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Listening to First-Year Community College Students

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College of Education

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Mary Drake

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Walden University
2015

Abstract

Listening to First-Year Community College Students

by

Mary Elizabeth Pickett Drake

MALS, Hollins University, 2002

MS, Nova Southeastern University, 2005

BS, Greensboro College, 1975

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education

Walden University

July 2015

Abstract

First-year community college students are often from underrepresented groups who are unaccustomed to voicing their needs or to being recognized for having more and varied needs than other groups. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the factors that may engender or prevent success through listening to what first-year community college students have to say. Research questions addressed what students identified as challenges and successes during their first year and how first person accounts can contribute to the information college personnel need to understand. Human development theories and models of student persistence informed this study. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 12 18 to 24 year-old first-year community college students from a midatlantic state in the United States. Data were analyzed for themes related to challenges of time management, academic expectations, and balancing the demands of school, life, and work. Students who were interviewed remained attached to their families, worked full or part time, may have had less than optimal learning skills for college material, and did not ask for help regarding academic or financial matters. This study contributes to positive social change by adding qualitative findings to the understanding of the multiple and complicated challenges that traditionally-aged community college students face in persisting in postsecondary education. Using this information, college personnel can design programs to introduce incoming students to services that will promote success.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Peter Drake, without whom I would have never embarked upon nor finished this journey. He has boasted about me, tolerated my frustrations, and encouraged me throughout the whole process. I could not have finished the dissertation process without his support.

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I would like thank Iris Yob for matching me with my mentor, Leslie Van Gelder. What a serendipitous decision! Thank you, Leslie, for coaching me, guiding me, and helping me to find my scholarly voice. I would like to thank Patricia Brewer, my second committee member, for her help with clarity and unity in my academic writing.

The people who first inspired me to begin this project are all the students I have encountered since I began teaching college composition classes in 2006. First-year college students need conscientious guidance and a friendly smile as they struggle to move into a new phase in their lives. First-year community college students need abundant compassion as they learn to juggle competing priorities, anxiety, and academic demands. I am so pleased to have met each one and in some cases to have witnessed their graduation from 4-year colleges. I would like to offer a special thank-you to the students who consented to be in this study and took their valuable time to meet with me and answer all of my e-mails.

I am so fortunate to have had several professional writers in my life who have discussed my work with me, made suggestions, and commiserated about the demands of bringing a document through the “publishing” process. Lisa Tracy, Nancy L. Johnston, and Leslie Van Gelder have all published books, and it has been a privilege to have their insight, interest, and help.

Table of Contents

List of Tables v

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study...1

Background 1

Community College Students 3

Statement of the Problem..11

Purpose of the Study 13

Research Questions 14

Nature of the Study 14

Conceptual Framework 15

Definitions..18

Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations, and Scope 19

Significance of the Study 21

Summary 22

Chapter 2: Literature Review...24

Literature Search Methods 26

Work–Life Balance 27

First Generation 29

Active Versus Passive Learning and Agency 30

Time Management and Study Skills 31

Developmental Perspectives 32

Cognitive Development 34

Intellectual and Ethical Development 38

Building Skills for Today's Complex World 42

Reflection and Problem Solving 47

Psychosocial Development 51

Stages of Psychosocial Development 51

A Proposed New Developmental Stage 54

How College Influences Development 56

Mental Health 61

Interviewing as a Suitable Qualitative Method for This Study 65

Studies Using Interviews 68

Summary 70

Chapter 3: Research Method 73

Research Design and Rationale 73

Role of the Researcher 77

Doing Research in One's Own Institution 77

Methodology 78

Participant Selection 78

Instrumentation 81

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection 82

Data Analysis 83

Issues of Trustworthiness 85

Ethical Procedures 88

Summary 90

Chapter 4: Results 92

Brief Review of the Purpose of the Study and Research Questions 92

Setting and Demographics 93

Data Collection 93

Data Analysis: Identifying Themes 97

Evidence of Trustworthiness...101

Credibility 101

Transferability 102

Dependability 104

Confirmability 104

Results 105

Narratives 106

Challenges 115

Successes 132

Summary 145

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations 146

Interpretation of the Findings...147

Challenges 147

Successes 158

Limitations of the Study...160

Recommendations 161

  Implications......163

  Conclusion......165

References......167

Appendix B: Recruiting Questionnaire......190

Appendix C: Invitation and Consent Form......192

Appendix D: Interview Protocol Set 1......195

Appendix E: Interview Protocol Set 2......197

List of Tables

Table 1 103

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Background

Community colleges enroll large numbers of students at risk of dropping or stopping out. Although completion and retention statistics for traditionally-aged first-generation 4-year college students have been studied regularly, less information is available for understanding the experiences of first-year 18- to 24-year-old community college students and what they bring with them that competes with or prevents individual academic success. McClenney (2011) stated that community college leaders believe that many students are lost in the intake process. She also noted that about 25% of community college students who enroll in the fall do not return for the second semester, and 50% will not return for the next fall semester. Only 15% of students who earn no credits in the first term persevere to the second term (Clery & Topper, 2008). National data, surveys, and focus groups have listed key characteristics of these students, but few studies have mentioned listening to individual students.

Some of the numerous factors that may hinder the efforts of community college faculty and staff to teach and mentor these young people are assumptions about their readiness, their experiences with academic tasks, attitudes toward learning, their cognitive and affective development, their social skills, and their sometimes-apparent unwillingness to put forth the necessary effort. Rutschow, Cullinan, and Welbeck (2012) noted that many students arrive at college without the experiences or skills to cope with college demands. Rutschow et al. also called attention to the evidence of low graduation rates and academically unprepared students at community colleges, which create challenges for program development decisions about the effects of helping students develop psychologically and socially or boosting academic achievement. According to Mullin (2012),

> between 1993 and 2009, the student body—as defined by the distribution, not the number, of students—on community college campuses shifted. For instance, students under the age of 18 are increasingly enrolling in community colleges. While the student body is becoming increasingly younger, the characteristics of younger students are not homogenous across all sectors of higher education. Community college students have a greater proportion of students with various risk factors when compared to all of higher education. (p. 4)

In a 1994 report for the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Gardiner (1994) reported that greater numbers of minority, disadvantaged, and nontraditional students had access to higher education; however, compared to their peers, these students were academically underprepared. In addition, since the economic downturn in the late 2000s, more people see community college as a less expensive alternative to 4-year college and decide to go to community college.

Additionally, many students come from generational or situational poverty, which encompasses different sets of social capital and attitudes toward education. Payne (2005) differentiated between generational poverty (two generations or longer) and situational poverty (short term due to circumstances such as death, illness, or divorce). Payne posited that schools operate from middle-class norms, but the values individuals bring with them along with the hidden rules of the class in which they were raised may be markedly different. It is the responsibility of teachers to teach students that there are two sets of rules. Payne asserted that to survive in poverty, one must rely on nonverbal, sensory, and reactive skills, and to survive in school, one must use verbal, abstract, and proactive skills. Nearly half of all minority undergraduate students and more than 40% of undergraduate students live in poverty (Mullin, 2012). The number in poverty in the South increased to 15.5 million in 2007, up from 14.9 million in 2006.

Social psychologists and cultural sociologists have long suggested that students' self-perceptions, shaped by social interaction and personal history, influence behaviors related to academic performance. With all the factors covered in the research literature that appear to be challenges for beginning community college students between the ages of 18 and 24, it may seem that helping them complete their postsecondary education is a daunting task. The purpose of this research was to sift out the factors that students themselves report as challenges. More information about who they are and what may challenge them is crucial. The following section presents information from the literature regarding the multiple challenges that first-year community college students face. A statement of the research problem, the purpose of the study, and a brief discussion of the method, conceptual framework, and other key aspects of the study follow.

Community College Students

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC; 2012), community colleges serve about half of the undergraduate population in the United States. Forty-three percent of those students are under 21 years of age. In the state where this study was conducted, community colleges enroll more than half of all undergraduate students. Community colleges are the primary access point to higher education for students from underrepresented populations: students from low-income families, students of color, and first-generation college students. Across the state, of the 197,226 students enrolled in fall 2011, 70,058 (about 36%) were between the ages of 18 and 21 (State Community College System, 2011a). Whereas 18 to 24 years is considered the age group for traditional students, community colleges often report groupings using 18 to 21 years, which may further emphasize the numbers of those recently out of high school.

One only has to walk through a faculty work area at a community college to hear conversations about what students can and cannot do, attempt to get by with, or offer as reasons why work has not been completed. There is discussion about the reasons for what seems to be a growing number of immature, irresponsible, underprepared, and cognitively underdeveloped students enrolled in all subject areas. Some students give up and officially withdraw from courses, while others just stop attending. In many classes, some just get by, although others remain enrolled for the duration of the semester not turning in work or consistently turning in substandard work. Faculty report that students exhibit inadequate motivation, unrealistic beliefs about their preparedness for college, widely varying degrees of maturity and development, inefficient study and time management skills, and familial obligations, attitudes, and job responsibilities that compete for their attention in engaging with community college demands (Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, & Ray, 2006; Rings, 2001; Sell & Levesque, 2007; Tannock & Flocks, 2003; Wirth & Padilla, 2008). Community college faculty recognize that many students who enroll in community colleges are underprepared to meet challenges of time management and academic expectations, along with balancing the demands of school, life, and work (Brown & Rivas, 2011). According to a Virginia Community College System (VCCS) report, developmental education enrollments increased from 23,542 students in fall 2006 to 26,655 students in fall 2010 (VCCS, 2011b). The same report indicated that nearly one-third of the students did not pass developmental reading or writing on their first attempt, and more than one-half did not pass developmental mathematics on their first attempt. Because of open-door policies, underprepared students are encouraged to enroll in community colleges. The Community College Access Program (CCAP) makes college available tuition-free to graduates of public high schools with a minimum 2.5 GPA in certain localities (CCAP, 2013). A program such as CCAP opens the doors to students who may have never considered college either because of unavailable funding, lack of achievement, lack of interest, or poor achievement in high school.

Powers (as cited in Fike & Fike, 2008) maintained that many entering community college are not college ready and do not understand the level of engagement that is necessary. Additionally, Wilmer (2008) indicated underprepared college students often experience difficulty connecting with the academic environment, lack academic direction and are uncertain of their goals, and share noncognitive characteristics found in first-generation and minority students. Moreover, according to Givens (2008), in developmental theory each individual has the possibility for ongoing development. Cognitive and affective dynamics are equally important. In her dissertation, Givens frequently referred to the earlier research of McCabe and Day (1998), who noted that students who enter community colleges tend to have a wider range of learning needs than those entering 4-year institutions and that some are not yet prepared to meet the literacy demands of college-level work. In addition, Givens claimed that regardless of ability, students can achieve nothing without the necessary motivation, confidence, and attitudes toward learning. Caporrimo (2008) related that community college students have many distractions, including full-time work, parenting, and caring for other family members. Barbatis (2010) reported findings that confirmed Tinto’s early claims about importance of family emphasis on the importance of education and cultural identity. The Barbatis study interviewed 22 ethnically diverse students. Of those 22 students, six graduated and 12 persisted toward graduation. The four students who dropped out either worked part time and had young children to care for or worked full time (Barbatis, 2010). Clearly while academic preparation is commonly regarded as the strongest predictor of academic performance and persistence, research findings suggest that psychosocial factors and other noncognitive factors have important effects on college outcomes (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Ashtiani & Feliciano, 2012; Bickerstaff, Barragan, & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2012; McClenney, 2011; Porchea, Allen, Robbins, & Phelps, 2010). To learn more about psychosocial and other noncognitive factors that present challenges, studies involving interviewing first-year community college students can illuminate factors and trends that need attention.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) identified major factors that influence performance in college, such as family of origin and peer culture, campus involvement, relationships with faculty or lack of them, motivation, organization skills, study habits, self-efficacy, and perceived locus of control. They reported that students frequently cite one or more reasons for their placement on academic probation, including making school a low priority, having poor time management skills, or working too much. In addition, they highlighted factors such as difficulty adjusting to the college environment, unrealistic study expectations, along with procrastination, test anxiety, and poor test taking and study skills. Pascarella and Terenzini also recognized that students may fail to attend class, have financial stress, schedule classes too early in the day, take on an unrealistic workload, have a poor attitude or lack of motivation, and live and study in distracting environments.

Walsh Portillo (2011) noted several factors that challenge community college students including, “financial hardship, mismatched students and programs, illness, poor time management, isolation, excessive socializing, and partying” (p. 4). She also maintained that it is the responsibility of institutions of higher education to “identify poor habits and attitudes and risky behaviors such as “excessive partying and skipping classes, among others” (p. 4). She argued further that it is these institutions’ obligation to provide students with information and tools to raise their chances of persistence. McClenney (2011) asserted that while many community college students arrive with the intentions to succeed, they often behave in ways that do not contribute to their success. The 2011 report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that 84% of community college students work and 60% work more than 20 hours a week. Working students have trouble deciding how to allot time for academics and may have trouble with employers who are not sensitive to students’ scheduling needs.

Michael, Dickson, Ryan, and Koefer (2010) referred to a 2007 study by the Academic Senate of California Community Colleges that showed U.S. faculty members believed incoming freshman classes include significant numbers of students who are insufficiently prepared for college-level academics, including skills in college-level reading comprehension, writing, note taking, math, and analysis. Tinto's (1993) retention model revealed that a number of factors determine the likelihood of success, including secondary preparation, individual attitudes, and family background combined with the student's goals and commitment, and the institutional structure. Many students are placed on academic probation, which may or may not ensure success. Students often view academic probation as punishment for failure, which compounds their chances for lack of success. Faculty, advisors, and administrators are faced with myriad additional challenges requiring attention, including language barriers, cultural differences, social adjustment, and students' unfamiliarity with the U.S. higher education system.

According to Wilmer (2008), many students enter college underprepared, but academic preparation is not the only area in which they are underprepared. Building self-management skills progresses slowly, with deliberate and substantial practice. Self-management skills in college include skills for keeping track of massive amounts of information, along with skills for organizing to meet deadlines and priorities. Students must have the skills to study independently and in informal and formal study groups. They must know when to ask for help and when to drop a course. Students who are the first in their family to attend college, from immigrant families, members of racial and ethnic minority groups, or from low-income families are more easily thrown off the path to success. These students need an assortment of proactive student services that will support them in their journey to achieve the academic and personal skills essential for college-level course work and academic success.

An additional challenge for community college students according to Schuetz (2008) may be the anxiety that comes with experiencing a new situation and new environment. She noted the simplest actions of everyday life require astute perseverance and sustained mental effort. She also pointed out that all the new information regarding course work and appropriate behaviors in a new social setting requires ongoing interpretation. All of the options assailing new students can induce fatigue and frustration. In an essay about the immigrant experience of being a stranger in the United States, Schuetz (1944) explored the concept of the sense of disorientation. He referred to a stranger's attempts "to interpret the cultural pattern of a social group which he approaches and to orient himself within it" (p. 499). Others have explored the same idea in terms of culture shock, disorientation, and social maladjustment. Students arriving at the community college are likely to bring with them incorrect perceptions about college; ignorance of the environment, both physical and social; and fear of being perceived as stupid, backward, or socially unacceptable (Bickerstaff et al., 2012). Conley (2008) noted that students who are the first in their family to attend college, from immigrant families, members of racial and ethnic minority groups, or from low-income families might face more challenges. If one considers the combination of the demands of the first week of classes with the emotional load of making one's way in a new environment, it is not too difficult to understand the rooms full of blank faces that frustrate so many instructors (Bickerstaff et al., 2012; Cho & Karp, 2012; Cox, 2009).

According to Rutschow et al. (2012), many students arrive at college lacking awareness of college expectations. A number of colleges across the country have created required student success courses to address this need. Dadgar (2012) reported that many college students combine studying with paid employment and that community college students tend to work even longer hours compared with students at 4-year colleges. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) called for more qualitative research on the effects of college. They recognized the need to incorporate theories from multiple disciplines to study the impact of college, because we are beginning to recognize that many elements of "…students' in- and out-of-class experiences" shape student change …" (p. 629). Caporrimo (2008) affirmed, despite the need for rules, guidelines, and consistent consequences, one must be sensitive to the challenges faced by community college students" (pp. 26–27). Stieha (2010a) noted that the focus in individual experiences allows a researcher to examine college challenges closely.

Although there appears to be a preponderance of evidence that first-year community college students face a variety of challenges, little beyond conversing with students in focus groups has been documented regarding what the students themselves have to say. This research study was designed to explore the challenges that students identify by listening to students at a community college in a southern Atlantic state.

Statement of the Problem

Students may arrive at community colleges with a variety of impediments to success, yet to date little research other than surveys has drawn information directly from the students. Since 2009, when the Obama administration began focusing on postsecondary education and job training, more research has focused on community colleges. Organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; the Lumina Foundation; the American Association of Community Colleges; the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas–Austin (CCLP); the Community College Research Center (CCRC), Teachers College, Columbia University; Jobs for the Future; Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation; and Public Agenda have funded projects to investigate what is important to help community college students realize greater economic opportunity and achieve their dreams. Many data have been gathered, and most are quantitative. A minority portion has focused on qualitative research using student focus groups. It is still difficult to find studies that report individual student voices. Recording individual conversations with students and discovering themes revealed by studying those conversations contributes to the useful qualitative research about community college student challenges. Although students must possess either a high school diploma or a GED, neither guarantees that students will have the prerequisite skills or habits to promote success. Very little information beyond documentation of previous schooling and perhaps some placement testing results is required when a student arrives to enroll in community college classes. Studies such as those done using focus groups conducted by the Center for Community College Engagement have begun to listen to what students have to say regarding barriers to success in academic courses, which range from academic readiness, such as reading, writing, and critical thinking deficits, to affective and personal traits such as study habits, quality of effort, poor time management, poor self-efficacy, and external locus of control (Center for Community College Engagement, 2010). Other barriers include social factors such as making school a low priority, living or studying in distracting environments, making lifestyle choices involving drugs and alcohol, or experiencing family obligations and interference.

Although first-year community college students can range in age from 17 to 55, this study focused on traditionally-aged, first-year community college students between the ages of 18 and 24. This age group may consist of the following representative identifications: (a) recent high school graduates, (b) high school dropouts who have completed a GED (immediately after high school or before their 24th birthday), (c) those who chose to work after graduating from high school, (d) those who chose to serve in the armed forces immediately after high school, or (e) students who may have postponed higher education because they have children.

The age range of traditional college students from 18 to 24 reflects a wide variety of developmental considerations. Arnett’s (2004) work on the stage of emerging adulthood placed 18- to 24-year-olds at the beginning of this stage rather than in a transition between adolescence and adulthood. Arnett proposed that a new stage of life has developed in the late 20th and early 21st centuries that lasts from age 18 through the midtwenties and that is discrete from adolescence or young adulthood. Arnett identified five key features of emerging adulthood, which include identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities. Arnett’s work expanded on and combined with Erikson’s (1959) stages of identity versus role confusion and intimacy versus isolation. In Chapter 2, I expanded on the work of Arnett and other proponents of emerging adulthood (Arnett & Tanner, 2006; Labouvie-Vief, 2006; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005; Settersten & Ray, 2010).

The developmental and social tasks that take place between the ages of 18 and 24 pose challenges that could impede success in postsecondary education. To help students make decisions that will contribute to success, more must be asked about first-year students. Ideas explored during interviews included the role of the family and social culture as they influence the decision to pursue postsecondary education, the importance of prioritizing a commitment to academics, and what an individual believes about his or her strengths and weaknesses in academic abilities. A culture of evidence beyond survey data is needed to assist in better understanding students and their early college experiences. Personnel at each community college should recognize that their own students are the ones to get to know to design first-year experiences that will build chances for success. Studies using interviews are reviewed in depth in Chapter 2.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the factors that may engender or prevent success through listening to what first-year community college students have to say. The key ideas explored during interviews focused on the role of the family and social culture as they influence the decision to pursue postsecondary education, how students prioritize the commitment to academics, and an individual’s strengths and weaknesses in academic abilities or preparation.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What do 18- to 24-year-old community college students identify as challenges and successes during their first year?
2. What can the first-person accounts of first-year community college student (ages 18–24) experiences reveal about their challenges and successes?

Nature of the Study

In this phenomenological I explored how themes derived from student interviews concerning their educational, sociocultural, cognitive, affective, and developmental backgrounds could inform supporting college success skills in required community college courses. Astin (1993) suggested that the “richest source of data on the student’s environmental experiences are the students themselves” (pp. 84–85). The research site was a community college in a midatlantic state in the United States with a current student population of more than 12,000. The pseudonym RCC, for “Regional Community College,” is used to represent the community college where this study took place. Eighty-four percent of the students in 2011–2012 attended part time, and 16% attended full time. I chose 12 first-year students from a pool of 170 students enrolled in English classes and student development classes and conducted two in-depth interviews during fall semester 2014. The first interview covered questions concerning early impressions, initial prejudices, fears, and anything thing else that may have created physical, mental, or perceived social barriers. During the second interview, students were asked to review the transcript of the first interview and elaborate on any issues that stood out. In addition, interview questions addressed successes and challenges that changed over the course of the term (AACC, 2012; Ahern & Norris, 2010; Ankeny & Lehmann, 2010; Ashtiani & Feliciano, 2012; Bahr, 2013; Barbatis, 2010; Baxter Magolda, 1992, 2001; Bickerstaff et al., 2012; Brown & Rivas, 2011; Caporrimo, 2008). From the interview data, I discovered themes related to cognitive, social, and affective development as well as needs and concerns the subjects identified. What the students revealed about themselves may be useful for creating avenues of access to all the opportunities for success a community college has to offer.

Conceptual Framework

Perry (1998) posited that as male college students progressed, they learned to appreciate multiple perspectives. He reported that they became more comfortable with the ideas of ambiguity and that questioning existing knowledge was acceptable. Others, such as Baxter Magolda (1992) and Gilligan (1982), have extended Perry's research to female college students. Baxter Magolda's work included both men and women, but it is significant that she extended the sample population to females. Chickering and Reisser (1993) proposed that building intellectual competence, knowledge acquisition, critical thinking skills, and the capacity for analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and creation of ideas are important tasks for 18 to 24 year-old college students. Among the tasks that 18 to 24 year-old individuals face, according to Arnett (1998), are accepting responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions, and creating financial independence. It is conceivable that those tasks and the U.S. emphasis on postsecondary education may create a complicated list of demands for this age group. For faculty and college administrators, understanding the challenges community college students face may be augmented by adolescent and young adult developmental and psychosocial theories. Understanding where students are operating cognitively, affectively, and socially may encourage community college instructors make course objectives explicit, teach age-appropriate critical thinking skills, and set boundaries for how much and what kind of assistance to provide ((Andrade, 2007; Fike & Fike, 2008; Givens, 2008).

Theories of human development, emotional intelligence, and self-efficacy can provide useful lenses through which to view young community college students. Insights may be gained by asking students to talk about themselves and their experiences to help recognize whether students are still making the transition from late adolescence or if they are moving into emerging adulthood, which encompasses different sets of tasks than adolescence (Arnett, 2004; Givens, 2008; Lewis et al., 1999; Stieha, 2010a; Whitney, 2011). I hoped that during the process of in-depth interviews, insights would be gained for succeeding at the community college level.

The conceptual framework was constructed around two elements: human development theories, which include both cognitive-structural and psychosocial approaches, and models of student persistence, which include constructs of social and cultural capital. Developmental theory should be given substantial credit in the study of the multifaceted issues of student achievement and college outcomes (Chickering, 1981; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Studies of the 18 to 24 age group by Wells (2008), Chickering (1981), Labouvie-Vief (2006), Tanner (2008), and Baxter Magolda (1992) have indicated that the varying degrees of social and cultural capital of students from diverse cultural backgrounds and social classes may affect their success and persistence in college. Students may not have developed the skills to perceive or overcome social barriers.

Developmental theories have emphasized the nature of change within the individual and have been dominated by psychological stage theories, which focus on levels of development proceeding in sequence (Arnett, 2000, 2011; Chickering, 1981; Erikson, 1968; Perry, 1970; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). College impact models highlight the psychosocial realm of interactions between and among individuals, which may influence student development. Additional influences include gender; academic achievement; socioeconomic status; race-ethnicity; and academic, cultural, social, or political climate created by faculty and students on a campus (Astin, 1999; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005b; Tinto, 1993).

Young people have multiple tasks during the years encompassing 18 to 24. Arnett (2004) pointed to the myriad influences these individuals encounter, such as relationship decisions; child bearing and parenting decisions; work and education choices; and coping with rapidly changing technology, finances, and leisure time choices. Many others (Love & Guthrie, 1999; Maunder, Gingham, & Rogers, 2010; Meyer, Spencer, & French, 2009; Morosanu, O’Donovan, & Handley, 2010) have studied the challenges of 18 to 24 year-old individuals attending community colleges and suggested program changes.

Definitions

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions applied:

Academic persistence: Continuous enrollment from semester to semester toward graduation (Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999).

Academic success: Achieving a GPA of a 2.0 (“C”) in all courses attempted in a semester on a grading scale of 4.0 (“A”) (CC, 2013).

Cultural capital: A person’s social assets that support social mobility beyond economic means, including exposure to various social situations, intelligence, quality of educational experiences, style of speech, dress, and physical appearance. Parents may or may not provide their children with cultural capital by transmitting the attitudes and knowledge needed to succeed in the current educational system (Wells, 2008).

Emotional intelligence (EI): “An array of non-cognitive capabilities, competencies, and skills that influence one’s ability to succeed in coping with environmental demands and pressures” (Bar-On, 2004, p. 14).

First-generation college student: Those students whose parents have not attended any postsecondary education (Strayhorn, 2006, p. 83)

Lived experiences: Those experiences that involve our immediate, prereflective consciousness of life (Van Manen, 1990).

Social capital: The information, values, norms, standards, and expectations for education as communicated to individuals through the interpersonal relationships they share with others (Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012, p. 246).

Traditional-age students: Students who attend college upon completion of high school studies or the issuance of a GED, whether or not there are intervening life experiences such as employment or military service, averaging from 18 to 24 years-old (Hoyert & O'Dell, 2009).

Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations, and Scope

I assumed that the respondents in this study would participate willingly and would truthfully share their experiences about their first semester of community college. I assumed that the purposeful sampling strategy and voluntary nature would identify participants who were willing and able to reflect on and articulate their experiences. Another assumption I needed to be aware of was whether the students would be willing to answer my questions and able to articulate answers.

I am an educator who has worked with college-aged students for 10 years and with special education students of all ages since 1975. Owing to those experiences, I brought assumptions about student readiness, capacity to communicate, and student willingness and ability to engage to this study. I had to be particularly careful to describe behaviors rather than to label them.

Because I live in the primarily rural region near where this study took place and am familiar with the school districts that feed into the community college, I brought assumptions about student readiness, especially around the availability of technology. Owing to the rural and mountainous nature of this region, availability of phone and Internet services varies widely. Some high schools in the region have far higher levels of technology availability and training than other schools. I assumed that students who came from regional schools were likely to have varying technological skills and access. I also assumed that the students who volunteered to be interviewed would be willing to share personal experiences with me.

The study has several limitations. First, the results of this study are specific to first-year students at one community college and may not be generalizable to other community college populations. Second, the participants in the study represent a specific group in a specific context and focus on the students' unique experiences in that context. Finally, one of the limitations of the phenomenological approach is that the discoveries cannot be generalized (Creswell, 2007; Van Manen, 1990). The small sample size from student enrollment at a particular community college may not represent the majority of first-year student experiences.

A further limitation was the fact that I was not able to begin visiting general education classes with my recruiting questionnaire until almost midsemester. Ideally, I would have begun visiting classes very early in the semester in order to gather the impressions of beginning students. In addition, at midsemester, students' availability became more limited due to course due dates and holiday working hours.

The study was delimited to a sample group of freshman during first semester acquired by visiting specific general education classes. A phenomenological study is typically limited to small numbers of participants. There were 12 participants partly because it was almost midsemester when I began gathering the potential population and partly because of the time it would take to collect in-depth data through personal in-depth interviews. I purposely chose only students who were 18 to 24 years old, going to college for the first time, and spoke English as their first language. The population and the findings can be compared to similar studies on community college students in the United States. Those researchers, staff, and faculty who work with 18 to 24 year-old students will recognize the descriptions of the students I interviewed. The study was designed for scrutiny of freshman students' thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a subjective manner to gain information in the form of student voices that may contribute in discovering insights concerning student behavior, especially during first semester of the first year.

Significance of the Study

This study served several purposes. Students' accounts of their experiences built a knowledge base for me, community college faculty, and student services staff. The study added to the literature that uses students' voices to promote faculty and staff understanding of first-year challenges.

One goal for this study was to add to the literature the voices of community college students expressing themselves about the challenges and successes of their first semester at a community college. Although one can locate dozens of quantitative studies with data related to retention, attrition, transfer, and graduation rates, there is an absence of studies containing the stories behind the statistics. In addition, there is an absence of literature derived from the voices of students from community colleges. The social change that this study may influence is to add to the understanding of the multiple and complicated challenges that traditionally aged community college students face in trying to persist in postsecondary education.

Summary

Chapter 1 included an introduction to this study. Students between the ages of 18 and 24 are increasingly enrolling in community colleges and include unprecedented numbers of minority, disadvantaged, and nontraditional students who are often less academically prepared than their peers. Although completion and retention statistics have been regularly studied for traditionally aged 4-year college students, less information is available for understanding the experiences of first-year 18 to 24 year-old community college students and what competes with or prevents their individual academic success. The needs of students who enter college underprepared exceed academic preparation. Impediments toward academic progress may comprise combinations of factors such as prior academic underachievement or preparation, lack of commitment to educational objectives, and excessive work or family responsibilities. Other dynamics include inadequate motivation, unrealistic beliefs about preparedness for college, and inefficient study and time management skills. In addition, students may be immature and lack experience in the social skills necessary to navigate the college environment. Little research to date has drawn information directly from the students. Evidence beyond solely quantitative data could contribute to a better understanding of students and their early college experiences. The purpose of this study was to examine first-person accounts of the college experiences of first-year students at a community college to identify the factors that the students themselves report as challenges.

A comprehensive review of the literature examining those factors follows in Chapter 2. The focus of the literature review examined groups of factors, which may stimulate a better understanding of first-year community college students.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the variety of factors that engender or prevent academic success through listening to what first-year community college students have to say about their experiences. The key ideas explored during in-depth interviews were the role of the family and social culture as they influenced the decision to pursue postsecondary education, how students prioritized the commitment to academics, and an individual’s strengths and weaknesses in academic abilities or preparation. This literature review contains theoretical and research writing from scholars in human development theory, emotional intelligence self-efficacy, and qualitative research methods, specifically phenomenology, because it contributed to the conceptual framework for the study.

In preparation for conducting this phenomenological study, I did an extensive review of the professional literature. I began this literature review by searching for research studies concerning the cognitive and affective development of late adolescents enrolled in college and moving into what used to be called young adulthood and is now referred to as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004). To avoid focusing solely on human development in general, I narrowed my search to articles and studies that specifically targeted traditionally aged first-year community college students and then to qualitative articles and studies that sought to identify, recognize, and listen to the voices of those students. I felt that it was important also to focus on the last 5 years (2009–2015) since the economic downturn has influenced more young people to enroll in community colleges (Levin & Kater, 2013; Mullin & Phillippe, 2011). The results of this study may provide insight into student support systems that aim to support underprepared students at the beginning of their first year. Such practices may positively influence the retention and degree-completion rates of underprepared 18- to 24-year-old students. In this chapter, I explored the areas of scholarship that related to the problem and phenomenon that are the focus of this study.

Chapter 2 represents the literature on first-year community college students and their development and the methods used to perform the literature search. Successive sections provide a review of the literature related to the lives of first-year community college students as well as the conceptual framework. I concluded the chapter with a review of literature related to interviewing as a qualitative research method for understanding first-year community college students. Reports and working papers sponsored by government agencies, universities, educational associations, and private foundations have been included, especially those which have been published since the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2009 (SAFRA). SAFRA proposed a federal investment in America’s community colleges, after President Obama announced new goals to increase college accessibility and affordability and promote the development of a highly trained workforce prepared to meet global economic needs. Several dissertations completed from 2008 to 2014 were included in the literature review because of their relevance to the research problem. The literature review includes research articles related to developmental, affective, self-efficacy, and sociocultural concerns regarding community college students published in peer-reviewed journals over the last decade.

Literature Search Methods

I built the literature review in the style of moving toward my subjects as if with a camera through a progressively widening lens. I began with Piaget because of his proposed progression in the adolescent years from concrete to abstract thinking and widened the view to encompass current voices about who today's community college students are and what they have to say about their own development and experiences. The literature review was guided by the following factors: student cognitive and affective development, social and cultural capital, college culture, college enrollment trends, retention and attrition, and factors complicating successful completion of community college courses. Literature examined also concerned the role of the family and social culture as they influence the decision to pursue postsecondary education, how students prioritize the commitment to academics, and an individual's strengths and weaknesses in academic abilities or preparation.

Journal articles from peer-reviewed journals included in the literature review were gathered primarily through searches of EBSCOhost, Academic Research Complete, ProQuest, SAGE, and ERIC databases, in addition to Education: a SAGE Full-Text Collection, SAGE Premier, Education Research Complete, and SocINDEX with Full Text from the Walden University Library. Reports and studies were included from appropriate academic organization Web sites such as those of the AACC, the CCRC, and the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC). Relevant dissertations were located through the ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database through the Walden University Library.

Among search terms used in the database searches were *underprepared students, first-generation, traditional college students, community college students, community college readiness, rural community college, rural community, family support, parent support, social capital, cultural capital, at-risk college student, persistence, educational attainment, student challenges and barriers, first-time students*, *completion*, and *retention*.

In addition, resources for the literature review were located by examining the references cited in the peer-reviewed journal articles located through the database searches. Full-text versions of the articles and reports that appeared relevant were located and evaluated for inclusion. Most of the scholarly books cited in the dissertation are books I owned or added to my collection as I delved into the material concerning the cognitive and affective development of late adolescents enrolled in community college.

Common themes in the literature review included work–life balance, first year, first generation, active versus passive learning, motivation, time management and study skills, unrealistic beliefs and expectations, perceived barriers, persistence, and social capital.

Work–Life Balance

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, community college enrollment shifted from 1993 to 2009, reflecting more students between the ages of 18 and 24. Those students typically arrived underprepared to meet the demands of college courses (AACC, 2012; Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey, & Jenkins, 2007; Mullin, 2012). Often these students are enrolled part time and work to support themselves, pay for college, or contribute to family income.

According to the AACC, for 2011– 2012, 22% of full-time students were employed full time and 40% were employed part time (“Fast Facts,” 2015). As emerging adults, these young people are still developing identity and time management skills, so they may struggle to prioritize academic tasks over work schedules. Some employers make this difficult by expecting students to work late hours and be on call (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & DuPont, 2009; Tannock & Flocks, 2003). A 2009 Public Agenda Report by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation compiled the following facts:

- Sixty-six percent of community college students work more than 20 hours a week (Orozco & Cauthen, 2009, p. 6).
- More than a quarter work more than 36 hours a week (Orozco & Cauthen, 2009, p. 6).
- “Most students leave college because they are working to support themselves and going to school at the same time the stress of work and study just becomes too difficult” (Johnson et al., 2009, p. 4).

One student in Johnson et al.’s (2009) focus groups related,

> Yeah, I think [working and going to school] was hard. You want to work so that you can help pay off [your tuition and loans] so you don’t have this accumulating debt. I think, for me, it always got in the way. I didn’t have enough time in the day to get everything done. (p. 6)

Another young woman pointed out,

> It’s very hard because I go to school three nights a week. I work from 8 to 5. I don’t get home until 9:30, 10 at night. . . . I also think my dedication to my classes could be better if I didn’t work as much. (p. 6)

The task of balancing course work, roommates, work, finances, and family and personal relationships in an unfamiliar environment is daunting for students who may be coming from a world where most of their basic needs were provided. Even if they came from an environment where they may have had responsibility for their own care, they are unaccustomed to the social and academic expectations of a postsecondary education.

First Generation

The enrollment of first-generation students in higher education has been significantly increasing over the past decade (Strayhorn, 2006). With the influx of younger students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, more are the first in their families to attend college. First-generation students face varied challenges. The traditional groups, including African American, Latino, and Asian students, are most often represented in the first-generation statistics, although more White students are joining this group (AACC, 2012; Bergerson, 2007; Padgett et al., 2012). First-generation community college students encounter the same challenges as other first-year students, in addition to lacking models for college success within their families of origin, feeling different from their family members, and possibly being criticized for trying to change. They may also have family responsibilities for bringing in income and taking care of relatives, sharing transportation, and challenging perceptions about how they will be viewed by others at the community college (Ahern & Norris, 2010; Bahrassa, Syed, Su,

& Lee, 2011; Sanchez, Esparza, Colon, & Davis, 2010; Stieha, 2010a). Additionally, language barriers can create numerous problems, such as feeling embarrassed about asking for help, speaking one language at home and having to use English at school, and difficulty following the pace of academic class lectures and directions (Gardner, 2007; Morales, 2012).

Active Versus Passive Learning and Agency

Having had 12 years or more of being prepared for standardized tests, many students arrive at community college with no understanding that learning is their responsibility. Students often ask what is going to be on tests and struggle when asked to generate their own ideas for writing essays or participate in discussions. Whitney (2011) discovered in a conversation with students that they often "struggle with the problems inherent in writing about topics on which they are *not* yet authorities" (p. 190). Considering Perry's position of dualism from where many students in the age group of 18 to 24 operate, it is understandable that they rely on the instructor to provide the right answer or the right way of doing things. They perceive their intellectual job to be memorizing and repeating the correct answers given by the professor. In addition, they often dislike active or cooperative learning. They prefer facts and figures and are not at ease with abstract concepts, frequently placing blame on their instructors, the course requirements, and other influences outside of themselves. They may hold the belief that their abilities are already fixed when they enter college (Ankeny & Lehmann, 2010; Bickerstaff et al., 2012; Capps, 2010; Dweck, 2006; Karp & Bork, 2012; Rings, 2001; Sorkhabi & Strage, 2011; Whitney, 2011).

Time Management and Study Skills

Along with immature ideas about how to learn, young first-year students lack effective time management and study skills. They believe they can manage a full load or more credits while at the same time they profess to have done very little in high school. These students also attempt to maintain full-time or part-time work schedules and find the time not only to attend class but also to use the library, the writing center, or other campus services, as well as finding the time to study and complete assignments. Rings (2001) cited the challenges of inadequate study skills, time management, an inability to organize and categorize information, an inability to distinguish important from unimportant information, and an inability to think logically and critically. Gardenhire-Crooks et al. (2006) recorded student beliefs that college courses were more difficult than what they were asked to do in high school and that their high schools did not prepare them well for college-level work. In the same study, they reported students saying that they tried to study daily but had to fit it in around family life, work schedules, and other interruptions. Other students reported having difficulty with focus either because of fatigue or because they were unaccustomed to sustained focusing. Another consideration raised by the studies was the issue of sleep deprivation. According to Gaultney (2011), “many college students are older adolescents and are still dealing with adolescent physiology such as a biologically driven delayed sleep phase” (p. 91). Students try to cope with sleep deprivation by making up for lost sleep by increasing sleep on the weekends, which actually worsens the problem. Sleep deficits have been associated with deficits in attention and academic performance, drowsy driving, risk-taking behavior and depression, impaired social relationships, and poorer health. Among college students who carried a full academic load, those who reported poorer sleep quality were likely to perform poorly on academic tests. Gaultney's data indicate a considerable number of college students may be at risk for sleep disorders or poor sleep hygiene, which in turn may affect academic success.

Developmental Perspectives

Developmental theory has had substantial emphasis guiding student achievement. Considering what a student aged 18 to 24 may bring to the first year of community college, the importance of understanding how that student operates cognitively and affectively is clear. Because community colleges have open enrollment policies, a wide array of students with varying levels of cognitive and affective development arrive in community college classrooms. Open enrollment allows students to enroll in college-level courses without entrance requirements such as a prescribed GPA or achievement test scores. The varying degrees of social and cultural capital and academic preparation with which students arrive may affect their ability to succeed and persist in college. According to Wells (2008), students may arrive without the skills to perceive or overcome academic and social barriers:

> Such barriers may be associated with low family income or wealth, low parental education, or the poor, ill-resourced schools that students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds often attend, all of which may result in less access to the financial, social, cultural, and academic resources that aid in the college-going process. (p. 26)

Wells pointed out the differences in social and cultural capital that students from lower SES, first generation college students, and ethnicity may bring with them. She discussed how persistence in postsecondary education is affected by factors associated with varying levels and types of social and cultural capital. Students must be able to “juggle the demands and rigor that becoming a young adult entails such as striking a balance among developing independent living skills, limiting excessive personal diversion, and cultivating strong academic skills” (Walsh-Portillo, 2008, p. 9). Walsh-Portillo emphasized that any combination of factors may be so substantial that balancing priorities is beyond their abilities or simply overwhelming. Owing to their backgrounds, underprepared first-year community college students may not have developed cognitive, affective, and social skill sets adequate for coping with college demands. According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), building intellectual competence, knowledge acquisition, critical thinking skills, and the capacity for analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and creation of ideas are important for 18 to 24 year-old college students. Nevertheless, in combination with less developed affective and social skills, developing cognitive skills in academics may become secondary. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reviewed and synthesized the research of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s to determine how college affects students. In their book *How college affects students*, they presented theories and models of student development and change in two broad sets. Developmental theories have focused primarily on the nature of change within the individual and have been dominated by psychological stage theories that focus on levels of development proceeding in an “invariant and hierarchical sequence” (p. 18). The other set of theories that can accompany developmental considerations are labeled college impact models. These models emphasize change involving interactions between and among individuals which may influence student growth along with other variables such as “gender, academic achievement, socioeconomic status, race-ethnicity, academic, cultural, social, or political climate created by faculty and students on a campus” (p. 18).

Because in this phenomenological study I was more concerned with what the students themselves have to say, the developmental theories cited in this literature serve as a framework for what may be expected of students of traditional college age rather than any explication or support for one conceptual framework or another. The variety of developmental theories seem to agree that people between 18 and 24 years of age should have reached certain milestones or be capable of certain tasks or levels of thinking.

Cognitive Development

Tinberg and Weisberger (1998) reflected on the desire and frustration of teachers and counselors to determine what their students are thinking and often frustrated staff and faculty blame themselves and frequently the students. According to Tinberg and Weisberger, instructors tend to expect students to have more knowledge and be able to do more than they are capable of.

To look for answers about where and how students are operating, educators have considered an assortment of developmental theories.

Piaget and Inhelder (1969) claimed that concrete operations and formal operations are the highest stages of cognitive development and suggested that learners may reach formal operations by age 15. In considering late adolescence and early adulthood, two problems exist. The first problem is that many people may not ever be confronted with experiences that would move them toward abstract thinking. The second is that many people may not have the capacity to move beyond concrete thinking. According to Good, Kromhout, and Mellon (1979), “from 25 to 75 percent of all adolescents and adults have not achieved formal operations, and many concrete interactions are needed for comprehension” (p. 428). Piaget suggested that cognitive development be viewed as a continuum involving the interaction of four factors, including maturation, active experience, social interaction, and a general progression of equilibrium (Piaget, 1971). In the formal operations stage, as proposed by Piaget, a person can think logically about abstract propositions and test hypotheses systematically and is capable of becoming concerned with the hypothetical, the future, and ideological problems.

The Bakken Test of Piagetian Stages (Bakken, 1995) has been utilized to measure stages of cognitive development. It consists of 21 multiple-choice questions composed of Piagetian tasks such as conservation of numbers, area, liquid, length, weight, and volume (Bakken, Thompson, Clark, Johnson, & Dwyer, 2001). Other items include problem-solving items involving classification, right-left relationship, perspective taking, reasoning, and logic. In one research study, the findings show that 73.7% of students were at the Concrete Operation Piagetian stage of cognitive development, aligning with Pascarella and Terenzini’s (1991) assertion that close to half of entering college students are not operating at advanced stages of cognitive development. In another study by Cohen and Smith-Gold (1978), “at Metropolitan State College, an inner-city, open-door, four-year institution, results indicated that more than 75 percent of students entering the college had not reached the level of Formal Operations" (p. 32). Woolfolk (2007) indicated, many people do not move beyond the concrete operations stage throughout life. In college concrete operations are not adequate to solve complicated problems. Webb (1980) asserted that instructors should not "assume that reaching adolescence or adulthood guarantees the ability to perform formal operations" (p. 96). As stated in the preceding paragraph, Woolfolk (2007) pointed out that many college students cannot perform formal operations. With the current emphasis on teaching critical thinking skills, students who function at the concrete operational stage are likely to struggle with abstract college assignments.

Piaget and Inhelder (1969) proposed that social interaction becomes more important as a child moves into the concrete operational stage, from about 7–11 years. Around age 12, approaching adolescence, an individual may pass into the period of formal operations, during which assimilation and accommodation develop. These two processes must be continuously balanced and reinforced as the individual develops the ability to manipulate concepts abstractly by engaging in a wide variety of social interactions, cognitive tasks, and quality educational opportunities. According to Piaget and Inhelder (1969), individuals are constantly trying to balance between accommodation, assimilation, and adaptation (Woolfolk, 2007). If new information or an experience does not conform to a particular schema, disequilibrium follows. College freshmen often claim that they are not learning because the professor is confusing them or not teaching them. The amount of disequilibrium must be just right. If uncertainty is not too disturbing, students may not be interested in changing. If the disequilibrium is overwhelming, students may be too uneasy or anxious to engage with it (Woolfolk, 2007). According to Bergstrom (1982), a college composition instructor,

> very often, such students don't perceive the connections between their ideas, at least on more than the most obvious level; and even more often they fail to help the reader see the relationships through the use of transitions, paragraphing, and subordinating conjunctions. They begin their essays with the first point they wish to make without giving their readers a context within which to understand it or even a reason to keep reading. They end the paper with the last point they wish to make, leaving me wondering sometimes whether I have not lost the last page of the paper. (p. 1)

Bergstrom (1982) stated that Piaget's theories have clear implications for the writing process. He found that many students arrive in college classes and approach the writing process with concrete operational strategies, while most college assignments request that they approach the writing process with formal reasoning. Bergstrom's dilemma, like that of many college teachers, is that the writers with such problems need to mature both affectively and cognitively in order to attain more sophisticated composition skills
The skills and formal reasoning necessary for college writing are also necessary for success in other college courses.

Bodner (1986) pointed out that Piaget "differentiated between physical, logico-mathematical, and social knowledge" (p. 2). Bodner was interested in determining whether students in his chemistry classes operated at concrete or abstract thinking levels. He was fascinated by the potential of Piaget's theory to clarify why his students had learning problems in chemistry. Bodner recalled a colleague, J. D. Herron, who remarked,

> The ability to classify students as concrete or formal is not as important as the realization that there are concrete operational students in our introductory courses, and even more importantly everyone reverts to concrete operational or are-operational thought whenever they encounter a new area. (p. 2)

Bodner later came to understand that all students reverted to a more familiar way of thinking to approach new concepts and material. The value of considering Piaget's ideas concerning community college students lies in several ideas. First, one cannot assume that reaching adolescence or adulthood guarantees the ability to perform formal operations. Second, the quality and type of educational opportunities during adolescence is crucial, because both the development and direction of formal operations depend on these experiences. One implication for using Piaget to understand where underprepared college students are operating is that the use of social interaction in learning experiences can promote growth in both interest and comprehension. Providing students more activities that involve interacting with their peers, the materials, and the college environment is more likely to promote the development of a variety of thinking skills than lecture and passive reading assignments.

Intellectual and Ethical Development

A college education is a challenging cognitive and affective journey as each student progresses through more complex forms of thought. Perry (1970) constructed a stage theory that examined the intellectual and ethical development of traditional college-age students based on an extensive series of interviews with Harvard College male students. In his stage model, Perry mapped the structures in which college students interpret increasingly complex experiences. Students must continually meet and cope with diversity and ambiguity and build skills to grow in learning and about self. Since Perry's original work, researchers such as Baxter Magolda (1992) have identified an important gap of gender in the existing work of Perry. She saw the need to address gender in the study and to involve both men and women. Additionally, Baxter Magolda argued that self-authorship should be the basis for learning outcomes in college to prepare students for this century. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997) built on Perry's scheme of cognitive development by interviewing women. In *Women's ways of knowing*, the authors described how women learn. In their book, they share their conclusions about how women "view reality and draw conclusions about truth knowledge and authority" (p. 3). Originally, Perry (1981) maintained that that visualization of a helix rather than a straight line or a circle might show that the expanding radius is a clearer representation of development. Perry (1970) preferred the term *position* to the term *stage* because *position* implies the place "from which a person views his world" (p. 48). Perry's nine positions of development show the varying levels of cognitive development that students in the 18–24 year age group may bring to college:

- *Dualism (Positions 1–2).* Alternative opinions or differing perspectives on the same phenomenon are likely to generate discomfort for a student who expects the instructor to provide correct answers. These students believe that all problems are solvable and that their job to learn the right solutions—that there is a right way and a wrong way and the authorities have the answers.

- *Multiplicity (Positions 3–4)*. Differing perspectives are recognized within the belief that all opinions are seen as having comparable claims on correctness. Students may still cling to a kind of dualism where there are two kinds of problems, those with known solutions and those with unknown solutions. Students may adopt the attitude that authorities do not have all the answers, so they wait for the authorities to find other authorities to provide the answers.
- *Relativism (Positions 5–6).* Analytical thinking skills develop and students recognize that not all positions are equally valid. All proposed solutions are supported by reasons within a context. Students may come to believe that some solutions are better than others, depending on context, so their task is to learn to evaluate solutions.
- *Commitments in relativism (Positions 7–9)*. The student is able make commitments to ideas, values, behaviors, and other people as part of his or her accepted beliefs and identity. Ambiguities become an essential part of identity. The student no longer struggles with uncertainty but accepts it as a part of life.

Arnett (2000) saw Perry as viewing emerging adults entering college with a worldview they learned in the course of childhood and adolescence. According to Arnett, changes in worldviews are often a central part of cognitive development during emerging adulthood. During college, students have many opportunities to question their worldviews. However, Arnett (1997) interviewed emerging adults who did not attend college who felt the same way as college students about the importance of deciding on their own beliefs and values while moving toward adult status.

Perry (1970) found that most entering college freshmen operated from the perspective of dualism. In this stage, students exhibited right–wrong thinking, which depends on authority figures to deliver right answers. They perceived their intellectual job to be memorizing and repeating the correct answers given by the professor. In addition, often they disliked active or cooperative learning. They preferred facts and figures and were not at ease with abstract concepts. Perry believed that the rate at which a student progressed through the positions could differ from one subject or issue to another. The same student might operate at different stages at the same time in different subjects. A student might be operating in the stage of multiplicity in his or her beliefs about homosexuality but at early relativism in his or her reasoning about human rights. In addition, sometimes a student may have to repeat part of the journey. Sometimes a person’s understanding of a subject may signal a readiness to move on, but emotionally he or she may not be equipped to handle it. There may be other factors at work as well, such as coming to grips with a new idea that conflicts with a person’s family or cultural values. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), “by 1981, Perry attached greater significance to the transitions between positions. He stressed that each position includes and transcends earlier positions” (p. 36). Development is recurrent and it may be fast or slow. Perry (1970) identified escapes, retreats, and temporizing within each position. Escape or retreat can lead back to a dualistic view of the world. Temporizing refers to pausing in the growth process, which may involve consolidation and deepening or may just precede drifting into escape.

Building Skills for Today's Complex World

In a different approach to cognitive stages, Kegan (1994) proposed that students might not be unmotivated or cognitively underprepared for academic demands. They are beleaguered by the multiple demands of modern life. Kegan maintained that we need clues "about how to help people meet the next demand by fostering the complexity of mind that would enable it" (p. 277). Kegan viewed human growth as the interaction between internal psychological capacities and the external demands of the environment. Kegan's views of development revolved more around the idea of complexity of mind or the way the mind learns to organize its interactions with the demands of life than around the behavioral tasks that were appropriate within a certain age range. Kegan's model suggested six orders of consciousness, which show a progression in the way the mind organizes information from sensations to perceptions and concrete categories, to consciousness about roles and reciprocity, to abstract systems and self-authorship, and finally to dialectical thinking and self-transformation.

In two major works, *The evolving self* (1982) and *In over our heads* (1994), Kegan constructed his theory of development to reflect the human ability to make sense of the world as an ongoing process from birth to death. Kegan's theory straddles the views of cognitive-structural theories and psychosocial theories. It is referred to as a constructive-developmental theory, constructive in that persons or systems construct reality, and developmental in that organic systems evolve through eras according to regular principles of stability and change. Psychosocial theories involve both psychological and social aspects. Constructive-developmental theory concerns itself with regular, progressive changes in how individuals make meaning. People are seen as "active organizers of their experience" (Kegan, 1994, p. 29). He explored not only the cognitive structures of development but also the way interactions evolve as the mind grows. Like Perry, he viewed human development as a helix rather than a linear progression through stages. According to Tinberg and Weisberger (1998), an important idea in Kegan's theory is that each individual sees the world differently according to his or her mental capabilities. In addition, they pointed out that Kegan focused on adolescence and beyond, which is important for considering beginning community college students.

One way to view Kegan's (1982) development of the mind is to think of frames of reference. He called them orders of mind. They are also referred to as distinct orders of transitional development. Each order has cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal components.

The ways of knowing in Kegan's theory important for understanding college students are contained in the second order through the fourth order. Individuals, ages 7 to10 years old, adolescents, and some adults, realize that their feelings and beliefs exist over time, and they become aware that others have beliefs and feelings that remain constant over time. Rules are regarded as constant; however, individuals may be preoccupied with trying to figure out how to get past a rule if it inhibits their desires. While empathy may not exist in this order, individuals realize that others have feelings and needs. Individuals operating at this order are self-centered and view others as being able to help or block having their needs met. At the community college level, students who have not had experiences to develop self-efficacy skills and interpersonal skills may struggle with higher education tasks for academic competence and balancing priorities. Kegan (1994) called the second order the principle of durable categories. He indicated that transformative learning happens when someone changes “not just the way he behaves, not just the way he feels, but the way he knows—not just what he knows, but the way he knows” (p. 17). This is an important correspondence to Piaget (1971), who focused on how people know, rather than on what people know, as a means for distinguishing development and cognitive reasoning in children. When students are able to operate in this stage, they can make connections between course work activities and life rather than merely going through the motions or asking for the instructor’s assistance to get through an assignment. Students who have not developed skills for transformative learning may view assignments such as discussions and collaborative group work as busywork.

For Kegan (1994) the transformation of meaning making is a distinction between that which is subject and that which is object. Things that are object are “those elements of our knowing or organizing that we can reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for, relate to each other, take control of, internalize, assimilate, or otherwise operate upon” (p. 32). It is difficult for those operating in the second order to question their beliefs and opinions. College students operating within Kegan’s second order will have difficulty with the critical thinking tasks required by college assignments or may become seriously offended by an instructor who refuses to accept essays written about certain topics such as abortion, creationism, or same-sex marriage. They have accepted without question what they have heard from their parents and other authorities and cannot understand that others have conflicting views. Webb (1980) made a similar connection using Piaget’s concepts of assimilation and accommodation, pointing out that within each person there is an internal self-regulation mechanism that responds to environmental stimulation by constantly fitting new experiences into existing cognitive structures (assimilation) and revising these structures to fit the new data (accommodation). If the existing cognitive structures are limited by immaturity or lack of exposure to a variety of people and situations, then, according to Eriksen (2008),

> the biggest and most unproductive mistake authorities make in response to teens or adults, who have not progressed beyond the imperial balance, whether in family, school, or clinical settings, is expecting such people to function as the interpersonal adults they physically appear to be. (p. 293)

First-year college students between the ages of 18 and 24 certainly look like adults; however, they may still act and socialize in ways that resemble early and middle teenagers. They may have no idea that learning is a personal responsibility and may express the belief that learning is something that teachers are supposed to make happen. They may make repeated requests for second chances and makeup work, professing not to have understood the finality of a due date. They may openly complain about the strictness of the course policies and the amount of work expected. They may demand credit for their efforts even if what they turn in does not meet assignment guidelines or correspond with assigned text material. In the third order, individuals regard information as valid because the experts or authorities said it was. Adolescents and a majority of the adult population may have the ability to include the needs of others. They recognize the feelings and emotions of others. According to Bugenhagen & Barbuto, (2011) conflict between new values encountered in college and the values they grew up with can cause students to have difficulty making decisions. This can lead to inactivity or anxiety.

There is no self outside of those around them (Kegan, 1994). According to Eriksen (2008), instructors and staff should provide explicit direction and feedback to students operating in Stage 3 because they still require “authority-based experience” (p. 238).

According to Bugenhagen and Barbuto (2011),

> we cannot make the assumption that each student is entering college with a similar level of maturity or meaning making. In fact, the literature on college student development suggests that students enter college with a wide variety of developmental levels. (p. 613)

At this stage, a person learns to subordinate durable categories to the interactions between them. The skill to be more objective about the world and not be completely subject to ideas, feelings, or the outside world is an essential developmental step. Instructors and staff working with traditionally aged college students need to determine how to create bridging experiences that promote integration of learning for college students. First-year students are often enrolled in general studies programs with no idea what major to choose. They may have difficulty making connections between course work and life and work.

In the fourth level of Kegan’s stages of development, adults have the potential to see themselves, others, knowledge, feelings, and morals as part of a complex system. This capacity of mind allows individuals to take perspective on their own meaning-making systems and those of others. They are able to separate the self from authority. Kegan saw this capacity potentially developing because of the demands of modern life where change is constant and diversity a fact of life (Kegan, 1994). Application across contexts and synthesis are important tasks during the fourth order. Barber (2012) referred to these tasks as transfer of learning, in which one applies the skills and knowledge from one context to another. Barber pointed out, “For college students, the majority of life’s day-to-day activities, problems, and choices are neither disciplinary nor interdisciplinary. The world is more complex than that and rarely organized into orderly disciplines” (p. 607). College instructors may make the mistake of expecting students to operate at the fourth level when they arrive in college classes. Because their prior educational experiences have not prepared them adequately, they lack the background to succeed at college-level work. An approach of creating bridging or scaffolding exercises may help students make transitions into higher orders of thinking.

Reflection and Problem Solving

Other ways of understanding what students are thinking and ways in which they operate and view the world can be discovered in the works of King and Kitchener (1994) and Baxter Magolda (1992). King and Kitchener’s (1994) model of reflective judgment provides a framework for educators to help students enhance their problem-solving ability by learning to make strong conclusions about difficult problems. They built their model on the work of Perry (1970), Piaget (1971), Dewey (1933), and others, as well as interviews with more than 1,700 people. This reflective judgment model was developed based on King and Kitchener's belief that Perry's scheme was inadequate because some individuals reason with assumptions that are beyond the positions defined by Perry. According to them, reflective judgment develops through seven stages. The seven stages are provided here to illustrate the limits in thinking skills that students in the 18- to 24-year-old age group may bring to community college:

> *Stage 1.* Characterized by a very simple belief system that consists of only one category. Students may believe only what they have seen and thus know to be true. It is the "epitome of cognitive simplicity" (King & Kitchener, 1994, p. 50).
>
> *Stage 2.* Individuals believe that a true reality can be known with certainty but perhaps is not known by everyone. In this stage, "beliefs are unexamined and unjustified" (Love & Guthrie, 1999, p. 45).
>
> *Stage 3.* Knowing includes the acknowledgment that authorities may not currently have the truth in all areas. In this stage, "evidence for beliefs starts to come into play, but it must point directly to the right answer and cannot be open to interpretation" (Love & Guthrie, 1999, p. 45).
>
> *Stage 4.* Individuals come to believe that one cannot know with certainty about many issues. Love and Guthrie (1999) pointed out, "In many cases evidence is chosen specifically because it validates prior beliefs" (p. 46).

Stage 5. Knowledge is contextual and subjective. Ability to coordinate evidence and arguments "into a well-reasoned argument is not yet developed, nor is the ability to compare and contrast evidence across contexts" (Love & Guthrie, 1999, p. 47).

Stage 6. Knowing is a process requiring the individual's active involvement (Love & Guthrie, 1999, p. 47).

Stage 7. This stage is "characterized by the belief that although an absolute reality cannot be assumed, one can synthesize interpretations of evidence and opinion into reasonable, cohesive, and justifiable conjectures" (Love & Guthrie, 1999, p. 48).

According to King and Kitchener (1994), "first-year college students typically have been assessed at 3.5 on the Reflective Judgment Interview (RJI), with only one sample of academically talented college freshmen averaging above 4.0" (p. 44). Similarly, Baxter Magolda (1992) found evidence that the progression of women's "ways of knowing" did not fit in well with Perry's positions. She conducted a 5-year qualitative study of 101 randomly selected university students 1986 in which women and men were equally represented. Drawing on her interviews with these students over their college careers and 1 year later, Baxter Magolda developed a model of epistemological reflection comprising four reasoning patterns: absolute knowing, transitional knowing, independent knowing, and contextual knowing. Like the research being conducted for this study, she believed that ways of knowing and patterns of knowing are socially constructed and that the best way to explore these patterns is through naturalistic or qualitative inquiry, so the context of student stories is important. The four patterns she found are related to gender, but not dictated by gender (Baxter Magolda, 1992). The governing patterns within the theory relate to absolute knowing, transitional knowing, independent knowing, and contextual knowing.

> *Absolute knowing.* Students believe knowledge exists as a certainty and is possessed by certain authorities, specifically teachers.
>
> *Transitional knowing.* Students believe some areas of knowledge are certain and some are uncertain.
>
> *Independent knowing.* Students recognize that they have the capacity and the right to possess and express knowledge—to think independently.
>
> *Contextual knowing.* Students understand the process of making judgments, and integrating and applying knowledge, within a context.

Important implications for this model are learning ways to challenge and support students in developing the skills to speak up for themselves and what they know. In addition, college staff and instructors can help students learn from their peer relationships and build relationships with faculty and staff based on mutual respect. Baxter Magolda's (2001) later work presents more evidence from interviews illustrating observations about these phases as students moved through them toward self-authorship. Among the skills associated with self-authorship are forming an integrated identity, developing mature relationships, cognitively maturing, deciphering ambiguity, and learning independently. Students who are struggling in any one of these areas may not be able to give their full attention to college tasks. Independent learning is especially difficult for students who have just arrived from high school where they have been taught to the test to meet state learning standards.

Additional evidence for difficulties with giving full attention to college tasks comes from Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), who pointed out that because students must come to terms with new ideas, new people, different and more difficult academic demands, and new experiences the information overload of college creates “a form of culture shock requiring significant social and psychological relearning” (p. 61). In addition, what they may be facing in their work and social lives can cause students to become overwhelmed to the point of paralysis

Cognitive-structural theories focus on the nature and processes of change and provide a useful backdrop for investigating how first-year students operate. An understanding of the nature of change in college students is also essential to building programs and services that will be of the most help. The preceding review of the theories is by no means comprehensive, but it does focus on a few theories that may be useful in determining how and in what ways first-year community college students are functioning.

Psychosocial Development

Stages of Psychosocial Development

Whereas cognitive-structural theories account for the ways individuals grow and change, concentrating on how people think in an effort to give meaning to their worlds, psychosocial theories emphasize the content of development. In psychosocial theories, the focus is on long-term issues occurring in sequence and correlated with chronological age, concentrating on progress through various stages or patterns by accomplishing certain deeds. Many of the current psychosocial theories applicable to college students were built on the work of Erikson (1959, 1963, 1968). Erikson placed emphasis on social context and strengths built during the course of life. Three elements are included in Erikson’s work. First, the epigenetic principle implies sequential, age-related, biological, and psychological development. Second, epigenetic theory focuses on the dynamic interaction between the genetic origins of behavior and environmental forces. According to Erikson, development occurs through a series of crises, intervals for decision, and those significant choices that present alternative courses of action. The results can be developmental progression, regression, or stasis. Third, Erikson considered the identity versus identity confusion crisis (Stage 5) as the dominant developmental task for people of traditional college age. Although Erikson claimed that each stage is built on the successful completion of earlier stages, mastery of a stage is not required to move into the next stage. If tasks are not successfully completed in any stage, a person may experience similar situations as complications in the future. College-aged students may exhibit any number of characteristics from earlier decisions in this stage, which typically begins around age 13. Features may linger from the preceding stages—basic trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority (Erikson, 1968). The existential question posed by college-aged students is, Who am I and what can I be, and an individual’s actions toward resolving that question can be colored by how the questions at previous stages were resolved. For example, at the earlier stage labeled industry versus inferiority, the existential question is, Can I make it in the world of people and things? Reactions to this inner state of affairs are evident in the actions of students who appear lost or indifferent and do not seem able to adapt to college social and academic demands. As individuals attempt to cope with new social and academic demands, success leads to a sense of competence, while failure results in feelings of inferiority (Woolfolk, 2007).

Based on Erikson’s theory on establishment of an identity as the dominant developmental task, Chickering (1969) proposed that college student development encompasses differentiation and integration as students encounter an often-snowballing onslaught of ideas, values, and other people and struggle to reconcile these new positions with their own ideas, values, and beliefs. When Chickering and Reisser (1993) revised Chickering’s (1969) seven vectors of development, they “tried to use language that is gender free and appropriate for persons of diverse backgrounds” (p. 44). The seven vectors are as follows: (a) developing competence (b) managing emotions, (c) moving through autonomy toward interdependence, (d) developing mature interpersonal relationships, (e) establishing identity, (f) developing purpose, and (g) developing integrity. It is important to note that the seven vectors are not hierarchical and that the rate of movement along any of the vectors may vary, and progress is not stage like. Chickering and Reisser (1993) preferred the term *vectors* rather than *stages* because *stages* implies a sequential movement from one to the next, whereas vectors can be viewed as maps. They also noted that movement along any vector could bring proficiency in new skills, self-confidence, mindfulness, and emotional stability, although intermittent backward movement and retracing steps may occur. Chickering and Reisser (1993) emphasized that college faculty have a great deal of responsibility for nurturing students as they negotiate the tasks of the seven vectors. According to Dalton and Crosby (2007), identity is entrenched in the roots of family, heritage, ethnicity, religion, race, gender, and subculture, which serves to support and ground stduents. In addition, Dalton and Crosby insist, "But there is much that is hidden about these young strangers, and we need to know them more fully if we are to make college a truly transforming experience for them" (p. 4). What must be considered, however, is that often the social and cultural capital that students bring with them from their families, communities, schools, and experiences is either inadequate to manage the demands of college or gets in the way. Chickering and Reisser (1993) tried to bring knowledge and practice closer together by identifying seven areas where they believe colleges and universities can encourage student development along each of the seven vectors: (a) clear and consistent objectives; (b) institutional size; (c) student–faculty relationships; (d) an educationally powerful curriculum; (e) teaching that calls for active learning and encourages student–faculty contact and cooperation among students; and (f) friendships and student communities. Student development programs and services are characterized by their educational content and purpose and are offered collaboratively with faculty.

A Proposed New Developmental Stage

In the 21st century, new information has developed that asks whether there is an in-between stage after adolescence and before adulthood that can be reasonably distinguished from adolescence. According to Gibbons and Ashdown (2006), there is a lack of studies that recognize college students operate in a distinct developmental stage.

In addition to Perry (1970, 1998), Gibbons and Ashdown noted the scarcity of theories regarding the development of college-age individuals. Arnett (2000) proposed a new developmental period affirming that emerging adults are truly distinct from adolescents. From his extensive interview studies, Arnett (2004) has offered five significant characteristics of emerging adulthood—identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and experiencing a range of possibilities. The theory of emerging adulthood proposed by Arnett expands on and combines tasks from Erikson's stages of industry versus inferiority, identity versus role confusion, and intimacy versus isolation. In addition, Arnett proposed that social changes, such as the availability of birth control, have contributed to a dramatic rise in the typical ages of entering marriage and parenthood, as has the increase in the years dedicated to pursuing higher education. Arnett (2004) emphasized,

> Emerging adulthood and young adulthood should be distinguished as two separate periods. "Young adulthood" is better applied to those in their thirties, who are still young but are definitely adult in ways those in the late teens through the mid-twenties are not. (p. 19)

One consideration is that the brain development of emerging adults may not be complete. The amygdala and the frontal cortex undergo important changes during this stage. These areas are responsible for coordinating thought, behavior, and action. Arnett's (2011) most recent collection *Debating emerging adulthood* posits that economic, technological, and cultural changes during the late 20th century and beginning of the 21st century have created conditions in which the traditional ideas about moving from adolescence into adulthood have changed almost beyond recognition. Arnett originally studied hundreds of Americans ages 18 to 29 from diverse social classes and ethnic backgrounds. He emphasized that the five features of emerging adulthood were applied specifically to Americans and could not be generalized to young people of other counties. More recently research has emerged that has studied young people in Asia, North and South America, and Europe, showing that a new life stage has been identified in industrialized countries around the world (Badger, Nelson, & Barry, 2006; Douglass, 2007; Galambos & Martínez, 2007; Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2012; Skaletz & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010). Tanner (2008) asserted that as an individual moves through the transitions from a dependent child to becoming a fully independent person, the balance of the adolescent asserting independence and the parents providing an appropriate amount of support is crucial. Because emerging adults are experiencing identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and a wide range of possibilities, they need psychological and emotional support to discover and make use of resources appropriate to help them grow (Arnett, 2004).

How College Influences Development

Approaches that are often referred to in the college retention and persistence literature are college impact models, including those of Weidman (1989), Astin (1999), Tinto (1993), and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005). These models emphasize the interactions between and among individuals, which influence student growth. Gender; academic achievement; SES; race-ethnicity; and academic, cultural, social, or political climate created by faculty and students on a campus are other variables that come into play to influence student growth. Peter Gomes (as cited in Lewis, 2006), Harvard University chaplain, claimed that his university was guilty of treating students “like a brain on a stick” (p. 100). Dalton and Crosby (2007) pointed out that “Gomes’s metaphor suggested that disproportionate focus on cognitive processes in college might result in a kind of brain drain, an emptying out of emotions, passions, beliefs, attitudes, impulses so that what is left is cold rationality and untainted objectivity” (p. 2). Whether they realize it or not, college students are enrolled in a developmental and social curriculum that could augment or interfere with their academic curriculum. Faculty members are often guilty of lacking this realization too. While one certainly expects students to dedicate effort and motivation to courses, a view of what else is going on may assist in designing assignments and course policies that contribute to both cognitive and affective development. Student development models help institutions understand and design interventions to help individual and groups of students succeed, while college impact models help institutions identify and change the institutional structures that enhance or inhibit student learning and development. Faculty and staff must look at all students over a substantial period and take into account the great diversity in student goals to plan for and foster student success.

Astin’s (1999) theory of student development could be useful for guiding research of student development and designing appropriate learning environments. He defined student involvement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 518). He used the term *involvement* to imply a behavioral component. Astin emphasized what the individual does rather than what an individual thinks or feels. With that in mind, Astin assumed five points about involvement:

> 1. It requires the investment of physical and psychological energy.
> 2. It occurs along a continuum.
> 3. It has both quantitative and qualitative features.
> 4. Student learning and personal development are proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement.
> 5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement. (p. 519)

Astin (1999) acknowledged that the mental and physical time and energy of students are limited, so educators must always compete with other dynamics in the students' lives for a share of that time and energy. Astin's (1975) theory of student involvement began with a longitudinal study of college dropouts that endeavored to identify factors in the college environment that significantly affect persistence in college. According to Saenz et al. (2011), findings from the 2010 CCCSE study indicate that students who show the least amount of engagement are at greater risk of dropping out. Their analysis showed results that "identified three distinct patterns of engagement among 15 clusters: low, diverse, and high engagers. When comparing the extremes, we found that certain clusters of students were either consistently detached from their school environments or highly involved on all fronts" (p. 255). A limitation of the study was that it did not offer reasons why students are detached or involved. The focus of Saenz et al. was to determine what student services could do to maximize overall student engagement more effectively. In an analysis, Jenkins and Cho (2011) examined program entry and completion. Their sample included 20,220 first-time college students who enrolled in one of an anonymous group of community colleges in the same state in 2005–2006. They analyzed 5-year educational outcomes for first-time community college students, including what they labeled "Concentrators, Failed Attempters, and Non-attempters" (p. 6); however, the focus was on program recommendations rather than student traits that would influence engagement or failing to engage.

Others who have addressed the concept of college's impact on students have asked questions about other dynamics in the students' lives are Weidman (1989), Tinto (1993), Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), Karp and Hughes (2008), and O'Gara, Karp, and Hughes (2009). Sociological models denote a particular role to the context in which students act and think. Community college structures, policies, programs, and services, as well as the attitudes, values, and behaviors of others, are all potential influences for change or retreat. Students can be active or passive participants in the change process, influenced by their environments. A combination of developmental models and sociological models can provide a more complete picture of today's community college students and what they face.

While Astin's theory of involvement explained the dynamics of how students change or develop, Weidman (1989) maintained that it is important to understand both the individual and the groups or memberships that influence the individual. Weidman's model of undergraduate socialization emphasizes student background characteristics that represent their abilities, goals, values, and SES. The model includes variables for representing socializing influences that students experience during college. Those variables are socialization with faculty and peers and influences from family members and employers.

In contrast, Tinto (1993) focused on why students withdraw from college. He maintained that negative encounters could lead students to withdraw, while positive encounters may influence students to invest in the college experience. He asserted,

> To be serious about student retention, institutions would recognize that the roots of attrition lie not only in their students and the situations they face, but also in the very character of the educational settings, now assumed to be natural to higher education, in which they ask students to learn. (p. 9)

Karp, O'Gara, and Hughes (2008) pointed out that students who arrive at community college lacking social and cultural capital often do not take advantage of available support services. Students lacking such capital are further disadvantaged because they may not take advantage of valuable opportunities that could encourage their persistence. Karp et al. pointed out that lower class children have few or no opportunities to higher status cultural capital. Reasoning that community colleges inadvertently shift the locus of success or failure away from the structure of the institution and onto the student, their research focused on exploring how institutional support services contribute to or hinder student progress toward a degree. They interviewed community college students to explore the ways that support services, intended to increase the likelihood of success for disadvantaged students, privilege those students who possess social and cultural capital. Karp et al. intended that their findings be seen as a jumping-off point to examine the ways that low-income and otherwise disadvantaged students are served within the community college.

Mental Health

At any developmental stage, something can go awry. The pressures of college may bring on or exacerbate anxiety, depression, physiological reactions to stress, or more serious mental health conditions. Chickering (1969) noted that college students encounter an often-snowballing onslaught of ideas, values, and other people. While struggle to reconcile these new positions with their own ideas, values, and beliefs, they could struggle with the first two vectors, developing competence and managing emotions.

Shanley and Johnston (2008) said students may wonder "if they are smart enough to continue the string of As and Bs, maybe Cs, they compiled in high school" (p. 3). If they completed high school with a lower GPA, they may wonder if they can handle college courses at all. Shanley and Johnston added, "First-year students arrive for orientation amid a bunch of other students the same age and equally scared. Even outgoing students who had a plethora of friends in high school felt intimidated" (p. 4). Students may also harbor worries about finding their way around, if there will be pressure to participate in social events, or if they will be safe on campus.

Arnett (2000) proposed five characteristics of emerging adulthood—identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and experiencing a range of possibilities. Those characteristics combined with the new academic and social environment of college could potentially precipitate reactions of anxiety, depression, sleep deprivation, or physiological reactions to stress.

In a study about students at University College Dublin Gibney, Moore, Murphy, and O'Sullivan (2011) noted, arrival on campus generates new challenges that in turn may engender new anxieties adding that skills for managing challenges and time will be effective only if they are introduced early and reinforced often. In their study, they reported incoming students described "a wide range of anxieties" (p. 359).

Cox (2009) reported that for the first-year community college students she interviewed beginning college was enormously stressful. Students who were uncertain about potential degree paths, course work, and navigating a new environment with strangers, reported feeling a range of emotional states "from lack of confidence to overwhelming fear" (p. 60). In the study Cox conducted with first-year students in an English Composition course, the data emphasized that profound fear of failure can obstruct students' likelihood of success.

Anxiety impairs cognitive functioning because the brain is dealing with competing demands. If an individual is in a new environment with many uncertainties, he or she may not be able to give attention to important cues or information because the fight-or-flight response has taken over in the brain. Taylor et al. (2005) discussed the fight-or-flight response focusing on the neurological and neuroendocrine responses that occur when a threat is perceived. In addition, Byron and Khazanchi (2011) suggested that anxiety can have a detrimental effect on creative performance. They pointed out, "findings provide insights into factors such as the type of anxiety, task complexity, exposure to stressors, and age that moderate the relationship between anxiety and creativity…" (p.279).

According to Lavie (2005), "simply instructing people to focus attention on a certain task is not sufficient to prevent distractor interference" (p. 81). For example, a student attending a community college orientation must deal with navigating traffic to a new destination, finding a parking place, finding the meeting location, and encountering unfamiliar faces. That person may already be experiencing anxiety from those visual and spatial demands. Upon entering the actual orientation meeting, there will likely be high visual and auditory stimulation further compounding the demands for attention. In such a situation the individual is likely to resort to familiar tasks, such as texting a friend, which further reduces attention. The selective attention necessary for listening to new information may be in conflict with the messages from the brain that there is a threatening situation. New students may miss important information that would be useful during the first semester. Students worried about social issues, such as how they are dressed or how their hair is styled, may be so consumed that they fail to hear directions about how to register, who their advisors are, or what services are available.

Vytal, Cornwell, Arkin, and Grillon (2012) noted that anxiety is adaptive, but it can reduce ability to deal with daily activities and learning. They studied the impact of worrying on executive processing resources in the brain. In their discussion they pointed out that "worrying about a social exchange" could contribute to "a racing heartbeat [which] can trigger a full-blown panic attack in an individual with a panic disorder" (p. 850). Once the panic attack begins, unless the person has training or medication to overcome it, all attention will be focused on the physical symptoms.

Katz and Davison (2014) explored community college student mental health by comparing the responses of California community college and traditional university students using the American College Health Association–National College Health Assessment II (ACHA-NCHA II). They reported that community college students have a high incidence of severe psychological concerns and access to fewer institutional mental health resources than traditional university students. Differences in access may be related to the differences between student demographics, cultural issues, and motives for attending community college. Both groups of college students can experience "feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, very lonely, very sad, and experiencing overwhelming anxiety," but community college students are less likely to report symptoms. Conversely, "community college students were more likely to report more severe concerns, including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, substance abuse, other addictions, and other mental health conditions, than traditional university students" (p. 320). They are less likely to seek help.

Misra and McKean (2000) recommended that college students be taught that time management skills have a positive influence on academic stress. In addition, they noted, "Physiological benefits from leisure activities significantly reduced academic stressors (conflict, change, and frustration) and reactions to stressors (behavioral and cognitive) among college students" (p. 45).

Multiple challenges to psychological well-being for individuals 18–24 years of age can a barrier to success for community college students. In the normal course development, issues such as establishing autonomy and identity; financial worries;

relationship concerns; fears of campus violence; academic, parental, and cultural pressures; and self-expectations require a lot of energy. If an individual already has anxiety as a trait or lacks support from home and peers, the thought of asking for help can be anxiety provoking.

Interviewing as a Suitable Qualitative Method for This Study

Demographics, retention rates, and surveys do not illustrate who the actual people are at community colleges. If instructors, advisors, and policy makers are going to make constructive changes, they must know more about who arrives in their classrooms and offices. Studies such as the one conducted by Duggan and Williams (2011) explored student success courses from the student perspective with questions about topics students find the most useful, teaching methods students find most helpful, and course design that best serves students. Mamrick (2005) advised that orientation should include activities to develop essential academic skills, to familiarize students with the campus, and to navigate campus services. Sixty community college students who completed an orientation or student success course were interviewed in the Duggan and Williams study. Overall, students reported that orientation courses delivered skills and resources necessary for succeeding in college. While this study and others like it employed interviews and reported a wide variety of student needs, there is still too little focus on getting to know the students themselves.

This study aimed to listen to students articulate challenges and barriers during their first year of community college. To obtain clues about the instructional and affective support they need to learn, it seemed logical to ask the students themselves. This has been done indirectly using surveys and questionnaires such as the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCCSE) since 2002 and the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) since 2007. These important instruments have contributed to national studies that examined the relationship between student engagement and community college student outcomes. Prior to 2002, such research focused primarily on students in 4-year colleges and universities. The CCCSE survey, directed to community college students, aims to assess institutional practices and student behaviors correlated with student learning and student retention. The five benchmarks structuring the tool serve as diagnostic points for documenting and improving institutional effectiveness over time. The benchmarks are as follows: (a) active and collaborative learning, (b) student effort, (c) academic challenge, (d) student–faculty interaction, and (e) support for learners (McClenney & Arnsparger, 2012). CCSSE reports information for each benchmark, with a standardized mean of 50, to compare performance on various benchmarks within an institution and a way to compare performance among groups of similar institutions and results for individual survey items.

SENSE serves as a complement to the CCCSE reports, narrowing the focus on early student experiences. It is designed specifically to be administered early in the academic year to help community and technical colleges focus on the beginning of the college experience. It is administered during the fourth and fifth weeks of the fall academic term to students in courses randomly selected from those most likely to enroll entering students. The six benchmarks covered by this assessment are (a) early connections, (b) high expectations and aspirations, (c) clear academic plan and pathways,

(d) effective track to college readiness, (e) engaged learning, and (f) academic and social support network. Although both questionnaires ask students to answer important questions, they are still limited by yes–no or Likert scale responses. The results obtained are quantitative data reported in terms of means, standard deviations, and frequencies.

A qualitative approach such as a phenomenological study, which employs interviews, provides individual accounts of the way a small number of individuals experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Interviews with individual students may take time, but results show that there are common themes across dozens of studies. Analyzing interviews provides a method by which researchers can better understand individuals' stories and perspectives. Participants are encouraged to elaborate, explain, and share their views on a particular topic (Hatch, 2002). According to Belenky et al. (1997), "connected teachers support the evolution of their students' thinking" (p. 217). In *Women's Ways of Knowing,* the authors discussed the idea that "because they are in positions of power, teachers who speak in their own voices risk turning their students' voices into echoes of their own" (p. 215). They also presented the idea of the teacher as midwife rather than as a banker depositing knowledge into empty receptacles. Whitney (2011) recalled a conversation with a student about the way he had addressed an assignment that required text references to a reading selection. Once she understood the way the student was thinking, she was better able to guide him. She said, "Now, after listening to him speak, I saw it differently: when Keith avoided revising his paper, he was not avoiding writing altogether but was instead avoiding making a shift away from his own ideas and into the readings' ideas" (p. 186). The only way to know what a person is thinking is to ask that person to speak. Once a perceptive teacher knows where a student is operating, the path to learning can be mapped out. Van Manen (1990) wrote that conversational interviewing could be used for discovering and collecting experiential narrative to cultivate resources for "richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon" (p. 66).

Studies Using Interviews

Since 2007, U.S. researchers and organizations concerned about retention at community colleges have spearheaded studies utilizing focus groups and interviews to gain understanding of the populations they serve. According to McClenney and Arnsparger (2012), college completion rates have increased only slightly over the last 20 years, because colleges have not pursued approaches that allow them to listen to students. Despite public school mandates, such as No Child Left Behind, they claim that a majority of community college students start college academically underprepared. State standards for learning have been adopted including in Virginia, which promote the idea that the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) better prepare students to compete in today's global economy. More rigorous English, mathematics, and science standards and expectations are being implemented that meet national and international benchmarks for college and career readiness. Notably, according to a 2011 VCCS report, developmental education enrollments increased from 23,542 students in fall 2006 to 26,655 students in fall 2010. The same report indicated that nearly one-third of the students did not pass developmental reading or writing on their first attempt, and more than one-half did not pass developmental mathematics on their first attempt. These figures are included to show that students arrive underprepared, not to demonstrate the efficacy of developmental courses.

According to Bahr (2013), the traditionally favored analytical approaches are unlikely to remedy the large gap in our understanding for developing interventions and adjusting institutional policies and practices to improve students' outcomes. Community colleges are the primary gateway through which nontraditional, underrepresented, low-income, and first-generation students enter postsecondary education. Bahr added,

> The traditionally favored approach to research on community college students and their outcomes, while important in its own way, has left largely unaddressed both the complexity of students' pathways through the institution and the relationships between these pathways and the resulting outcomes experienced by students. (p. 139)

It is important to listen to student voices to appreciate the shifting demands today's students face while attending community colleges. According to Seidman (1998), "at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9). Current researchers claim that students' accounts of the challenges encountered during community college are rarely found in the literature (Gardenhire-Crooks et al., 2006; Kates, 2010; Reid & Moore, 2008; Sell & Levesque, 2007; Tannock & Flocks, 2003; Wirth & Padilla, 2008). Dittmar (2014) interviewed 10 community college students to investigate their perceptions, beliefs, and expectations about college. He emphasized the need to understand college students and provide the support they need to be successful.

Caporrimo (2008) who did a study comparing community college students and four year college students, reported on her personal experiences with community college students said, “There should be an understanding that despite the need for rules, guidelines, and consistent consequences, one must be sensitive to the challenges faced by this population” (pp. 26-27). Phenomenology was chosen as the method for this research because the best approach to the questions raised in this study is to hear the answers from first-year students at a community college. As a community college teacher, I have encountered many young students who appear to be underprepared, unmotivated, and lacking focus. Asking them to explain “where they are coming from” seemed to make the most sense. I sought articles and research studies whose motives are similar to mine. Rather than being satisfied with questionnaire and survey data, those authors also wanted to hear from the students themselves.

Summary

Due to a shift in community college enrollment between the years 1993 and 2009, increased numbers of students between the ages of 18 and 24 have enrolled, but many were underprepared to meet the demands of college courses. The themes uncovered in the literature search revealed varying as well as insufficient levels of cognitive development and social capital as well as the changing types of students in the 18- to 24-year-old age group (Eriksen, 2008; Good, Kromhout, & Mellon, 1979; Tinberg & Weisberger, 1998; Wells, 2008; Woolfolk, 2007). Equally important, many students arrive at college who may not have had the experiences to develop self-efficacy skills and interpersonal skills needed to cope with higher education tasks for academic competence and balancing priorities. In addition, there has been an increase in the number of students with competing outside influences (Jenkins & Cho, 2011; Karp et al., 2008; Kegan, 1994; McClenney & Arnsparger, 2012). Furthermore, the literature shows that instructors may not realize all the challenges that students bring with them, so there is a need to create more activities to discover where students are operating and what challenges they are facing inside and outside of community college life. Additionally, traditional student services may not meet the needs of the changing student population (Jenkins & Cho, 2011; Karp et al., 2008; Kegan, 1982; McClenney & Arnsparger, 2012; Saenz et al., 2011).

The literature review revealed that researchers have studied the challenging cognitive and affective journey of college students during their first year primarily using quantitative methods, with an increase in qualitative studies since 2006 (Bahr, 2013; Duggan & Williams, 2011). The qualitative studies have been predominantly survey and focus group studies, while a minority of studies have employed personal interviews (Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, & Ray, 2006; Kates, 2010; Reid & Moore, 2008; Sell & Levesque, 2007; Tannock & Flocks, 2003; Wirth & Padilla, 2008). The gap in the representation of students' voices is significant in that limited research investigates in depth the widely varying experiences and needs of students.

This study aimed to contribute to existing literature by gathering students' perceptions of the challenges and barriers they experience during their first year of community college. To obtain clues about the instructional, affective, and institutional support they need to learn, the students were asked to speak for themselves. My study may provide insights for student support systems that aim to support underprepared students at the beginning of their first year.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the factors that may engender or prevent success through listening to what first-year community college students have to say. The key ideas explored during interviews focused on the role of family and social cultures as they influence the decision to pursue postsecondary education, how students prioritize the commitment to academics, and an individual’s strengths and weaknesses in academic abilities or preparation. Students may arrive at community colleges with a variety of impediments to success, yet little research to date has drawn information directly from the students. Many data have been gathered, and most are quantitative; a small portion has focused on qualitative research using student focus groups. It is still difficult to find studies that report individual student voices. Recording individual conversations with students and discovering themes revealed by studying those conversations can contribute to the useful quantitative research about community college student challenges. In this phenomenological study, I aimed to discover how themes and perspectives derived from student interviews concerning their educational, sociocultural, cognitive, affective, and developmental backgrounds might inform instruction and support for first-year community college students. Chapter 3 includes descriptions of the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the methodology, and issues of trustworthiness.

Research Design and Rationale

The important issue was to discover firsthand how students experience navigating their first year of community college. In a review of the literature, a plethora of quantitative information was available, but the voices of the students themselves were underexplored. Trends tracking enrollment demographics, graduation and transfer rates, headcounts in developmental programs, and student access to services are widely available, but very few studies have reported on what the students have to say about their experiences. During the first year, many students enroll who may not have the social and cultural capital to survive in the new and challenging environment. I anticipated that the narratives derived from interviews would capture important information because each interviewee told me about his or her experiences in the form of rich storytelling and anecdote.

The following research questions guided this qualitative study:

1. What do 18- to 24-year-old community college students identify as challenges and successes during their first year?
2. What can the first-person accounts of first-year community college student (ages 18–24) experiences reveal about their challenges and successes?

Phenomenology was selected because it employs "a broad approach to the study of social phenomena [that is] grounded in lived experiences of people" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 2). In contrast, a case study does not focus on the lived experience but rather on the factors that affect the subject in its environment through a bounded system. Though the possibility of a case study could have been used to explore some of these questions, it would have been too limiting a method to gain a greater depth of response. According to Creswell (2007), in case study research, the investigator explores a case (bounded system) over time through in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, such as observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports, and reports a case description and case-based themes.

According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenology aims “to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (p. 13). The purpose of phenomenology is to analyze data about a specific experience, or phenomenon, and then reduce the data to capture and detail the facets of the experience that research participants hold in common (van Manen, 1990). The outcome of phenomenological research is rich descriptions of the “essence of the experience” (Creswell, 2007, p. 94). To gain a more thorough understanding of the mind-sets of 18 to 24 year-old community college students, phenomenology was an appropriate means to explore and describe perceptions of the beginning of the community college experience.

A phenomenological study focuses on “exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning” (Patton, 2002b, p. 104). Exploring college student responses during interviews was a suitable approach because phenomenological studies focus on understanding a phenomenon or perceptions of a group. In this case, student experiences and perspectives were examined in the contexts of their epistemological development, their emotional intelligence and their efforts or lack of effort to adjust to the new demands the community college experience places on them. In their comprehensive review of the literature regarding college student development regarding qualitative approaches, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) asserted,

> Although quantitative approaches provide a powerful set of tools for estimating the impact of college on students, these tools are probably most useful in painting the broad outlines of the portrait. Rendering tone, tint, texture, and nuance may require the finer brushstrokes characteristic of qualitative approaches. Indeed, naturalistic and ethnographic inquiries may be particularly well suited to identifying and examining indirect and conditional effects. (p. 636)

Because phenomenological studies focus on understanding a phenomenon or perceptions of a group, the voices of students during their first year of community college can provide illuminating information regarding the challenges students encounter. Each student who attends community college has specific reasons for choosing community college and brings a varied package of educational, sociocultural, cognitive, affective, and developmental traits (Caporrimo, 2008; Houston, 2013). Within each learner the combination of those traits shapes the ways he or she will react to and adjust to the new academic demands of higher education. Although community colleges have open admissions policies, the assumption is that the people who enroll are capable of making use of what the college has to offer. What the students revealed about themselves may be useful for creating avenues of access to all the opportunities for success a community college has to offer. Often the programs and personnel are available, but students may not be aware of them or be reluctant to seek help (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Barbatis, 2010; Methvin, 2012; O’Gara et al., 2009; Rings, 2001; Sorkhabi & Strage, 2011; Wirth & Padilla, 2008).

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher for this study was as an investigator, the sole interviewer, and data collector. Although I am a part-time instructor of college writing at the campus where the interviews took place, the interview questions were not geared specifically to any particular course of study offered at the college. I created the interview instruments found in the appendices at the end of this document.

Doing Research in One's Own Institution

Since I am currently a part-time instructor at this college, my roles are limited to instruction and working with students on class assignments. There are no other organizational roles currently in place for me that created conflict with my role as a researcher for this study. An advantage to doing my study in the same institution where I teach is that my colleagues in the Liberal Arts and Social Sciences division knew me and were willing to assist in distributing and collecting the initial questionnaire that helped me locate my pool of participants. Additionally, because I have a good reputation and credibility within my department and division, it was easier for me to gain site permission for places to conduct interviews and cooperation with other staff to obtain student records if needed. Two of the 2013 accreditation and quality enhancement objectives at the community college are that the advising team will be able to understand their roles and develop a greater awareness of the importance of advising and an academic plan. Team members are working on progressive advising, which seeks to establish a partnership between the student and the advisor. In surveys preparing for the enhancement of the advising program, it was recognized that faculty and staff were unsure of their roles in advising, had limited awareness of the importance of advising in relation to student success, and worked within an advising structure that does not serve students efficiently. Research that seeks the voices of students can be instrumental in building an enhanced and more relevant advising program.

Methodology

The community college (RCC) from which the sample was derived serves two metropolitan areas along with seven nearby rural counties. While the community college itself is not considered a rural community college, the surrounding counties are primarily rural. The college has an open enrollment policy requiring proof of a high school diploma or a GED. In recent years, the college has responded to the economic downturn by serving laid off workers and unemployed workers who wish to upgrade their skills. In some cases laid off workers are supported by the Trade Assistance Act, which provides a variety of services and benefits to individuals laid off from a trade-certified company that has been adversely affected by foreign competition ("Petition Filing," 2012).

Participant Selection

The sample had potential for diversity in terms of academic preparation, racial and ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomics, and program enrollment. Students ages 18 to 24 in their first year of community college include those who may have been exploring the selection of an appropriate major, those who have already selected a major with fairly certain plans to transfer to a 4-year institution, or those just beginning their college studies without any idea of choosing a major or a career.

I proposed a purposeful sampling approach to create a pool of participants drawn from the answered questionnaires distributed to general education classes at the community college where I teach. Prior to distributing questionnaires as described, I sent a letter to instructors who teach sections of general education classes (Appendix A) requesting their cooperation. I used printed questionnaires rather than online questionnaires to ensure that I received an adequate pool of respondents. The questionnaire was designed to obtain general information to screen for age group 18 to 24 first-time college students; English as a first language; demographic items such as whether the student lives in an urban, suburban, or rural area; and first-generation status. The sample that I chose was purposeful in that I chose only 18 to 24 year-old students with English as their first language, because I did not want the variable that English as a second language could impose on the students' challenges. This type of sampling is also called criterion sampling by Miles and Huberman (1994) because the subjects met all the listed criteria. Gender was not a consideration, except that I tried to balance the number of each so as not to create the implication that either gender has more challenges during their first year. I did not attempt to screen for income or socioeconomic status class, but instead allowed the data to yield that information.

I had planned to select from a pool of participants drawn from the questionnaires (Appendix B) distributed to six English courses, six College Success Skills courses, and six beginning math classes at the community college. No math instructors responded. In the fall term, typically there are from 15 to 25 students in each class, providing a pool of participants of up to 450. I contacted all instructors who teach the preceding listed general education courses, which all students must take. The letter (distributed by campus e-mail) explained the purpose of the questionnaire and the purpose of the study. I visited nine classes and explained the purpose of the study. After I sorted through the completed questionnaires to choose students who met the criteria described, I contacted the students who indicated that they would be willing to participate by using the college e-mail system. The e-mail described the study and the interview process and asked about a convenient time to meet for two 1-hour meetings on campus. The e-mail included Appendix C, which described the study and the interview process. I had planned to interview a pool of about 10 to 15 participants and conduct at least two semistructured interviews with each student (Interview Protocols 1 and 2, Appendixes D and E). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), in qualitative research, any conclusions drawn must be supported by multiple cases. Patton (2002a) reiterated that there must be redundancy in the data. Creswell (1998) recommended a narrow range of sampling strategies for a phenomenological study. In addition, Creswell pointed out that in a phenomenological study, between one and 10 interviews is typical because the purpose of the in-depth interviews is to describe the meaning in a small number of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. Polkinghorne (as cited in Creswell, 1998) believed that 10 subjects for a phenomenological study was a reasonable size because the in-depth interviews along with the reflections of the researcher constitute a qualifying range of data.

Instrumentation

This phenomenological project collected and analyzed data from the individual responses and testimonies of each participant and synthesized the experience for the group (Moustakas, 1994). Deriving from the types of questions used in interview protocols by other researchers in the literature, I created questionnaire items and interview protocols that could yield data relevant and particular to first-year students. The survey questionnaire and interview questions were based on questions found on the CCCSE and in studies discussed in Chapter 2 (AACC, 2012; Ahern & Norris, 2010; Ankeny & Lehmann, 2010; Ashtiani & Feliciano, 2012; Bahr, 2013; Barbatis, 2010; Baxter Magolda, 1992, 2001; Bickerstaff et al., 2012; Brown & Rivas, 2011; Caporrimo, 2008). There was one recruiting questionnaire (Appendix B) and two interview protocols (Interview Protocols 1 and 2; Appendices D and E). The questions were developed based on the literature, a project in a qualitative research design course, and with the help of the dissertation committee. These instruments were considered sufficient to elicit responses from interviewees about their challenges and successes during their first year of community college and provided discovery of themes derived from the students' first-person accounts of their educational, sociocultural, and developmental backgrounds. Concerning content validity, the questions were developed specifically to inquire of the interviewees about their first-year experiences at the community college. The questions were created for a project in an advanced research course and used with four community college students. The questions yielded valuable data about the experiences of first-year community college students. No changes were made in the current instrument. In addition, I drew from experience in listening to the concerns of first-year community college students since 2006.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

At the community college where I teach, a pool of 12 students who met the criteria of first-year community college students, with English as their first language, were chosen from the recruiting questionnaire described earlier (Appendix B). The pool of nine general education classes with 15 to 25 students enrolled in each was sufficient to provide enough interviewees. I was the sole contact and interviewer. The students were contacted by campus e-mail or by telephone, and meeting times were agreed upon. I met each student in a quiet room on campus provided by the human resources department. At the beginning of each meeting, I introduced myself, described the study, reviewed confidentiality issues, and reviewed the informed consent form that each student signed as part of the participant pool collection process (Appendix C). The students were assured that participation and responses would remain confidential. I created pseudonyms to represent each student. Each student was reassured that his or her responses would not be shared with any instructors on campus, nor would they have any bearing on our relationship should the student enroll in a future course section that I teach. Using the interview protocol in Appendix D, I made a recording of each interview using an Olympus digital recorder along with handwritten notes. At the end of the interview, I asked the student about scheduling the second interview in about 2 weeks. Between the first and second interviews, a professional transcriptionist transcribed the recordings verbatim. At the second interview, the students reviewed the transcription of the first interview. Any changes or deletions requested were made. The second interview proceeded using Appendix E and was recorded and transcribed as with the first interview. If students wished to view a copy of the second interview, I provided it by campus e-mail, which can be marked confidential. Students were thanked for their participation and reassured that the responses would be private.

Data Analysis

The primary types of data acquired for this study were the accounts related to me in the recruiting questionnaire and during the first and second interviews. Those instruments (Appendixes D and E) were designed to elicit responses from interviewees about their challenges and successes during their first year of community college and provide discovery of themes derived from the students' first-person accounts about their educational, sociocultural, and developmental backgrounds. After the interviews were recorded, they were uploaded to my home computer and saved as audio files. A professional transcriber created a separate document for each interview. Manual coding was used to discover patterns and themes. No software programs were used to create codes. I chose not to use software due to the time needed to learn how to use a software program and because I felt that *The Listening guide* and other traditional ways of coding interview data (described later) would be the best ways to elicit meaning from the interview responses. To determine patterns and themes, one of the methods used to analyze the narrative data was *The Listening guide*, which originates from the relational psychology work of Brown and Gilligan (1992). *The Listening guide* methodology consists of a process of engaging with a narrative in a series of "listenings," or steps, which guide the listener in tuning into the story being told on multiple levels (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2006, pp. 253–271). *The Listening guide* is recommended by Saldaña (2013) and Sorsoli and Tolman (2008). Sorsoli and Tolman asserted, "*The Listening Guide* centers on voice not as a metaphor but as a physical embodied entity-as one of the primary ways inner thoughts and feeling scan be communicated" (p. 497). Saldaña (2013) referred to *The Listening guide* as an "evocative method for analyzing talk and text" (p. 141). I also referred to Weber's (1990) *Basic content analysis*. Content analysis is useful for examining trends and patterns. Part of the content analysis used for the interviews was to look for recurring comments, actions, and lack of certain actions (such as asking for help). Some categories overlap, such as family support and family behaviors that may appear to be in opposition to support. Weber pointed out, "Reliability problems usually grow out of the ambiguity of word meanings, category definitions, or other coding rules" (p. 15).

I coded and analyzed the recorded interview responses for each research question separately. I generated codes based on themes I discerned as I listened to the interviews and read the transcripts. In addition, I referred to descriptive notes that I made during the interviews for bracketing purposes and reflection. Bracketing in qualitative research is identified as temporarily setting aside the researcher's assumptions. Moustakas (1994) wrote that it is "a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, and predispositions" (p. 85). Several procedures Creswell (2007) recommended were used to verify the trustworthiness of the study at three points. First, the data collection process was verified through triangulation of data sources, a process that required that the researcher (a) examine themes as they emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts and (b) look for confirmation of the themes from other sources (researcher log, archival data, or other participants' interviews). Subsequently, the steps to analyze the data and develop the themes were verified by an administrator at the community college and my dissertation committee chairperson. The administrator at the community college was not a direct supervisor for me, and I have very little contact with her in my capacity as an instructor. For each of those individuals, e-mails and written notes during any meetings served as verification. Any written material is stored on my home computer and in a large three-ring binder. Third, the transcripts were checked for accuracy by the participants themselves during the second interview. Any discussions during the second interview were recorded. For each participant, a hard copy of the interview transcript was used during the second interview so I could make notes as needed. At the end of the second interview, the participants each received a VISA gift card, were reassured that their interviews will be anonymous, and were reminded that they were welcome to contact me by e-mail for any further issues regarding the study. The transcripts were made available to the participants in person, by e-mail, or by the U.S. Postal Service.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Creswell (2007) described measures to reduce the chances for ethical issues to develop, including identifying the problem and the purpose of the study, acquiring informed consent, assessing and accommodating potential risks, using thoughtful written language, and refraining from unethical practices when reporting findings. To safeguard credibility, I asked participants to review the transcript of the first interview for accuracy, and at the end of the second interview to review the points covered during the interview (member checks). After the second interview, participants were e-mailed a copy of the interview transcript. They could contact me by e-mail with concerns regarding the second transcript. In response to the question of saturation, the sample size of participants is 12, which falls within the recommendations for phenomenology studies suggested by Creswell (1998). I referred to and reflected upon descriptive notes that I made during the interviews to use for coding, bracketing purposes, and reflection. In addition, to ensure credibility, I employed triangulation and peer review of discovered themes and coding with an administrator at the community college and my dissertation committee chairperson. For each of those individuals, e-mails and written notes during any meetings served as verification.

Regarding transferability, statements were made in the limitations section of Chapter 1, specifically that the results of this study are specific to first-year students at a specific community college and may not be generalizable to other community college populations. The participants in this study represent a specific group in a specific context, and results focus on the students' unique experiences in that context; however, some developmental generalizations might be made regarding the 18–24 year age group at community colleges in the United States. One of the limitations of the phenomenological approach is that the discoveries cannot be generalized (Creswell, 2007; Van Manen, 1990). The small sample size from a student enrollment of a particular community college may not represent the majority of first-year student experiences. Thick, rich description of the interview contents and the students themselves is one strategy that can contribute to transferability.

One of the issues concerning transferability is that participant selection should be varied. I attempted to safeguard variety by choosing from a variety of general education courses, including an equal number of students who are from rural, urban, and suburban areas. In addition, I attempted to balance the number of male and female students selected so as not to create the implication that either gender has more challenges during their first year.

Strategies were used to assure dependability included triangulation and audit trails. I employed triangulation and peer review of discovered themes and coding with a qualified peer, two administrators at the community college, and my dissertation committee chairperson. For each of those individuals, e-mails and written notes during any meetings served as verification. All records and data collected are confidential, shared only with the dissertation committee and Walden University.

To address confirmability, I employed several strategies. First, I checked and rechecked the data throughout the study by creating charts of potential themes and student responses. Next, I met with a qualified peer who asked me to share quotations from students that I had matched with potential themes. Third, I met with the dean of the Liberal Arts and Social Sciences division at RCC who agreed with the initial themes based on her experiences with students. Finally, I met with the coordinator of research and assessment at RCC, who did an excellent job of playing the “devil’s advocate” role with respect to the findings by questioning my focus on challenges. She reminded me to look for themes that revealed success. She advised me to review recent internal and external survey results to compare my research and interview questions to questions asked on those surveys.

Ethical Procedures

I personally contacted each participant whom I chose from the participant pool obtained using the questionnaires. During interviews, I described the nature and the purpose of the study, with no mention of anticipated outcomes. The initial contact conversation by e-mail or telephone was used solely to determine the willingness of the participant to engage in the study and to answer participant questions about the study, including the appropriateness of his or her involvement in it. A journal was used to verify each contact. Participants were provided with a document assuring confidentiality. Recordings and transcripts of interviews are kept on the researcher’s password-protected computer, and data sticks are stored in a secure location in the researcher’s home. No documents or recorded materials were shared with any other parties at the community college. I assured each participant of the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Each participant was offered the opportunity to examine and request changes to the transcribed narrative text.

Responses on questionnaires, digital recordings of interviews, and transcripts are stored at my home in a secured file drawer. Student names are pseudonyms, and other identifying information is not disclosed in the narratives. Interviews took place in a private room on the community college campus with distractions and interruptions minimized. Students were assured that none of their responses would be shared with instructors and that FERPA regulations would be observed. I did not know any of the students chosen for the sample before arranging the interviews. Part of the informed consent contains the following statement: “I understand that the data I will provide will not be shared with anyone except the interviewer’s instructor and classmates at Walden University.” On the questionnaire I used to recruit potential interviewees, the following statement appears as part of the introduction to the questionnaire: “Your responses on this questionnaire will not be shared with anyone, including your current instructors. Your responses will have no influence on your current course assessments or grades. They will become my private personal property. Any information I use will be reported without your name or other identifying information.” While I know a great many students, I do not believe that my interactions with them prejudiced me in any way toward obtaining what I sought to explore with an unknown group of students. I take delight in discovering each new group of students and the individuals who choose to talk with me during class, after class, in the hallways, and in my office. I understand the age group in terms of developmental expectations, but I did not anticipate projecting those expectations onto the answers I received during interviews. Since I did not serve as the lead instructor for any courses in which participants were enrolled, their responses should not have affected a classroom relationship or created any bias in assessing class requirements. In addition, as I sorted through the initial questionnaires, I had planned to eliminate any students whom I already knew. I did not teach any classes on campus during the semester. I did not serve as an advisor or mentor to any of these students during the time that the interviews were being conducted; hence, I refrained from offering any kind of advice or guidance for any issue that came up, even if it was requested.

To ensure the protection of participants, an approved human research protection-training course with the National Institutes of Health was completed. Ethical issues were addressed by procuring approval through Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) process and the community college IRB process. All procedures outlined in the IRB application were followed.

Summary

In this chapter, I described the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the methodology, and issues of trustworthiness.

According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenology "aims to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it" (p. 13). The purpose of phenomenology is to analyze data about a specific experience or phenomenon, reducing the data to capture and detail the facets of the experience that research participants hold in common (van Manen, 1990). The result of phenomenological research is a description of the "essence of the experience" (Creswell, 2007, p. 94). To gain a more thorough understanding of the mind-sets of 18- to 24-year-old community college students, phenomenology was an appropriate means to explore and describe their perceptions of the college experience. The narrative process allowed each subject to tell me about himself or herself in the form of stories. Students need "good company" to support them as they negotiate the intellectual and affective challenges of college (Baxter Magolda, 1992, p. 1). This study could increase understanding about the importance of providing cognitive and affective support for first-year community college students. According to Lyons (2007), a qualitative study can give voice to the personal experiences of first-year students while examining institutional and nonacademic factors. Lyons also asserted that such a “study may give life to the rhetoric of defining success, not only in terms of grades, but also in terms of personal development and progress” (p. 10). This study contributes to positive change by providing a means to expand the paucity of research that asks the students themselves what they are experiencing, rather than relying on surveys, questionnaires, and retention and attrition statistics. Chapter 4 presents the data collection process, coding and analysis methods, narrative reports and quotations from the participants, and a discussion of findings from the data.

Chapter 4: Results

Brief Review of the Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the factors that may bring about or prevent success for first-year community college students. I had hoped that listening to their voices in personal interviews would provide insight for the following research questions:

1. What do 18 to 24 year-old community college students identify as challenges and successes during their first year?
2. What can the first-person accounts of first-year community college student (ages 18–24) experiences reveal about their challenges and successes?

I interviewed 12 first-year community college students using face-to-face open-ended interviews and e-mail correspondence to obtain their personal responses about challenges and successes during the first semester of enrollment at community college. A phenomenological approach was selected because it employs “a broad approach to the study of social phenomena [that is] grounded in lived experiences of people” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 2). Because students may arrive at community colleges with varying levels of experience and preparation, personal interviews allowed drawing information directly from the students. This chapter includes (a) the data collection process, (b) coding and analysis methods, (c) narrative reports and quotations from the participants, and (d) a discussion of findings from the data.

Setting and Demographics

The data collection occurred at an accredited 2-year community college in a southeastern state that serves approximately 3,200 students. RCC is a pseudonym. The college operates on a semester schedule and offers 2-year degrees, with a current enrollment of more than 12,000. RCC offers certificates, diplomas, transferable credits, and dual enrollment options. While no organizational conditions influenced participants or their experiences at the time of study that would influence interpretation of the study results, the follow-up interviews were affected by mid-term exam schedules, project deadlines, and increased holiday work hours.

Data Collection

The participant pool was identified during a 2-week period in late October 2014 and was obtained by contacting faculty members who taught general education courses and student development courses (SDV). Twenty-one faculty members were contacted. Twelve responded to the request. I was able to attend nine English and student development classes in which I provided information to students about the study and distributed informed consent forms requesting participation. I was not able to attend the other three classes due to scheduling conflicts. I distributed 200 questionnaires. One hundred thirty students completed questionnaires. Sixty-one responded positively. Of the 61 who agreed that I could contact them, 20 answered my follow-up e-mail and 18 scheduled an interview. One student agreed to participate, but was 40 years old. Five students scheduled interviews but did not show up. I used the mobile phone numbers provided by those students to send a text requesting that they contact me. Two responded saying they did not have time and the other three did not respond. The students who attended scheduled interviews included 13 first-year students from the community college’s service region: seven women and six men between the ages of 18 and 20. Five of the 12 were first-generation students. One student arrived for a first interview but admitted he was not yet 18, so I did not continue interviewing him. All the students had English as their first language and were first time college students. Seven lived in outlying rural areas and five lived in suburban areas near the college. No students with urban addresses answered the initial survey.

The first interview consisted of 21 open-ended questions, and a conversation focused on experiences during their first semester of community college. The second interview consisted of 21 questions and conversations to clarify issues discussed during the first interview.

I was able to begin scheduling interviews on November 3, 2014 and completed 12 interviews by November 11, 2014. November 11 was the 13th week of a 17-week semester. Twelve students kept appointments for the first interview. Transcriptions were completed and second interviews were held between November 18, 2014 and December 4, 2014 the 14th through 16th weeks of the semester. Interviews lasted from 55 to 60 minutes and were recorded using an Olympus digital recorder accompanied by handwritten notes. In my original proposal for research, I proposed two face-to-face interviews; however, it was difficult to schedule a second in-person interview for some students. Thanksgiving break was from November 25 to 30, and classes ended for the semester on December 10 with exams scheduled the following week. Many students were engaged in research projects, while others had increased work hours for the holidays. I requested a change in procedures through Walden University’s IRB to contact students using e-mail to follow up on the first interview and ask additional questions. Twelve students scheduled and attended the first in-person interview, 10 scheduled and participated in a second in-person interview, and two did not respond to contact by e-mail or schedule a second interview. The 10 students who participated in a second interview all responded to e-mails asking for a review of the interview transcript and answered additional questions to clarify information from the first interviews. The initial interviews provided in-depth information and the subsequent follow up interviews as well as multiple emails filled in any gaps in information needed to provide a clear picture of these students’ experiences.

Regarding saturation, I had planned to conduct 12 to 15 interviews based on recommendations for phenomenological studies by Van Manen (1990), Creswell (1998), Polkinghorne (2005), Patton (2002b) and Baker & Edwards (2012). According to Baker and Edwards, “Because qualitative research is exploratory by nature, qualitative researchers may not know how much data to gather in advance” (p. 5). Baker and Edwards suggested that they would shoot for a sample of 12. This number gives them the experience of planning and structuring interviews, conducting and partially transcribing these, and generating quotes for their papers. More than this number seems to be impractical within their customary time constraints. For a longer project (an honors thesis, a 2-semester course) they might extend that slightly, but rarely to more than 20. (p. 10).

As I planned to conduct two interviews with each student, the potential for 24 hour-long interviews seemed consistent with recommendations found in the research for answering my research questions about the phenomenon of first year experiences. In the end, I had 12 complete hour long first interviews and 10 complete hour long second interviews. The transcripts containing the students' stories were rich with detail and personal expression. I considered the transcripts from the first and second interviews as one set of data rather than two separate sets. The information obtained in the follow up emails and interviews supported the data of the first interviews and produced no new themes. When the semester was over, I sent one additional e-mail to each student after the end of the semester asked students to share their final grades and their intentions to enroll for second semester. I wanted to follow up on each student's progress, but I did not use any information from the 10 email answers in analyzing the data.

In responding to questions about challenges and successes, themes of anxiety and uncertainty regularly appeared. As I examined the interview transcripts, I discovered that anxiety, misinformation, and not asking for help were frequent themes, so I probed the transcripts further for examples in the students' stories. In examining the transcripts and the emergent themes, the students' stories appeared to portray the uncertainties of their first semester experiences in adequately. Ideally 15 to 30 interviews could possibly illustrate the generalizability of the themes I found, but due to the limitations listed above, I chose to use 12 complete hour long first interviews and 10 complete hour long second interviews, and field notes as my full data set. Hindsight tells me that the one hour-long interview per participant with email follow-up would have been adequate to obtain answers to my research questions. Using that approach I may have been able to schedule 15 or more hour long interviews with more individuals, which may have led to richer data simply because of more unique stories, not necessarily more specific themes.

Interviews were conducted in a small windowless office at the college provided by the Human Resources department. There were no interruptions or distractions. Consent forms were reviewed at the beginning of each interview, and a copy was offered to each participant. Recorded interviews were transcribed by a professional and stored as password-protected files on my home computer. I filed the transcribed interviews with initials and a pseudonym. Interviews and notes were stored in a password-protected file on my personal computer, and printed material was stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home office. All identifying information was removed from the interview transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms.

Data Analysis: Identifying Themes

The stories in this study were gathered to gain insight into first-year community college students' experiences. The recorded interviews were transcribed and printed with double spacing between lines to allow for note taking. Analysis was completed using all 12 first interviews, which contained the most in depth information. Analysis also included follow up information for second interviews in person with 10 students. The first step of data analysis consisted of listening to all of the recorded interviews while reading the transcripts to correct errors and make notes of impressions. Van Manen (1990) referred to this process as "mining meaning." To organize the interview data, the first cycle of coding consisted of open (descriptive) coding with underlining, highlighting, and marginal notes. Next, I created a chart on which I listed all of the first set of interview questions along with each student's responses (from 12 students). This step of coding was used to "develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from [my] array of First Cycle codes" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 147). In addition, I reviewed my field notes to add important information to the emerging portraits, such as nervous tics, gestures, and appearance. Next, I followed the first two steps suggested in *The Listening guide*, a method with four distinct steps to mine data requiring the active engagement of the researcher throughout the analysis. It is intended to be a guide or a set of steps that provides a basic frame rather than a set of prescriptive rules to be followed (Gilligan et al., 2006). The first listening consists of two parts: (a) listening for the plot and (b) the listener's response to the interview. The second listening requires constructing an "I poem" (Gilligan et al., 2006). Finding all of the "I" statements with the accompanying verbs made by the subject allows the researcher to listen to the participant's first-person voice. The researcher copies each "I" statement and pastes them chronologically in a new document to create a text that resembles the format of a poem. Examining the text of the I poem allows the researcher to look for themes that may arise from the subject's statements about himself or herself in the absence of the accompanying text or language patterns. In some cases, this step is revealing, and in others, it may not be. Step 2 of *The Listening guide* approach can be compared to writing analytic memos in which the researcher begins to make notes about emerging categories and themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2013). Analytic memo writing in the transcribed interview documents "serves as an additional code and category generating method" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 51). Step 3 of *The Listening guide* requires the researcher to identify, specify, and sort out the different strands in the interview that may speak to the research questions. During reading of the interview transcripts, I color-coded themes related to family support, adjustment, engagement or lack of it, identity, preparedness, and social capital. Themes discovered in this step can be compared to the I poem. According to Gilligan et al. (2006), "this third step in *The Listening guide* method offers a way to listen for the counterpoint in the text we are analyzing, or the multiple facets of the story being told" (p. 12). Step 4 of *The Listening guide* "pulls together what has been learned about this person in relation to the research question" (p. 17). After four or more readings of each transcript, I composed analyses in the form of matrices, identifying what I learned about the students in relation to the research questions. This step led me to 19 preliminary codes and a discussion with a qualified peer about the accuracy and usefulness of the first set of codes. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) recommended ordering interview transcripts and other information chronologically or by some other criteria. The chart I generated listed the first set interview questions in the order they were asked, student responses, and potential categories into which the responses might fall. Categories included social capital, coping, challenges, motivation, maturity and development, inefficient study skills, familial obligations, level of engagement, lack of confidence, self-efficacy and perceived locus of control, self-identified procrastination, test anxiety and poor test taking skills, insufficient preparation, not knowing when or how to ask for help, and culture shock. The codes were descriptive to coordinate them with the literature review findings in Chapter 2. According to Saldaña (2013), these researcher-generated concepts are interpreted “pattern detection, categorizing, theory building, and other analytic processes” (p. 4). *The Listening guide* and the creation of the first two charts of interview responses are most closely related to descriptive coding, which provides an index of topics for indexing and categorizing (Saldaña, 2013). From the various stories, patterns, categories, and themes emerged, pointing to the essence of each student’s experience and the relationship of his or her experiences to the research questions.

I repeated the process using the chart I created using the second set of interview questions and responses from 10 students. In this step, I discovered no new categories or themes. After a discussion with my committee chair, I reduced the number of codes and refined each one, arranging them in order of the frequency in which they represented students’ challenges and successes. Finally, I examined each student separately to ensure that no new themes arose or that any contradictory information was present. Later, I met with two administrators at the community college who provided feedback and suggestions for my coding process. One reminded me to add details to my codes for successes, as I had tended to focus on challenges. To answer both research questions, the final codes for challenges identified by students were uncertainty and inexperience, anxiety, and competing demands that include both family and work. The successes identified by the students included classes and teachers they felt good about, the college services they used, refining and mastering time management skills, support from families and employers, and self-efficacy, which included feeling prepared and becoming more confident.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In Chapter 3, I referred to Creswell (2007), who described measures to reduce the chances for ethical issues to develop, including identifying the problem and the purpose of the study, acquiring informed consent, assessing and accommodating potential risks, using thoughtful written language, and refraining from unethical practices when reporting findings. My data analysis process shows that I considered both the first and second interview sets to confirm that no new themes emerged and the codes accurately represented the students' responses.

Credibility

To safeguard credibility, I sent e-mails to participants for review of the first interview transcript for accuracy. Students replied by e-mail or in person with suggestions or confirmed that the transcript was accurate. A few asked that particular comments about a course or an instructor's name be deleted. After the follow-up interview, the points covered during the interview were reviewed and followed up with additional e-mails for clarification (member checks). In response to the question of saturation, the sample size of participants is 12, which falls within the recommendations for phenomenology studies suggested by Creswell (1998) and Morse (1994). I referred to and reflected upon descriptive notes that I made during the interviews and coding for bracketing purposes and reflection. In addition, to ensure credibility, I employed triangulation and peer review of discovered themes and coding with two administrators at the community college, a qualified peer, and my dissertation committee chairperson. For each of those individuals, e-mails, consent forms, and written notes during any meetings served as verification.

Transferability

Regarding transferability, the results of this study are specific to 12 first-year students at a specific community college and may not be generalizable to other community college populations. While the results may not be generalizable to the entire freshman population at the community college where these students were enrolled, the information in the findings can be useful to college support services, advisors, and faculty members. Any information that provides clues about the needs of new students could be valuable. The data in this study represent 12 initial in-depth interviews and 10 completed second interviews with Caucasian individuals at a Virginia community college and results focus on those particular students' unique experiences in that context. One of the limitations of the phenomenological approach is that the discoveries cannot be generalized (Creswell, 2007; Van Manen, 1990). The small sample size from a student enrollment of a particular community college may not represent the majority of first-year student experiences. Because the intention of this study was to listen to the voices of individuals about their personal experiences of their first semester I can make no claims that the themes that emerged represent any portion of the freshman population; however, the experiences related by these students can provide useful clues for types of support needed early in the community college experience. In Chapter 2, the literature review illustrated similar issues revealed by students at other community colleges.

I did not require identification of ethnicity in the survey, and the pool of participants was drawn solely from those who responded and kept appointments. The table below shows that Caucasian students are the majority at RCC. The participants' homogenous ethnicity may limit the transferability of this study. Table 1 shows the RCC enrollment by ethnicity for 2013–2014.

Table 1

Enrollment by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Headcount	
	Number	Percentage
American Native	33	0
Asian	419	3
Black	1,575	12
Hispanic	193	2
White	10,527	82
Unknown	102	1

Note. Adapted from http://www.[redacted].edu/about/ie/factbook.php

Rich description of the interview contents and the students themselves is one strategy that can contribute to transferability. One of the issues concerning transferability is that participant selection should be varied. I attempted to safeguard variety by choosing students from a variety of general education courses, including an equal number of students who are from rural, urban, and suburban areas, if possible. I asked each student for his or her home address and asked for a description of the area. In addition, I attempted to balance the number of male and female students selected from those who responded to my email to schedule the initial interview so as not to create the implication that either gender has more challenges during their first year. Once I had 13 possible interviews scheduled I did not accept any more volunteers. I turned down one scheduled volunteer because he was only 17 years old and another volunteer because he was 40 years old. The methods described in this study could be replicated with a longer period for the sampling strategy to ensure not only more participants but a more diverse pool of participants.

Dependability

Strategies to ensure dependability included triangulation and audit trails. I employed triangulation and peer review of discovered themes and coding with an administrator at the community college, a qualified peer, and my dissertation committee chairperson. For each of those individuals, e-mails and written notes during any meetings served as verification. All records and data collected remain confidential, shared only with the dissertation committee, one community college administrator, and Walden University.

Confirmability

To address confirmability, I employed several strategies. First, I checked and rechecked the data throughout the study by creating charts of potential themes and student responses. Next, I met with a qualified peer who asked me to share quotations from students that I had matched with potential themes. Third, I met with the dean of the Liberal Arts and Social Sciences division at RCC who agreed with the initial themes based on her experiences with students. Finally, I met with the coordinator of research and assessment at RCC, who did an excellent job of playing the “devil’s advocate” role with respect to the findings by questioning my focus on challenges. She reminded me to look for themes that revealed success. She advised me to review recent internal and external survey results to compare my research and interview questions to questions asked on those surveys.

Results

The two research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. What do 18- to 24-year-old community college students identify as challenges and successes during their first year?
2. What can the first-person accounts of first-year community college student (ages 18–24) experiences reveal about their challenges and successes?

The results are reported as themes distilled from the data. After distilling the data a number of times and in a number of different ways, I created lists of challenges and successes the students identified during the interviews. The reports are presented in the following manner. First, I created a short narrative portrait of each student using my impressions from notes and student quotations from interviews. Next, the challenges and successes are reported in sections using the students’ words. Challenges identified included uncertainty and inexperience, anxiety, and competing demands that included both family and work. The successes students identified included classes they enjoyed and teachers with whom they were comfortable, the college services they used, the need to learn or refine time management skills, support from families and employers, and self-efficacy, which included feeling prepared and becoming more confident. Some terms the students used were Community College Access Program (CCAP), English Fundamentals (ENF), Information Tech Essentials (ITE), and Student Development (SDV). The student names used in the following presentation of results are pseudonyms.

Narratives

Annie. When I met Annie, she was sitting in front of the library reading a book. She was neatly dressed in a plain T-shirt and jeans and wore no jewelry or makeup. Annie is 20 years old and graduated from high school in 2012, when she was 17. She described herself as a first-generation student and said she is trying to complete college because she does not want to struggle like her parents have. Annie had recently moved back to the area from Florida, where she had planned to attend college but could not. She lives with her mother in a small town about 20 minutes from the college. She takes care of her mother, who recently broke her foot and has severe arthritis. During the first week of classes at RCC, she spent a night at the emergency room with her 92-year-old grandfather because he was having heart attack symptoms. In addition, she often provides transportation for him. At the time of the interview, along with her college courses and caring for family members, she was holding down two part-time jobs, the 2:00 A.M. shift at Target and the 6:00 A.M. shift at Kmart. She said she would soon quit the Kmart job and only work at Target so she would have time for sleep. She said that work comes first because she must make ends meet. Despite her difficulties, she has not asked for help and she was not sure who her advisor was. Annie finished first semester with an A average.

Micky. Micky turned 18 the second week of the semester and got married. She and her husband live with her parents in a small rural community about 25 minutes from RCC. She said she has always been fascinated with x-rays and was enrolled in the radiography program. She describes herself as shy and easily gets anxious or embarrassed in new situations. During both interviews she rubbed or scratched her arms and twisted her sweater. She did well in high school and graduated with a 3.5 GPA, although she admitted she did not have to study. Micky said she found the pace of college classes, especially anatomy, daunting and missed some class days because she became ill from stress. She did not know her advisor and was reluctant to ask her instructors for help. She works 3 days a week at a local secondhand clothing store. Sometimes the workdays are over the weekend, which prevents her from studying for Monday tests. She was very frustrated because she had applied for the CCAP program and was under the impression that she had been accepted. At the end of the semester she found out that she had not been enrolled in the CCAP program. She wrote in an e-mail, "They said we didn't finish FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid] soon enough but I clearly remember us having to go to financial aid and doing it I don't know what they're talking about. So stressful!" Although she completed the semester with A and B averages, she failed the anatomy course.

Katie. Katie, who just turned 18 in August, described herself as "not at all" a morning person, so she attempted to schedule her classes in the middle of the day. She does not like to be around strangers, so she spends her breaks between classes in her car. She described herself as shy and mentioned that she walks through the halls "with my head down, and hope that no one notices me." Incongruously, she wore dramatic makeup and was dressed fashionably with boots, leggings, a jacket, and a hat.

She lives with her parents, helps with household tasks, and picks up her younger brother after school. The small town they live in is about a 35-minute drive from RCC. Both parents are college graduates who have consistently encouraged her to go to college. Originally Katie thought she would transfer to a 4-year college, but has considered cosmetology school as well. She told me she thought she would like to move to California so she could be near extended family members and enjoy life in a bigger city.

At the time of the first interview, she was doing well in all of her classes but said that she really did not like her history class at all because she was not all interested in it. She did not respond to my e-mail asking about her final grades. Katie considers herself an organized person because she hates to feel unprepared in class. She maintains planner/calendar both on paper and on her phone. She said she tends to procrastinate if a deadline is weeks away.

Louisa. Louisa said she is going to college because "none of my family has really got through high school and college." She added, "I'm definitely going to finish." She lives with her mother, a single mom, and spends several days a week at her aunt's house because it is closer to the college. Her mother's house is in a rural area about an hour's drive away from RCC. She works at a work–study job on campus and receives financial aid in the form of the Commonwealth Grant and the Pell Grant.

Enrolled in the general studies curriculum during first semester, she plans to transfer to a local health sciences college and complete training to be an occupational therapy assistant. Her history and nutrition classes were difficult for her because of the pace and the amount of material covered in a short time. She graduated from high school with a 2.5 GPA and said she really does not know how to study. She described herself as barely “hanging in there.” During the interview she kicked one or both legs and moved her arms and hands continuously.

At the time of the interview, she had not connected with her advisor or sought assistance from the tutoring services. In an e-mail after the semester, she shared her final semester grades and said she had enrolled in second semester. Her grades included two Bs and two Cs.

Sammie. Sammie, age 18, said she choose to go to college because no one else in her family had. She chose RCC because it was close to home and allowed her to make a slow transition from high school to college life. She lives at home with her parents and shared that it is important to her to spend time with them. They live in the city where RCC is located. She is currently enrolled in the general studies curriculum and has plans to transfer to a health sciences college in the area to enroll in the physical therapy program. Having attended a small private high school with only 30 students in her graduating class, she found the bustling, crowded atmosphere at RCC a little unsettling. To compound her discomfort, she had knee surgery over the summer and had just stopped using crutches. Planning time for walking slowly between classes was one of her challenges. She told me that the first few weeks on campus were scary because she did not know anyone. She described herself as a procrastinator and said she had to learn to divide her reading assignments into manageable chunks. She sometimes gets up at 6:00

A.M. to study while no one in the house is awake. At the end of the semester she said it had been hard work, but not as intimidating as she had thought it would be. Sammie works as a cashier at a local grocery store 10 hours a week and babysits around 10 hours a week. She said that while she wants to contribute money to paying for college, she thinks she will have to cut back her working hours to keep up with her course load. She finished the semester with a straight A average.

Suzie. Suzie, age 19, lives in two households, which are an hour and a half apart with RCC in the middle. Her mother lives an hour south of the college and her father lives 30 minutes north of the college. Currently her mother is enrolled in a 4-year college program for a criminal justice degree and her father is studying to be an insurance agent. Suzie said, “In both homes I have a closet full of clothes. . . . I don’t have to go bring [them] back and forth.” She receives CCAP funds for tuition and her father pays for gas. She works part time in a preschool 30 minutes from RCC.

Suzie wants to major in elementary education, so she has plans to transfer to a 4-year college when she completes her courses at RCC. Currently she is enrolled in an introductory education class, which requires 40 hours of classroom observation in addition to the weekly class meetings. She bubbled with enthusiasm and confidence when she talked about her job as a preschool leader and her two favorite activities, horseback riding and swimming. She told me she started a swim team at her high school and served as a lifeguard for 4 years. Suzie finished the semester with a B average.

Carrie. Carrie, age 18, stated enthusiastically that she chose to go to college because she loves music, plays the flute and the piccolo, loves band, and wants to be a band director. She and her family decided it would be economical to complete general education requirements at a community college and then transfer to James Madison University for a major in music education. At the time of the first interview she was serving as a paid intern coaching a high school band 2–4 days a week.

She lives with her parents in a rural mountainous area outside of the district eligible for CCAP funding and drives 25 miles from her home to go to RCC. Because she lives in a remote rural area, Internet access is sometimes “sketchy,” as she said, and that can create problems if she has homework to complete online. She added that there is no cell phone service where she lives because of the mountains. Carrie chose RCC because she wanted to get a fresh start without seeing her high school classmates who might attend the community college closer to her home. Carrie said she did not like the peer pressure at her high school.

In contrast to her animated conversation with me, Carrie confided that she is shy around strangers, self-conscious in her Tai Chi and French classes, and generally uncomfortable in large groups of people. She finished the semester with a 3.0 average.

Dave. Dave, age 19, missed his first appointment for an interview because he was focused on studying for a biology test. He has been on his own since his 18th birthday because his parents asked him to leave. His stepmother could not tolerate his choice to be homosexual because it went against her denomination’s principles. Dave said, “She publicly gave my dad an ultimatum . . . either he leaves or I leave.”

He told me that in the rural area where he grew up, most people have strict religious views. He receives CCAP funds for college costs but must work full time at a fast-food restaurant to support himself. He also was in a car accident early in the semester and sustained a concussion. In addition, he has fines to pay related to the accident and higher insurance rates. Despite his difficulties, Dave volunteers at a local diversity center whose purpose is to support, educate, empower, and advocate for LGBT individuals and groups in the region and to encourage collaborative efforts with the greater community to improve the quality of life for all. Currently he lives with a roommate in an apartment complex within walking distance of RCC. Although he had experienced headaches and some depression because of the concussion, at the time we talked he was maintaining passing grades in all his courses, and he sent me an e-mail to say that he finished with a B average. He is enrolled for second semester and wants to transfer to George Mason University to major in economics.

Ed. Ed is a multitalented 18-year-old who lives at home with his parents and seven siblings ranging in age from 9 to 17 in a small town 15 minutes from RCC. He told me that the biggest disadvantage to living at home is that it was too noisy for studying. He receives CCAP funding for tuition and works for a local civic center to set up for entertainment, sporting, and corporate events so he can pay for personal expenses such as auto insurance. Ed had surgery for a hiatal hernia and acid reflux early in the semester but only missed 2 days of classes. He has dealt with digestion issues since he was 14. He believes it is exacerbated by stress and turns to motor cross biking, building cars with his dad, painting, and running for relief. During high school Ed participated in the International Baccalaureate (IB), a rigorous course of studies offered to students who are academically motivated and have a good work ethic. Ed told me, “Honestly, I just showed up [for high school]. Tomorrow seemed to hold all of my motivation and things, and it didn't catch up to me until about the last 7 months of my high school career."

Because of all the Advanced Placement (AP) and dual enrollment credits he earned in high school in U.S. history, U.S. government, computer design, liberal arts, math, statistics, and German, Ed was able to enroll in higher level courses at RCC. He plans to change his major from general studies to communication design and transfer to George Mason University. Ed did not respond to my e-mail inquiring about his final grades.

Bob. Bob, age 18, considers himself a first-generation college student, although his father completed an associate's degree in technology at ECPI University. Bob lives with his family in a small town 20 minutes from RCC. He is planning to transfer to Liberty University next fall. CCAP is paying for his first two semesters at RCC. He had never talked to his advisor about transfer requirements and was not aware that he had an advisor. He is enrolled in the general studies curriculum and is interested in political science. He said that one of his challenges was adapting to being responsible for himself and his learning without someone supervising or reminding him. He admitted that he had to buy a planner to write down assignments and due dates. Since he took the 100 level English and biology classes as dual enrollment and AP courses in high school, he was able to enroll in 200 level courses such as American Literature and Biological Problems in Contemporary Society. He admitted that those courses have demanded more critical thinking and writing than he expected. Bob works 12 hours a week in a restaurant and is responsible for picking up his younger siblings when they get out of school. He is close to his family members and invested in church activities. He said keeping up with course work, family, church, and work had required him to plan his time carefully and not procrastinate. Procrastinating led to not completing course readings on time or not giving them his full attention, resulting in lower grades on essays and tests than he expected.

Jim. Jim, age 19, plans to transfer to the University of Virginia and major in mathematics, statistics, and chemistry. He has already made a transfer plan with his advisor. He graduated from high school with a variety of AP credits in English, history, calculus, statistics, chemistry, and U.S. government, so he was able to sign up for several advanced classes in the fall. He receives CCAP funds for tuition and works full time at a local grocery store as a front end supervisor. In the second interview he described himself: “I’m more ahead of the game and trying to get things done.” He is the first in his family to go to college and says his parents are proud of him. He lives with his family in a small town about 20 minutes from the college. Jim told me that he is an avid drummer and percussionist and really enjoyed his music appreciation class. His other favorite class was statistics. He expressed admiration for the instructors of those two classes. He said that the only challenge he could foresee in college was time management and that he worked conscientiously to manage his time and keep his priorities in order. He finished the fall semester with a 4.0 average.

Peter. Peter, who is 19, arrived at the interview site before I did. His lack of eye contact and nervous hand and finger movements seemed in contrast to his tidy appearance and statements of confidence. His responses to the interview questions varied from terse confidence to circumlocution. His response to a question about his parents’ approval went as follows: “They definitely, they are definitely proud of me because I’m getting an education and they think that I am adjusting well to it like I’m passing my classes right now and they just think that it’s good that I’m going to college.” Toward the end of the interview he told me that in case I had not noticed he had a speech impediment with R sounds and W sounds. He is a devoted drum player who played in his high school band, and he still attends his high school’s Friday night football games regularly. In addition, he said is passionate about bowling; however, he had not learned to score until enrolling in a bowling class first semester. He told me that he wanted to get a college education because it is a necessity to get a better job. At the time of the interview he indicated that he might like to transfer to Virginia Tech or James Madison University and major in teacher education so that he can teach third or fifth grade. He graduated from high school with a 4.0 GPA. He finished the first semester at RCC with straight As.

Challenges

The list of challenges identified by students included uncertainty and inexperience, anxiety, and competing demands. The following excerpts from the interviews illustrate these challenges.

Uncertainty and inexperience. Uncertainty and inexperience were illustrated by accounts of being physically lost on campus, missing information, failing tests due to lack of preparation, and numerous incidents of answering questions prefaced by “I don’t know,” “I think,” and “I guess.” Students admitted not asking for help, not knowing who their advisors were, and not having the study skills to cope with course demands and material. Inexperience was implicated by descriptions of feeling overwhelmed, lack of engagement, not asking questions, being from small schools or small towns. Each student who was interviewed had attended a summer orientation session on campus and registered for classes in designated computer labs staffed by advisors and faculty members.

Louisa, whose constant movements with her arms, legs, and hands made her appear nervous, indicated that she still carried the campus map with her even though she had come to campus before the first day of classes with some friends to find her way around. The interview took place in about the twelfth weeks of classes. She revealed,

> I always have that with me. I won't leave it at home. The first week of classes . . . my teachers got right in, pushed us right into things . . . and they showed us the schedule of everything that they already had planned out. . . . It was . . . overwhelming. . . . I have to really focus or I'm going to fail . . . so my teachers are definitely on top of us about you need to do this, no procrastination.

When I inquired what classes she felt good about she replied, "Right now? English and SDV and that's it. English I'm really good at, but my History and Nutrition are really hard right now."

For her nutrition class she spoke of lengthy PowerPoint presentations and 17-page test preparation notes and added, "Always have something every week to do."

She described her history class in a similar manner, commenting on lengthy note taking and the instructor's Web site that students had to consult for test preparation. She said,

> Then, he has a study guide, which has . . . no less than 20 questions. It’s 20 questions or more and these are not like one sentence, but these are like paragraph questions and you have to go through [the research Web site], which is like a gazillion pages and go through and find the information and copy and paste it onto there. Then, you have to study that. This is definitely new because my classes in high school were definitely different from this. They didn’t cram things on top of one another. It wasn’t so much information they were throwing at you. It’s a totally different level. I don’t handle stress well, and so this is very stressful for me. I haven’t been to the tutoring center yet, but I probably should do that because I don’t know how to study really.

Finally, when asked if she felt moderately successful two-thirds of the way through the semester she agreed, “Moderately, yes” and emphasized that she was just barely hanging in there.

Annie described her first day of classes in this way:

> I was overwhelmed. I was like oh my gosh, I have to run from Anderson to Duncan, back to Anderson, back to Duncan. . . . I’m sitting here thinking oh gosh, I’m not going to be able to do this. I had to use the map and then I was going blindly. I couldn’t figure out where everything was to save my life. . . . The third class I took on Tuesdays and Thursdays is now over; it was the dynamic course, which I didn’t know at the time. I haven’t exactly used the advising office yet.

Sammie said she was overwhelmed and confused by the application process. She did not know who her advisor was. When asked about the first week of classes she said,

> Actually I was pretty nervous the first day because I went to a really small school, there were 30 kids in my [graduating] class . . . maybe I built it up too much in my mind but I was extremely nervous the first day. I've made some friends in my classes so that was nice, having a familiar face in the class because the first term is kind of scary not knowing anyone.

Sammie expressed a desire to transfer to the Jefferson College of Health Sciences but had not spoken with her advisor about transfer requirements. She revealed,

> I am actually going to call them, I think . . . I searched the website and I was able to find some information but as far as what I needed to do before [I apply] . . . as far as observation hours and stuff like that, I couldn't really find it so I think I'm going to just call tomorrow.

Micky is enrolled in the radiography program. She emphasized the support she receives from her family including her new husband. She described the process of applying and registering for classes in this way:

> Ooh that was confusing. . . . I honestly could not explain back over again. I just thought it was a mess . . . the day that we did come and signed up for classes and all I didn't know what I was doing. It's really confusing to me. I couldn't explain it all, I don't know.

She indicated that she felt embarrassed during the registration process because she had trouble logging in to the college registration site and she felt that she was the only one having difficulty. She said, “I was getting behind and everyone else was moving along. My dad was waiting for me in the Whitman Theatre. . . . It was frustrating and embarrassing at the same time.”

When asked about the first day of classes, Micky revealed that she felt intimidated because she did not know anyone. She also shared that she was confused until she realized that room numbers in the four hundreds were on the fourth floor, saying, “Most of my classes are in health science and then I realized the four hundreds in the fourth floor and that really broke it down and helped a lot.”

When asked why she registered for a course load of 18 credits, she said, “Because that was what written down on my sheet. . . . I did nothing about it. I was just trusting that she had everything right.”

While she was describing her classes, she said she didn’t feel like she needed to be in the ENF course. (ENF is a first-year college composition course combined with the student development course.) She did not question her placement and had not asked her teacher about it. She felt that she was a better student than many others enrolled in the class were. When asked if she needed the next course in the English sequence, she replied, “To be completely honest I do not know.” Micky struggled in her anatomy course but never attended the tutoring center nor asked her instructor for help. In an e-mail after the semester was over she said that she failed the course and would take it again in the spring term. She typically failed tests and said, “You know we just didn’t have to know all the bones in the body we had to know each little lump and hole and where everything was and that's the part I didn't know." In addition, she later found out she had never been enrolled in the CCAP program, which would have paid for first semester. Students in the CCAP program are required to do community service and check in regularly with their advisors. Micky never checked in with her advisor and insisted that no one contacted her about the CCAP requirements. A refrain in her responses was, "I wish someone would have told me."

Dave, asked by his family to move out when he was 18 years old, has faced a number of uncertainties. Although he is enrolled in the CCAP program based on his county of residence and his parents' tax information for the FAFSA, he has had to navigate community and college tasks on his own. He said the registration process went well, but when I asked him to describe his feelings on the first day on campus, he replied in an animated manner that his high school consisted of only one hallway.

He said, "Where are my classes? I was so lost. To be honest, I got lost for the first two weeks . . . every day the first two weeks."

Since he is from a rural area, city traffic was new to him and took some getting used to. Early in the semester, he had a car accident and sustained a concussion. Remarkably, he continued to attend classes in spite of headaches and some depression. His primary network of support consists of friends around his age and his current roommate. Dave's main challenges have been navigating the adult world of work, paying bills, and recovering from his injuries.

A good example of not knowing when to ask questions is Ed's experience with the grade book on Blackboard. He struggled in biology but thought his grade was adequate. He said,

> Honestly, in Blackboard it says your point over top of your other points I had a 88.5 points. . . 88.5 is a high B. Well I didn't, I had a 88 out of something like 200. When it didn't change after like a couple of assignments and I was like how do I have 105 now? How do I have 100 in this? How do I have . . . and I was like oh wait. I finally did the math and I realized that I had a 79.

Suzie made a similar mistake when she neglected to take assignments seriously in her SDV course. She related,

> I took my midterm exam and I actually got a C on it because I did not pay attention to the study guide or anything and I was like it's got to be common sense. . . . I got to the test and I'm like this is a little bit more than common sense. So I'm kinda worried about that and it's stressful.

Other uncertainties mentioned by students included difficulty learning course material such as in biology or math. A few had study buddies or study groups but had not asked instructors for help or visited the tutoring center. Six students did not know who their advisors were and had not visited the advising office for any reason including to plan the next semester. Lack of experience or lack of social capital were illustrated by comments regarding the number of credits a course was worth, using Blackboard, misunderstanding the ways assignments were graded, knowing the difference between regular courses, dynamic courses, distance courses, and hybrid courses. Regular courses meet on campus weekly, hybrid courses meet once a week in the classroom and the rest is online using Blackboard. Dynamic courses meet for only the first or last 8 weeks of a semester, and distance courses are totally online. It is understandable that the course labels would be unfamiliar, but what is significant is that students did not ask about the labels during registration. In addition, many did not question the times of day courses were held, and several remarked that 8:00 A.M. courses were a problem due to reasons such as not being a morning person, working late the previous night, negotiating early morning city traffic, or finding a parking place on campus. What stood out the most were the numerous responses prefaced by “I don’t know,” “I think,” and “I guess.” A number of students revealed that they choose RCC because they were not academically or socially ready to go to a 4-year college or that community college was close to home and seemed like a good transition from high school to college.

Anxiety. Anxiety was identified in a variety of ways including getting lost, becoming ill, being scared, and some physical gestures exhibited during the interviews.

Louisa admitted that she was very nervous the first day of classes. She said, “It was really nerve wracking. Just the ride here was like gripping the steering wheel and talking to myself saying I can do it.” Louisa was in constant motion, kicking her legs, and moving her arms and hands, especially when she described the course demands. She also moved a lot when describing her boyfriend who helps her study. She said, “He is ten times smarter than I am . . . he graduated with a 4.2 GPA. I graduated with a 2.4. . . . He makes sure that I don’t forget things. And when I do forget things, then he remembers everything.”

Carrie said,

> I was a little bit terrified of how many people were in each class . . . I'm not really a people person. In Tai Chi when he [the instructor] teaches us a new move I kind of don't want to do it in front of people because I don't like to look like an idiot in front of a bunch of people. [In French class the instructor] is energetic and she speaks in French. She's spoken, like, different commands in French since the day we walked in. I will never stopped being embarrassed.

Micky twisted her sweater and her hands and scratched her arms throughout the interview. When asked about how her family feels about her going to college, she answered, "My dad tells everybody. Sometimes it gets embarrassing." She also said that she felt embarrassed during registration because it took her longer than others to complete it. She said, "I was getting behind and everyone else was moving along. My dad was waiting for me in the Whitman Theatre. It was frustrating and embarrassing at the same time."

She told me that her graduating class consisted of only eight students. She revealed,

> It's really intimidating and I'm really shy. . . . When I don't know somebody, I will not talk. In classes I just had like my little cluster of people I talk to that sits around me and everybody else I pretended they are not there. Anatomy class is just a big overload. . . . It goes so fast, you have to know so much stuff, but my brain just can't go that fast . . . and I can't learn that way and I'm too worried about getting the question right. . . . I'm worried about trying to search for an

> answer and I . . . find myself not paying attention to what she is saying. I'm shy, I will answer some questions [in class] but I'm not going to blurt out the answer every time . . . that's too much attention on myself

Micky also added that stress made her physically ill. She said, "I missed a day 'cause stress got to me . . . my ribs got inflamed and I couldn't breathe. I went to the doctor and that's what they told me. . . . I'm scared to death that I failed it [an anatomy test]."

Her grade at Week 12 of the semester was F. In the follow-up interview she shared that she had failed anatomy and would take it over in the spring. Other responses to interview questions were interspersed with "I don't know," "I can't remember," and "I wish someone would have told me." In the follow-up interview, I asked, "How do you feel when you are on campus?" Her reply was,

> As I said before I'm shy, I don't like attention from people . . . and this may sound silly but when I'm walking through the hall and I see someone look at me I feel like something's wrong with what I'm wearing. In class? It kinda stresses me out depending on the class like anatomy. I don't like to ask my instructors questions. . . . Oh goodness not my thing. I will e-mail, wait until class is over, or ask a friend. I'm shy, I will answer some questions [in class] but I'm not going to blurt out the answer every time that's too much attention on myself.

When I asked Bob about challenges the first week, he responded, "Transitioning to classes was just kind of getting over that fear of the college atmosphere compared to the high school stuff." He said experienced a little anxiety when he realized how much harder he had to work in his American literature and biology classes to maintain grades above C. He said, “It’s going pretty tough . . . it’s probably one of my difficult courses . . . with papers and stuff.”

Katie said the process of applying and being accepted and registering for courses was a little nerve wracking. It was a little scary trying to sign up for classes because I’ve never done that before. I’ve always gone to a private school. They set up your classes for you. . . . The first day on campus I was so scared. I was shaking. I was like shaking while I was driving. I was just so nervous. I’ve always gone to a small school. I graduated with seven people. I didn’t have my books either the first day. . . . I was really scared about that. Parking was crazy. I tried parking at the Chapman Hall, and there was nothing so I had to park down below and it was kind of tough.

While we were discussing how she spends the time between classes, she said,

> I usually open my computer, sit in my car, and do homework, so I just don’t like to be in public. I don’t like to do my homework in front of people or anything. I am generally a very shy person, so I usually walk with my head down, and hope that no one notices me. . . . I’m kind of like an OCD person. . . . I have a planner and I keep one my phone so I don’t forget. I don’t like to forget stuff. If I forgot my homework . . . I would freak out. . . . I just don’t like that feeling of not having something done . . . and be . . . so upset.

Ed said of the first day of classes,

> That was hard. I didn’t know where anything was and I walked around in circles so I had to be probably half an hour early to all my classes. I had the paper map

> and the paper schedule. . . . I had everything on paper. I had folded my schedule up I had erased one of the real numbers of my classes.

Ed missed the first Friday and Monday of classes due to surgery for a hiatal hernia. He said,

> Stress does affect it, I think. . . . I also try to calm down. . . . I still ride my bike . . . I ride BMX. . . . It's a good stress reliever. I run occasionally if I still find time to do that, painting is really stress relieving, just things like that. This year I think it was the stress of everything . . . over the summer trying to get everything done. . . . I was still working a lot though I wasn't sick yet. On top of school and . . . trying to help our mom . . . with all the kids . . . trying to help out. I started having the acid reflux, I started hurting, and I was like I need to slow down. In October my girlfriend had an almost fatal car crash and broke her neck so I had to take care of her cause she couldn't drive or really do anything.

When I first began talking with Annie, she shared that she had taken some AP classes in high school. She said,

> I took AP English for two years and I never got the credit for them. I did extremely well in the class and when it comes to tests I'm like "no thank you." I got eights and nines on the practice tests but I would only get three and fours on the actual test. I have a lot of test anxiety. The first day of classes was just so overwhelming; there were so many people. I was like 'Oh my gosh, I'm never going to fit in here . . . my English class went well. My teacher kind of terrified me . . . Miss A. She

> kind of terrified me because she was talking about family as the theme of the class and I'm sitting here thinking, I don't have a very good family.

Annie related a number of family situations that contributed to her stress level. When we discussed her psychology class, which she enjoyed, she said, "I'm very participative and I don't understand why I'm not doing well. It is test anxiety, it truly is."

Sammie, reflecting on registration and the first day of classes, said,

> Actually I was pretty nervous the first day because I went to a really small school, there were 30 kids in my class and there was definitely a big change in the atmosphere and I was just, I guess, maybe I built it up too much in my mind but I was extremely nervous the first day but then once I got through, now it's no big deal.

In the follow-up interview when asked about her expectations she said, "There is hard work involved but it is not as intimidating as I once thought it would be." I'm very comfortable asking questions, but I would usually ask them after class or through e-mail. When an instructor asks questions of the whole class I usually let others respond.

Dave experienced anxiety mostly because of a car accident early in the semester. He said,

> For about three weeks, I was terrified. I really had high anxiety even being a passenger of cars. So, my first time being in the car within probably five minutes, that freaked me out. I was also debating whether to drop out and go into counseling because I attempted suicide a few times. It was very rough and now

> I'm starting to get back on my feet. I think the biggest thing was I guess dealing with stuff I never had any idea how to deal with and then it's totally new.

Suzie did not have any big worries except being concerned about hurting her parents' feelings if she stayed at one of the other's house. She mentioned,

> I took my midterm exam and I actually got a C on it because I did not pay attention to the study guide or anything and I was like it's got to be common sense I got to the test and I'm like this is a little bit more than common sense. So I'm kinda worried about that and it's stressful a little bit.

Bob was concerned about the anticipated differences between high school and college, but at the time of the interview was feeling comfortable.

Peter indicated that he had the whole first semester experience under control, however; he has not chosen a major nor talked with his advisor about possibilities. When I asked him how his family felt about him going to college, he responded,

> They think that I am adjusting well to it like I'm passing my classes right now. . . . I feel good when I'm in the food court on campus because I can relax and not have to worry about stuff that happened in class that particular day.

Students identified a variety of anxiety and stress related to being shy, coming to a new place, being around strangers and large numbers of people, and coming to terms with college-level course demands. A few students had experienced traumas in their personal lives that affected attendance and academic success. The words that stood out describing anxiety and stress were scared, overwhelming, nerve wracking, stressful, high anxiety, intimidating, and terrified.

Competing demands. Competing demands were identified as challenges by descriptions of family illnesses or injuries, family members' behaviors, family commitments, and attempts to balance work hours with schoolwork. All but one of the 12 students interviewed live at home or split their time between two households. Eleven of the 12 students hold full time jobs or one or more part time jobs.

Annie reported,

> I have a lot of responsibilities. . . . It's just hard . . . it's just thing after thing. . . . My mom was in the hospital for about 24 hours and then my grandfather went to the hospital for about a week and then my stepdad's been in the hospital for two weeks, so it's just one thing after another and I have to find time to do all my assignments and get them done. . . . My mom needs me because she broke her leg and I can't find time. If she needs me, she yells for me. . . . She has bad arthritis so I have to take care of a lot and my stepdad doesn't feel like he has to do anything, so I have to take care of everything. I have a 2am shift and then I'm going to come here and then I go back to my second job and then I go home. I work at Kmart, and I just got hired at Target. Target is my 2am shift and Kmart was my 6am shift. . . . I have to balance a lot . . . I don't have more time to spend on my school work. I'm trying to get the best grade that I can, but the classes are a little difficult.

Louisa said she is her mother's "right hand man . . . because she is single mom . . . and I stay at my aunt's house three times a week."

Louisa takes care of her siblings at home, and when she is at her aunt's house, she babysits for her 1.5-year-old nephew. Study time is in the evening after the children have gone to bed. Louisa's mother lives an hour away from the college, while her aunt is only five minutes away, so she must manage her schedule for varying commute times. Louisa balances her time on campus between classes and studying and a work–study job. She has not really discovered successful strategies for learning college material so she needs to find time to go to the tutoring center.

Sammie believes her family is supportive, but

> they just don't show a lot of interest . . . they just kind of, leave it up to me. . . . I guess they'll wait until I graduate. . . . Sometimes it makes it a little bit more difficult because my friends' parents are really involved. . . . I guess my parents are just really laid back, so it's not like they don't care, they're just really laid back. My mom . . . she's a stay at home mom and I guess she gets lonely so when I'm at home she's like "come and sit with me," and so it kind of, it is a big distraction. It's definitely difficult trying to balance the family time . . . when I'm at home, I'll feel guilty if I'm trying to go off and study. . . . I'll skimp on homework or put it off because I feel like I need to spend time with my family . . . going hunting with my dad . . . watching TV together, even just talking.

Sammie had knee surgery over the summer so she had to build in time for walking from class to class. RCC is built on a series of hills so she had to locate ramps and elevators. She said, "I'd just gotten off crutches and was trying to carry a really heavy bag so it was a bit of a struggle to try and get back and forth to the classes on time."

Sammie works about 10 hours a week at a local grocery store and babysits for about 10 hours a week. She said,

> It's definitely a bigger struggle than I thought it was going to be. At first I was trying to work as much as I could to help pay for college but then I realized that definitely made me a lot busier than I thought I would be. Plus it's hard to start on homework after you get home from work.

Sammie believes "planning and time management" will be necessary for her to succeed in college. She added, "I think most of it depends on me for the most part such as deciding who to hang out with and when."

Suzie divides her time between two households, which are about an hour and a half apart. She said she feels guilty sometimes when she has to tell one parent that she will be staying with the other. She said, "I hate hurting people's feelings and so every now and then I'm go over to dad's or go over to mom's I'm gonna have to make that call saying I'm not coming over." Every Wednesday between classes, she said, "from eleven to two I actually go to my dad's house. . . . I eat lunch with him there and let the dog out. . . . At my dad's I take my sister to school and then I go to college."

Suzie holds a part-time job at "Fort Lewis Baptist Church as a preschool leader . . . from twelve to six on Mondays and Fridays and . . . Saturday Sunday I have from nine to twelve." If she has spare time she rides horses or swims. She worked as a lifeguard for 4 years but doesn't have time to do that now.

One student described the difficulty of finding time to practice playing the flute and the piccolo. Another mentioned the importance of finding time for socialization with his church youth group. Two young men from large families described helping out with younger siblings and finding a quiet place to study at home, but not as problems. These student stories described some challenges created by competing demands such as family illnesses or injuries, family members' behaviors, family commitments, and attempts to balance work hours with schoolwork. Most of the students felt strongly about family commitments and found that college course demands and study time demands required them to find new ways to balance their time. Two students out 12 did not describe any competing demands.

Successes

The list of successes identified include descriptions of classes and teachers the participants felt good about, the college services they used, places they found comfortable on campus, mastering effective time management skills, support from families and employers, semester grades, and self-efficacy, which included statements about feeling prepared and becoming more confident. Ten out of 12 participants reported their semester grades by e-mail. The following excerpts from the interviews illustrate these successes.

Positive description of classes and teachers. Annie said that she felt good about her psychology class and liked her instructor. She finished psychology with an A average. Her English class was going well and at the time of the first interview she had an A average.

Ed was especially impressed with his biology instructor. He was pleased that she did not merely hand out material and expect the students to grasp it on their own. He described being worried that college professors would not be personable and helpful. Ed had taken a number of AP courses in high school so he felt prepared to tackle a college course load.

Jim said he felt good about all of his classes because at the time of the first interview he had a straight A average. He described his statistics instructor as "one of the best teachers I've ever had. I can tell he has a love for math." He added, "My Music Appreciation teacher is passionate about music. . . . I think she really enjoys it." In an e-mail after the semester was over, he told me, "Straight As."

Sammie revealed, "I really like all of my teachers, Miss L., she's . . . a really good instructor. She makes it interesting and she handles the class really well. She shared that she enjoyed her psychology class and fund it interesting. Sammie said she felt well prepared for college courses because she wrote lots of research essays in high school. She finished the semester with A averages in all her courses.

Micky said Medical Terminology was her favorite class. She said, "I love that class . . . I love my professor. . . . We all get good grades in there because of how she teaches it . . . you just think she's up there having a good time." Micky said she enjoyed the instructor's method of teaching by funny associations, for example, "like a rhino is a medical term because the rhino has a big horn on its nose."

Suzie said of her English instructor, "She cracks me up on daily basis. . . . She is one on one with us if we need it. She has funny stories and she . . . just seems to get us."

Suzie also said she enjoyed her instructor for the ITE class because “she is so funny she tells us stories all the time and . . . she’ll tease the class.”

Peter was one of the students who felt that he had no challenges during his first semester. He liked his English instructor and said, “She is pretty cool, she is pretty laid back and easy to get along with; easy to understand.” He told me that he got 98 on the descriptive and personal narrative essays he wrote. He liked his ITE instructor and said that she walked students through each step of programs such as Microsoft Excel, Word, and PowerPoint.

Bob said that his American Literature class was tough but that he enjoyed the instructor, adding, “She is always there to help with the paper and especially [with] drafting. . . . She is always in her office hours.” He said that he really liked his math teacher and said his favorite class was Old Testament Survey.

Dave said, “I think my most favorite teacher would be in biology. . . . She is just amazing . . . one of the best teachers I’ve [ever had].” He said she makes time for students, takes time to answer individual questions, gives thorough lectures, which she records, and places on Blackboard, maintains regular office hours and offers appointments, and answers e-mails within 24 hours. Dave said, “I think my most favorite class would have to be U.S. history.” He says the instructor makes history come alive.

Katie said her English class was her favorite and the instructor makes it fun. She said,

> She has us do . . . lots of drafts and a peer review. . . . She provides lots of feedback. She keeps everything interesting. It’s never . . . boring. . . . We do

> journals every day . . . expressing our opinions about her topic that she gives us. . . . She just makes it enjoyable.

Katie said even though she is not very good at math, she liked her math class. She said her math teacher “was nice and makes it . . . easy to ask for questions.” Katie added, “I don’t ask a lot of questions, but she’s always . . . checking on us. . . . She has extra people coming in to help.” In the follow-up interview Katie shared that she was comfortable asking questions of all of her instructors. She did not share her final semester grades with me.

The students revealed that they appreciated instructors who made learning interesting and fun with a sense of humor, provided lots of feedback, and were available during posted office hours. A few participants commented that they were pleasantly surprised that their instructors treated students with respect and were engaged in teaching rather than merely handing out assignments. One student commented that all of her instructors were “friendly and welcoming.” Overall the students felt that the instructors were open to students asking questions about course demands and material.

College services used. Students identified specific advisors, advisors for the CCAP program, the career center, the writing center, faculty office hours, and the library as services they used during the first semester. In this study 6 out of 12 participants knew who their advisor was and had met or talked with him or her on the phone at least once. All six were satisfied with their advisors.

In the second interview, Micky revealed, “I did locate my advisor and talked to her twice already and let me tell you an advisor cares more than anyone. They want to help you achieve your goal and ready to answer any question you have.”

Louisa said, “I wanted to get an idea of what I should do and so she [her advisor] helped me with that, but then she helped me with getting ready for classes too.” Louisa added,

> We just had a test in Nutrition and I didn’t do good on it, even though I studied like six hours, I didn’t know what to do, so I e-mailed my teacher and I told her I needed help because I was totally like stunned as to what to do next, and so she e-mailed me back saying thank you for reaching out to me.

Suzie praised an advisor in the CCAP office, saying,

> She’s helped me so much and . . . have . . . helped me. As a member of CCAP they are my advisors and . . . is actually my faculty advisor so I could actually go with her with any problem. . . . [I like] my public speaking teacher. . . . I can’t remember her first name at the moment. I can go talk to her about anything not just school. . . . She’ll be in her office hours and we’ll just talk . . . I feel like I can relate to her.

Interviewees who used the services of the writing center felt that it was worth their time. Several commented that the tutors were well qualified to review their writing assignments and were pleased with the results. Others relied on their English instructors to coach them through writing drafts and revising. A few commented that their English instructors were consistently available during office hours.

Students gave positive ratings to the library orientation sessions. One commented on learning about using the library databases, “They told us in the library that you only . . . when you Google something . . . I didn’t know the other 80 percent is technically hidden.” Several students discovered that the second floor of the library was a quiet place to study and connect to the Internet.

Comfortable places on campus. Students identified the food court, the top floor of the library, and the arboretum as places they felt comfortable on campus. Many students had arranged their schedules in order to park, go to class, and go home, not spending any extra time on campus. Six students indicated that they typically came to campus and went home or to work after classes. Here are some of the comments regarding reasons to stay on campus:

Louisa explained, “I go to the library and study for a couple hours at night for my Nutrition and History class.”

Annie said, “I like the library. . . . I have come to appreciate the quietness of the atmosphere on the third floor. This allows me to do most things I can’t do now that I don’t have Internet at home.”

Sammie remarked, “I love the library (especially the top floor where it’s quiet). I usually get lots of work done there.”

Micky said,

> I do go to Subway and the smoothie bar all the time and study over there. I think it’s really cool in the student life building. In the student life building, everyone is always having fun and smiling there. . . . That’s always the meeting place for my

> friends and I in between classes. It’s just a good atmosphere in there. I’m really glad they opened that building right as I’m starting college.

Peter said, “I feel good when I’m in the food court on campus because I can relax and not have to worry about stuff that happened in class that particular day.”

Jim said, “I feel relaxed . . . [in the] upstairs library, it’s nice and quiet and I can get everything done.”

For the six students who stayed on campus to study, relax, or socialize, it was good to hear that they had acclimated to the campus since they had expressed anxiety about finding their way around new surroundings earlier in the semester.

Mastering time management skills. Some students felt that they already had good time management skills, while others discovered the need to learn how to balance course demands with family life, work hours, and social life. Some were former procrastinators, trying to change their habits. Following are some of their comments.

Annie, who was working two jobs, admitted,

> I have to slow WAY down on working and focus more on trying to get my school work done as well as balancing studying on top of that. Maybe take one less class to balance myself out. I have no clue yet.

Sammie said,

> It’s definitely difficult as far as managing time but I kind of have to. I’m a big worrier too so I might as well go on doing the things I need to do now instead of than having it hang on over my head. A lot of the time I get up at six to do my homework. That way I won’t have to worry about putting it off.

Ed confessed, “In high school I procrastinated and the night before things were due I was up to five or six in the morning and then waking up for school at seven thirty.”

Micky said,

> I didn’t study in high school. . . . When I came out of high school I felt like I had everything situated, everything was right and I knew . . . who I was. I really had no idea. When you start these classes . . . you really don’t have much time for anything else you just spend a lot of time with yourself and your textbooks.

Bob said,

> Lot of times in high school . . . procrastinating . . . obligations . . . doing chores . . . making sure my younger brother is doing his chores and taking care of my responsibilities . . . watching TV. . . . It’s important to find a balance as much as the classes are difficult stuff . . . and church and other responsibilities within a balance of doing the [course] work.

Peter said,

> To succeed in college, I try to complete to complete my work as soon as possible so I don’t have to rush and do it the last minute. I learned to keep a calendar with important dates marked such as exam dates.

The need to learn effective time management came as a surprise to some students because there had not been a need for it previously. Balancing course demands, work, and family obligations proved to be a bit harder than they expected. They found that multiple methods of keeping track of deadlines such as coordinating a paper planner and an electronic planner helped.

Support from families. The next collection of comments includes responses to this interview question “How does your family feel about you going to college?”

Louisa shared, “They’re excited for me. They come home every day and ask, ‘How was college?’ They’re very excited . . . they just really want me to do well.”

Annie said, “My mom is extremely proud of me.”

Ed said, “They are glad I didn’t just go and work ‘cause that wouldn’t have gotten me far.”

Jim said, “I think they’re very happy. . . . They really wanted . . . me to go to [RCC] too and not start for four-year college. . . . They’re really proud of me.”

Sammie said, “They’re supportive for the most part. They’re not too involved with it.”

Micky said, “My dad tells everybody . . . he is constantly bragging about it. Everybody is really proud of me.”

Suzie said, “They are extremely happy . . . my parents they both are very extremely happy that . . . I’ll have a degree.”

Peter said, “They are definitely proud of me because I’m getting an education.”

Bob said, “They are really glad because they see it as necessary thing to be able to do. . . . Definitely it’s great to have support.”

Katie said, “They’re extremely happy.”

Carrie said, “Each one is supportive in different ways.”

Dave said, “From what I hear, um, my family just loves it.”

Support from employers. Eleven of the 12 students hold full-time jobs or one or more part-time jobs. The next collection of comments includes positive responses to questions about employers and work hours.

Louisa appreciated her campus work–study job because “they give you time for your classes. . . . I’d rather have this work–study than having an actual job because an actual job is not going to care if you have class.”

Jim, who is a supervisor at a local grocery store, said that his employers were cooperative about arranging a flexible schedule. He said, “I can basically tell them when I want to work or won’t work.”

Sammie, a cashier at a nearby grocery store, said, “I’ve been working about twice a week, but they give me short shifts so it’s usually only about ten hours a week.”

Suzie works as a preschool leader in a church preschool. She said of her boss, “She’s definitely has already told me that she understands that I’m in college.”

Ryan works at a local restaurant and has been able to arrange his schedule on days when he does not have classes or after classes are over for the day. He works mostly evenings and weekends. He said, “It hasn’t been too difficult especially just working those kind of hours, working on days when I don’t have classes.”

Katie said, “During the summer I work full time but they’re working with me with my schedule every semester.”

Micky works at a consignment clothing store part time. She said, “My boss is okay if I have to take some time off.”

Dave works full time at a fast-food restaurant. He works the morning shift or a split shift to work around his class schedule. He said he is usually scheduled “for 36, but they tend to ask me to stay over.”

Most of the students who work had supportive employers. They had flexible hours, schedules that coordinated with class days and time off if needed.

Self-efficacy, including feeling prepared and becoming more confident. Peter, Jim, and Bob maintained that they arrived on campus feeling prepared and confident that they would do well. Each had taken numerous AP classes in high school and claimed high grade point averages and excellent time management skills. Peter and Jonathan finished the semester with straight A averages. Bob did not share his final grades.

Louisa said her confidence level had improved. She said,

> The first day of college, I wasn’t confident in myself at all and didn’t think I could do this. I . . . didn’t know what to expect from each class. . . . Now I kind of have the general idea of each teacher . . . what they expect and what they’re going to throw at me.

In an e-mail after the semester was over, Louisa shared her final grades with me. She wrote, “My final grades for last semester were 2 C’s and 2 B’s.”

Annie said, “I think I’m more confident with myself.” She added, “The best thing that I can say about that is the more prepared you are, the more successful you’re going to be. You can’t really wing things anymore when you’re in college and I’ve learned that very quickly.”

Annie sent an e-mail after the semester was over saying she was

> happy to report that I got a 98 in my SDV course, a 90 in my psychology class, and a 90 in my English course. I finished my MTTs [developmental math courses], all 9 of them, so that was just a participation/completion grade."

When asked about feeling successful, Ed said, "Time management, I haven't really been wasting much time, I really got everything together." He added, "Staying motivated and persistent toward goals and realizing what I need to do, to get what I want."

Ed shared his final grades in an e-mail after the semester was over. He said, "I finished last semester with a C in English, a C in biology, a B in psychology, a B SDV and a B in my ITE class."

Sammie identified changes in herself this way: "I think so, in as far as, maybe independence and also just self-discipline. . . . I definitely have to work harder and study more." In an e-mail after the semester was over, she shared, "I finished with an A in all of my classes!"

Micky admitted that she had not done much studying in high school, so college was requiring her to learn new study techniques. After the semester was over she reported, "I got an A in math, an A in SDV, an A in English, a B in medical terminology, and then the dreaded anatomy . . . F."

When asked about her strengths, Katie shared,

> My biggest strength would probably be organization. I try to work that into other aspects of my life . . . trying to keep up with your work is not like the easiest thing

> but . . . it's a balance of yes you've got to get it done, but it's like you don't want to do it at the same time, but then I just do it.

She said that being more responsible for herself was the biggest change she noticed. Katie did not share her final semester grades with me.

Suzie admitted that she had made some assumptions early in the semester that did not serve her well. She said, "Now I definitely step back and look at the big picture because like my SDV class, I assumed things that might not always be true . . . this showed me that I need to step back and think."

Suzie sent me an e-mail to tell me about her final grades. She wrote, "Survey of American Literature C, College Survival Skills A, Tai Chi 1 A, Pre-calculus with Trig B, History of World Civ. B, Beginning French B."

Dave identified both positive and negative changes he noticed in himself over the semester. Early in the first interview he told me that he had decided not to hang around with some high school friends who only seemed to want rides if they were too drunk to drive. He later added, "I believe I'm becoming more disciplined . . . I'm starting to get stuff done . . . more on time. . . . I'm more accountable. I think I'm . . . becoming more reclusive . . . more withdrawn." Dave shared his final grades with me in an e-mail: "Biology . . . 77.81, College Composition 88.91, Pre-calculus 72.98 US History 91.25."

Overall, these students gained confidence in themselves over the course of the semester. They engaged in their courses, interacted with their instructors, learned to keep up with assignments, used college services, and decided that time management and preparation served them well.

Summary

The conversations during the interviews, along with responses to follow-up e-mails, revealed a variety of challenges and successes during fall semester 2014. The students identified varying challenges and successes in response to interview questions. The responses about challenges revealed themes of uncertainty and inexperience, anxiety, and competing demands. The responses about successes revealed themes of feeling good about certain classes and teachers, the college services they used, places they found comfortable on campus, learning skills of time management, support from families and employers, and self-efficacy, which included statements about feeling prepared and becoming more confident. Each encounter with a student progressed in its own direction as the student candidly expressed his or her experiences, thoughts, and concerns. While most of their responses are not surprising or new, they illustrate areas in which the college could enhance the first semester experience. The findings illustrate the wide variety of ways students view and experience the first semester of their first year of college. Despite their challenges, overall this group of students was far more successful than many I have encountered in teaching first-year classes. Every one of the interviewees finished the semester with passing grades and enrolled for second semester. In Chapter 5, I presented my interpretations of the ways the students' responses and themes relate to the research questions.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the factors that may bring about or prevent success for first-year community college students. When I originally conceived this idea, I had concerns regarding the struggling first-year community college students I had taught over the last 8 years. Many had anecdotally identified chaotic lifestyles and family lives, lack of support from families and employers, immaturity, and a lack of academic and social preparation to handle college demands. The literature cited in Chapter 2 illustrated similar concerns by other authors and researchers. I hoped that listening to student voices in in-depth interviews would provide insight for the following research questions:

1. What do 18- to 24-year-old community college students identify as challenges and successes during their first year?
2. What can the first-person accounts of first-year community college student (ages 18–24) experiences reveal about their challenges and successes?

The first-year students I interviewed identified challenges that included uncertainty, inexperience, anxiety, and competing demands, which include both family and work. The successes students identified included classes and teachers they felt good about, the college services they used, finding places to be comfortable on campus, mastering new time management skills, support from families and employers, and self-efficacy. In the next section, I analyzed the challenges and successes the participants identified. Their answers are supported by the research cited in the literature review in Chapter 2.

Interpretation of the Findings

The first research question asked what students would identify as challenges and successes during their first year of community college. The challenges students identified in this study included uncertainty and inexperience, anxiety, and competing demands (both family and work). Successes students identified included classes and teachers they felt good about, the college services they used, learning new time management skills, support from families and employers, and self-efficacy, which included feeling prepared and becoming more confident. This section addresses the second research question, which asked what the first-person accounts of first-year community college student (ages 18 to 24) experiences could reveal about their challenges and successes.

Common themes in the literature review included work–life balance, first year, first generation, active versus passive learning, motivation, time management and study skills, unrealistic beliefs and expectations, perceived barriers, persistence, and social capital. The themes that I derived from my interview data confirm knowledge about community college students found in the peer-reviewed literature described in Chapter 2.

Challenges

Challenges participants identified included uncertainty and inexperience, anxiety, and competing demands (both family and work). The challenges reveal a lack of social capital to cope with new environments and college demands. While these young students indicated that going to college was expected by their families and necessary to get ready for the job market, their responses demonstrate a lack experience in a variety of areas and unrealistic expectations about what college would require of them. They lacked experiences that would prepare them to ask questions or ask for help.

Anxiety, uncertainty, and inexperience

In the interviews, Micky used words such as *confusing* and *embarrassing* to describe new experiences on campus. Annie said registering was a challenge and related incidences of test anxiety. She used the word *overwhelming* when she described finding her way around campus. Dave illustrated his anxiety with phrases such as *freaked out* and words such as *terrified* and *lost*. When Katie described going to campus for the first day of classes, she said, “I was so scared. I was shaking.” Micky described, “Stress got to me and I don’t know how this is related but my ribs got inflamed and I couldn’t breathe. I went to the doctor and that’s what they told me.” Ed suffered from digestive difficulties and pain associated with a hiatal hernia.

These findings are supported by the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. According to Wells (2008), students may arrive without the skills to perceive or overcome academic and social barriers. Wells discussed the importance of recognizing different forms of social and cultural capital as it affects first generation college students and those from lower SES. One of the first barriers students must overcome is finding their way around an unfamiliar physical and social environment. Students who lack experiences in navigating unfamiliar environments may experience anxiety when they arrive on campus for the first time for orientation and/or registration. Vytal et al. (2012) pointed out that “worrying about a social exchange” could contribute to “a racing heartbeat [which] can trigger a full-blown panic attack in an individual with a panic disorder” (p. 850). In the study Cox (2009) conducted with first-year students in an English Composition course, the data highlighted “a significant complication involved in assuming college student status: a profound fear of failure that impedes afflicted students’ possibility of success” (p. 77).

Once the anxiety or panic attack begins, unless the person has training or medication to overcome it, all attention will be focused on the physical symptoms. The fight or flight response was identified by Cannon in 1932 (as cited in Taylor et al., 2000) to describe the physical and neural response to perceived or real threats. Byron and Khazanchi (2011) pointed out that “anxiety occurs with striking regularity in people’s lives—such as when meeting someone new, speaking before a group, or taking an exam. And for those with a dispositional tendency toward anxiety, anxiety may be an ever-present distraction” (p. 269).

For some, the anxiety level may be so high that no information is actually received or retained because their brains may be in fight or flight mode. This may account for not catching on to the importance of communication with one’s advisor or becoming familiar with the basic layout of campus despite that information being provided during orientation. Kegan (1994) proposed that students are not necessarily cognitively underprepared, but instead are stressed by the multiple demands of modern life. In Kegan’s words, students may not have developed “the complexity of mind” (p. 277) to incorporate the new demands of the college environment. Webb (1980) made a similar connection using Piaget and Inhelder’s (1969) idea that individuals are constantly trying to balance between accommodation, assimilation, and adaptation. Schuetz (2008) pointed out that the simplest actions of everyday life require astute perseverance and sustained mental effort. She also asserted that all the new information regarding course work and appropriate behaviors in a new social setting requires ongoing interpretation. In terms of culture shock, disorientation, and social maladjustment, students may arrive at the community college with incorrect perceptions about college, ignorance of the environment both physical and social, and fear of being perceived as stupid, backward, or socially unacceptable (Bickerstaff et al., 2012).

According to Deckro et al. (2002), excess stress influences physical health. Many disease conditions and physical symptoms are complex interactions among genetic and behavioral factors and anxiety. Among college students, stress is related to headaches, sleep disturbances, and the common cold.

Conley (2008) noted that students who are the first in their family to attend college or students from low-income families might face more challenges. If one considers the combination of the demands of the first week of classes with the emotional load of making one’s way in a new environment, it is not too difficult to understand the rooms full of blank faces that frustrate so many instructors (Bickerstaff et al., 2012; Cho & Karp, 2012; Cox, 2009).

According to Caporrimo (2008), in her experience, community college students have unrealistic expectations about what college is like. Caporrimo pointed out that they believe they should get good grades because they show up to class on time and turn in assignments regardless of quality. They find tests to be harder than they expected or that tests ask for more than rote memory. Some students lack critical thinking skills that would enable them to demonstrate learning rather than mere completion of work. Caporrimo also noted that first-generation students may view “making it to college” as the ultimate achievement and may lack the experience and persistence to achieve the goal of graduating. She related that community college students were surprised that she expected critical thinking and excellence in writing skills. In addition, she encountered shock when she graded for both content and form. In the interviews, Katie expressed surprise at the amount of material she was expected to cover on her own before tests in Nutrition and History. Bob said he found out quickly that the night and morning before a paper was due was not sufficient time to write for his literature class. He said he needed to plan much more time than he had in high school to cover reading assignments.

Acknowledging that students arrive at community college with deficits in both academic and noncognitive skills, Walsh-Portillo (2011) asserted that unprepared students could benefit from training to boost their emotional intelligence in areas such as self-awareness and self-management. In addition, students could benefit from training to assess and build the interpersonal skills necessary to seek college services and build relationships with faculty. She pointed out that students could benefit from training to develop discipline-specific skills and tools for adapting to college demands. Students need to know about college services and be comfortable using them. O’Gara et al. (2009) affirmed that student success courses “contributed to students’ overall feelings of integration into the social and academic fabric of the college” (p. 212).

The comments participants made in this study verify that uncertainty, inexperience, and anxiety are challenges in themselves and precipitate other challenges such as not hearing important information that would have relieved anxiety or not taking advantage of services that would have alleviated uncertainty or confusion. Uncertainty and inexperience appear to be tightly intertwined with anxiety about being a stranger in new environment. Although all 12 participants had attended the summer orientation sessions, which included supervised registration, 10 participants expressed feelings of being lost, confused, and overwhelmed during the orientation and registration process and the first week of classes. In spite of the assistance and information offered during orientation, these students expressed varying degrees of not knowing how to navigate the new environment and not asking for help when it could have been beneficial early in the semester. I asked each student, and the answers varied from not knowing help was available or where services were located. Many expressed surprise at how fast their instructors jumped into course materials and assignments. As of Week 12 of the semester, four students who were struggling to meet course demands had not asked their instructors for help. Some professed being too shy while others had not considered it. Only five of the 12 participants knew who their advisors were, and only four had actually met their advisors. The CCCSE results from October 2014 showed that only one-fourth of the 867 responding students at RCC had participated in academic advising and planning in one of their courses. Student responses to my interview questions indicated that anxiety over parking, finding classrooms, encountering new people and crowds, and feeling underprepared for course demands were the biggest concerns.

Additional evidence for difficulties about whether new students give full attention to college tasks comes from Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), who pointed out that “the transition to college provides a form of culture shock requiring significant social and psychological relearning” (p. 61). Karp et al. (2008) argued, “Although support services technically are open to all students, only those who come to the community college with pre-existing social and cultural resources can take full advantage of them” (p. 1). Students lacking such capital are further disadvantaged because they may not seek valuable opportunities that could encourage their persistence. Because most of the students I interviewed grew up in rural or small town communities and still live with their families, I believe it is possible that they have not had many opportunities to explore new environments or to learn coping skills when they encounter new situations.

Shanley and Johnston (2008) explained, “First-year students arrive for orientation amid a bunch of other students the same age and equally scared. Even outgoing students who had a plethora of friends in high school felt intimidated” (p. 4). Students may also harbor worries about finding their way around, if there will be pressure to participate in social events, or if they will be safe on campus. Five students I interviewed professed to be shy and worried about their appearance. One student said that she was too shy to ask instructors for help in person but would ask in an e-mail. Some students said they felt uncomfortable because they did not know anyone in their classes. Only two students attended extracurricular events during the first semester.

To show that fear of the unknown may have created anxiety that affected navigating the college’s physical layout, a description of the campus may be enlightening. The RCC campus is organized into North and South campuses. A bridge over the street connects the two sides of the campus. Most of the buildings are clearly labeled, but some are not. There are 13 buildings, eight of which are classroom buildings. New students are provided with campus maps, and tours are provided during orientation. Maps are also available on the college web site and accessible on mobile phones. During the first week of classes, volunteers with name tags stand in the halls and on sidewalks to answer questions. Despite all the help available, students' anxiety related to fear of the unknown could prevent clear thinking about learning one's way around or asking for help from instructors or advisors. Some students expressed having attended very small high schools. Others revealed lack of experience such as not knowing that room numbers are generally organized by floors, that is, the 400 room numbers are on the fourth floor. In the Duncan and Humanities buildings, the rooms are designated by initials, such as H 118 or D 200. The lack of experience in finding one's way around can compound confusion and anxiety.

During the interviews, anxiety about the college experience was identified explicitly in a variety of ways, including getting lost, becoming ill, being scared, and implicitly by some physical gestures exhibited during the interviews. Some issues related to uncertainty and inexperience appeared to cause anxiety. Seven students admitted that they were shy and not used to associating with large numbers of people. Worrying about whether others are noticing how one is dressed could indicate lack of experience, a reflection of treatment by peers in high school, or perhaps an anxiety disorder.

Others experienced stress because they made assumptions about course demands, due dates, and grading methods that turned out not to be true. For example, Micky expressed frustration over the amount of material and the speed at which it was presented in her anatomy class. She indicated that the amount of material on tests was more than she could manage. Louisa explained that the history and nutrition classes were difficult for her because of the pace and the amount of material covered in a short time. She said she really did not know how to study. Bob shared that the American Literature and Biological Problems in Contemporary Society required more critical thinking and in-depth writing than he was accustomed to. Ed shared an experience when he assumed his grade was okay, but found out he had misinterpreted the grade scale on Blackboard. He then had to scramble to bring his grade up before mid-semester. Nervous gestures during the interviews demonstrated that some participants were either nervous by nature, had anxiety issues already, or were possibly uneasy about talking with a stranger (me) about personal issues. Others openly admitted being easily stressed or shy. Karp (2011) showed that “meaningful social relationships play an important role in promoting persistence because they help students feel comfortable in college and provide them with access to information that can ease their path toward a degree (p. 6). Karp emphasized the importance of helping students develop meaningful on campus social relationships. Students who lack the social skills to form new relationships may miss valuable information and opportunities.

Competing demands and time management

Competing demands were identified by descriptions of family illnesses or injuries, family members' behaviors, family commitments, and attempts to balance work hours with schoolwork. All except one participant lived at home with parents and siblings and expressed concerns about balancing the increased need to spend time on course work and still give their families the attention they perceived was necessary or expected. All participants except one worked between 10 and 30 hours at one or two part-time jobs. Six expressed the need to cut back on work hours to meet course demands for the next semester. Two of the 12 students interviewed lived at home or split their time between two households. Eleven of the 12 students held full-time jobs or one or more part-time jobs. Rings (2001) cited the challenges of inadequate study skills, including time management, inability to organize and categorize information, inability to distinguish important from unimportant information, and inability to think logically and critically. Gardenhire-Crooks et al. (2006) recorded student beliefs that college courses were much more difficult than what they were asked to do in high school and that their high schools did not prepare them well for college-level work. All the students I interviewed commented on the pace of the courses and the heavy workloads. Micky, Annie, Sammie, Bob, Ed, and Dave commented on specific tasks that gave them trouble because they lacked experience with course pace, reading loads, or expectations for tests.

Several students mentioned having to help parents or siblings at home in addition to picking up siblings after school, babysitting, chores at home, or providing transportation for parents or grandparents. Some had parents who seemed needy or demanding, which made it more difficult for the students to use their time wisely. Sammie shared, “My mom . . . she’s a stay at home mom and I guess she gets lonely so when I’m at home she’s like ‘come and sit with me’ . . . it is a big distraction.” Louisa mentioned, “Being mom’s right hand man definitely means that I’m not always free.” Ed said studying at home was difficult sometimes because there were so many people in the house. He has seven siblings living at home ranging from ages 9 to 17. Bob described doing his chores and making sure his younger brother did his. Bob also picks up his sibling after school before he goes to work.

Most of the participants in this study were receiving financial aid and they felt that working at least part time was a necessity. In addition, they paid for many of their own personal expenses despite still living at home. Without prior experience in managing a college course load, most believed they could work as many hours as possible and still keep up with assignments. As they progressed through the first semester, they found that their work schedules and in some cases their course loads had to be reduced.

According to the AACC for 2011– 2012, 22% of full-time students were employed full time and 40% were employed part time (“Fast Facts,” 2015). As emerging adults, these young people are still developing identity and time management skills, so they may struggle to prioritize academic tasks over work schedules. Eleven of the 12 students interviewed held full-time jobs or one or more part-time jobs. They all said their employers were cooperative and not too demanding in terms of weekly scheduling or if they needed time off. While some employers make this difficult by expecting students to work late hours and be on call (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Johnson et al., 2009; Tannock & Flocks, 2003), these students felt that their employers were helpful and understanding.

During the interviews, when we discussed what changes they had noticed in themselves or what changes would need to be made, most participants brought up time management. They mentioned cutting work hours, decreasing their course loads, or rearranging the weekly course schedule. Others mentioned choosing to stay on campus to study or getting up very early in the morning to study before there were any competing demands in the household. A few who had enjoyed attending classes only two or three days a week wondered if they would be so lucky the next semester. Others found eight o'clock classes were not suitable and hoped to schedule classes later in the day.

Successes

The list of successes participants identified includes descriptions of classes and teachers they felt good about, the college services they used, places they found comfortable on campus, learning time management, support from families and employer semester grades, and self-efficacy, which included statements about feeling prepared and becoming more confident. In their descriptions of classes and teachers they felt good about and the college services they used, the participants demonstrated that they found instructors to be personable and helpful. Some described admiration and appreciation for excellence in teaching. Two interviewees expressed pleasant surprise that their instructors treated students with respect. Students who took advantage of the writing center and advising services said that those services were helpful. Although most of the interviewees were initially uncomfortable on campus, they discovered places they found comfortable on campus for hanging out or for studying. A favorite spot was the top floor of the library for studying and computer access. Some interviewees expressed a need for learning time management skills, and some felt that they had begun to identify ways they needed to change their priorities and apportion their time. Positive family support and employer cooperation for flexible or reduced working hours were important to all the interviewees. Those who shared their final semester grades achieved A, B, and C grades. Only one reported an F and was enrolled in the course again for second semester with a new understanding of when to ask for help and that she needed to acquire some new skills for learning. Several participants arrived on campus first semester very sure of themselves and expressed that they felt prepared for the academic and social demands of college. They felt that participation in AP courses in high school contributed to their success. Near the end of the semester, most expressed feelings of increased confidence and self-knowledge. Successes are important to persistence, especially for academically vulnerable students. According to Karp (2011), the term *academically vulnerable* refers "to students from backgrounds that are correlated with low levels of postsecondary success, including those who are academically underprepared, from underrepresented minority groups, students with low SES, and students who have low levels of parental education" (p. 1). Louisa graduated from high school with a 2.4 and described herself as the first in her family to go to college. Carrie and Suzie shared comments about not working very hard in high school. Micky struggled in her anatomy class. She said, "I can't read a chapter and then in two days have an exam and know every little thing about it." She told me her high school experience did not prepare her for courses such as anatomy.

Limitations of the Study

When I envisioned this study, I worried that when I asked for volunteers, I would encounter only students who were willing to volunteer their valuable time and spend time talking with a stranger. One of the limitations of this study was that only students who felt like they had time volunteered to participate. Many indicated on the recruiting questionnaire that they did not have time. Some returned it blank or checked no and provided no personal information. Others merely left the papers on the tables. A few asked questions about the study. Another implied limitation was that those students with poor social skills or any of the issues listed earlier would not be willing to take time to have a conversation with a stranger. An additional limitation is that the students who scheduled and showed up for interviews exemplified a small range of experiences and cannot be construed to represent community college students in general. An unanticipated limitation was the lack of response from the potential participant pool when I tried to contact them to set up interviews. I had requested that all students write an email address on the recruiting questionnaire. Some emails were incomplete and others were missing.

Another factor that could limit the generalizability of the study was geographical. The participants had grown up in and lived in the small towns and rural areas in the service area of the community college. The small sample size from a student enrollment of a particular community college cannot be construed to represent the majority of first-year student experiences. Although the students I interviewed had positive high school experiences, good grades, completed their first semester, and enrolled for the second semester, they revealed needs and struggles that many young people between the ages of 18 and 24 experience. The results of this study illustrate areas in which they could benefit from support.

This study was not a long-term study of diverse groups of freshman college students from various colleges. Interview participants were a small group of freshmen students from one community college in one state representing a specific locality and population. Due to the nature of a phenomenological study the interview method produced data that were specific to this particular small group.

Recommendations

In teaching community college freshmen over the last 10 years, I have listened to and read a wide variety of stories from students. In essays and conversations, they haved shared personal accounts of chaotic lives, including homelessness, parental abandonment or abuse, drug use, mental health conditions, automobile accidents, difficult relationships and divorce, criminal activity, and acting as caretakers for terminally ill parents. A few have had such poor social skills that they were difficult to interact with. Some have been veterans of war, with mental and physical wounds. Many are single parents and have more than one child. Most students worked at least part time. I have encountered young people who somehow graduated from high school with minimal literacy and others with stellar academic records. In each class that opened with about 25 students enrolled, at least 10 dropped out before the semester ended. It was those stories that inspired me to begin this project. Most had enrolled in community college classes hoping to gain job skills. Several enrolled because they did not know what else to do after high school or because their parents insisted.

In contrast, some students had uneventful lives, or lives rich with experiences, supportive parents, a stable home life, and a successful high school experience in public, private, or home schooling. A few of those dropped out for various reasons, but most went on to complete an associate's degree or transfer to a 4-year college.

This study could be repeated exactly as described or enhanced by written material from the participants. I believe the descriptions and voices of individuals experiencing community college for the first time can provide valuable insight for enhanced college support services.

More qualitative research that uses personal interviews of first-year college students is needed to exemplify the need for early and aggressive support. Van Manen (1990) wrote that conversational interviewing could be used for discovering and collecting experiential narrative to cultivate resources for "richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon" (p. 66).

Karp (2011) stressed the improtance of helping students navigate the world of poetsecondary education. Karp also pointed out that "it is also clear that providing information to students en masse, through flyers or large orientation sessions, is ineffective" (p. 25). All of the students interviewed for this study had attended the orientation session before the semester began and enrolled in the student success class (SDV) designed to familiarize them with the college environment and available services. If more students are interviewed personally, richer, more explicit evidence of their needs will be obtained. Conversations reveal more than survey answers. Qualitative studies using personal interviews can provide abundant information about what is needed and what is working well. Studies such as the one conducted by Duggan and Williams (2011) have explored student success courses from the student perspective with questions about topics students find the most useful, teaching methods students find most helpful, and course design that best serve students. Analyzing interviews provides a method by which researchers can better understand individuals' stories and perspectives.

Implications

The potential impact for positive social change is to demonstrate the importance of the individual student. If community colleges aim to produce more graduates they must begin when the students first come to campus. Advisors and instructors can learn more about how to help and encourage students if they build relationships early. Time for individual conferences can be built into the course schedule and can be included in course outcomes. Advisors should make the effort to personally meet their advisees rather than wait to hear from them. Student development course instructors can include in course requirements not only personal conversations with each student, but can require that each student meet with his/her advisor and report on the results. Regarding his research, Dittmar (2014) emphasized, "It is true that the sample size was small and the responses could be idiosyncratic, but we cannot know the answers to these questions until we investigate the expectations and beliefs of college freshmen further" (p. 118). The sample size for my study was small, but shows in detail what students had to say about beginning their college education at a community college. This study can contribute to existing literature by bringing attention to students' perceptions of the challenges and barriers they experience during their first year of community college. To obtain clues about the instructional, affective, and institutional support they need to learn, the students were asked to speak for themselves. My study may provide insights for student support systems that aim to support underprepared students at the beginning of their first year. Often faculty and student service personnel assume that because the information has been made available, new students will take advantage of it. The truth is that students may not have requisite interpersonal skills or may not realize how vulnerable they are in an environment with an unfamiliar structure and academic demands different from their high school experience. Uncertainty and inexperience create an impact on engagement and coming to terms with course demands. They can also prevent students from realizing that there is help available and that it is okay to take advantage of it.

The nature of personal interviews in a private room, in a casual conversation with nothing at stake, allows the possibility of facts and feelings being revealed that may not otherwise be discovered or tapped by surveys. According to Karp (2011), "we know that student situational interpretations and identities matter. Students create their own understandings of college, and these understandings influence their learning and the ways that they experience attempts to improve their outcomes" (p. 21).

If a quantity of compelling evidence in the form of student voices becomes available, college programs designed to support new students can be designed to introduce incoming students to services that will promote success more explicitly. My recommendations are as follows:

1. Plan for advisors and faculty to meet students personally during orientation in small groups of no more than six, so staff or faculty members can notice if some students are reticent or look confused and can speak to them one to one.
2. Provide a suggested script or set of questions for the introduction meetings to find out what kind of high school experience each student had and what their vision of college is.
3. Require creating an academic plan with one's assigned advisor early in the semester as part of a student success course.
4. If a tracking program is available, faculty and advisors should contact students who are receiving low grades early in the semester.
5. As part of the student success course, require students to use each type of college service at least twice during the first semester. The assignment could require a short narrative of the encounter along with appropriate signatures.
6. Provide faculty and advisor training that presents the results of qualitative studies similar to this one so they can be made aware that just because services and help are available, students' prior experiences and social capital may not be adequate to enable them to ask for help.

Conclusion

In this study students were asked to identify challenges and successes for their first semester of the first year of community college. As the results show, the students who were interviewed remained attached to their families, worked full or part time, may have had less than optimal learning skills for college material, and did not ask for help regarding academic or financial matters. One student's refrain—"I wish someone would have told me"—illustrates that often new community college students do not know what they don't know. They believe they have what it takes to succeed in college, but their challenges are often related to lack of experience, anxiety, or competing demands for their attention. Surveys do not reveal the variety of personalities, interpersonal skills, or social and cultural capital that community college students bring with them. Listening to their voices in conversations can provide information useful to helping them help themselves. Good faculty–advisor–student relationships begin with conversations. Community college students are individuals and must not be lost in the crowd. They need personal assistance and campus relationships to learn to thrive for their psychological well-being and academic success.

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Appendix A: Letter to Faculty

Dear English 111, SDV, and Math faculty members,

I am preparing to do my dissertation research for a PhD in Education through Walden University. I need your help to access a potential pool of participants. Would you please consider allowing me to use the last 5–10 minutes of a class period to administer a recruiting questionnaire during one of your regular class sessions? Students should be able to complete it in less than 10 minutes. I will assure them that their responses will have no effect on their grades in your class. When they are done, I will collect the questionnaires.

This phenomenological study aims to discover how themes derived from student interviews concerning their educational, sociocultural, cognitive, affective, and developmental backgrounds can inform teaching of and support college literacy skills in required community college courses.

Thank you for your assistance. I will be happy to discuss my research with you if you are interested. Please let me know which class and what day and time would be convenient for me to administer my questionnaire. Attached is a letter you may e-mail to your students to let them know what to expect.

Sincerely,

MaryBeth Drake

Adjunct Instructor of English

Appendix B: Recruiting Questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to respond to this questionnaire**.** I am conducting a research study to investigate the perspectives of first-year community college students who are 18–24 years old, in college classes for the first time, and have English as their primary language. You do not have to complete this questionnaire if you do not fit the criteria listed, nor are you required to complete it if you do not wish to. Your responses will help me select a small group of participants whom I will interview in person. Your responses on this questionnaire will not be shared with anyone, including your current instructors. Your responses will have no influence on your current course assessments or grades. They will become my private personal property. Any information I use will be reported without your name or other identifying information. Thank you for sharing your information.

1. Name____
2. Student ID____
3. Current address____
4. Best phone number to contact you (voice or text) ______________________
5. Your CC e-mail _______________________________________
6. Check one: male________ female_________
7. Age________
8. Is this your first (ever) semester at a college? _____________________________
9. Have you attended college classes anywhere else? _________
10. Where? ____

11. Did you complete any kind of college course before this one? _______

12. Is English your first language? Yes________ No_________

Would you be willing to participate in two one-hour interviews? If you indicate Yes, I will contact you by one of the following methods. Please indicate your preference:

__CC secure e-mail
__phone call
__text message
__United States Postal Service

Thank you for your time! Please look over the questions to be sure you have answered each one.

I will be in touch if you have indicated that you would be willing to participate.

If you have questions, please contact me by e-mail at [contact information removed]

Appendix C: Invitation and Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study of the first-year experiences of community college students. This study intends to provide a better understanding of the first-year experiences of community college students.

I have invited 18- to 24-year-old first-year community college students.

The primary research question that will guide this study is:

What do community college students identify as challenges and successes during their first year?

This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named MaryBeth Drake, who is a doctoral student at Walden University. You may already know the researcher as an English instructor on this campus, but this study is separate from that role.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to identify areas of concern to help community college faculty and staff gain a better understanding of the instructional and emotional support students need to learn and grow at the college level.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in 2 one-hour interviews which will be recorded digitally
- Discuss transcripts of the interviews either by phone, e-mail, or in person

Here are some sample questions:

- Please describe what led you to choose to go to college.
- Please describe what led you to choose CC.
- Please describe how your family feels about you going to college.
- As you moved into a routine of attending classes, can you identify challenges or barriers that caused problems?

Voluntary Nature of the Study

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision whether to be in the study. No one at the Community College will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as fatigue, stress, or becoming upset or worrying that you are answering the questions “correctly.” Please keep in mind that the researcher is very interested in your particular experience of beginning at a community college, so there are no correct or expected answers. Being in this study will not pose risk to your safety or well-being. No one will know if you participate in this study unless you choose to tell him or her.

No information you provide will be shared with anyone on campus.

Participating in this study may have potential benefits such as reflecting on your current goals and circumstances, thinking about your learning styles, and thinking about what makes you successful or unsuccessful.

Privacy

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The interviews will take place in a private office in the library on campus or in a mutually agreed upon place where there are minimum distractions. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. In addition, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secure by digital recordings and transcripts of interviews on the researcher’s password-protected computer, and data sticks will be stored in a secure location in the researcher’s home. No documents or recorded material will be shared with any other parties at the community college. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

Contacts and Questions

You may ask any questions you have now, or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via e-mail at [contact information removed].
If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is (612) 312-1210.

Walden University’s approval number for this study is **10-09-14-0030798**, and it expires on October 8, 2015.

The researcher will e-mail you a copy of this form to keep.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Printed name of participant ____

Date of consent ____

Participant’s signature ____

Researcher’s signature ____

Appendix D: Interview Protocol Set 1

Name of interviewee ____

Date ____

1. Please describe what led you to choose to go to college.
2. Please describe what led you to choose CC.
3. Please describe how your family feels about you going to college.
4. How has that affected your attitude toward college?
5. What are (were) your current living arrangements (during your first year)?
6. Please describe what you see as advantages and disadvantages to your current (during your first year) living arrangements related to college.
7. Please describe the process of applying to, being accepted to, and registering for courses for your first semester. (prompt for details about who or what helped or hindered)
8. I would like you to reflect on the first day you arrived on campus.

   What were your feelings?

   How did you find your way around the campus?

   What went well?

   What did not go so well?
9. How many classes did you sign up for the first semester?
10. What influenced you to choose that number of credits or courses?
11. Would you please share your course schedule with me?

12. What might you do differently for your schedule next semester? Why?
13. What classes did you feel good about?

    Would you tell me more about that?
14. What teachers did you feel good about?

    Would you tell me more about that?
15. As you moved into a routine of attending classes, can you identify challenges or barriers that caused problems or anxiety?
16. Please tell me about feeling prepared or unprepared for the skills and requirements of each of your courses.
17. As you moved into a routine of attending classes, can you identify events, issues, or people that helped you adjust and feel more comfortable?

    Would you tell me more about that?
18. If you work now or have worked during school in the past, please tell me about managing your time between course work and your job. What are some of the issues that come up?
19. When you are thinking about other facets of your life that you must consider when deciding how to spend your time, what comes up?
20. Can you identify any changes in yourself as you moved through the semester?

    (prompt: what event made you notice or contributed to the changes?)
21. Would you describe if you feel successful or unsuccessful in each of your college courses so far? Can you explain why you feel that way?

Appendix E: Interview Protocol Set 2

Name of interviewee ____

Date ____

1. After you have had a chance to review the transcript from our first interview, do you have anything to elaborate upon or something you would like me to delete?
2. What did you expect from college?
3. How have your expectations changed?
4. How do you feel when you are on campus?
    - Walking through the halls?
    - In class?
    - In the library?
    - In the food court?
5. Please describe any particular places where you feel good on campus. Would you elaborate about that?
6. What kind of student were you in high school?
7. What kind of student are you now?
8. What steps made by you will be necessary for you to succeed in college?
9. What steps made by others will be necessary for you to succeed in college?
10. What traits do you recognize in yourself that you regard as strengths?
11. Are you involved with any campus activities?
12. With whom do you associate while you are on campus?

13. Have you been invited to any campus activities or events? By whom?
14. What campus activities or events have you attended?
15. What do you perceive as efforts by the college to make you feel part of the college community?
16. Please describe experiences when you felt understood by an instructor.
17. Please describe any experiences when you felt misunderstood by an instructor.
18. Please describe how you participate in your classes.
19. Please describe the experience of when an instructor asks a question to the whole class. Do you respond? Can you tell me more about when and if you respond?
20. Please describe your comfort level with asking questions for each of your instructors.
21. Please add any information you choose about your first-year experience at this community college.