analysis. The participants explained the resources and services provided by the college and the sense of safety in the community college environment in relation to the 12 FGS academic learning experiences. Sixty-six percent of the participants mentioned that the registration process and financial aid services were convenient, easy, and friendly. For example, Noah said, “I

got good advice when applying for scholarships or grants. The financial aid staff provided a step-by-step process on how to apply for financial aid. The registration process was always smooth. I did not wait in long lines.” Another participant, Ashlyn, reiterated, “Registration was pretty easy for me. I was able to register and get the schedule that I needed. The staff was friendly and very helpful. Student Support Services were recommended by advisors and instructors.” Environmental support, including support services such as tutoring, study skills, financial counseling, appropriate registration, and library services, were necessary for the participants while they embarked on the academic learning process.

Thirty-three percent of the participants stated they experienced challenges such as late filing, ineligibility for federal aid, and selection for verification regarding their financial aid. Fifty percent of the participants explained that they used tutoring services provided by student support services and visited the college’s library to complete course assignments. Although 75% of the participants indicated they felt safe while at the college, 25% discussed instances of college vandalism. Kellie mentioned occurrences of these damages: “I felt that security and safety could be of greater importance to the school. We encountered break-ins and stolen school property. Installing security cameras and proper locks on windows and doors would be a good suggestion.” The 12 FGS explained that the environmental support they received was foundational for their academic learning and perseverance while enrolled in the community college. Additionally, the participants described their thoughts concerning their academic achievements and how they felt about the support they received in the community college

environment in relation to their academic learning experiences.

Discrepant Cases

There were no elements of the data that did not support or contradict themes that emerged from the data analysis. None of the participants indicated that they wanted to withdraw from college, give up, or quit. In addition, no participant conveyed that they wanted to change their academic plan from the healthcare field to another discipline.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In Chapter 3, I discussed trustworthiness for qualitative research in relation to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In this section, I describe the implementation of strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of my research.

Credibility

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility indicates that the outcomes are descriptive of the respondents' perceptions. To ensure credibility, I used strategies such as triangulation, member checking, and peer review. My methods triangulation involved using multiple sources of data to compare and cross-check the participants' responses. For example, I emailed two follow-up questionnaires, at different times, within a 2-month period to participants. Because FGS are a unique group, I ensured that my data analysis was accurate by using member-checking. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility suggests that the outcomes are descriptive of the respondents' perceptions. Credibility for this investigation occurred with data saturation (Creswell, 2005). I achieved data saturation when no new information surfaced, and no new significant themes emerged. Peer review was also significant to the credibility of my research;

therefore, I used the strategy of a peer reviewer by allowing one of my colleagues with a doctoral degree to examine my study's findings for credibility.

Transferability

Merriam (2009) suggested that transferability is the degree to which the results of a study can be used in other situations. The strategies I used, such as providing a descriptive, detailed presentation of the setting, participants, and findings along with sufficient quotes from the participants and data from the documents, demonstrate transferability. I gave careful attention to selecting the study sample. I used a purposeful sample of FGS. I selected and described the FGS students who graduated from a healthcare program at a community college. I selected four FGS from diagnostic medical sonography, four from FGS medical radiologic technology, and four FGS from the practical nursing program.

Dependability

I used dependability strategies to make certain that my findings are consistent and could be replicated. Merriam (2009) also mentioned that researchers could use dependability strategies in basic qualitative research. The strategies include peer reviewers, triangulation, and an audit trail. As I have previously discussed, I incorporated triangulation strategy. I verified the participants' detailed responses from the questionnaire, themes in the participants' responses from the questionnaire, two email follow-up questionnaires, and supplemental documents. I verified all responses with the participants to ascertain the accuracy of my comprehensive interpretations. This process of member checks (Creswell, 2005) also augmented trustworthiness of the basic

qualitative study. Additionally, member checks ensured that the views of participants were not misrepresented or misinterpreted. I also enlisted the assistance my colleague to serve as a peer reviewer. I asked my colleague to review part of the data and to establish whether the results were trustworthy. Lincoln and Guba (1985) posited that dependability could occur through an audit trail. I used participants' verbatim responses from their emailed questionnaires to highlight themes and verified with the participants the accuracy of their perceptions.

Confirmability

I reflected critically on myself as a researcher during this study. I provided a critical self-reflection of worldviews, biases, theoretical orientation, and disposition to the inquiry. According to Merriam (2009), such a clarification allows a reader to understand better how the individual researcher might arrive at a particular interpretation of the data. I used the strategy of reflexivity when I expounded on my perception about this study and as I explained my assumptions. Furthermore, I maintained a journal (Appendix H) with an account of how I conducted the investigation and how the data was analyzed.

Results

The findings of this study center on the experiences of 12 FGS who graduated from a community college with a degree or certificate in a healthcare field. The graduates' responses to the initial questionnaire, the two follow-up questionnaires, and my review of supporting documents obtained from the community college where the study took place, provided emerging themes. Three research questions guided this study.

Research Question 1

How did FGS make decisions to graduate from a community college? Participants made decisions to graduate in at least three ways: (a) they relied on the support received from family and friends, which included encouragement, as well as emotional, psychological, and financial support; (b) they mastered a skill, which propelled them toward completing their degree; and (c) they were proud of their ability to overcome the challenges they faced, thus giving them the determination to persist toward graduation.

As far as family and friends are concerned, FGS described their confidence in talking with family members about their educational goals and informed their families of the amount of time and dedication required to complete a degree in a healthcare program. Here is how Jacqueline described it: “My family and friends have always been supportive of my schooling decisions. I had great support and encouragement during my time at College.” Almost all participants echoed this type of response. Another example of how family support was important to participants’ determination to graduate is reflected in a comment from Michelle: “I had great family support from my husband, kids, and parents. Everyone pitching in really helped my college experience go smooth and eliminated a lot of stress.” Participants made decisions to graduate by depending on emotional support and encouragement from family and friends.

Participants decided to graduate after they realized that they wanted to (and could, indeed,) master a skill in the healthcare field. Some reasons why they chose this field included wanting to care for the sick and elderly, the high demand for skilled workers in the healthcare field, the desire to obtain employment with good benefits, and a wish to

improve the lives of their families, as reflected in these verbatim comments. Tracie stated, “I watched my mother have a massive heart attack before my eyes. I felt helpless. I wanted to teach others about preventing cardiac problems and save lives. I knew that failing was not an option.” Ashlyn explained her motivation to master a skill:

Without an education, I would continue to struggle. Working low paying jobs was not making ends meet. I decided to go to school because I would be able to receive a certificate or an associate degree in a healthcare program.

Finally, Mollie noted, “I needed to learn a skill to improve my financial stability.”

Participants realized that mastering a skill would allow them financial stability as well as help them to provide for ill family members.

With the support from family and friends and the confidence in having mastered a skill, participants found themselves in a better position to press through the challenges they faced and persist toward graduation. One participant described the relief she felt after overcoming an educational, financial obligation. Mollie explained, “I had to pay out of pocket for one semester of classes. I was almost forced to quit because I did not have funds to pay tuition. I talked to the College President, he awarded me a president’s scholarship.” Although the participants faced financial challenges, they did not withdraw or drop out of college.

Without the support of family and friends, the confidence in having mastered a skill, and the perseverance to overcome challenges, it is possible that the participants in this study would not have made the decision to persist toward graduation. The influence and support of family members affected their decisions to graduate from a community

college. Emotional involvement and provisions from family members and friends contributed to the 12 FGS' persistence to complete a healthcare program at a community college. The participants' cognitive abilities and desire to transform their lives by mastering a skill motivated them to graduate with a degree or certificate in a healthcare field. The participants demonstrated that they were passionate about their academic achievements; they spent hours in the classroom, libraries, and laboratories as well as engaged in the college's organizations. The participants commuted from home and learned how to balance the demands of coursework with their family commitments. Finally, the 12 FGS in this study made their decisions to graduate by achieving academic and intellectual competence.

Research Question 2

How do FGS describe their academic learning experiences of being first in their families to graduate from a healthcare program? Participants often used emotionally charged words and phrases to describe their experiences of being the first to graduate from college. For example, when asked to describe how they felt about their academic learning experiences, Michelle said, "I feel empowered to be a first-generation college student. It gives my children something to look up to. It sets an example that hard work pays off." Jacqueline stated, "Neither of my parents graduated from college. I was the first to graduate which was a huge motivator. My parents instilled in my head the importance of education. Not going to college was never an option for me." These are just two of the responses that exuded the pride the participants felt in being an FGS. Similar answers full of pride and accomplishment were seen when participants described

how they felt about being a FGS. Heather stated, “I am proud of being a first-generation college student who graduated with a degree. College opened many doors for me and has allowed me to meet people who, otherwise, I never would have encountered.” Some participants used anecdotes to describe their experiences. For example, Ashlyn said, “As a little girl I wanted to help people. I drew a picture of what I wanted to be. I drew a hat with [a] Red Cross on it. Nurses wore hats. I knew the healthcare field was my destiny.” The experiences described by participants all reflected a sense of inspiration and awe, as well as the awareness that knew they had what it takes to be a FGS.

The participants were inspired by their instructors and peers. Learning new skills in healthcare and knowing new employment opportunities were available to them inspired the participants throughout their academic learning experiences. Experiences with sick family members, an interest in human anatomy and physiology, as well as their aspirations and motivations for fulfilling careers and postsecondary education opportunities, inspired the participants to pursue and persist with their education. They were aware of their personal circumstances including a lack of higher education, little or no funds to pay for college, unreliable child care, the additional responsibilities of being a single parent, the need to provide for their families, and the desire to give back to their communities.

Research Question 3

How do FGS describe the support they receive in the community college environment in relation to their academic learning experiences? Although participants’ descriptions of the support they received in the academic environment were mixed, the

majority of the 12 FGS' remarks were positive. For example, similar to the results reported in research question 1 regarding family and friends, participants described the support they received from faculty, advisors, instructors, student services, and classmates. One participant, Ashlyn, said, "My faculty supported me emotionally and spiritually. I needed their support in the program. My teachers asked me about my goals. They suggested that I keep a journal so I could reflect on my progress in the program." Academic advisors also played an important role in what participants perceived as strong support. Mollie explained, "Instructors helped me to stay motivated and on top of my studies. They were involved in our learning every step of the way. They informed us about the real-world in healthcare. They were instrumental in helping us locate employment." I received similar responses when I asked participants to describe the support they received from ancillary services, such as the registrar, financial aid counselors, and student support services. On only one occasion, a participant reported a negative experience. Melanie complained, "Unfortunately financial aid and I had tons of problems. It seemed that every semester it was a disaster to get registered and stay registered. I did not use student support services. But, I did used [*sic*] the campus library." Environmental support was foundational for the participants' perseverance at the community college.

It was evident to me from the participant responses that the support they received from various members and departments of the college played an integral part in their decision to graduate. The faculty persuaded the participants to overcome their challenges and struggles and not allow these to prevent their academic achievement. The students

indicated that administrators provided a safe, friendly, and student-centered environment that promoted learning. Finally, the participants developed familiarity with the layout of the college so they could navigate the campus and locate administrators to receive academic and support services.

Other Results

Several studies (Creswell, 2005; Meriam, 2009; Patton, 2015) recommended that documents are valuable, illustrate descriptive information, are ready for analysis, and are useful in providing support to complement a study. I examined four documents, enrollment reports, licensure reports, retention rates, and safety and security reports in this study, as described below.

Enrollment reports. The enrollment reports indicated that 84 students registered in a healthcare program and graduated. The enrollment reports tracked data from applicant status to student status and provided information for medical radiologic technology, diagnostic medical sonography, and practical nursing programs. The enrollment reports showed that 43 of the FGS were African Americans and 41 were Caucasians. The number of students who enrolled in and graduated in from healthcare programs during the 2012, 2013, and 2014 academic years included 12 males and 72 females.

The documents are important to this study because they included enrollment information on the 12 FGS who participated in this study. These reports showed that the participants met the enrollment requirements for their healthcare programs. The documents are part of the college's institutional effectiveness reports and are created

annually and strengthen this study through data triangulation. The healthcare program had an estimated program length of 18-24 months. Fifty-eight percent of the participants indicated that they wanted to gain a skill that did not take 4 years to complete. The participants expressed that they chose to enroll in a community college because they had an opportunity to complete a degree in 2 years.

Licensure reports. My review of the licensure reports revealed that a total of 84 students passed their licensure exams during the 2012, 2013, and 2014 academic years. Twelve of these students were participants in my study. The purpose of the licensure rates reports is to illustrate that the healthcare programs' graduates are well-prepared to meet the demands placed on medical radiologic technologists, diagnostic medical sonographers, and practical nurses. Additionally, the licensure reports revealed that the graduates were capable of performing critical thinking skills, demonstrating academic ability and technical skills across a variety of inpatient and outpatient settings while working in close teamwork with a qualified physician. The participants established that they possessed the academic and technical knowledge required to earn certificates or degrees in their program of study. The licensure reports showed that the participants passed their licensure exams during their first attempt.

Retention rates. The retention rate reports also complement my study. The retention rate reports during the 2012, 2013, and 2014 academic years from the community college described that the healthcare programs retained 100% of its students. Retention rates are determined by evaluating the cohort of students who enrolled for the fall semester of 2012 and continued their enrollment for the fall semester 2013, or by

reviewing the cohort of students who enrolled for the fall semester 2013 and continued enrollment for the fall semester 2014, and so on. The purpose of the retention rate reports at the community college is to track measures such as retention, graduation, monitor the college's performance, and identify and establish strategic goals for improvement. All 12 of the participants in my study met retention criteria.

Safety and security. I validated participants' responses concerning their physical well-being while on campus with the college's safety and security reports. These reports confirmed that there were minimal incidents of thefts, break-ins, and vandalism. Physical safety and feeling secure in the college environment were important to the participants' academic learning experience. The community college environment was safe and conducive to academic learning. The reports also provided information on the college's alert notification system, which notifies the college's community of any emergency situations.

Summary

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand the persistence of 12 FGS who graduated from a healthcare program at a community college. This homogenous sample of participants provided their perceptions, views, thoughts, and feelings regarding their persistence in a healthcare program. From the participants' responses, a better understanding of the persistence, perceptions, experiences, the importance of academic support structures, and motivations of these 12 FGS emerged. Based on the research questions that guided this study, I developed an in-depth questionnaire that explored the persistence, academic achievement, and career

opportunity experiences of 12 FGS who matriculated in a healthcare program at a community college. College documents including enrollment, licensure, and retention reports supplemented this study.

Eight themes emerged from the participants' responses to the initial and follow-up questionnaires. These include family support, mastering a skill, challenges and academic successes, inspiration, vocational interest, self-awareness, faculty and student engagement, and environmental support. These themes related specifically to the three research questions. The themes of family support, mastering a skill, and challenges and academic successes assisted in answering the first research question of how FGS make decisions to graduate from a community college. The themes of inspiration, vocational interest, and self-awareness relate to research question 2 concerning how FGS describe their academic learning experiences. The themes of faculty and student engagement and environmental support assisted in answering research question 3 regarding how FGS describe the support they receive in the community college environment in relation to their academic learning experiences.

The respondents pursued their program of study because of the high demand for skilled workers in the healthcare field, a desire to help others, the joy of taking care of others, and a sense of purpose.

In Chapter 5, I provide an interpretation of the findings of this study. I explain any limitations to the trustworthiness and recommendations for further research. I discuss the potential opportunities for positive social change that may arise from the findings of this

study and recommendations for educational practice to assist FGS in their persistence to graduation at a community college.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

FGS are a unique population of students in that they are often academically unprepared for college, have low incomes, and need personal and academic support (Jehangir, 2010a). FGS enroll in community colleges where they are known to struggle with their educational goals and aspirations and lack the ability to navigate the college environment (Davis, 2010). Because of these observations, FGS have been studied extensively. Yet, there is more to be learned from this population of students. The purpose of my study was to tap into the experiences of FGS in a specific discipline—namely, healthcare. I used a basic qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of FGS' persistence, academic learning experiences, and academic environmental support. This study is needed because it focuses on the participants' interpretations of their experiences as they completed their associate degrees or certificates. Besides identifying many of the challenges and barriers faced by FGS, this study adds to the body of literature that supports the persistence of FGS who graduated from a healthcare program at a community college and are gainfully employed. Three research questions guided this qualitative study.

1. How did FGS make decisions to graduate from a community college?
2. How do FGS describe their academic learning experiences of being first in their families to graduate from a healthcare program?
3. How do FGS describe the support they receive in the community college environment in relation to their academic learning experiences?

The key findings from this study include:

- Research Question 1: Students made their decisions to graduate by relying on support from family and friends, mastering a skill to complete their degrees, and overcoming challenges.
- Research Question 2: Students described their academic learning experiences as feeling empowered and inspired, they desired to achieve knowledge in their vocation, and they developed an awareness of their cognitive abilities.
- Research Question 3: FGS describe the academic support they received from faculty and college support services as important to their academic learning experiences.

In this Chapter, I present an interpretation of the findings of this study in relation to the literature review and the conceptual framework. Additionally, I describe the limitations of the study and provide recommendations for further research. Finally, I discuss implications for positive social change.

Interpretation of the Findings

I interpreted the findings within the context of confirmation, disconfirmation, and adding to the body of knowledge concerning the persistence 12 FGS who completed their degree or certificate in a healthcare program at a community college. My interpretation of the findings encompasses not only the literature but also the theoretical framework on which I based this study.

Findings and the Literature

Findings center on aspects identified in the literature that connects to the participants' decisions to persist in college. I discuss the themes of family support,

mastering a skill, overcoming challenges (Research Question 1) inspiration, vocational interest, self-awareness (Research Question 2), and faculty and student engagement, and environmental support (Research Question 3). Details on these themes were presented in Chapter 4. Below is a discussion of what my study confirmed, disconfirmed, and added to the literature.

Confirmed. When asked to describe how they made the decision to graduate (Research Question 1), participants' responses revolved around the themes of family support, mastering a skill, overcoming challenges, and achieving successes. For example, participants mentioned that friends and family supported them by relieving some of their financial burdens and providing the reliability and emotional fortitude they needed to pursue their degrees in healthcare. Mastering a skill also resonated in the participants' responses. The participants explained that they wanted to gain skills and develop competence in a technical field with good benefits, become independent, and provide for their families.

Likewise, participants described the challenges that they overcame as well as their academic successes. Challenges included things like transportation, childcare, emotional barriers, and financial problems. Successes included being on the Dean's List and in the National Society of Leadership and Success, to name a few.

My study confirmed the literature in all three of these areas: family support, mastering a skill, and challenges and academic successes. As far as family support is concerned, Bryan and Simmons (2009) asserted that the support of immediate and extended family increased retention and persistence of Appalachian FGS. The

Appalachian FGS reported feelings of being a different person at home than at school; their collegiate experience encouraged their behavior to achieve academically. Likewise, Winkle-Wagner (2015) claimed that family emotional support contributed to African American women's ambition toward educational accomplishment and college success.

My study also confirmed the reports in the literature regarding mastering a skill. Cross (1981) stated that many FGS need a foundation of factual knowledge—an understanding of facts and ideas in the context of a conceptual framework and organizational skills. Purswell et al. (2009) asserted that study skills and the completion of coursework are critical in determining FGS' and continuing-generation students' specific academic achievement behaviors. Many FGS reenter postsecondary education institutions to gain skills and knowledge after being displaced from their previous employment (Ghilani, 2008). Russo-Gleicher (2013) noted that FGS' psychological readiness and demonstration of technological skills are factors that promote FGS' continuance to persist in college. Lastly, in terms of overcoming challenges and achieving academic successes, my study also confirmed the literature. Mamiseishvili (2010) affirmed that FGS face challenges related to their family and employment circumstances during their educational journey at community colleges. Many previous studies confirmed the presence of challenges that FGS face. These include studies by Fike and Fike, (2008), Fontana et al., (2005), Nomi, (2005), Owens, (2010), and Pike et al., (2014). Akin (2010) asserted that college students are unique in their academic achievement behavior because of their emotional, motivational, and cognitive levels. Consequently, my study confirmed the literature that demonstrated FGS relied on support

from family and friends, mastered a skill to complete their degrees, and overcame challenges while enrolled in a postsecondary institution.

Two additional themes that emerged in my study also confirmed the findings in the literature. These include faculty and student engagement and environmental support. Faculty and student engagement were important in my study as participants described how instructors not only provided these students with access to course content and tools to enhance critical thinking skills about the subject studied, but they also served as mentors and resources as the participants completed their degrees and began their careers. Instructors were vital to the participants' college and career success. This engagement with faculty members helped the participants to navigate their academic learning and persist in college. Similarly, environmental support was an important finding in my study. Participants reported that academic advising, efficiency in the registration process, financial aid services, and the Student Support Service Program (a federally funded TRIO Program) helped them navigate the enrollment and academic learning environment and achieve persistence.

The results of other studies ran parallel to my findings in these two areas. Regarding faculty and student engagement, Knowles et al. (2005) posited that student engagement with faculty occurs when students develop feelings about their peers, instructors, and the college that provide a sense of connectedness and affiliation while receiving opportunities for learning and development. According to O'Gara et al. (2009), students who created important relationships with peers and staff persisted in college. The academic and social support provided by faculty were essential to FGS' persistence

and satisfaction while enrolled in college (Deil-Amen, 2011; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Rood, 2009). McKay and Estrella (2008) noted that student-faculty interaction outside the classroom provided students the opportunity to resolve issues, seek ideas, ask questions, and discuss goal achievement. By the same token, my study also confirmed the literature findings concerning environmental support.

Institutional objectives, as well as student development programs and services, are interconnected factors that contribute to FGS learning and development (Knowles et al., 2005). Merriam and Bierema (2014) noted that classroom environments also influence student learning and development. Correspondingly, Tovar (2014) illustrated how various student support services such as study skills, tutoring, financial counseling, career counseling, cultural events, student activities, and academic advising contribute to student persistence and academic achievement. Means and Pyne (2016) noted that financial aid and scholarships contributed to matriculation in college. Thus, my study confirmed the literature that indicated faculty and student engagement is critical to the persistence of FGS and that environmental support is vital for FGS academic achievement, retention, and graduation.

In this study, the findings are clear regarding the participants' decisions to graduate. The participants could not persist in college without a good support system, such as family and friends. Academic achievement in college required more than studying hard. The participants surrounded themselves with individuals who encouraged them emotionally, academically, and financially. Even though the participants encountered various challenges, they persisted with the help of family members, friends,

and loved ones. Additionally, the participants experienced academic successes while enrolled in college. They persevered despite the obstacles they encountered and rejoiced in their academic accomplishments. Faculty and student collaboration inside and outside the classroom challenged participants to complete their educational goals. The participants' achievements, behaviors, and feelings of belonging produced a successful, supportive relationship with the faculty. The relationship between the participants and the environment regarding academic support had an impact on the persistence of the participants. The physical surroundings on campus and cocurricular activities influenced these FGS to persist and graduate. Additionally, faculty and student engagement and environmental support proved vital to the persistence of the participants.

Disconfirmed. Three themes that emerged from my study were disconfirmed in the literature. These include inspiration, vocational interest, and self-awareness (Research Question 2). The participants' statements concerning inspiration highlighted how their self-efficacy, internal fulfillment, and external rewards motivated them to reach their goals and learn the curriculum in the program of study. Vocational interest is another theme disconfirmed in the literature. The participants expressed their vocational interest as they explained why they chose to study either diagnostic medical sonography, practical nursing, or medical radiologic technology. The third theme disconfirmed in the literature is self-awareness. Their feelings, beliefs, strengths, and emotions allowed them to see themselves as learners and contributors to knowledge in the healthcare field. The participants associate their self-awareness with their determination to persist in higher education.

These findings challenge previously reported data that some FGS do not persist in higher education because they succumb to obstacles and barriers, resulting in failure to complete their academic and career goals. Although they experienced obstacles and barriers similar to many other FGS, the participants in this study did not withdraw from college, nor did they give up on their academic learning experiences. More specifically, nowhere does the literature report findings that FGS turned challenges into positive experiences of inspiration, vocational interest, and self-awareness.

These findings (especially those that are disconfirmed in the literature) suggest that future research is needed in the areas of inspiration, vocational interest, and self-awareness. These factors are particularly important because they appeal to the dignity and self-worth of students. Additionally, these factors may shed light on FGS' determination to persist.

Add to literature. Findings from this study add knowledge to the literature by reporting on FGS achievements in a specific discipline—namely healthcare. This unique cohort chose to persist because personal experiences motivated them not to quit (e.g., the death of a family member or illnesses of loved ones). Furthermore, the participants persisted because they were innately caring, compassionate, and aspired to help the sick. Feelings and desires such as these inspired the participants to pursue a field in healthcare and to ultimately graduate. Vocational interest, consonant with participants' characteristics, influenced their persistence in a healthcare program. The participants persevered because the degree and employment in a healthcare field would afford opportunities for them to be self-sufficient and provide a better life for their families.

Acknowledgment of their academic achievements in healthcare and willpower demonstrated how FGS viewed themselves and served as catalysts for self-awareness of their academic characteristics.

Theoretical Framework

I viewed the persistence of the 12 FGS through the lenses of Kolb's experiential learning theory (Wlodkowski, 2008), Chickering's identity development and environmental influence (Cross, 1981), and social cognitive career theory (Brown, 1996; Packard & Babineau, 2009). The theoretical framework provided the preliminary basis for understanding the persistence of the participants in this study.

The theoretical perspective reported in the literature regarding Kolb's experiential learning theory (Wlodkowski, 2008) acknowledged that FGS demonstrate persistence and academic achievement when engaged mentally, physically, and emotionally during their learning experience. According to Kolb, experiential learning perspective emphasizes performing the task to become skilled at the task (Wlodkowski, 2008). Kolb's experiential learning theory also involves reflection, action, thinking, and feeling (Wlodkowski, 2008). FGS not only create knowledge from formal instruction but also from experience. The participants in this study expressed reasons why an education in a specialized field is an avenue to improve their lives personally and financially. For example, Melanie said, "I wanted to study sonography and make a difference in people's lives. The demand and salary for sonographers are growing. Also, employers want competent workers. After I graduated, I showed my boss my sonography license." The

participants in this study expressed reasons why an education in a specialized field is an avenue to improve their lives personally and financially.

Chickering, in his identity development and environmental influence theory, posited that educational environments influence FGS' development in higher education (Cross, 1981). The findings of this study revealed that the 12 FGS had to feel a sense of connection to their college environment to matriculate to a postsecondary institution. Additionally, the data from questions on environmental support suggested that the registration process, library assistance, financial aid services, academic student support services, and safety and security were important variables that directly influenced the participants' persistence in higher education. It is evident that because the college provided environmental support, this caused the FGS to feel confident they received the academic support needed, which resulted in a positive impact on their persistence.

Packard and Babineau (2009) discussed (in the context of social cognitive career theory), how FGS developed, determined, and obtained their academic and career goals. Brown (1996) provided insight how time, money, personal responsibilities, academic readiness, and the employment outlook influenced the career choices of FGS. The participants explained that they were confident and determined to complete their educational and career goals. I inferred that the participants' vocations and personal aspirations impacted their college adjustment and perseverance. For example, Tabitha said, "I entered the nursing field because many family members suffer from diabetes and being around this disease for many years I decided to work in this field to benefit me and my family." Even with this small homogeneous sample, it was evident from the

participants' responses that social cognitive career theory applies to their persistence to graduate and become employed in a healthcare field.

Limitations of the Study

Although this research contributed to understanding the persistence of 12 FGS who obtained an associate degree or certificate in a healthcare field from a community college, this study was limited in certain aspects. The qualitative research design imposed limitations of this study. These are described below.

The first limitation was that this study did not collect or incorporate quantitative data as done in mixed-methods research. A mixed-methods would provide an enhanced understanding of FGS' academic experiences. A combination of surveys, observations, interviews, and archival materials would provide a rich and comprehensive outcome regarding the persistence of FGS at a community college. The mixed methods would also provide greater confidence in the generalizability of the results.

The second limitation of this study was the theoretical framework, which focused on experiential learning, identity development and environmental influences, and social cognitive career theory. This study and its findings were limited to three theories that formed the theoretical framework: experiential learning, identity development and environmental influences, and social cognitive career theory. There is likely a rich set of themes that could emerge if adult learning theories, motivational theory, and Tinto's (2012a) theory of persistence augmented the theoretical framework.

The third limitation of this study involved data collection from the community college. I collected college documents such as enrollment reports, retention rates reports,

licensure reports, and safety and security reports at one community college in a southern region of the United States. Additional documents, such as faculty-student surveys, student satisfaction surveys, completer exit reports, and grade point averages might have provided additional data to support this study. Finally, this analysis relied on data collected from only these 12 FGS who completed their educational and career goals. Therefore, the data may limit an understanding of the challenges and obstacles of FGS who temporarily withdrew from a postsecondary institution or changed their program of study.

Recommendations

There are several recommendations derived from the findings of this investigation. These recommendations are divided into two categories: Recommendations for Future Studies and Recommendations for Practice.

Recommendations for Future Studies

Recommendation 1: Replication with larger sample size. This study took place at a single community college; the overall sample size could have been larger. While Creswell (2005) mentioned that a sample size of five to 25 is sufficient, I recommend replication with larger sample size at several community colleges. The participants in this study were not specifically selected based on their race, gender, age, family's income, social position, work experience. A larger sample size would also allow collection of more demographic data.

Recommendation 2: Use archived data. A mixed-methods design to include archived data, such as GPAs of FGS and interviews that consist of a larger sample at two

or more community colleges, is warranted to ascertain the relationship between persistence, academic achievement, and self-awareness of FGS who attend community colleges. Future research may benefit from incorporating demographic factors, socioeconomic status, and GPAs of FGS who attend and persist at a community college.

Recommendation 3: A qualitative study with individual interviews. The participants spent the largest amount of their time on campus in the classroom. Findings from this study indicated that faculty and staff contributed to FGS persistence. A qualitative study with individual interviews should be conducted at a community college to understand the perceptions of intentional advising and explore ways academic advising is perceived to influence the academic and career goals of FGS.

Recommendation 4: A mixed-methods study of persistence. The participants in this study focused on their vocational training and working in their chosen healthcare fields. Findings from the study revealed that vocational interest compelled the participants to persist toward degree completion. Environmental support was also a significant finding in this study.

A mixed-methods study can provide further insight into variables that influence the persistence of FGS in other disciplines. Students who study healthcare at community colleges have an innate desire to help take care of the sick and the elderly in addition to providing comfort and helping these individuals heal. Students in other disciplines at community colleges may not have the same internal feeling or awareness. A mixed-methods study can provide further insight into variables that influence the persistence of FGS in other disciplines.

Recommendations for Practice

Recommendation 1: Development of a mentoring program. A common factor in the persistence of FGS is the development of a mentoring program that pairs new FGS with continuing FGS. The continuing FGS who academically excel could serve as mentors to help students with academic, personal, social, and career decisions. In addition, the continuing FGS can reflect on their academic learning experiences and share their stories with first-year FGS. These relationships subsequently would increase the persistence of FGS.

Recommendation 2: Formation of small support groups within the healthcare programs. Another practice that aids in the persistence of FGS is the formation of small support groups within the healthcare programs. Collaboration in the support group should strengthen students' commitments to achieve academic and career goals. Supportive small groups allow FGS to express challenges they face, such as lack of money for college, unreliable child care, single parenting challenges, and navigating the college environment.

Implications

This study has several implications for positive social change and educational practice. This study also has the potential to impact FGS who enroll in community colleges as well as their families, educators, policymakers, and administrators. The implications, in addition to my reflections, are discussed below.

Positive Social Change

This basic qualitative study provides consequential data that may be extracted to enhance the college environment, improve academic assistance, and student support services. These variables may influence persistence, career attainment, and effect positive social change for FGS. Developing a comprehensive understanding of FGS' persistence will provide resourceful data on how faculty, staff, administrators, constituents, and legislators can improve academic student support services and enhance the academic learning of FGS at 2-year colleges, which ultimately impacts positive social change for students, their families, and community colleges. This research provided data on how participants persisted at a community college. The knowledge gained through this study may create awareness for postsecondary education administrators and policymakers so they can align these factors with the institutions' visions and strategic initiatives. This knowledge and practices may create an economic impact in the workforce and also effect positive social change for FGS.

This study is valuable for FGS because they have an opportunity to mentor other FGS who desire to study in a healthcare program and persist at a community college. Postsecondary institutions that acknowledge the perceptions, views, discernments, and observations of its FGS and align these with the institutions' visions and strategic initiatives may yield not only a positive economic impact but also effect positive social change for the organization, community, and the students. Additionally, this research revealed resourceful data on how faculty, staff, and administrators can support students and promote FGS enrolled in 2-year colleges, which ultimately impact positive social

change in the lives of students. By supporting and encouraging FGS through graduation at a community college, educators will be assisting FGS in developing educational and employment goals that will confidently lead them to become productive citizens in the community and state, thereby effecting positive social change.

Implications for Educational Practice

An effective tool in aiding the persistence of FGS is the design of a web page on the community college's website. The web page should consist of links to the college's resources, such as extracurricular activities, registration, study groups, career center, counseling, and navigating the college. Information on the college's website that highlights activities and academic support services for FGS should be readily available for students. Additionally, the online information will enhance FGS' academic learning experiences.

The establishment of a daycare facility located on the college campus will also affect the persistence of FGS (and other students). The children would attend the daycare facility while their parents attend classes, laboratories, and internships. The students would be able to focus on coursework and not miss classes due to lack of childcare.

Compilation and assessment of FGS' enrollment data are essential to aid in persistence. The community college's admission applications should include the question: "Did either of your parents graduate from college?" The data should be captured in the student electronic data system to identify FGS enrolled in college. The college administrators should have the capability to generate reports and invite FGS to attend financial aid seminars each semester. The seminars should include topics such as

how to apply for federal financial aid, how to apply for scholarships, the benefits and consequences of student loans, and financial literacy. An awareness of financial aid services may improve FGS' academic learning experiences.

Reflections

I am a FGS, a lifelong learner, and a registrar at a higher education institution. I am passionate about this study, which has illuminated how FGS earned their degrees or certificates although they faced barriers such as unreliable childcare, lack of finances, unreliable transportation, or academic unpreparedness. While completing this study, I did my best to avoid any biases. I dedicated time reading, coding, and interpreting the data without judging the participants.

This study has been a unique learning experience for me. I was pleased to understand the factors that motivate FGS to graduate from college. The participants provided considerable information on their decisions to graduate, their academic learning experiences, and the support they received in the college environment regarding their academic learning. Family involvement, the ability to develop a marketable skill, and the ability to overcome challenges and celebrate academic successes were essential to the participants' decisions to graduate from college.

Through this study, I gained a deeper awareness of how FGS describe their academic learning experiences of being first in their families to graduate from college. The students felt a sense of inadequacy while sitting in the classroom with other classmates, but they remained in the class and did not withdraw. The participants incorporated their life experiences into overcoming their barriers. Four participants felt

helpless when they saw sick family members' health decline; they did not want to feel helpless again and earned their degree or certificate.

Additionally, I acquired an appreciation of how FGS described the support they received in the community college environment in relation to their academic learning experiences. Faculty and student engagement was critical in their academic learning experiences. Faculty provided encouragement, support, and open communication to ensure that they completed the healthcare program.

I was impressed with the willingness and dedication that the participants demonstrated to complete my questionnaire. My observation regarding the amount of time required to complete the questionnaire implied that the participants were serious about the data and wanted it to reflect in their responses. Moreover, this indicated that the participants considered my study to be worthwhile. Their actions and responses provided me with an opportunity to collect, analyze, and expand on rich data. I was grateful for the participants' commitment and cooperation to share their answers and experiences with me. This study enlightened me. I am more knowledgeable and zealous to make a positive change in the lives of FGS who aspire to attend and enroll in institutions of higher learning.

Conclusion

Research for the background of this study revealed that FGS' characteristics, challenges, academic unpreparedness, life experiences, and behaviors contribute to the attrition of FGS. Additionally, since FGS may be constrained by financial obligations and have lower self-esteem, it would seem logical to expect that FGS do not persist in higher

education. Many studies showed attrition and lack of persistence of FGS in a community college; however, the participants in this study were found to be committed to completing their degrees or certificates and become gainfully employed. My study was necessary because of the gap in the research literature. It was difficult to locate sufficient literature that supports the perceptions of FGS who earn an associate degree in a healthcare program from a community college and are gainfully employed. My study reported the positive outcomes of 12 FGS and showcased the resilience of the participants. This study is requisite; it added to the body of existing literature regarding the perceptions of persistence, academic achievement, and gainful employment in FGS' specialized career fields. This study could provide individuals, organizations, and legislators the data needed regarding the persistence of FGS who graduated from a healthcare program at a community college.

The participants in this study provided their explanations, perceptions, and opinions regarding their persistence in a healthcare program at a community college. Overcoming adversity and challenges, while striving to accomplish their educational and career goals, are circumstances that many FGS are familiar. The participants revealed how they established their career goals and understood the aspirations associated with their decisions.

The participants in my study described a connection with their faculty, peers, and staff at the community college. Although some of the participants reported instances of vandalism at the community college, the participants persevered and completed their academic learning and occupational endeavors. The participants explained they had

prepared academically, and those not prepared reported they utilized environmental resources to meet the demands of the healthcare program. Some of the participants utilized the financial resources and academic environmental support to assist them while in college.

Descriptions from the participants indicated that they were focused, demonstrated self-esteem, confidence, believed in their capacity to perform academically, and were motivated to graduate from a community college and obtain employment in their specialized fields of study. Community colleges that do not have a clear, well-articulated practice for assisting FGS may use the findings from this study and incorporate best practices to assist FGS to succeed in college. These findings could also be put into practical use. For example, building a better program that would help improve persistence among FGS. This study provided a better understanding of FGS in a healthcare program and added insights into variables that influenced their persistence.

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Appendix A: Letter Permission to Conduct Study

Southern Community College

Walden University

Southern Community College
Office of the President

October 14, 2015

REF: Persistence, Academic Achievement, Career Opportunities: Experiences of First Generation Students at Two Community and Technical Colleges

Dear President of Southern Community College:

I am enrolled in the doctoral program online at Walden University, in Education, specializing in Higher Education. Dr. Delfina Ashley-Baisden is my dissertation Committee Chair and may be contacted at email if you have any additional questions.

This letter is being sent to you to request permission to conduct a study at your institution for my dissertation project. I am also the Principal Researcher for the study. The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of first generation students' persistence, academic achievement, and career opportunities, while they were enrolled in a community college. A final copy of the dissertation will be made available to you, should you desire. Please know that the Interview Protocol enclosed is strictly confidential and anonymous to protect Southern Community College, students, and faculty. The web-based interviews are a one-time process, will take about 60-70 minutes to complete at the convenience of the students, who graduated during 2012 through 2014. However, I will also conduct 1-2 follow-up email interviews to ensure that my interpretations of the participants' responses to the questions are not misinterpreted. The study will explore perceptions of first generation students', persistence, academic achievement, and career opportunities encountered by FGS during their educational journey at community colleges. Additionally, this research will extract resourceful data on how faculty, staff, and administrators can increase student support services and promote FGS who are enrolled in two-year institutions, which ultimately impact positive social change.

If you would kindly permit the study to be conducted at Southern Community College, I respectfully request a *Letter of Consent* to conduct the study (sample enclosed). Additionally, I would also request a contact person with whom I might closely coordinate the study, including meeting face-to-face as needed, receiving enrollment, retention, and job placement data for medical radiologic technology, practical nursing, and diagnostic medical sonography students for academic years 2012-2013 and 2013-2014. All materials

and costs will be provided and assumed by the Principal Researcher of the dissertation project.

If you have any questions that I may answer, please do not hesitate to contact me. I can be reached at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or (xxx) xxx-xxxx (cellular). My email is [u](#)

Included with this letter, *as draft enclosures*, are the following items for your review:

1. Experiences of First Generation Students Enrolled at a Community College:
Student Questionnaire
2. Student Information Sheet

Mr. President, please accept my sincerest gratitude for your consideration in allowing the institution to participate in this very important study. Should you have any question, please do not hesitate to contact me or Dr. Delfina Ashley-Baisden at Walden University.

Very best regards,

Tennie Sanders-McBryde
Southern Community College
Director of Admissions and Registrar
Office: (xxx) xxx-xxxx
Cellular: (xxx) xxx-xxxx or (xxx) xxx-xxxx
Email:
Principal Researcher & Doctoral Candidate, Walden University
Education, specializing in Higher Education

Cc: Dr. Delfina Ashley-Baisden, Committee Chair

Appendix B: Letter of Cooperation from Research Partner

Southern Community College
Office of the President

October 14, 2015

Dear Mrs. Tennie Sanders McBryde:

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled *Persistence, Academic Achievement, and Career Opportunities: Perceptions of First Generation Students at a Community College* within the Southern Community College.

As part of this study, I authorize you to conduct student and employee interviews via the web and utilize *SurveyMonkey* to collect data for the dissertation topic listed above. You are granted approval to interview students who were enrolled in a healthcare program during fall semester 2012, fall semester 2013 and fall semester 2014. The results of the interviews will follow procedures of anonymity and confidentiality to protect Southern Community College, students, and employees. You have permission to communicate with students to ensure that their findings and themes are neither misrepresented nor misinterpreted. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

We understand that our organization's responsibilities include for you to work closely with the Director of Management Information Systems to provide retention data, job placement data, licensure data and enrollment data for fall semesters 2012, 2013 and 2014. The Director's telephone number is (xxx) xxx-xxxx and email:

We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change. I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting and that this plan complies with the organization's policies.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the student's supervising faculty/staff without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,

Southern Community College President

Appendix C: Questionnaire

Questionnaire
<p>Research Question 1: How did FGS make decisions to graduate from a community college?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tell me about yourself. Describe your experiences with family and friends while you were enrolled in a community college? 2. What factors motivated your decisions to persist and graduate from a community college? 3. Describe at what point in your life you knew that you would attend a community college. Explain what encouraged you decision? 4. Explain how you were motivated to stay in school. 5. Describe any successes that you experienced while you were enrolled in a community college? 6. Tell me about any obstacles that you experienced while you were enrolled in a community college.
<p>Research Question 2: How do FGS describe their academic learning experiences of being first in their families to graduate from a healthcare program?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tell me how you feel about being a first generation college student. 2. Describe why you chose to study a healthcare program? 3. Describe any extracurricular activities in which you did participate or would have participated in and how these activities encouraged you to remain in college. 4. As a first generation student, describe how you feel about achieving your degree at a community college. 5. Many FGS work full-time or part-time to support themselves or their families. Were you employed while enrolled in college? If so, describe why you were motivated to continue to work full-time or part-time while you pursued a degree in the healthcare field.
<p>Research Question 3: How do FGS describe the support they received in the community college environment in relation to their academic learning experiences?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Describe your academic learning environment. 2. Describe your experiences with safety and security while enrolled in college. 3. Tell me about your experience with academic advising. 4. Explain your experiences with the registration process and financial aid services. 5. Describe whether student support services were referred or recommended by your instructors and or program advisors. Describe any campus resources that you used while enrolled in college. 6. Describe your experiences with any student support services that you may have received while enrolled in college. 7. Describe your thoughts about your educational achievement since you graduated from a community college. 8. How did you feel about persistence or “not dropping out” while you were involved in the collegiate experience?

Appendix D: Email Follow-up Questionnaire

<p>Thank you for answering the questions using the <i>Questionnaire</i>. The purpose of this first email follow-up questionnaire is for accuracy and to provide you an opportunity to clarify your responses that you submitted in <i>SurveyMonkey</i>. Please email your responses within 14 days of receipt of this email. This first email follow-up questionnaire should take no more than 30 minutes to complete.</p>
<p>Research Question 1: How do FGS describe their academic learning experiences of being first in their families to graduate from a healthcare program?</p> <p>I reviewed your responses for the sub-questions listed under Research Question 1. Your specific responses provided insight on how you made decisions to graduate from a community college. Please provide more details on sub-question(s) _____, or provide additional details so that I may gain a detailed understanding of your decision to persist in college. I have provided the sub-question(s) and your response(s).</p>
<p>Research Question 2: How do FGS describe their academic learning experiences of being first in their families to graduate from a healthcare program?</p> <p>You provided responses on your academic learning experiences regarding completion of your degree in a healthcare program at a community college. Please provide more details on sub-question(s) _____, identified under Research Question 2, so that I may gain an in-depth understanding of your decision to persist in college. I have provided the sub-question(s) and your response(s).</p>
<p>Research Question 3: How do FGS describe the support they received in the community college environment in relation to their academic learning experiences?</p> <p>You described the support that you received in the community college environment relative to your academic learning experiences. Please provide more information on sub-question(s) _____, identified under Research Question 3, so that I may gain a thorough understanding of your decision to persist in college. I have provided the sub-question(s) and your response(s).</p>

Appendix E: Second Email Follow-up Questionnaire

Thank you for responding to the email follow-up questionnaire and for submitting your responses in the email. The purpose of this second email follow-up questionnaire is to provide you an opportunity to clarify and/or confirm your responses to ensure that my interpretation or your responses are not misleading or misinterpreted. Please review my interpretation of your responses and email your comments within 10 days of receipt of this email. This second email follow-up questionnaire should take no more than 20 minutes to complete.

Research Question 1: How do FGS describe their academic learning experiences of being first in their families to graduate from a healthcare program?

Your responses to the sub-questions identified under **Research Question 1**, provided insight on how you made decisions to graduate from a community college. Please let me know if my interpretations of your responses are accurate so that I may provide a thorough understanding of your decision to persist in college.

Research Question 2: How do FGS describe their academic learning experiences of being first in their families to graduate from a healthcare program?

You provided responses on your academic learning experiences regarding completion of your degree in a healthcare program at a community college. I examined your responses for the sub-questions listed under **Research Question 2**. Please let me know if my interpretations of your responses are accurate so that I may provide a thorough understanding of your decision to persist in college.

Research Question 3: How do FGS describe the support they received in the community college environment in relation to their academic learning experiences?

You described the support that you received in the community college environment relative to your academic learning experiences. I have reviewed your responses for the sub-questions identified under **Research Question 3**. Please let me know if my interpretations of your responses are accurate so that I may provide a full understanding of your decision to persist in college.

Appendix F: Themes by Research Questions

Research Questions	Themes By Research Questions	Descriptions of Themes
<p>1. How did FGS make decisions to graduate from a community college?</p>	<p>1. Family Support</p> <p>2. Mastering a Skill</p> <p>3. Challenges and Academic Successes</p>	<p>Family Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouragement • Provide food and groceries • Provide childcare • Transportation • Provide emotional and financial support • Provide spiritual support <p>Mastering a Skill</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gain knowledge • Acquire skills • Passion for the healthcare field • Wanted to become independent • Wanted to gain skills in a demanding field with good benefits • Cognitive and academic ability • Interest in the healthcare field <p>Challenges and Academic Successes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty adjusting to coursework • Struggle adjusting to class schedules • Difficulty adjusting to the learning environment • Lack of funds to pay for college • Had surgery during one of the semesters enrolled in college • Single parents • Unreliable transportation • Earned the Dean's List award • Earned the President's List award • Served as college ambassador • Member in National Society of Leadership and Success • Graduated with academic honors

<p>2. How do FGS describe their academic learning experiences of being first in their families to graduate from a healthcare program?</p>	<p>1. Inspiration</p> <p>2. Vocational Interest</p> <p>3. Self-Awareness</p>	<p>Inspiration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings of elation, happiness and excitement • Attending college opened many doors • Feeling of empowerment and self-assurance • Desire for self-sufficiency • Want to improve the lives of their families • Believe that they could achieve their goals <p>Vocational Interest</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wanted a job that was secure • Liked the idea of being able to help and take care of sick and elderly people • Always wanted to be a radiologic technologist • I was fascinated with the human anatomy and physiology <p>Self-awareness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Felt inadequate • Believed that they could improve their lives • The hands-on demonstrations helped with my learning • Knew that the goal was to finish the healthcare program • Had deal with different personalities during clinical assignments • Motivated to complete the requirements for graduation • Understood that they could not participate in extracurricular activities because of coursework demands
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Appendix G: Researcher Journaling Sample

Narrative and Date	Comments and Date
Experiences (What did I experience while conducting this study?)	
Reflection (What were my feelings, thoughts, and perceptions about events encountered during this study?)	
Observation (What are my significant beliefs or biases that are significant to the researcher?)	
Planning and Goals (How will I apply what was learned during this research process?)	