Success Against The Odds: The Experience of Academically At-Risk Students Who Graduate From Postsecondary Institutions

Four Case Studies

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by

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Adult Learning and Human Resource Development

(ABSTRACT)

Over the years, dramatic changes in retention and attrition rates have given rise to extensive studies on the academically at-risk college student (Nisbet, Ruble, and Schurr 1982; Levin and Levin, 1991, White & Salacek 1986). Yet, most of these studies have focused on statistical measures identifying predictors of success using traditional quantitative methodology, with only sparse attention given to the amorphous phenomenon of the “student’s experience.” Against the odds, some at-risk students continue to succeed in college, despite academic difficulty.

The purpose of this study was to examine the experience of academically at-risk students who graduated from four-year institutions and to discover how they successfully navigated higher education life’s path, despite academic challenges. Specifically, this study sought to understand the process by which these students persisted from college entry to graduation; the tasks of accomplishing requirements for course work and earning sufficient grades; the management of social issues of home and campus life, and the strategies they employed that yielded success. This research used a case study and grounded theory methodology to analyze the interviews of four students. A comparative iterative analysis of the data revealed that these students experienced a supportive, enjoyable, yet highly stressful college experience that was shaped by interactions within their academic and social communities.

Findings also revealed that these students perceived their college experience as hard work and presented with the defining feature of a unique will to continue in college during high levels of stress that was central to research on student resiliency. In addition, this study provided an example of how students experience a developmental shift from late adolescence to adulthood, where the transition to adulthood often involves an overwhelming amount of responsibility that some students might not be equipped to fully handle.

Successful strategies that these students employed consisted of: a) self-appraisal, b) mirroring of parental values, c) long range goal-setting, d) positive use of time, e) monitoring of extracurricular activities, f) practice, visual, and hands-on learning, g) resourcefulness, and h) extra effort.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my loving children, Brandon and Briana Banks for their unconditional love, tolerance, and support.
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As I navigated higher education life’s path, indeed this has been an insightful journey of growth and development. Several essential people have contributed to this process.

This research could not have been completed without the dedication and determination of the student participants. I am deeply grateful for their willingness to see value in this topic and for their priceless assistance in completing this study.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the study that sought to examine the experience of academically at-risk students who graduated from postsecondary education, and how they successfully navigated higher education life’s path, despite academic challenges. The chapter includes an introduction, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the study, limitations of the study, and definitions of terms associated with the study.

Background of Problem

Current enrollment in postsecondary institutions is expected to rise significantly in the year 2000. Yet, the percentage of students who continue to drop out of college in the first year has reached an all time high (Gose, 1996). These statistics echo the projections of the National Center for Education Statistics from 1990-2000, which show that almost half of the students who enter higher education will leave before completing either an associate or baccalaureate program (Gerald 1992; Ting, 1998, p. 15).

Over the years, dramatic changes in retention and attrition rates have given rise to extensive studies on the academically at-risk college student (Nisbet, Ruble, & Schurr 1982; Levin and Levin, 1991, and White and Salacek 1986). Related to the academically at-risk students are student persistence factors and predictors of academic success for first semester college students (Aitken, 1982; Webb, 1988).

These studies have given detailed accounts of academic attributes such as a student’s GPA, class rank, and math/verbal scores on standardized aptitude tests as predictors of success. More recently, attrition and persistence studies have shown that nonacademic attributes, such as self-concept, leadership experience, and social integration could be better predictors of student success. Yet, most studies have focused on statistical measures identifying predictors of success using traditional quantitative methodology, with only sparse attention given to the student’s perspective. These studies are reviewed in Chapter two.

Over 40% of first-time college students continue to drop out (Tinto, 1993); thus, retention of students must be an important enrollment issue in the USA. Moreover, cost constraints encourage the development and use of effective means to identify potentially non-persistent students and the implementation of constructive programs that encourage students to be successful in college (Witherspoon, Long, Chubick, 1999).

Several factors contribute to the decline in academic performance and the dropout rate of students. These factors include poor college selection and advisement, lack of institutional and student commitment, financial issues, social environment issues, poor academic and social integration, and academic unpreparedness (Pantages & Creedon, 1978; Tinto, 1987, 1993; Noel & Levitz, 1982 and Ting, 1998).

The alarming dropout rate presents with multifaceted problems of which retention programs have had minimum success. Thus, the strive for academic excellence has presented with grave challenges. For many late adolescents, the move to college facilitates important social adjustment and developmental tasks, such as the establishment of greater autonomy and independence; the exploration of intimacy in friendships and
romantic relationships; and the consolidation of a coherent sense of identity (Brooks & DuBois, 1995, p. 357). According to Tinto (1987), aside from the social adjustment, many students do not realize that the standards for academic success in college are considerably more demanding than those of high school. Often, students feel an implicit pressure to view college primarily as a place to obtain employment skills (Carter, 1990). Although academic preparation and achievement in college is significant to this study, equally significant are the personal values of college students who elect to participate in this study and social adjustment issues that impact their ability to persist from freshman year to graduation.

Jones & Watson (1990) report that student attrition is a problem for American colleges because an increasing number of college enrollees fit the demographic and socioeconomic profile of “high risk.” Academically at-risk students are generally thought to be at greater risk of dropping out than other students, due to their disadvantaged academic, socioeconomic, or cultural background (Moore, 1970; White & Sedlacek, 1986 & Horn, 1997). A review of the literature indicates that these students are often academically underprepared and are frequently specially admitted students (Riehl, 1994), particularly in four year institutions. In the late 1960s and 1970s, hundreds of postsecondary educational institutions established special admission programs (nontraditional) for promising applicants who failed to meet the minimum standards for regular admission. Many of these admissions programs were created to comply with federal mandates like the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Peterson, 1996). The rationale for these programs has been that traditional admissions predictors are inadequate indicators of future academic performance of some students (White & Sedlacek, 1986).

Traditionally, college admissions has attributed a student’s level of performance to academic skills and knowledge acquired before entering college (Aitken, 1982; Terrill, 1988; Webb et al., 1988). Grades from secondary school, as well as math and verbal scores on standardized aptitude tests have served as the most valid factors that affect academic success in college. A linear relationship between entering compatibility with college demands and first year attrition indicates that a student's level of academic preparedness plays an important role in determining college persistence. Institutions admitting students with the highest test scores (SAT and ACT) experience the smallest attrition rate after the freshman year. In contrast, those institutions admitting students with low test scores experience a high average attrition rate (Noel & Levit, 1985; College Entrance Examination Board, National Report 1972-1995).

Specially admitted, first generation, and disadvantaged students generally have lower college entrance examination scores and high school class ranks, and many are ethnic minorities (Department of Education, 1994; Ting, et al, 1998). Academic variables may provide a means for detecting at-risk students, since they measure skills that colleges reward. However, as a more comprehensive guideline, Noel and Levit et. al., offer three definitions for identifying academically unprepared students: a) any student who needs skill development; b) any student who does not meet regular admissions standards, e.g., low admissions test score, low high school GPA; and c) any student whose placement test score is below the cut-off for assignment to regular courses. More recently, researchers have argued that success cannot be determined by academic variables alone. There are several studies suggesting that non-intellectual dimensions such as a student’s educational aspiration, social integration skills, and positive self-concept concerning
academic aptitude are equally, if not more, predictive of a student’s potential to succeed (White & Sedlacek, 1986; Pascarella & Terenizini, 2000, Tinto et al.).

Abrams and Jernnigan (1984) reported that traditional academic predictors of success are not appropriate when applied to a population of students who have been selected to participate in college integration programs based on high school grades. This study found no link between the traditional academic variables (high school grade point average and aptitude test score) and the student’s success in his or her first semester at college. Other studies, such as research conducted by Rose (1989) and Cliff (1999), have focused on students who were admitted to college with successful pre-college education, but became temporarily at-risk for failure during some point in college. These studies suggest that researchers should view “at-risk” as a temporary status for some students.

**Statement of the Problem**

Although many studies have attempted to identify the academic success of at-risk students using high school grades, class rank, and standardized test scores, these quantitative studies often report low validity for traditional measures and many researchers have called for better methods of determining the success of at-risk students (Stanley, 1971; Nisbet, Ruble, & Schurr, 1982 and Ting, 1998).

The paucity of research has been less than adequate on the success of at-risk students with academic challenges who graduate from postsecondary institutions. Moreover, quantitative research has provided few answers for the phenomenon of the student’s experience. The unique experience of how these students navigated higher education life’s path and successfully graduated from postsecondary institutions despite academic challenges, needs to be fully discovered and understood, if better methods of addressing the dropout crisis are to be developed. Thus, it is reasonable to investigate how academically at-risk students who graduate from postsecondary institutions succeed, despite academic challenges. Implicit in this question is “what the experience was like and how they navigated higher education life’s path?"

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine the experience of academically at-risk students who graduated from postsecondary institutions and how they successfully navigated higher education life’s path, despite academic challenges.

**Research Questions**

The Research Questions are:

1. How did these students deal with the task of mastering material, accomplishing requirements in course work, and earning sufficient grades/GPA?
2. How did they deal with the social issues of home and campus life?
3. How did the strategies they employed yield success?
Significance of Study

The data collected and reported in this study addressed the gap of knowledge in the research literature on student persistence and the success of at-risk college students. A perplexing issue for researchers is the distinction between the cumulative effect of a personal history of the lives of at-risk students, the daily academic struggles that they encountered, and their ability to persist in college to graduation. This study allowed students with academic difficulty to tell researchers what issues are truly important and relevant, and to share their life story.

Specific to adult education research and practice, this study serves to provide a deeper understanding of the lives of college students who have succeeded, despite academic challenges. More specifically, this study serves as a resource to illuminate issues for educators and policymakers to consider certain kinds of teaching strategies and programs that might improve the retention rate of college students, and to consider if these programs and strategies are effective.

Limitations of Study

In this study of the experience of academically at-risk students who graduate from postsecondary institutions, several limitations are identified. Self-report data, as collected in the in-depth interviews, are retrospective and only as good as the information that is presented. Related to this limitation is the potential for a reactive effect to the interviewer (interviewer bias) in such a study. The researcher used a semi-structured questionnaire to help minimize this limitation. This study is also non-random in nature. Findings from this study are intended to provide insight; generalization from this research is not the aim.

Definition of Terms

Through the use of qualitative methods, this research focuses on the success of academically at-risk students who graduate from postsecondary education. The following definitions will be used:

1. **Postsecondary Institutions** - formal education beyond high school from an institution of higher education (college or university). For the purpose of this study, a 4-year institution will be used.

2. **At-Risk** - students with the potential for failure to achieve their expected success in school due to factors associated with socioeconomic status, family variables, academic deficiencies, or physical/neurological impairment. For the purpose of this study, the terms at-risk and high risk will be used synonymously.

3. **Academically At-Risk** - students with the potential for failure to achieve their expected success at some point in school due to academic difficulties. These students might have multiple withdrawals or repeats on academic transcripts, academic probation, low GPA (2.2 & below), low SAT scores (800 average or below) low class rank, or identified difficulties learning course materials.
4. **Academic Challenges**- adversity students face that cause potential for failure to achieve academically, i.e. difficulty learning course materials, lack of financial resources, difficulty managing home and campus life.

4. **Persistence**- the will to continue; students who elect not to dropout.

5. **Resiliency**- the capacity to spring back successfully and adapt in the face of adversity, despite exposure to high levels of stress.

6. **Success**- completion of requirements for graduation at a four-year college/university.

7. **Attrition**- a student who either permanently dropout of school or transfers voluntarily to another campus, and/or students who are dropped from school as a result of inadequate grades.

8. **Retention**- students who continue to re-enroll at the same college campus.

**Summary**

In conclusion, there are many factors that contribute to the decline in academic performance, the dropout rate of college students, and student persistence. This chapter has provided an introduction, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the study, limitations of the study, and definitions of terms associated with this study.

The usefulness of this study will result in gaining a deeper understanding of the lives of college students who succeed, despite academic challenges. By gaining a deeper understanding of the lives of successful college students, it is intended that information from this study will be used to improve services for college students at-risk for failure and aid in minimizing the college dropout rate.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This literature review focuses on four core themes related to this study. First, this section of the literature review considers postsecondary education and the culture of the college student. The second section of the literature review provides an overview of the research on at-risk students. It begins by providing a definition of various types of at-risk students, especially as the construct applies to college students with academic difficulties. The third section of the literature review provides information on student departure and persistence. The fourth section ends by discussing perspectives on addressing the college dropout rate. The review of literature illustrates the paucity of research on why some students are at-risk for departure from college, while other students persist and graduate, and illuminates the need for a case study approach to understand their “lived worlds.”

Postsecondary Education

Merriam and Caffarella (1998) define formal educational institutions to include public schools and postsecondary institutions of all sorts, that have had as their primary mission to serve youth. For some, one might imagine postsecondary education to be the traditional-age student in a classroom encased in four walls, learning from formal lectures and small-group interactions. However, postsecondary institutions usually refers to education past high school, i.e., 2-year college, 4-year college, corporate training providers, libraries, publishers, and courseware developers (Jones, Ewell & McGuinness 1998). Furthermore, the populations of community colleges and selected postsecondary institutions have changed so dramatically that they are now reaching more adult learners than traditional-age students (Merriam & Caffarella, 1998).

Particularly, postsecondary education is becoming increasingly important to the US and its citizens, both individual and corporate. Problems society must deal with have become increasingly complex, i.e. diversity in the school and workplace, recent debates on international trade, global warming, and changes in technology. Postsecondary education provides individuals with unlimited opportunities to explore the complexity of society through formal instruction. While some individuals have not yet recognized or accepted the growing link between education and quality of life, a rapidly growing number of people are doing so each year. As a result, people in society are pressing to acquire new knowledge and skills through the services of a broadening array of educational institutions (Jones, Ewell & McGuinness, 1998, p.1). The need for society to acquire new knowledge and skills has created important public debates about a wide variety of issues in postsecondary institutions. These issues are particularly germane to college students in academic institutions of higher education i.e. two-year and four-year colleges and universities. Such issues include the growing need for remediation, educational equity, affirmative action, technology, obligations to "pay' for higher education, public verses. private benefits regarding accountability, and occupational opportunities continue to elicit controversy among academicians, researchers, policymakers, students, and parents. Other issues include the redefinition of higher education for the global community. In the Agenda for Policy and Research, Jones and
others (1998) suggest that higher education should consist of a broader definition to encompass those institutions normally designated by the label “postsecondary education.” More significantly, this initiative suggests that higher education should recognize the capacity and contributions of a growing sector of providers that would normally be left out of the current definition of postsecondary institutions. Pascarella & Terenzini (2000) suggest that researchers studying college impact and higher education research have an opportunity to contribute to the informed resolutions of those debates (p.1). Altbach (1998) reports that debates too often focus on specific problems without adequate consideration of the changing context of society.

For example, in higher education, some 30% of entering freshmen in college are in need of remedial courses in reading, writing, and mathematics (Carter, 1998). More often, discussion about these issues and debates have focused on remedial courses, while ignoring the demographic and socio-economic changes that have taken place in the student population. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education declared the United States “A Nation at Risk.” The educational system of society was faced with a rising tide of mediocrity that threatened the future as a nation and a people. Fordham (1998) reported that a decade and a half later, the risk posed by inadequate education has changed. Yet, the need for remediation of college students has increased and the presence of disparities has continued to exist among the societies of educational institutions.

Related to disparities are issues on affirmative action, a civil rights legislation affecting higher education institutions. Disagreement regarding the impact of affirmative action on colleges and universities continues to exist. Since a large majority of colleges and universities receive federal student financial aid and may receive other federal grants, some policy analysts argue that this could broadly be interpreted as a contract and, therefore, subject to the limits of the legislation. Others contend that, if narrowly focused, the impact of such a proposal would be minimal on higher education (American Council on Education, 1999).

The Agenda for Policy Research (1998) in higher education, recognizes that delivery of education must reflect the objectives of the learner and society-at-large. Higher education will need to “go to” many of the clients they serve today and respond to the growing need for certificate programs. This change in demand will require higher education to become more effective in the delivery of technology, such as broadcast or satellite-distributed television, the internet, or CD-ROM-based instruction more effectively to meet this growing demand (Jones, Ewell, & McGuinness, et al., p. 5).

Also critical to this issue is the current definition of public accountability. Jones, et al. report that public accountability involves a concern with costs, as well as benefits. Thus, studies that attempt to determine how much colleges and universities influence student growth and development may well confront the question of how much it costs to achieve that growth. Pascarella and Terenzini (2000) contend that a major response to pressure for accountability of institutions is to produce evidence that universities do, in fact, foster the cognitive and personal growth of their students. Accountability regarding how attainment of a college degree translates into long-term labor market value, and fosters the cognitive growth of students will need to be further explored.

For example, Gose (2000) examined the earnings of students who were accepted by elite colleges, but who chose to attend less-selective institutions. In his study, he found
that students did not enhance earnings by graduating from colleges with high college admissions scores. Findings from this study suggest that admissions decisions fail to account for intangibles such as student’s ambition, maturity and motivation—qualities that also lead to high earning potential. Furthermore, reports from industry indicate that employers are expressing difficulty finding people to hire who have the skills, knowledge, habits, and attitudes required for technologically sophisticated positions (Jones et al. 1998). Most recent efforts from the Department of Education (2000) are the initiation of the “National Dialogue on Postsecondary Education.” The Primary question posed for this initiative is: “How can the Department of Education address the new realities facing American’s Postsecondary Education?” With on going efforts by the Department of Education’s Office of Postsecondary Education through this Agenda Project, the Department of Education hopes to address this question in the year 2000.

Overall, America’s postsecondary education now clearly finds itself facing serious questions and concerns about issues that affect both the private and public sector. Accountability, and the need for colleges and universities to provide reasonable and broad acceptable indicators of what they do and how well they do it must be enforced (Aper & Hinkle, 1991). While many issues and constraints continue to impact postsecondary education, sociopolitical and economic competitiveness have become a central feature affecting the educational system in the US today. Submerged in these issues, are factors that can affect the personal lives of college students, their daily academic struggles, and their ability to persist in college to graduation. Today’s college students are faced with many new challenges. Pascarella and Terenzini, et al. (2000, p. 7) believe that “these are neither the best nor the worst of times for higher education, but revolutionary times, times of great challenge and opportunity.”

The Culture of The College Student

In the last five to eight years, the culture of the college student has changed dramatically. Some of these changes resemble those of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s; most other changes are unique (Astin, 1998). From 1992 to 1997, a series of studies on undergraduate life were conducted to provide educators with a better understanding of students enrolled in the nation's colleges and universities. Research revealed that undergraduates have changed considerably in the last decade and a half in many different respects (Altbach, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini 2000). The full-time, traditional age, non-working, non-minority students of middle or upper middle-class social origins who reside on campus are no longer the norm. Compared to earlier generations, undergraduate students are older and more diverse and over the years, have been shaped by different political and social events (Levine & Cureton, March-April 1998). In part, these researchers describe the new generation of college students as being over 25 years of age; 54% working and 55% female, and 43% attending college part-time. In addition, this research indicated that higher education was not as central to the lives of today's undergraduates as in previous generations. Pascarella & Terenzini (2000) report that recent college impact research underscores the extent to which changes in student demographic characteristics may influence effects of different college experiences.

Thus, increased student diversity means that researchers will need to devote more time and energy to explore whether a particular student’s experience has the same basic
impact for all students. For example, the National Study of Student Learning (1998) found that cognitive effects of fraternity membership during the first year of college depended upon student ethnicity. Fraternity membership had a significant negative influence on the cognitive growth of Anglo-American men, but a slightly positive influence on the cognitive growth among men of color. Similarly, in a recent study of socio-cognitive development, the factors influencing growth for Anglo-American students were essentially unrelated to the growth of Chicano students (Durham, Hayes & Martinez, 1994; Pascarella & Terenzini et al., p.).

As a portrait of the changing character of the American college student, Astin et al. examined the college student based on data from a longitudinal national survey on college students from the 1960’s to present time. His research examined the effects of the Women’s Movement as a catalyst for changing attitudes of both men and women. In this research, he uses the term “gender convergence” to describe how women and men today are much more alike in their interests, aspirations, values, and behaviors than three decades ago. Today, women constitute 45% of the first year students planning careers in business and the majority of those pursuing doctorate degrees and careers in traditionally “male” professions (Sax, Astin, Korn & Mahoney, 1996).

In addition, Astin et al. examined how the “Student Protest” era between the late 1960’s and the early 1970’s presented with rapid grade inflation; disengagement of students from traditional politics; increasing uncertainty about college finances and careers; decreasing interest in getting married and raising a family; increasing support for gender equality; student autonomy, and student’s rights. According to Astin, et al. (1999) between the 1960’s and 1980’s students became much more committed to materialistic values, and less committed to “developing a meaningful philosophy of life.” For example, 30 years- ago, developing a meaningful philosophy of life was a priority among college students, as opposed to being very well off financially. In the late 80’s these two values reached an opposite extreme among 80% of the entering freshman.

Today, the college student shows a clear pattern of increasing concerns about financing college. However, the failure of Federal Aid to keep up with the rising cost of college has not only forced more needy students and parents to carry a greater share of the financial burden, but has also contributed to a greater sense of concern about paying for college. More students have been forced to pick their college, based on cost and availability of financial aid, rather than the quality of the program offered (Astin, et al.).

From Astin’s research, recent trends also suggest that today’s freshman are experiencing more stress than previous classes. The percentage of freshman who report “being overwhelmed by everything I have to do” has increased steadily from 16.4 to 29.4 since 1987, the first year the question was asked. Concurrently, the percentage reporting that they frequently “feel depressed” has increased (from 8.3 to 10.0); and the percentage of students rating themselves above average in “emotional health” has been on the decline. Students are also aspiring to graduate degrees at record high numbers; obtaining higher grade averages—increasing nearly half a percent within the last six years and have taken more college preparatory courses (p.8). These aspirations often contribute to the high stress levels reported by students and could also reflect competitiveness in society rather than changes in career aspiration. Research on stress has shown that events that might otherwise serve to reduce stress, e.g., peer events and social activities, can actually increase feelings of stress during college (Dill & Henley, 1998). Pearlin (1990) suggests
that there are two major types of stressors, i.e. life events and chronic strains. Life events are the extent to which accumulation of a series of experiences can create a stressful impact and chronic strain results in role overload. High levels of stress have been associated with suicidal ideation, smoking, and drinking (Naquin and Gilbert, 1996).

Other significant findings from Astin’s research include an increase in volunteer and community service among today’s college students. Although engagement in campus and community politics is at a low, students interested in volunteer and community services is at an all time high (Astin, et al.).

Similarly, Levine and Cureton, et al. report that today’s college students are more damaged psychologically, have different values, and greater financial concerns. They describe college students as goal-oriented individuals, who want different types of relationships with their colleges; are in need of academic remediation, and view large-scale problems around their generation.

Although current research has shown a dramatic shift in the profile of the college student, the responses of institutions of higher education to these changes has been characterized by great debate. Prior research has suggested that it is common for students to experience difficulties adjusting to college (Baker & Siryk, 1980; Hudd & others 2000). Inevitably, commencement of collegiate studies will require a different set of adaptational demands that many young adults may not be adequately prepared to successfully handle (Brooks & DuBois, 1995). Through examples of real-world demands, understanding a student’s readiness to adjust to the complexity of college life has challenged researchers to examine the relationship between individual development and contextual changes. Coelho, Hamburg, and Murphy (1968) call this period the most dramatic “normative age-graded” change during late adolescent years (Cook, 1998, p. 1).

Levinson (1987), assert that development is bound by very specific ages. One’s life structure tends to be established and maintained during stable periods and then questioned and changed during transitional periods. As part of life transition, students are generally very stressed and anxious when they are experiencing new educational settings (Crockett, Peterson, Graber, Schulenberg, & Ebata 1989; Santrock, 1997; Dill & Henley 1998) In college, students are experiencing changes in grading standards, course loads, teaching practices, peer groups, and parental contact (Coelho, Hamburg, & Murphy, 1968; Cook et al., p. 2). In addition to the stress of change, students also bring unresolved personal difficulties to their new environment. These difficulties can include problems in friendships or romantic relationships, conflicts with parents, and other significant stressors, such as recent parental divorce or death of a loved one (DuBois & Brooks, 1995).

Smith (1994), investigated how college adjustment was influenced by the level of separation-individuation and problem-focused coping strategies of freshmen students. A path analysis using an ordinary least squares regression approach indicated that freshmen students with higher positive separation feelings and problem-focused coping strategies reported higher college adjustment. Consistent with these findings, is a study conducted by Cook, et al. that examined the learning styles of freshmen entering college and first year academic achievement to help incoming students negotiate the high school to college transition. Preliminary results from this study indicate that divergers and assimilators have greater difficulty academically than the convergers and accommodators. Data suggests a trend where more divergers and accommodators are on
Perry, (1970) provides a cognitive development map based on the work of college students. He believes that those at the higher end of the continuum are able to view knowledge in a contextual sense and search for relationships between ideas. Thus, throughout their educational process, they are able to conceptualize complex notions of mature dialectic thinking and see their instructors as more of a guide.

Kegan (1994) offers a way of examining how individuals respond to a particular life event from a psychological-contextual perspective in his Level-of-Consciousness Model. He contends that a “hidden curriculum” of modern life necessitates different ways of thinking and “a new conception of consciousness thresholds individuals may have to reach in order to satisfy contemporary expectations of love and work.” Kegan (1994) explains how an adult’s thinking of life must continue to evolve through five levels of consciousness in order to navigate our complex lives. However, from his longitudinal work Kegan (1994) found, as with similar work, (Riegel 1976; Kramer & Bacelar, 1994) that most people do not enter the fourth level of consciousness until their forties.

Working from a different perspective, McClusky (1970) suggests that adult students, in particular, have to be adept at juggling multiple responsibilities and demands on their time. McClusky’s Theory of Margin examines adulthood as a time of growth, change, and integration in which one constantly seeks balance between the amount of energy needed and the amount available. This balance is conceptualized as a ratio between the load of life, that dissipates energy, and the power of life, that allows one to deal with the load. The energy left over when one divides load by power was called “margin of life” by McClusky.

Also applicable to college students, is a number of educators who proposed that engaging in learning activities is one way that most adults cope with life events and transitions (Knowles, 1970; Merriam and Yang, 1996; Merriam & Clark, 1992). Building on the work of others such as Mezirow (1981), Merriam & Clark (1992) and Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman (1995) found links between transitional times created by life events and learning. They observed that more learning happens in periods that people perceive as good and bad times. Learning that is more likely to transform occurs in the bad times. For example, the more difficult the transition as perceived by a college student, the more potential this transition may have for learning.

Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) provide suggested areas of knowledge and skills that are helpful in transition, such as problem-solving techniques and skills for coping with transitions. Schlossberg and her colleagues believe that personal support through family, friends, and professionals is needed to help with life transition.

Research is beginning to show links between transitions and life events that can be helpful in explaining changes that characterize the life of the college student. Nonetheless, for those college students who are considered “at-risk,” adjustment to college life presents with unique challenges. Challenges such as the lack of family support, literacy problems, and difficulty meeting the high expectations of teachers, students, and family, are often characteristic of this group of students (Levin & Levin, 1991). This study considers academic and social adjustment issues that are integral to the lives of these students and how they persist from college entry to graduation.
At-Risk College Students

The term “at-risk” students can be defined as students with potential for failure to achieve their expected success in school due to factors associated with socioeconomic status, family variables, academic deficiencies, and/or physical/neurological impairment (National Institute on Education for At-Risk Students, 1999).

High-risk students are generally thought to be at greater risk of dropping out than other students, due to their disadvantaged academic, socioeconomic, or cultural background (Moore, 1970; White & Sedlacek, 1986). A review of the literature indicates that these students are often specially admitted students (Riehl, 1994; White & Sedlack, 1986).

Other studies, such as Rose et al. (1989), and Cliff et al. (1999), have studied students who have experienced “temporarily at-risk” status in college. According to Cliff et al., these students have experienced pre-college success followed by academic difficulty during their matriculation in college. She describes “temporarily at-risk” students as “a lost group in college: neither quantifiable “at-risk”, nor academically “gifted” enough to have a wrinkle-free academic transition (p.6).” Indicated below is an overview of five categories of at-risk students: namely: a) first generation; b) disadvantaged; c) ethnic minorities; d) diagnosed learning disabilities and, e) self-reported learning disabilities (Bowers 1970; Department of Education 1994; Ting et al. 1998). Although the concept “temporarily at-risk” is not included in this overview, a close examination of a sudden shift in a student’s academic status will be acknowledged in this study.

First-generation students are the first ones in their families to attend college. Compared to traditional students, first-generation students take fewer classes, work more hours off-campus, and are more likely to believe that faculty members do not care about student learning. According to Terenzini (1996), first generation students are most likely to be Hispanic American women from lower income families, who do not get much encouragement to attend college.

Also among the academically at-risk students are those who come from low-income families. Currently, there are over 200 federally or state funded Student Support Service (SSS) programs operating under a variety of descriptive titles serving over 400,000 students who are low-income (Department of Education, 1994). The working definition of “educationally disadvantaged” students are those who are not succeeding or are underachieving in school, due to insufficient educational experiences in at least one of the three domains of school, family, and community (National Institute on Education For At-Risk Students, 1999).

Another comparative “at-risk” group is minority students. As the number of minorities in the United States has increased, so too has the number of minority students attending higher education institutions. Specifically, the number of African-Americans enrolled in college has increased by 27% between 1982 to 1992, from 1.1 million to 1.4 million students (American Council on Education, 1995). Smith (1997) indicates that minority students, specifically Hispanics, African Americans, and Native Americans, drop-out in greater numbers from college than European American students or Asian American students. Within six years following college entry, 63.3% of African Americans and 54.4% of Hispanics have dropped out, in contrast to 41.5% of European American.
A fourth at-risk group is the number of students with learning disabilities who enrolled in postsecondary institutions. The American Council on Education indicated that 1.1% of all first-time, full-time first year students reported having a learning disability, and that percentage had nearly tripled by 1994, reaching 3% (Henderson, 1995). College students with learning disabilities may have difficulties in reading (Runyan, 1991), written expression (Blalock, 1981 and Vogel, 1985), and math (Cordoni & Snyder, 1981). Additionally, many have trouble organizing and budgeting time, taking notes, taking tests, identifying the essential requirements of a task, integrating information, and establishing long- and short-term goals (Mangrum & Strichart, 1998; Vogel, 1987; Dunn, 1995).

A major concern is the academic failure rate of students with learning disabilities (Vogel & Adelman, 1992). In a survey of 911 former high school students with learning disabilities, Sitlington and Frank (1990) found that only 6.5% of those who had enrolled in a postsecondary education program were still in school. Similarly, Bursuck, Rose, Cowen, and Yahaya (1989) reported that for students enrolled in two- and four- year degree programs, a graduation rate of only 30% for students with learning disabilities occurred, as compared to a national graduation rate of 50% for students without disabilities.

Finally, students who believe they have a learning disability, but have never had a formal diagnosis of learning disability are at-risk for college departure. Hoy & Gregg (1986) suggested that some individuals are not identified until college, because they can handle the material at the elementary and secondary level. However, at the college level, they may experience serious difficulty for the first time, due to the requirements of higher levels of abstract reasoning and more extensive written work. Increasingly, these students are being referred (or are presenting themselves) to special service centers at universities because they are experiencing extreme academic difficulty for the first time (Dunn, 1995, p. 271). Although there are no clear statistics that account for the decline in academic achievement for college students with undiagnosed learning disabilities, one can hypothesis that the attrition rate with these students is high. Many of these students may not be aware that they have a learning disability. Therefore, failure to seek assistance does not occur or occurs too late.

**Departure and Persistence of College Students**

Departure from higher education is identified in studies of student attrition. The term “departure” often refers to (a) students who permanently dropout of school or transfer voluntarily to another campus; and (b) students who are dropped from school as a result of inadequate grades. However, attrition statistics do not account for those students who drop out of one school and re-enroll on another campus (Watson, 1996).

Students drop out or manage to persist in college for a variety of reasons. Students who persist or do not drop out of college have been identified as having unique characteristics. For example, Bennet & Bean (1984) identify commitment to educational goals and perception of progress towards educational goals as characteristics of student persistence.

The literature on college attrition and persistence is highly influenced by Tinto's Multivariate Model of Attrition. This model includes a comprehensive set of
demographic, cognitive, psychosocial, and institutional factors. According to the model of Tinto et al. (1975, 1993), both student characteristics and interactions with the social and academic environments of the institution are the principal determinants of educational goals and institutional commitment. These characteristics and interactions account for the decision to persist or withdraw from college.

By extension, Tinto et al. (1993) proposed that persistence or departure behavior is directly influenced by two dimensions of commitment: i.e. institutional and goal commitment. Institutional commitment represents the degree to which an individual is motivated to graduate from a specific college or university. According to Tinto (1975, 1993), "Given individual characteristics, prior experiences, and commitments, the model argues that it is the individual’s integration into the academic and social systems of the college that most directly relates to his continuance at college." (p 44).

In this manner, perspectives that support Involvement Theory have been used to explain why college students persist. The more academically and socially involved students are, i.e. the more they interact with other students and faculty—the more likely they are to persist (Austin, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini et al. 1980; Tinto, et. al. 1993;). Some authors contend that different educational settings influence persistence (Kraemer, 1997; Terenzini, 1996). Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson (1997), believe that academic and social involvement seemed to be more important to persistence of the four year institutions than the two-year institutions.

Christie and Dinham (1990) conducted a study of freshmen experiences based on Tinto's Model of Departure. The findings revealed that the institutional experiences of living on campus and participating in extracurricular activities appeared to minimize attrition. Nora (1990) conducted a study on qualitative indicators of pre-college factors in Tinto's attrition model. This study indicated that reasons for leaving school centered on dissatisfaction with grades, high tuition, family responsibilities, insufficient financial aid, and personal problems. A study conducted at DePaul University (Strategic Plan for DePaul University 1995-2000) indicated that lack of commitment is also a significant reason for college departure. In this study, the student’s academic experiences had the largest impact on commitment. Issues comprising the academic experiences of students related to faculty effectiveness and the student's emphasis on teaching.

Quigley (1992) examined the problem of attrition in adult basic education and found that although reluctant learners value education, they have negative attitudes and experiences of schooling and dropout because of dissatisfaction with the lack of challenge and attention they receive. Mezirow, Darkenwald, & Knox (1975) observed that many adult basic education programs reflect middle-class value, and that adults having different values or life-styles rarely participate in them. Educationally disadvantaged adults have different goals and different definitions of success (Briscoe & Ross, 1989; Reder, 1985).

Knowles (1970) further asserts that adults define who they are, based on their accumulation of unique sets of experiences. Because adults define themselves in this way, they have a deep investment in the value of those experiences. Parallel with this concept are college students in this study who share their unique sets of experiences, and speak on issues that are truly important and relevant to life as a student with academic challenges.
Olagunju (1981), conducted a study on the assessment and treatment of attrition and retention problems specific to college students. According to this study, the most frequently cited problem in a student's first-year of college was having a heavier workload compared with the 12th grade. Jacobs (1982) studied a group of non-returning students in higher education. This study cited the factors for student’s academic dismissal as those tending to have low grades; dissatisfaction with academic performance, personal achievement, and personal adjustment problems.

Riehl (1994) compared the academic preparation, aspirations, and first-year college performance of first-generation college freshmen with other college freshmen at Indiana State University. First-generation students were more likely to drop out during the first semester and had lower first-semester grades than students with one or more college-educated parents. In contrast, Gayson (1995), concluded that not having a parent who graduated from a university did not appear to confer a disadvantage in terms of first-year grade point average (GPA), particularly for students with high academic credit averages. However, first generation college students were less involved in some academic and social activities that contributed to high GPAs, such as hours per week spent on campus and cultural involvement. Colton, (1999), examined average students from pre-college to college with an emphasis on their becoming at-risk for failure in college. Conclusions suggest that factors such as college preparation, insufficient academic advisement, and a false sense of academic ability contribute to their college challenges.

Minority groups in higher education are the focus of other attrition studies. Watson (1996) examined the impact of academic climate on minority attrition in institutions of higher education. This study reported that the academic climate of an institution has an impact that is both positive and significant on minority attrition. Eddins (1982) studied the attrition of specially admitted Black students in higher education. The construct most highly related to college attrition was on-campus academic behavior, such as attendance and time management skills. Similarly, Sailes (1990) investigated Black student attrition at Indiana University and found that academic difficulties were the chief reason for withdrawal.

A study conducted on first-year students at Maryland public college campuses indicated that the top two reasons for black students not returning to college were academic dismissal and inability to obtain sufficient financial aid; while white students cited various reasons such as, a desire for a different academic or social environment, as well as financial difficulty (Keller & Rollins, 1990). Sanchez' (1992) survey research on the attrition of Hispanic students found a significant difference between dropouts and those dismissed for academic performance. Family values and demands, as well as extra-academic variables exerted considerable pressure on students to dropout.

Gerald (1992) reports that a popular contention of departure among minority students is simply a reflection of greater academic difficulties; but the reality is more complex. Blacks and Hispanics tend to be concentrated in the lower socioeconomic status (SES) sectors; thus, their college completion rates reflect their lower economic status. Moreover, not only are students from minority or lower socioeconomic backgrounds more likely to have attended public rather than private high schools, but these public schools, in poorer neighborhoods, are also generally of lower quality. Inevitably, low SES students will be less well prepared for college than those students who emerged from
private schools or public schools located in high SES districts (Department of Education, 1994).

For students who choose not to dropout, matriculation through college comes with its challenges. To examine the literature on student persistence, the findings of Nisbet, Ruble, and Schurr (1982) showed that study habits, a student's perception of his or her future study environment, and the need for supervision, constituted decisive factors for determining student persistence and academic achievement. Their own perceptions of their ability to study contributed more to their success than did past academic performance.

Maxwell (1981) suggested that high-risk students who succeed are better at adapting to the college environment than those who fail. These students have more clearly defined aspirations and greater goal commitment and are more willing to study hard. Horn (1997) concluded that at-risk students differ most from their counterparts in educational aspirations and academic preparation, and that academically prepared at-risk students are most likely than their counterparts to take college entrance exams.

According to Levin & Levin, et al. (1991) student pre-college predictors of persistence for at-risk students include academic preparedness, adaptability, willingness to seek academic assistance, and self-confidence. Family characteristics, such as level of education and socioeconomic status are also important predictors of persistence. Donovan (1984) reports that although pre-college predictors are regarded as important, even more critical is the at-college experience itself. Strong at-college predictors of persistence have been found to include living environment, academic advisement, classroom experience, extracurricular activities, financial support, and faculty involvement. Large effects on persistence behavior include commitment, encouragement to stay, grades, and intentions (Okun, Benin and BrandtWilliams, 1996). Positive student interactions with peers, advisors, and faculty, in addition to, confidence and belonging have also been reported in persistence literature (Donovan, 1984; Astin, 1985, and Levin & Levin, 1991). Large effects on persistent behavior have included family characteristics Levin & Levin et al, and student commitment (Tinto et. al.).

Maxwell et al. reports that a student's ability to cope effectively with the college experience may be as important as academic ability. Peng, Lee, Wang, and Walberg (1992) contend that successful at-risk students possess temperamental characteristics that elicit positive responses from individuals around them. They identify these personality traits as resiliency factors. McMillan & Reed (1993, 1994) report that these traits begin in early childhood and are manifested in adolescence as students seek out new experiences and become self-reliant. Recently, researchers have used resiliency scales to identify “protective factors” such as optimism, risk-taking, academic self-confidence, and skill acquisition to explain the success of at-risk students (Yellin, 1997; Bennett, Novotny, Green & Kluever 1998; Morales, 1999).

The National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988-1994 reported that high indicators of persistence for at-risk students included patterns of behaviors such as: (a) not delaying postsecondary education by a year or more after high school; (b) attending postsecondary education on a full-time basis, and (c) attending college continuously from the time of enrollment (Horn, 1997). A study conducted by Brower (1992) found that student persisters tend to focus more on academics during the first semester and social and personal needs during the second semester.
Overall, many of these authors have claimed that non-academic dimensions of
achievement are just as effective or more effective for distinguishing student persistence
and the success of at-risk students as academic dimensions (Terrill, 1988; Tinto, 1993;
In addition, research on student persistence has claimed that student academic and social
involvement fosters persistence. A critical examination of factors that affect student
departure and persistence is important to isolate, because it provides the researcher with a
better understanding of how and why some students succeed in college, despite academic
difficulties, while others dropout. This study particularly examines the lived experience
of four academically at-risk college students to better understand how they successfully
navigated higher education life’s path.

**Addressing the Dropout Crisis**

Presently, preventing the dropout rate has become a national priority. Although
college administrators and practitioners have always committed themselves to student
success, addressing the student dropout rate is now a matter of economic survival. The
dwindling cohort of traditionally-aged college students has triggered a keen competition
among colleges for enrollments (Rounds, 1984, p. 1).

Both private, public, two-year and four-year universities throughout the country,
have developed strategic action plans to address the high incidence of student dropout.
College enrollment management has developed specific methods to diagnose, track, and
prescribe interventions for students upon admission to the university (Podhajsky, 1997).
Intervention has included the design of pre-college outreach programs, mentoring,
orientation and advisement, tutoring, career planning, and financial aid. Ford reports
(1999) that based on Tinto's Model of Attrition (1993), early identification and early
intensive, continuous intervention is needed to address the dropout crisis. Furthermore,
Ford suggests that identification of the “student at risk" academically and socially at
application, can be achieved at the earliest possible time through the examination of
academic records and recommendations.

Other researchers suggest the use of learning communities yield important
benefits that may aid in addressing the dropout rate (Tinto, et al. 1998; Tinto, Goodsell,
& Russo, 1993). Learning communities enable students to take courses together, forming
a study team. This type of learning forms its own support peer groups and extends
beyond the classroom. This experience of sharing the curriculum leads students to spend
more time together, both inside and outside the classroom, which provides academic and
social support. Levin & Levin (1991) identify five critical components of a retention
program for high risk students. These components consist of: (a) proactive intervention
(b) small-group tutorial; (c) the teaching of study skills, learning strategies, and test-
taking techniques in the context of courses that address students basic language skills;
and (d) quality instruction (Clarke, 1982; Fridlander, 1982). Stewart, Russell, and Wright
(1997) argue that the first stage in the development of a strong program to retain students
is the implementation of a comprehensive orientation program for new students, coupled
with academic advising, and followed-up with good tutoring programs. Findings from a
study conducted by Stewart, Russell, and Wright et al. (1997) indicated that special
student services are needed on college campuses to address the needs of minority
students. Appenzelle (1998) studied the adjustment process and its effect on programs
that are designed to enhance transition to college. The results of this study concluded that the impact of participation was most dramatic for students that are high risk because English was a second language. The findings of Doroge and Roundy (1992) recommended a program designed to meet the needs of students at-risk for poor academic performance or attrition, due to inadequate pre-college preparation. Suggestions for this study indicate that attention to learning style, class mix of "at-risk" students with other students, and attention to diversity issues are important retention program components.

Over the years, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has taken the lead in promoting "lifelong learning" as a master concept. The thinking behind the term “lifelong learning” is inclusive of adult learning and fosters this notion by casting learning or education as a “cradle-to-grave” concept (Merriam & Brockett et al. 1997). This term helps educators and students conceptualize the learner's needs as an on-going, continuing process across the life span. Despite the movement towards lifelong learning as a master concept and the design and implementation of special retention programs and services offered to at-risk students, the attrition rate of college students remains high. Even with large amounts of money expended by colleges and universities on programs and services to retain students, the high dropout rate of college students continues to exist.

Summary

This chapter has examined several topics related to the purpose of this study. The literature suggests that academic difficulties are a common problem impacting student departure, particularly among at-risk students. Nonetheless, a significant number of authors report that persistence can be seen in students who present with certain types of nonacademic attributes. Moreover, literature has indicated that students are more likely to persist when they are involved academically and socially and when both forms of involvement are integrated into the institution.

Although a wide range of special programs and services are offered to students who are academically at-risk for graduation, students who persist, despite adversity, remain among the few. What needs to be explored is the unique experience of the lives of these students, and how the strategies used by these students yield success. This study builds from the literature on the dimensions of at-risk students who persist in college. It particularly provides a review of four central strands of the literature search within the context of higher education to analyze the results of the study: (a) postsecondary education and the culture of the college student; (b) at-risk students; (c) student departure and persistence and, (d) addressing the college dropout rate. By gaining a deeper understanding of the lives of successful college students, it is intended that the information from this study will be used to contribute to the improvement of services for college students at-risk for failure, and aid in minimizing the college dropout rate.
CHAPTER III: METHOD OF RESEARCH

This chapter describes the study design, bounds of the study, and data collection that include: the setting, the participants, and the particular focus of the study. This chapter also includes the ethical considerations; data collection and storage procedures; data coding and analysis; and verification process. A qualitative case study approach is used to give consideration to the following research questions regarding academically at-risk students who graduate from postsecondary institutions:

1. How do these students deal with the tasks of mastering material, accomplishing requirements in coursework, and earning sufficient grades?
2. How did they deal with the social issues of home and campus life?
3. How did the strategies that they employed yield success?

Design of the Study

As Miles and Huberman (1984) explain, qualitative data are especially useful for inquiries in poorly charted waters; "They are a source of well-grounded rich descriptions and explanations of processes in local context" (p.28). Because this study focuses on the "how" of the issue, "how do academically at risk students succeed despite academic challenges?"--- and the uncharted "student experience," a qualitative case study has been selected as the most appropriate method for gathering the information.

Yin (1994) offers a method of distinguishing between the kinds of questions answered by quantitative and qualitative research. "The first and most important condition for differentiating among the various research strategies is to identify the type of research question being asked." ‘How’ and ‘Why’ questions are likely to favor the use of case studies, or histories. Moreover, Merriam & Simpson (1995) differentiated case studies from other forms of research based on multiple variables in a single unit, rather than a few variables across numerous units. Merriam (1988) indicated that qualitative research is used when insight, discovery, and interpretation “are more appropriate to the study than the testing of hypotheses” (p10).

Bounds of the Study and Data Collection

This section describes the boundaries of the study and data collection. Specifically, it describes the setting, the participants, and the particular focus associated with this study.

The Setting

The setting for this study was determined based on accessibility and availability of participants. Participants in this study attended a four-year inner-city university. Thus, this university served as a backdrop from which the participants matriculated.

Participants

Participants in this study were individuals who were identified as having academic difficulties upon admission or during undergraduate education. A snowball sampling technique from alumni associations, student academic advisors, academic support
programs, and in the workplace were used to identify the participants. Potential participants who were believed to have met one or more of the following criteria were interviewed: a) multiple withdrawals, failures, or several repeats on academic transcripts; b) GPA of 2.2 or lower; c) low SAT scores (900 average or below); d) low class rank, or e) difficulty learning course materials. Academic records were reviewed as part of the selection process. After a preliminary interview with the participants, a purposive sample of four students were selected to participate in this study.

At the time of the study, three participants were seniors preparing to graduate from a health sciences program, and one participant was a college graduate of less than one year from a health sciences program. Participants selected for this study engaged in a series of interviews. Interviews were audiotaped and a journal was recorded regarding thoughts and reactions of subjects. All participants were informed that any involvement in this study would be strictly voluntary and informed consent for each individual was secured.

Research Focus

In this study, the research questions provided a framework that focused on discovering and understanding the experience of at-risk students through the lives of those students who spoke for themselves. The context of these students, as well as their perceptions while matriculating through a four-year college, was integral to this study.

Ethical Considerations

General safeguards to the participant during the interview included the use of an informed consent that included permission to review academic records. Furthermore, a discussion of the interview agenda with each participant and the use of a tape recorder, served to ensure accuracy. A standard code of ethics was read to each student prior to interview (Appendix F). The researcher was sensitive to the critical importance of anonymity and confidentiality. In the selection process and interview of the participants, the researcher assured anonymity and confidentiality, whenever possible. The participants were also informed that they had the right to make any corrections, including names and events. The researcher received written or verbal verification from participants to assure accuracy and protect their rights. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw at any time from the study without penalty.

Data Collection Procedures

A series of three semi-structured interviews was conducted with each subject. Interviews consisted of both face-to-face and telephone surveys. The instrument used during the interview consisted of an outline of discussion topics (See Appendix E). This topic outline was developed based on the work of Gerber and Reiff’s research on adults with learning disabilities (1991) because of their holistic perspective on personal life experiences and focus on academic difficulties as an important dimension. The interview process involved discovering the participant's point of view within his or her context. Interviews were held in various settings, that included the participant’s home, school, and place of employment.
Interviews were audiotaped and a journal was maintained regarding the researcher’s thoughts, observations, and additional remarks shared by the participant. Academic records were also collected and stored as part of the data collection process. All data collected was transcribed and stored using the commercial software, Ethnograph. Transcribed data were reviewed and approved by subjects to verify the researcher's understanding of the participant's experience.

Data Analysis Procedures

A thematic analysis using a grounded theory approach was used to analyze the audiotapes and field notes (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, 1997). Grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. i.e. it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to the phenomena. Procedures for collecting and handling data can best be understood through familiarity with the techniques of grounded theory approach. Theoretical sampling, constant comparatives, and saturation are techniques used to determine what data to collect, how to handle the data, and when to stop gathering data (Merriam & Simpson, 1995).

a) Theoretical Sampling: selection of a sample of individuals to study, based on their contribution to the development of the theory.

b) Constant Comparatives: identification of incidents, events and activities, and constant comparison of them to form an emerging category to develop and saturate the category.

c) Saturation: no longer finding new information such as incidents, events, or activities that add to the understanding of the category.

The basic procedures for conducting grounded theory research for this study consisted of four stages. Analysis in these stages involved the use of theoretical sampling, constant comparatives, saturation and three major types of coding: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, and (c) selective coding. In the first stage, this researcher carefully selected and individually interviewed a sample of participants to study, based on concepts such as at-risk status, graduation from four-year college, and academic difficulty upon college entry or during matriculation in college. Transcriptions from the interviews were reviewed with the use of open coding, in which this researcher generated categories and properties of the data collected. In the second stage, the researcher integrated categories and their properties through comparative analysis.

Once the initial categories emerged, axial coding was used for further comparative analysis and creation of subcategories for specific properties and dimensions, such as who was involved, when did it happen, what does it mean, and why did it occur. Emerging themes regarding the student's experiences within the context of their natural setting was then closely examined.

The third stage was characterized by the illumination of a substantive theory. While this study did not reach a point of grand theory building, the researcher was able to engage in the process of selective coding to identify the central phenomenon of the case study, based on findings from open coding and axial coding in accordance with the grounded theory paradigm model. This process allowed the researcher to discover a substantive theory grounded in the views of participants in the field. Thus, findings from
selective coding were compared with current literature to see under what conditions did this phenomenon hold true. Here, similar categories were reduced to a smaller number of highly conceptual categories; hypotheses were generated and data was further compared and checked for their "fit" into an overall framework. The simultaneous collection and comparative analysis of data ended when the categories began to show no new information that added to the understanding of the categories.

The fourth stage consisted of the actual writing of the theory from coded data and memos. At this stage, the researcher was convinced that the analytic framework that existed formed a substantive theory that provided an understanding of the experience of these academically at-risk students. The findings supported agreement for framing questions shown in this study.

**Verification Process**

To address the trustworthiness and authenticity of the study, the researcher used several methods consistent with qualitative methodology. In a qualitative study, the researcher is often the primary tool for data collection. He or she may make use of guiding questions, (as in an interview) and mechanical tools, such as an audio or video tape recorder and transcriber. As evidence to demonstrate the researcher's ability to conduct such an interview, the researcher first conducted a pilot study with a subject that met the criteria for this study. Additionally, the researcher presented with nine years of experience as an educator and academic advisor in higher education.

To achieve triangulation, the researcher reviewed transcripts of the participants. The researcher also kept a journal of thoughts and observations and additional remarks shared by the participants. The researcher then compared the themes that emerged from the analysis of the transcribed tapes, transcripts, and journal with current literature on at-risk students. Findings from the analysis were reviewed and approved by participants to verify the researcher's understanding of the participant's experience. The researcher received written or verbal verification from participants regarding the various aspects of their lives. The researcher also sought expert consultation by sharing findings with the research advisor.

**Summary**

This chapter has included the overall study design, the setting, the participants, ethical considerations, the procedures for data collection, the method for analyzing the data, and verification procedures of this study. The method of this research study followed a qualitative case study design that employed a grounded theory approach and included triangulation of the data findings. It identified the use of a snowball selection and purposive sample to examine the experience of academically at-risk students who graduate from postsecondary institutions, and how they navigated higher education life's path.
CHAPTER IV: INDIVIDUAL CASE STUDIES
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter provides a summary of the research findings of four college students with academic difficulties. Included in this chapter is a group sketch of the student participants and interpretive findings of the individual case studies.

Group Sketch of Students

Demographics

Participants in this study range in age from 23 to 34 years. Four participants were under the age of 26, one participant was 34 years of age. Among the group of participants, there were two males and two females. Three participants were African-American, one participant was Latino. In this study, participants lived in all regions of the United States, ranging from the West Coast of California, the midwest region of Chicago and Iowa, and the east-coast region of New York.

Education

The participants in this study graduated from both private preparatory and public high schools. Three participants graduated from public high school and one participant graduated from private school. Two participants attended a community college prior to enrolling in a four-year college. During the time of the study, all participants attended a four-year, inner-city university. Three participants were seniors preparing to graduate from an undergraduate health sciences program and one participant was a recent college graduate (less than one year) from a health science program.

Family

The families of the participants consisted of various households. Two participants lived on-campus, one participant lived with his parents, and one participant lived on her own. Three of the participants’ parents are married and one participant’s parent is divorced. All of the participants indicated that at least one of their parents attended college. Three of the participants grew up with siblings, and one participant was the only child. The socioeconomic status of the families of all of the participants were working and middle class.

Individual Case Studies

This section introduces an interpretive case study of each student participant and includes transcribed data from the student’s interviews to offer a rich text of the lived stories shared by these students. Several experience and behavioral themes are revealed in this section. These themes reflect the academic and social challenges that these students encountered, as well as academic and social strategies that yield success. Although there is an overlap of information in both sections, experience themes primarily focus on capturing the feelings that these students shared regarding their college
experience. Behavioral themes, on the other hand, focus on how the student participants responded to these experiences and the strategies that they employed that yield success. Theme titles in this section share the words of the student participants, and in many cases, use the exact words from the interview.
Jennifer: The Nonconformist

Jennifer is best described as a strong willed and determined individual, whose unconventional style of management could be viewed as that of a nonconformist. Her method of management is sometimes risk-taking, yet it has provided Jennifer with teachable moments and coping strategies in her life that have enabled her to persist from freshman year to graduation. Jennifer arrived early to the interview session and waited patiently to meet with the researcher. When explained the purpose of the study and how this information would be used, Jennifer leaned back in her chair and in a somewhat comfortable tone said, "cool." She smiled when the researcher explained that she was really interested in talking with her, because they had a common interest. When the researcher asked if she was a college jock, Jennifer said "Very much so."

An Examination of Academic and Social Challenges

From the interview with Jennifer, six experience themes related to this study illuminated the data: a) perceived pre-college status good, “but I’m not very good in math,” b) “I had some struggles,” c) “It’s hard to be productive at both,” d) “I had to learn to…” e) friends, teammates, parents…l’d talk to my mother," and f) “I don’t think that I missed out on too much…”

Pre-college Status Good, But “I’m Not Very Good in Math”

The first prominent experience theme was the prevalence of Jennifer’s perceived “good, but I’m not very good in math” pre-college preparation status. In addition, this theme emerged out of statements that Jennifer also experienced at-college academic difficulties with college math, and became at-risk for academic failure. During the interview Jennifer shared statements that described herself as a poor math student and expressed difficulty with math as early as third grade. However, she commented that she was academically strong in other subject areas, such as English and science, and agreed that her pre-college preparation in high school was good. Jennifer shared her perception regarding this theme, when she described why she thought she had difficulty with math.

I thought it [college preparation] was pretty good. I went to an all girls Catholic preparatory school.
I didn’t have an issue with going at all. That wasn’t difficult. Just like the schedule, if I had a break, that wasn’t difficult because I had that in high school.
I’m a poor math student. So, I didn’t get past algebra. I’m not very good at math, so I struggled throughout math. I didn’t really pass any of my math classes, so that was a major issue. I probably would have done better if I would have tried harder. I think that I never got the complete basics of math. So I passed math, but it gets more complicated as you go further on in math. If you don’t understand where it comes from, you can’t do it always correctly or efficiently. I probably would have had to have the intervention, I would probably say third grade. I’ve gotten some, but it wasn’t focused. It wasn’t like, this is a real problem or it can be a major problem…I did well in most of my science courses. I understood them.
So I liked science. I didn’t care for math. English was fairly easy. I chose the ones I liked generally.

“I Had Some Struggles”

The second experience theme revealed comments and incidents that supported the concept that Jennifer had unique struggles in college that presented with multiple demands and high expectations of self and others. Jennifer was required to carry a very high course load (18 credit hours report; as much as 22 on transcript), and a strenuous athletic schedule. These external demands and high expectations left little time in her daily schedule for other activities or events. The adjustment in workload from high school to college was difficult for Jennifer to manage. Although there were some institutional parameters in place, such as class schedule and practice schedule, these parameters alone did not prevent Jennifer from losing focus. She experienced a different level of autonomy and responsibility in college, unlike high school. There were times during her freshman year, in particular, when she struggled to stay focused, and as a result, became academically at-risk for failure. Even though Jennifer shared that she was poor in math, she felt strong in other academic subjects and perceived her difficulty in college as a time management issue.

Well, first semester I didn’t do so well in classes, but I fixed it second semester. But, second semester I got into a fight with my suite mate. So moving out of there, away from her probably was better because I had to relax. Then I did better that following semester, getting her out of my way. I almost lost my scholarship. I got over that. That was all in my freshman year.

Not really [my relationship with my roommate did not affect my performance in college], I just…I got here, and I was just like out there. A freshman…when you get here and you have all of this freedom, not that I was locked down at home…I didn’t have any time management, so that affected my grades. She [my roommate] just got on my nerves anyway, so that just affected it. So we had a confrontation and I got kicked out of my dorm.

Although, Jennifer’s way of adapting to a new environment and the demands of being a full-time student and athlete involved risk taking behaviors, the experience she shared was painful, both emotionally and physically.

She was on the team [my roommate], so I was kind of off to the side for the rest of the semester…from the team. I was on the team, but I really didn’t…Right [I didn’t travel]. So, that was an issue. I got over that too. Coach C. said “well you’re not hurt, so why…” but I was. But, I was hurt, my ankles were always hurting, and they were bad and I had stress fractures, but you could not see them. So he tried to take it away [scholarship].

When ask about her financial distress, she commented:

Not until this year. My first five years, I was on an athletic scholarship. Last year I had a loan. Well, actually my father had a loan. This year we don’t have a loan. That was his choice. Now, I have some struggles. All to struggle for a Masters later.

Jennifer also shared how she encountered the challenge of meeting high expectations of her family, when she discussed how graduating from college was very important to her parents.

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Jennifer also shared how she encountered the challenge of meeting high expectations of her family, when she discussed how graduating from college was very important to her parents.
I think it’s a bigger thing to my parents. I’ve been…but my mother, my parents are probably my best support. I talk to my mother three times a week.

**It’s Hard to Be Productive at Both**

The third experience theme highlights Jennifer’s expressions of how difficult it was for her to be productive as a student and athlete. One of Jennifer’s greatest challenges was to perform as a student and as an athlete, while adjusting to a new living environment. She was surrounded by external and internal demands that required her to diligently balance a difficult schedule, adjust to a new roommate, and conquer math as a challenging college subject. Jennifer shared how these challenges were difficult for her.

[In college, I had a] normal course load. It was very high, 18 credit hours per semester. So we had a full load plus practice in the morning and in the afternoon. So, it was time management. It was an adjustment.

The schedule wasn’t an adjustment, because I had the same kind of schedule in high school. Being able to do what you wanted was an adjustment. It wasn’t an awkward adjustment. Because it was like I just wanted to be out there, but just an adjustment of time. Having so many hours and having practice and class work, sometimes it’s hard to be productive at both.

**“I Had to Learn to…”**

In her own way, Jennifer came to understand that there were experiences, both positive and negative, that became valuable life lessons. She used terms such as, “learning experience,” “a learning process.” “I had to learn to,” and “I didn’t do so well in classes, but I fixed it second semester” to describe this experience theme. Jennifer made reference to the learning concept, particularly when she described several critical incidents where she was faced with uncomfortable or negative experiences. For example, her experience as a first-year student athlete, involved uncomfortable experiences that, over time, taught Jennifer how to be adaptive and discover ways to cope with difficult situations.

Coach C...It was a learning experience. I came here by myself. I didn’t have any friends except for a couple of people that I talked to, but were really not that close with. So, when I came to the university, I came by myself. The team members were my friends and that’s where I spent the majority of my time [in college]. That was a learning process. I’m the only child. To live with somebody...they were on the team, so I saw them at night and all day, and had class with them. So it was interesting.

Her pre-college academic difficulty in math and her at-college risk for failure status also fostered teachable moments, where she shared several comments of how she learned to adapt and adjust her behavior, in order to cope with the task of trying to perform academically while presenting with a deficiency in math.

I didn’t care for math. English was fairly easy. I chose the ones I liked generally. Well, first semester I didn’t do so well in classes, but I fixed it second semester. Some people taught where they were good at. So, I taught vocabulary and English and somebody else taught math.

Jennifer further shared comments of the learning experience when she talked
about her experience compromising with her friends.

Because I was moody, some people didn’t like it and they were not my friends, and for those who didn’t care, they would just ignore me until I got over it, but I was nice. That wasn’t a problem. I was set in my ways, being the only child. I had to learn to compromise.

**Friends, Teammates, Parents... I'd Talk To My Mother**

Jennifer’s comments regarding parental involvement portrayed strong emotional support from her mother, from college entry to successful completion of graduation requirements. Jennifer’s statements indicated that the emotional support and guidance from her mother was reliable, particularly during times of difficulty.

Although her mother played a key role in her college experience, Jennifer spoke of both parents. She specifically talked of her dad’s financial help. There were also statements that indicated that successful completion of graduation requirements involved support from teammates, close friends, and the community. Jennifer commented that she received affirming responses from her teammates and friends when she spoke of how they were there when she needed someone to talk to. She also received affirming responses from helping others as a student volunteer.

I think to my own success, I’ve been...but my mother, my parents are probably my best support. I talk to my mother three times a week. If I didn’t want to talk with them [friends, teammates], then I’d talk to my mother.

I had plenty of friends. So if you needed to talk to somebody here, then I could do that...that wasn’t a problem.

Probably that I like to help people. And I did it in high school and I feel like I do it now.

**“I Don’t Think That I Missed Out On Too Much....”**

When asked to describe her college experience with one word, Jennifer commented that it was “fun.” Although there were many struggles in Jennifer’s life, she shared positive expressions of pleasure and satisfaction in attending college, especially attending campus and off campus events, such as parties and other extracurricular activities. There was a sense of comprehensiveness when she spoke of her college experience.

Fun, I had fun. I had fun. Despite all the class work and all the ups and downs, I have a good time, or I had a good time. I don’t think that I missed out on too much that I wanted to do.

Inclusive in this experience theme were positive experiences shared by Jennifer when she acknowledged her volunteer work off campus.

My volunteer work was off campus [was my social life], I didn’t pledge anything. I didn’t party every day. I had practice, so after a competition was usually when I went out to parties. I usually didn’t go out on Fridays because we would have to compete on Saturday, and I really wouldn’t go anywhere.
An Examination of Academic and Social Strategies that Yield Success

As revealed from the interview with Jennifer, ten behavioral themes emerged: a) “I’m a nonconformist,” b) “I don’t believe in regrets,” c) “life comes in many forms” d) finishing school: “that was your only choice,” e) “I have goals,” f) “when you exercise that was a stress relief,” g) versatility and learned adaptability, h) “I’m the product of an only child,” i) I’m a hands-on learner, but “just do your work,” and j) “I’m not the kind of person to give up.”

“I’m a Nonconformist”

The first prevalent behavioral theme was Jennifer’s frequently illustrated behavior as a nonconformist. When asked if Jennifer could describe her classroom experience, without hesitation, she commented that she did not really like the classroom process. She also stated that she deliberately sat in the back of the classroom, and also talked of how she would fall asleep in class after about 2:00 p.m. In addition, her fight with her roommate that left her with stress fractures and got her put out of the dorm, further depicted nonconformist behavior. Jennifer also spoke boldly of how she was independent and did not have a set way of doing things.

A typical day was...I probably had class at 8:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. or 3:00 p.m. Probably after 2:00 p.m., I was sleeping. If it was longer than that, it was bad, because I wasn’t retaining too much information after that.

[The classroom experience was] interesting. If its interesting it’s OK, but if I get bored... Its OK. I sit in the back. Teachers don’t like that. But I don’t like to be in the front. I don’t like having a bunch of people sitting behind me. I guess I get a little paranoid...if you can see them. They all...I’m always turning around to see what they are doing. I can’t see what they are doing if they are behind me and that’s why. I don’t like that. I’m sitting in the back too because I don’t like sitting in the front.

[I describe myself as] independent. Because I am a nonconformist and I kind of do things to my own drum. I don’t have a set way of doing anything, but I am extremely independent in my thinking, which is good and bad, but I don’t feel the need to always lean on someone unless it’s absolutely necessary.

The frequency of Jennifer’s nonconformist behavior was also revealed when she discussed her personal definition of success:

I kind of feel that some people are trying to pull you towards what their definition of success is and that’s not my definition of success. I think that individualism is lost at certain points when people are like, you should be right here, or right here, or right here, but that’s not were you want to go.

Jennifer acknowledged that her unconventional risk-taking behavior was both “good and bad.” Her story shared how her nonconformist behavior came with consequences, yet was worth holding. This type of behavior facilitated several teachable moments for Jennifer and has served as a coping strategy for her, by helping her maintain self-identity and control of situations, despite the negative outcomes. For example, Jennifer’s statement that she chose to sit in the back of the class, (even though she knew her position in the back might make her a target from the teacher) brought rewards by
keeping her from wondering what other students were doing and seemed to ultimately help her stay focused in the classroom.

“I Don’t Believe in Regrets”

Jennifer shared reflective statements that indicated that she engaged in a decision-making process with a sense of confirmation, closure, and acceptance. Her ability to do this was embedded in her comment that she gives an earnest effort to be honest, to try, and not to quit. This behavioral theme was evident in a statement when she talked of how she did not “believe in regrets.”

Oh Jennifer you quit, you did not try, or give an honest effort. So if I didn’t do something, I know I didn’t do it like the way I want to do it; that’s OK because I don’t believe in regrets. But I don’t want to look back and realize that you really should have completed such and such, and you could have and you didn’t [third person].

“Life Comes in Many Forms”

The third behavior theme shared expressions of her ability to acknowledge individuality, not just within herself, but also among others in need of help. Her volunteer experience helped expose her to a concept that “life comes in many forms,” and provided her with opportunities to develop leadership qualities during an early age in life. She believes that the way she treats people most of the time and her choice to pursue a helping profession were significantly influenced by her volunteer service to the community. Supporting statements from Jennifer’s interview included:

So, I think volunteering with people who were in a different role showed me that life comes in many forms and that just because you have this doesn’t mean that others do. Not that I didn’t know that, but seeing it and talking to people who are maybe less fortunate is different than just seeing it. If you sit down and talk to them, you can understand why, how they got there, why they got there, and they will even tell you what they need to change. So, I think that probably made a big difference in what I decided to do. It affected me in terms of how I treat people most of the time.

Finishing School: “That Was Your Only Choice”

Jennifer made reference to statements that emphasized the importance of completing college, despite adversity. From this theme, Jennifer seemed to strive to maintain a sense of individuality and independence, while also maintaining strong values on the importance of education echoed by her parents.

I never looked at that [not finishing school], because it wasn’t like you can’t finish school. That was your only choice, to finish school. I know I’m getting out. I think it’s a bigger thing to my parents.
“I Have Goals”

Related to this concept were Jennifer’s distinct skills in personal and professional goal-setting. Jennifer’s statement regarding her goals spoke to her self-identity as a worthy and determined individual. Her goal-setting ability also reflected a portrait of a focused nature, deep within her, and offered Jennifer ownership of a road map to success, despite various struggles that she encountered. When asked if there were any “ah” moments in her life that caused her to want to graduate from college, she harshly commented:

I probably should have had one of these moments (laugh) [a wake-up call] So, I really didn’t have one. I don’t think so. If I like it I like it if I don’t I don’t. I kind of roll with the punches. I don’t know. I just didn’t want to be one of those people, friends who have kids with no means of support. I can’t understand it. I’m like, you all are stupid, and I am not. So maybe that is it. I had goals or I have goals.

If you have it [goals] written in your mind exactly what you want to do and you write it down and you can see it, then that kind of helps you say where you want to go…or at least have an idea by mapping it out.

Her definition of success further supported this behavioral theme.

[Success is] obtaining the goals that you have set for yourself that no one else has set for you.

“When You Exercise That Was A Stress Relief”

The sixth behavioral theme emerged out of statements that exercise helped Jennifer cope with the challenges of college life. She commented that she was an athlete when she described how exercise was a “stress relief.”

Well, I was an athlete, so when you exercise that was a stress relief.

Versatility and Learned Adaptability

Jennifer spoke about her skills as an adaptable and versatile person with clarity:

“I see myself as a very versatile person.” During her comment she also stated:

I do OK in a multitude of situations. I don’t really have a problem with that. As long as I can read the situation, I’ll figure it out…things that present a difficulty for me.

As discussed earlier, her ability to gain control over a difficult athletic schedule and a high course load highlighted her ability to be adaptable in handling academic and nonacademic related activities. During Jennifer’s freshman year, she was able to “fix it” after her grades dropped, a confrontation with her roommate, and a threatened loss of her scholarship.

However, her ability to modify her behavior and adapt in new situations (such as college life), emerged as a learning process for Jennifer. Various statements and behaviors revealed that adapting and adjusting to the demands of college life were difficult for her, i.e., “I was just out there,” “it was an adjustment of time,” and “I had to learn.”
Although Jennifer was familiar with the challenge of a difficult schedule in high school, she was forced to learn new ways to modify her behavior and prioritize tasks, using a different set of skills that required a higher level of commitment and sacrifice. She learned that she needed to monitor her nonacademic activities in order to meet the requirements necessary for graduation and to also meet the demands of an athlete. Jennifer’s major task was transforming negative experiences into positive ones.

I had practice, so after a competition was usually when I went out to parties. I usually didn’t go out on Fridays because we would have to compete on Saturday, and I really wouldn’t go anywhere.

“I’m a Product of an Only Child”… “You Have to Survive”

The eighth behavioral theme involved the frequency and intensity of her perceived independent nature and her need to survive. Jennifer attributed this behavior to her role as an only child.

I would consider myself independent. I’m a product of an only child. I’m a very independent thinker and all that other stuff. You have to survive on your own. There is no one there to take care of you. I feel like I can do things for myself to a certain extent in a multitude of areas, until it is absolutely positive that I can’t do it.

Although there may have been times of struggle when Jennifer did not seek help and experienced difficulty managing academic or nonacademic activities, Jennifer spoke as though she was insightful and willing enough to know that, if she absolutely needed help, she would find it and use it. She seemed to choose a small group of human resources that primarily consisted of parental and teammate support. Throughout her educational experience, she also made use of close friendships and individual tutoring.

The team members were my friends and that’s where I spent the majority of my time… I had tutors here. I had tutors over the summer, at home, and in college just focusing on algebra and the fundamentals of algebra. So we went back to fractions on up, but I just don’t get the concept.

“I’m a Hands-on Learner,” but “Just Do Your Work”

Jennifer engaged in long hours of work as an athlete and also completed her requirements for graduation. She viewed herself as a hands-on learner, but in a no nonsense way, Jennifer commented that she did not routinely share her learning style with her professors. Her direct, no nonsense approach displayed her effort to acknowledge the relevance of the statement, “do your work.” This concept was well grounded in the following statements:

I am probably a better hands-on learner. I read the books, but it doesn’t present a visual picture for me versus seeing it done and doing and then reading, or reading and then seeing it done and doing it yourself. It leaves more of an imprint. So I have to actually do it to learn it. No, not really [professors were not tuned into this]. Sometimes. Sometimes I would [volunteer this information] and sometimes I wouldn’t. I just figured that I would have to seek it, learn it, so I would have to
know it, then when I get to see it then I can reference it, and then I know that it would be more informative to me after I’ve actually seen it.

I don’t think I had a strategy. Work, I just believed that if you did your work, then you passed, and if you didn’t you failed. You either do your job or you don’t.

“I’m Not the Kind of Person to Give-up”

Despite the difficult confrontation with her roommate that led to physical injuries, Jennifer found ways to adjust and cope, as she continued to participate on the athletic team. She also continued to juggle a very difficult schedule as an athlete and student within a five-year period of her college education. Her comments and perspectives shared from the interview largely supported her statement that she is “not the kind of person to give-up.” This statement, and others, depict an educational value that Jennifer shared, that reinforced a desire and determined will to succeed in college over time, during difficult periods in her life. With strong conviction, Jennifer commented:

I would say (pause) I’m not the kind of person to give up. I would have done it anyway. I would hate to look back and say, Oh Jennifer you quit, you didn’t try, or give an honest effort.

In summary, Jennifer shared how she arrived at college with academic difficulties, yet had a strong will and determined character to persist. She also shared how her human rights perspective and skills as a leader were shaped by her experience interacting with individuals within the community. Jennifer’s story depicts high aspirations and a no nonsense attitude that helped equip her with coping and management strategies needed to navigate her higher education life’s path.

While Jennifer’s methods of management were sometimes risk-taking, it provided her with teachable moments and coping strategies in her life that enabled her to learn how to adjust to a new and highly demanding living environment. To Jennifer’s credit, she was able to identify her nonconformist behavior and clearly discussed this descriptor in the interview. However, what unfolded in this study was the depth and breadth by which her nonconformist behavior, goal-setting skills, community volunteer experience, exercise, and parental support helped her persevere as a successful college student.
Joel: The Timekeeper

Joel is a very motivated individual who described himself as a high achiever. However, for Joel, the pursuit of academic achievement did not come with ease. The inevitable vigor of long work hours on the job and the difficult demands of home and college life consistently challenged Joel. Like many working adults, he struggled to manage day-to-day tasks with seemingly never enough hours in a day.

Joel waited patiently to meet with the researcher. His posture and facial expressions portrayed a sense of seriousness as he talked about his college experience. In the interview, he discussed why graduating on time was important and the importance of securing employment, once he graduated from college.

Examination of Academic and Social Challenges

From the interview with Joel, six experience themes emerged: a) perceived pre-college preparation: “it was good”…but not good in English?” b) “every day you have to be on your toes,” c) responsibility…“you learn how to be an adult quicker,” d) “freshman year was kind of tough… staying focused,” e) friends, professors…“my parents, they were there,” and f) “fun, a lot of growing up to do personally and a challenge.”

Pre-College Preparation: “It was Good.” But Not Good in English

The prevalence of Joel’s perceived “good, but not good in English pre-college status emerged from the data. Joel shared statements indicating that his high school status was good, especially in math, but not so good in English (English is a first language for Joel). His statements also reflected his belief that the course work in high school was not as challenging as the course work in college. Compared to high school, Joel commented that college was a “different world.” This experience theme was grounded in the following statement:

In high school, it wasn’t bad. It was good, but as a whole…high school and college are a different world. [In college] the performance is kind of bent out of you. You can slide by with that. You don’t have to give all your effort [in high school]. In college, you could not do that. I had to be on top of things with science. Yeah, I had to put a lot of work in those classes. Math is easy for me versus English. It’s a challenge, but it’s not a challenge that will challenge you to a point of your utmost.

“Every Day You Have to Be On Your Toes”

The second experience theme reflected Joel’s expressions of high pressure to perform in a variety of roles. Joel worked throughout college to pay for his tuition. He was challenged with adjusting to life as a college student, while skillfully trying to juggle school and work. There was external as well as internal pressure for high-quality performance at work, as well as school and in the home. Unlike traditional college students, Joel had to pay for his school and books while staying at home with his parents.

I worked through school, I had loans and PEL grants. I was in a work study program most of the four years of institution. So I had to schedule class, so that I
was able to go to class and go to work. It was also a challenge especially in undergraduate, to fit class time with work time. I needed to take this class to get into this program…will I have enough time to go to work so I could pay for my school? So, it was kind of a challenge.

I stayed home. I had to pay for everything, books and tuition. So I could pay for them and then I would continue to pay all my loans off. It’s a little bit more pressure because you’re paying for it and you don’t want to repeat any classes. It’s not like, OK I can switch my major and have another year or two. Whatever I say I’m going to do, I go hard and I make sure that’s what I’m going to do.

Joel further made reference to comments regarding pressure to meet the high expectations of his professor’s requirements in college. He said:

With professors, you have to excel every time, be outstanding. Your level of work was harder. It wasn’t that easy. In an hour you weren’t done. You had to put the time in in so many week days to get what you really wanted to present…to get that ‘A’ in class.

You always had to put your best foot forward, even with that it wasn’t enough. There was also the external pressure of keeping his job in order to pay for his college tuition.

You have to perform at work or you’ll get fired, you need a job.

Additionally, expectations such as arriving home at a reasonable time, helping with the family chores, and contributing to the household finances were present in Joel’s life. Joel shared how he realized that there were advantages and disadvantages of living with his parents, as a college student. He appreciated the availability of support from his parents, particularly during difficult times, but Joel knew he had to follow his parent’s rules, unlike students living in a college dorm.

There are rules and regulations with your parents. You have to abide and you have responsibilities being at home to do certain things, chores, and responsibilities, helping with things at home, bills and stuff like that. Things that some of my classmates were able to do. Certain things on campus, I don’t mean activities, but other things, especially at home. When you’re at home, you have to go by the rules and you can’t break them. Being able to walk in and out. When you’re on campus, there is a security guard. You show them your ID and you go in…you come in at 3:00 in the morning 6:00, but you can’t do that at home. You can’t disappear for the weekend and expect to come back to school... and get ready for school on Monday. So, there were responsibilities that you had to live up to at home. It wasn’t stressful. It was just more responsibility.

This experience theme also reflects how pressure to perform in a multitude of roles, school, work, and home created a degree of mental and physical fatigue that sooner or later, became a part of Joel’s daily routine. The overall intensity of the pressure described in this experience theme is best revealed with these comments:

You have to perform at work or you get fired. You have to go home and study and perform well to stay in the program. Every day you have to be on your toes. It really wasn’t a day were I could sit back, even if I wanted to. If I did, things just piled up. [I had] a lot of growing up to do. Your body gets physically and mentally tired, but you have to do it. Sooner or later it became a routine. If you didn’t do it, and you decided to take Saturday off, and go out and party all night,
it’s going to catch up with you...you’re tired and you’re not able to perform.

Responsibility…“You Learn How to Be an Adult Quicker”

Similarly, the fourth experience theme reflected statements that Joel perceived his college experience as a process of rapid growth, where he was challenged with a higher level of responsibility then in high school. This experience theme probably portrays one of the greatest challenges expressed by Joel. His frequent comments regarding responsibility supported this theme.

[I managed by] staying focused basically, knowing what I wanted to do and keeping my eye on the prize. I want to get into a program, I want to graduate on time and everything, and that was my motivation. “Keep it up,” “you’re almost there,” “the light is not that dim.” “It’s getting brighter.” “The time will go fast.” There were days when I would say “oh man it’s Spring Break.” Some of my classmates went home or just enjoyed Spring Break. But for me, that was the time I used to catch up. I had to work full-time to get enough money for next semester. So, you learn how to be an adult qucker. You have a lot of responsibility. It was my responsibility to pay. You have to abide and you have responsibilities, being at home, to do certain things, chores, and responsibilities, helping with things at home, bills and stuff like that.

Joel was presented with the multifaceted challenge of portraying himself as a responsible student, worker, and son at a point in his life, developmentally, when social life was important to him. Following these comments is the experience theme, “freshman year was kind of tough… staying focused,” which further supports this concept.

“Freshman Year Was Kind of Tough… Staying Focused”

Building from the second and third theme, the fourth experienced theme acknowledges the difficulty Joel shared, trying to remain focused while attempting to be a responsible student, worker, and son. Joel expressed tough challenges maintaining focus and monitoring his social activities, particularly his first year in college.

Freshman year was kind of tough. When I wasn’t in school, I wanted to get involved with a lot of things that were happening on campus, but I couldn’t because of my schedule. Basically, you try to stay focused. I’m here for school. Yeah party, let’s go out and party, yeah, but I have to study.

Supported by these statements were also Joel’s comments indicating that staying focused in college was difficult because the level of work was harder.

It wasn’t that easy. In an hour your weren’t done. You had to put the time in so many week days to get what you really wanted to present, to get that ‘A’ in class. The level of work is harder.

Friends, Professors…“My Parents, They Were There”

The fifth experience theme consisted of social relationships that reflected nurturing comments from Joel’s professors, friends, co-workers, and parents. Although
Joel’s expressions revealed that there were high expectations from his professors to perform, there were also challenging words of support. My professors pointed out what I needed to do to be the best. They always did that. [My professors would say] “work wise” and I could do better; they expected better work from me. If I turned in a paper, they would step outside and say “you need to step it up” “now you know you can do better” “if you need help, we’re here to help you.”

Joel also expressed memories of support from his classmates, even if it meant sometimes listening to advice that he might not want to hear. [My relationship with my friends] it was good. Pretty much they had their own stress, and work so... they wanted me to do well, they wanted me to do well on the exam, but it was my responsibility to take that time to study. If you kind of slacked, they will let you know... “stop that,” “you know that,” “you were not supposed to go out and hang out last night.”

However, frequent memories of support were most prevalent when Joel spoke of how his parents were there for him and how they positively influenced his educational path. Joel admired the commitment that his parents made when they were college students and also had to work. His comments indicated that reflections of his parent’s college experience inspired him to work hard. The frequency of this experience theme portrayed a sense of respect and admiration for his parents, as he worked hard in college to follow their advice and model their behaviors.

My parents, they were there. I didn’t want to stay on campus. It would be too distracting I thought. My parents were especially there. They went through the same thing. They had to go to work and go to school. That was kind of inspirational. My parents were focused. If someone else could do it you can do it. Keep focused, when things were down and hard, it’s rough, but if you don’t do this now, you are going to do this the rest of you life. Take the hardship now, deal with it while you’re young. They were there, my parents. Yes. Seeing people around me doing well, my parents pushed me when times were rough. My parents were my idol. So, if they did it, I know I can do it. It was alright.

When Joel discussed the advantages and disadvantages of being home, he commented that although the responsibility is different, he believed that face-to-face conversations with parents are more valuable than conversations over the telephone. Although, he appeared frustrated at times when he spoke about the constraints of being at home with his parents, he emphasized the availability of parental guidance and support, particularly during times of difficulty, as a primary advantage of living at home with his parents.

The pros and cons of being at home. Pros, if you have a special time or if you were having a bad day, you were able to talk to your parents versus if you were away. Pick up the phone...it was a difference when they were on the phone.

“Fun, a Lot of Growing Up to Do Personally and a Challenge”

The sixth experience theme consisted of reflective memories that indicated that Joel’s college experience was fun, a growth process, and a personal challenge.

I went to parties, but you had to make sure you didn’t go every weekend… It was
fun. The little functions during lunch, maybe or that weekend we had off and there was not an assignment due for two weeks, we went to a little party that they had on campus or like the football game, but that wasn’t every weekend. I had friends that stayed off campus and on campus. They would keep me aware of the things on campus, if I missed it...the parties, so they would invite me to go.

His co-workers and parents both encouraged him to have fun in college, but at the same time, his parents encouraged him to stay focused. His comments implied that Joel’s parents, in particular, valued his educational pursuit; and spoke words to Joel that influenced his decision to monitor his behavior. Thus, Joel had to learn how to put his responsibilities as a student, worker, and son before his social life.

[If I] come in late, knowing that I had to go to work, or do things to perform that I didn’t get a chance to at home…my parents, my parents [keep me focused]. ‘Enjoy yourself.’ Even my coworkers were like ‘college life is great,’ ‘enjoy it while you are in college,’ but I was kind of like ‘oh yeah’ it’s kind of hard to work and go to school. I just think they just went to school. [My parents said], “Make sure you don’t go overboard…”

College can be fun. You just have to study. Enjoy college life.

Joel also made reference to several critical statements revealing that working a job and attending college created a dichotomy of fun and reward, yet sacrifice, where the stress from working a job placed limitations on his social life and academic performance. During Joel’s junior year at a four-year college, he became academically at-risk when he was placed on probation because of a low grade point average in his major.

It was a little difficult because you didn’t get a chance to enjoy campus life like the other students. They didn’t have to work. They just attended school and went to different parties, Fridays and Saturdays, and to Homecoming and things like that. When you have to work and go to school, your time is not...you have to be very...what’s the word I’m looking for? You didn’t have a lot of time to waste… Looking back now, I think that if I didn’t have to work, my grades would have been better. When you have to work and go to school, it’s a bit more stress and pressure. It’s a challenge, a good one.

An Examination of Academic and Social Strategies that Yield Success

As revealed from the interview with Joel, six behavioral themes emerged: a) “time management was a big thing,” b) “I have high expectations of myself,” c) study groups: “they would challenge me with certain things,” d) “I have to see things,” e) “be disciplined and focused on what you are doing,” and f) “catch-up”...“keep it up”... “but if you don’t have to work, don’t.”

“Time Management Was a Big Thing”

The most prominent behavioral theme was the prevalence of Joel’s ability to manage deadlines for assignments, class schedules, work, and home. This behavioral theme also revealed statements that implied that Joel was committed to finishing college and developing effective methods to manage a difficult schedule as a primary means of accomplishing the goal of graduating from college. With such a strenuous schedule, Joel knew that he had to manage his time. It was as though he believed that there was nothing on his schedule that he could relinquish, so he just did it. Joel’s management skills
became an integral part of his adult responsibility and a survival technique that was routine in his life.

He managed an everyday schedule where he often caught the bus, worked whatever hours he was allotted (20-30 hours per week), and then travel home by bus. He got home late, ate and studied until early in the morning, and that was an everyday schedule. He participated in social activities, primarily on weekends. Because he lived off campus, Joel selectively chose campus activities that he really wanted to attend, and relied on friends who lived on-campus to keep him aware of current campus events.

I didn’t have that choice. It was my responsibility to pay. My time was…I took time out for breaks, but I didn’t have time to waste. [My] time management [was], good. It had to be. If I had a class, it’s eight o’clock in the morning. You have to travel. Take the bus and metro to work. I worked 20-30 hours per week or whatever time you were allowed to work, and then you had to travel and take the bus home. So I didn’t get home until late, it was a long day. I’ll get home, eat and hit the books until early in the morning. It was an everyday schedule. My body gets physically and mentally tired. But I have to do it. Sooner or later it became a routine. If I didn’t do it, I decided to take Saturday off and I’d go out and party all night, it’s going to catch up with me. I’m tired and I’m not able to perform. Time matters. It’s very important. I have to prioritize things, school, work...The longer you stay in school, the more money…its’ coming out of your pocket.

“I Have High Expectations of Myself”

The second behavioral theme was Joel’s description of himself as a high achiever. This behavioral theme also revealed an effort expressed by Joel to reassess his performance, to make changes in his behavior and achieve his goals. Joel also made reference to his thirst for challenge, his competitive nature, and his high expectations as personal attributes. These perceived attributes seem to help Joel engage in a reassessment process, where he would examine his progress and performance in school. The highest expectation of Joel was expressed when he talked of graduating on time and starting his own business. He believes that success, involves being internally motivated to do well, and doing his best.

I have high expectations of myself. If I don’t perform well, I go back and say something is not right. I’m a little competitive, trying to excel and keep going. [My goal is to] graduate on time with my class, which I will be doing, and doing well, getting my hands wet, being top notch, take care of my responsibilities, starting my own business. So right now, I’m just getting some experience and getting an idea of how things feel, pay for finances, and start a career. Start my own business. That’s my goal. [Success is] motivation, having that motivation…internal motivation, wanting to do well…having high expectations of yourself and always trying to do your best.
Study Groups: “They Would Challenge Me With Certain Things”

The third behavioral theme emerged from statements that Joel used group studying with members whom would challenge him.

I try to study in a study group. I’d study with members whom I felt continued to do better than me, so they would challenge me with certain things. They would present material that I wasn’t sure about. That would make me go over that chapter again. I’d say “ok.” “I need to refocus on this section of the chapter.” Having someone who is a little better than me was challenging...quizzing me. On a quiz, I would often do better.

This type of behavior showed how studying helped Joel work collaboratively with others and helped him become focused on information that he may have otherwise overlooked. This behavioral theme also reflected comments that Joel believed that good preparation, such as going over the material at least 20 minutes to a half an hour every day, as well as taking notes and sharing notes was helpful; however, cramming before an exam was not.

[The best way for me to learn is] one-on-one, with one student to cover the material that I need to study, then during exam time, what I’ve learned with that individual to study on my own, and go over the material at least 20 minutes to a half and hour everyday. So, be prepared for when you have to take the exam. It wasn’t cramming. I went over it Monday thru Friday. So it’s pretty much like I reviewed Wednesday and Thursday. It was stretched out.

“I Have to See Things”

Another emerging theme from the interview came from Joel’s statement that he was a visual learner. He believed that it took time for him to understand the course material. Joel read his material over and over again to understand the material. Even his comment that he could see the whole picture when he stepped back in the classroom supported this behavioral theme. His statements implied that Joel felt that he comprehended the information better when he was able to concretely visualize and re-read the words; thus, this technique became a successful academic strategy that helped him learn and understand his classroom material.

I’m a visual learner verses abstract. It takes time for me to understand things. I have to read it over and over again verses some people who you could tell them one time and they could pick it up and understand it. That was more...I have to see things.

I like to see everything [in] the classroom. Sometimes someone behind me is asking a question and you know you have to turn around. You can see things better I think.... If you step back and look at the whole picture. If you are right in the front of the class, you only see part of the picture.

“Be Disciplined and Focus On What You Are Doing”

As Joel was challenged with choosing to participate in a variety of activities, his efforts to remain focused and disciplined emerged as a fifth behavioral theme. This
behavioral theme emerged from several statements, that included Joel’s comment that he decided to live at home, because staying on campus would be distracting. This behavior theme revealed the frequency of Joel’s internal desire and commitment to achieve the goal of graduation.

[I managed by] staying focused basically, knowing what I wanted to do, and keeping my eye on the prize. I want to get into a program. I want to graduate on time and everything, and that was my motivation. “Keep it up,” “you’re almost there,” “the light is not that dim.” “It’s getting brighter.” “The time will go fast.” I had to put the time in so many weekdays to get what I really wanted to present, to get that ‘A’ in class. Discipline is a big thing. Be disciplined and focus on what your are doing.

Also revealing was how Joel’s statements served as self-talk strategy that mirrored statements from his parents such as:

If you want the best out of something, you are going to have to work hard.
“don’t burn the candlestick.” “It will catch up.” “Do your work.”

This self-talk strategy seemed to help Joel remain focused, despite his difficult schedule and academic challenges, until completion of graduation. He further commented:

They exposed me to work hard to succeed, to see what you can do. Life is up to you. If you want the best out of something, you are going to have to work hard.

“Catch-up”… “Keep It Up”… “But if You Don’t Have to Work, Don’t”

Emerging as a sixth behavioral theme was Joel’s comments on the importance of catching up, particularly with scheduled course work. Joel tried to take advantage of school break periods to catch-up with class work. He talked of his frustrations associated with this, such as not being able to enjoy Spring Break. However, Joel knew that he had to use vacation time to complete outstanding course work, in order to keep up with his course requirements.

In this behavioral theme, also emerged statements concerning Joel’s perception of working while attending school. He commented that he believed that fatigue from working and going to school prevented him from processing some classroom material, even after going over and over the material. Yet, Joel has strong beliefs that he needed to stay focused and disciplined.

Keeping it up [if] you want to get into a program and graduate on time, you had to keep it up.

Looking back now, I think that if I didn’t have to work, my grades would have been better. Some material would not sink in, after going over and over, I would fatigue and wouldn’t catch what the person was talking about, because I was tried. So if you don’t have to work, don’t do it.

Overall, Joel perceived his college experience as a process of rapid growth, where he was challenged with a higher level of responsibility in college, then in high school. He experienced many difficult challenges faced by working students, who elect to dropout or take breaks in their educational pursuits. Yet, he was able to complete the necessary course requirements and graduate from a four-year college. He discovered positive ways to stay focused and manage a difficult schedule. He also had high expectations and a
willingness to study in small tutorial groups with classmates who were supportive, yet challenging. He also listened closely to what his friends, professors, and parents had to share. Joel specifically used self-talk strategies, by reciting positive words from the voices of his parents to help him cope during times of difficulty.

However, in Joel’s voice, one could hear the frustration he expressed as he talked about the constraints of being a student, full-time worker, and son. As a young adult, he desired a more active social life. Nevertheless, he chose to sacrifice his desires in order to pursue his career goals. Joel’s story provides an example of how students are encouraged to attend college with a lack of financial resources and experience the effects of a strong interplay between struggling to: a) perform academically; b) perform on the job; c) participate in social activities, and d) meet the requirements for graduation from college.
Sheila: The Friend

Sheila is a very friendly and down to earth individual, who described herself as persistent. Captive and authentic, Sheila explained how relationships with family, friends, and peers played a key role in her life as a college student.

In a friendly kind of way, Sheila stuck her head into the door to begin talking about her life as a college student. It was count down time for Sheila, and soon she would graduate from a four year university. Although this is Sheila’s second undergraduate degree, she never imagined that she would obtain a degree in a science major. She began by discussing her excitement, as well as fears of being away from her peers in college.

An Examination of Academic and Social Challenges

From the interview with Sheila, six experience themes emerged: a) pre-college status good, but “I never thought that I could do science or math,” b) “I was older, that was a unique experience” c) “trying to put all those demands on myself,” d) this time: “I really want to do my best,” e) “I missed all the people.” and f) “I just think about the whole process."

Pre-college Status Good, But “I Never Thought That I Could Do Science or Math”

The first experience theme reflected statements indicating that Sheila experienced pre-college anxiety regarding her academic competence both times she attended college; and was hesitant to pursue a career in math or science, even though she felt that her college preparation was good. In addition, this theme emerged from statements that the first time Sheila attended college she experienced at-college academic difficulty with college math and became at-risk for academic failure. During her first college experience, she deliberately avoided selecting majors that would require a concentration in math or science.

Sheila discussed how she selected a major in a non-related science and math field during her first college experience, specifically because the program requirements did not emphasize math or science. Sheila commented that she knew that math was a foundation for chemistry and other sciences; thus, her negative experience of attempting to complete the course requirements in college math reinforced her belief that math, in addition to science, would be too difficult to pursue as a major in college. She shared a critical incident where she experienced difficulty in a college math course.

I don’t know [why I thought I couldn’t do math or science]. I did it in high school. I mean in my state, they have regents programs and non-regents programs. I had a regents diploma. I took all of the classes I need for regents. I did well in school. I took physics in high school. I mean it wasn’t my favorite thing. I found it to be a little difficult, but I just didn’t think that I could do it on a college level. I don’t think…anything that I can think of or anybody telling me I couldn’t do it. My freshman year…in college, my school doesn’t have this class any longer...there was a class called Operations. Oh yeah, o.k….and a lot of people didn’t graduate on time because of Operations. o.k. I took Operations three times and dropped it, and by the time I was getting ready to graduate, they started this new class. I was able to get in that class and I passed. But, that Operations class it didn’t look like
it, it just looked like he was writing something foreign… foreign language on the board. I mean, I knew…well, I thought that I couldn’t do it. If that was supposed to be Basics of Operations, the first class you are suppose to take, [then] I knew anything that came after that was way beyond my grasp. So, I knew math had to tie in closely with science.

So, if I couldn’t get the math that was a lot of the foundation for chemistry and all of the formulas that you have to compute in school, there was no sense in doing anything like that. So, I never went into... and then I never knew about this field. I never researched a lot of the science fields. So, the science and math was…if I could avoid it I did, and I did. I was able to avoid it for four years by taking one math class, which was a requirement to get out of school.

“I Was Older, That Was a Unique Experience”

The second experience theme reflected expressions that Sheila’s college experience presented with unique social and academic experiences because she was an older student. Several comments supported this experience theme.

I paid for everything. You’re just more responsible…it’s everything else that you have to deal with on top of school work that makes it so hard, especially when you are an older student.

When you are 22-or 21-years old in college and you are living on campus and mom and dad are paying for everything, you don’t have the same responsibilities as the older student that has to pay for their bills and keep up their apartment, as well as a family...maybe not children, but you still have family and responsibilities. It’s a big difference for a younger student than an older student.

Much like many adults who pursue a second career and reenter college, this experience theme revealed a small segment of a developmental shift that Sheila shared from late adolescence to adulthood when in both instances, she compared her first college experience to her second college experience. Submerged in this experience theme were two sub-themes that most reflected Sheila’s current college experience: a) the second career student and b) the second degree student.

The Second Career Student

As a second career student, Sheila expressed how she had acquired a wide range of life experiences having worked as a full-time employee. Although she spoke of challenges as a full-time student, her employment experiences helped her develop a different outlook on the value of education and job satisfaction. Sheila commented that “there was more to life than eight hours at work and not liking it.” Her statements implied that there was a direct link between education and job satisfaction. Her statements also show how Sheila’s work experiences broaden her perspective on education and life in general. Sheila became driven by a need to pursue a less stressful and more rewarding career. She began by discussing her desire to re-enter college and delay working to focus on her studies.

I said, I’m not going to work. This will be the last time in my life that I will have the opportunity not to work. I said I’m not working.
For some reason after…I guess the job…working, this wasn’t it. There is more to life than this eight hours here at this job, and not liking it. So I’m going to try; and I started one class at a time.

I didn’t think of a job as…I just thought of it as a job. I didn’t…it was a paycheck. It wasn’t a career until I got out and graduated and got a job and started working. Then I really realized that for me, I had to do something that I really liked. Because I didn’t want to spend eight hours miserable, or doing something I didn’t like. It was just too stressful. I came from a very stressful job before I came back the second time to school. So I didn’t link the two together. School and getting a job…you go to college, and get a degree, and of course you get a job, and it’s just going to be there, no matter what job. You get a job. So, I didn’t link the two together. So to me it was this time, I’m spending four years in college.

The Second Degree Student

Sheila’s perspective on the value of education has also been shaped by memories of her first experience as an undergraduate student. She provided several statements regarding how she viewed her academic performance the first time verses the second time she attended college. Her comments revealed a stronger commitment to excel academically as a second degree student than when she attended college the first time. Several comments supported this experience sub-theme:

This is my second time getting a degree, but it is totally different than what I did the first time. I don’t think the first time I was thinking about the grade. I was thinking about getting out of class, but I didn’t care what the grade was. You know, I wanted an ‘A,’ but if I didn’t get an ‘A’ I didn’t get an ‘A’. I just didn’t put my all into it. I wasn’t really pressed about the grade. I knew I would pass the class, but I wasn’t pressed about the grade because I didn’t think about graduating Summa Cum Laude.

I’m from the West Coast. I came here. I lived on campus. There were a lot of parties. Not in my dorm per say, but other places that we went. You meet a lot of people from different areas and it was a big socialization. You know. Big parties (laughing).

So I got an ‘A’ in that. I got an ‘A’ in socialization (laughing). But this time, I really want to do my best.

“I Really Want To Do My Best”

Sheila’s insight and anxieties regarding her ability to excel academically were tightly nested in many of her shared statements. However, her positive experience of accomplishing the goal of pursuing a degree in the sciences and the success of completing college math improved her confidence level and motivated her to excel. Although Sheila continued to share moments of doubtfulness, her echoing expressions of fulfillment, determination, and a strong desire to “do her best” magnified the data. This experience theme was best revealed in these statements:
I really want to do my best, and it’s funny, a lot of the work… and I might still get an ‘A’ out of it, but I still think I could have done some more… worked harder on it.

I went to Biology I and Biology II. It took me a while, but I’m finishing. Never in a million years could you tell me that.

“Trying to Put All Those Demands on Myself”

The fourth experience theme was the prevalence of several specific statements concerning Sheila’s personal view on stress and the demands of college life that she faced as a second degree student. Although Sheila was more insightful, committed, and focused on her academics as a second career student, she was challenged with the task of managing an already established social and personal life, as well as the demands of her new college experience. Sheila laughed as she commented:

You either have to step up and meet it or fall by the wayside.

She stated that balancing all of the demands was probably the most difficult task for her to accomplish during the last two years of school. She also commented that demands take up a “big chunk of your time.” She elaborates:

It’s a big difference for a younger student then an older student. But college is not that hard, it’s just life in general and trying to fit something into a life of something that you already had... it’s taking up a big chunk of your time...and trying to make those mixes or blends and have an equal amount of both.

This experience theme revealed that Sheila has lived a very challenging and stressful life as a college student. Also revealing was her struggle to develop effective ways to help manage high levels of stress, while in college. She shared the challenge of dealing with tasks outside her academic life, such as, managing her daily household chores, and her need to help her sister and others (but not accepting help from others). These nonacademic demands combined with completing the necessary course work for graduation as a full-time student, resulted in sleepless nights and disorganization of her environment, that became both physically and emotional taxing for Sheila. When asked how she managed to deal with such stressful situations, she laughed and commented that she “stresses some more probably.”

[When handling stress I] stress some more probably. I try...I mean I’ll get into a routine. I like to walk, I like to go to the park out by the water. I’ll get into the routine of doing it, something will come up and will stop it, because I should be sleeping...because I don’t get much sleep. I’m studying this or writing this, and I need to be more organized in my household chores because my house is a mess, when your house is a mess it takes you forever to find your assignment...those are the books you need. So that’s gotten in the way. But it’s just been so much, especially the last month. Before this last month, you know finals time is always rough. Stuff starts going hay wire. So, I guess I’m a little disorganized.

When I was in college the first time, I would say that my sister, who is four years older then me...she is dyslexic and she has always been in slower classes. There were issues there. As a teenager, she got on drugs and remained on them most of her...until a year or two ago...when she started getting treatment...being the problem child for my mother and father. So a lot of attention was being placed on
her as far as issues that she had. In college, the first time I really didn’t know about her problem or the severity of her problems. I might have known that it was something, but I didn’t know how bad it was until probably right before I decided to go back to school the second time.

I feel responsible for her, because she needs so much assistance and I really used to worry about that a lot the first year up until this last semester. I’m a worrier and I worry about everybody but myself. It would really affect my sleep and my work, but then I got to a point where I said, “I’m getting ready to have a nervous breakdown worrying about her.” She is a grown woman and she has to make these decisions for herself that she wants to do better and get better. All I can do is be a support. I can’t live her life and she is not going to do what I do. After I started to let those things go and stop worrying about what was going on in her life, things really started to get better.

I always had…I think I knew I had a big support system, but I’m not the type of person to ask for help. So you really don’t have the opportunity to give me support. I don’t allow it. So, I didn’t feel alone. I have a family, and a lot of good friends, but I don’t ask for help.

“I Missed All the People”

The fifth experience theme reflected expressions of memories that revealed a strong bond that had been established between Sheila and her college classmates and a routine of attending college that she valued. Although Sheila admitted to having difficulty allowing others to help her during times of need, she spoke of how she valued relationships with classmates, friends, and family. Her statements spoke extensively about her social relationship with her family and how family was an important entity in her life. This experience theme particularly unfolded Sheila’s desire to maintain her family network and hold onto relationships from experiences in college, fostered by a sense of family, i.e. her “college family.” Included in this experience theme were several memories of her classmates, friends and family, including those who offered help, whether she excepted it or not.

I have a lot of my same friends now. A lot of my best friends were my friends back in the 1980’s.

Yeah, it’s scary not to be with your friends. This summer was hard. I’m use to…if I’m not busy, it like depresses me. Even though I didn’t want to be here with all of the school work, I missed all of the people.

Family is a big part of my life, that’s why I guess I claim all six, where sometimes people say half brothers and half sisters. I really don’t get into that. Not that we have a close knit family…they are much older then me. I’m 34. As far as the other three from the previous marriage, I see them every once and a while and I talk to them on the phone during the holidays. I wish we could be a lot closer. Maybe some day we will be. I think family is a very important part of my life. That’s why I stress that there is a total of six, not just three.
“I Just Think About the Whole Process”

The intensity of Sheila’s insightful reflections regarding her ability to appreciate her college experience as a “process” of growth emerged as the last experience theme. This experience theme occurred late in the interview when Sheila began to talk about the value of her college experience and the gain in confidence she experienced. In the interview, Sheila discussed how college had been a big challenge for her and that she knew she needed to pursue the goal of returning to college. Yet, there were times when Sheila worried about getting through the difficult science and math courses. She also wondered if she would secure a job that would make her educational journey worthwhile. Despite Sheila’s hesitant nature, and related positive and negative experiences of college life, she developed an appreciation for the process by which these experiences helped shape and mold her into a confident and mature individual. Her appreciation for the process became the hallmark of her college experience, and was illuminated by the reality that she had accomplished the goal of graduation in the area of science that she “never in a million years” thought she would be able to achieve. This critical moment provided Sheila with a positive experience, knowing that she did not need to focus only on her academic performance for reward, but that there was a process that she engaged in that was much more valuable than academic performance alone. Her provoking statements about the confident gains that she experienced are best captured in this experience theme:

I think with this degree and the whole process...its not even the degree. I know that the field is kind of tight and I worry about that, but then I think about this whole process... the whole process of me having enough courage to go back to school and do it, and working hard. I think I’ve gained so much more from the process, to carry over to other areas of my life, than the degree could ever give me and the job could never give me. Just the skills that I’ve developed, the confidence, even though it’s still lacking, the confidence gains that I have achieved from this whole process of the struggles...staying up all night...things that I never thought I could do. By accomplishing that, its just setting me up to do much better in the future. I think it’s just a building block of what is to come.

An Examination of Academic and Social Strategies that Yield Success

From the interview with Sheila, six behavioral themes emerged: a) “I enjoy doing things for people, but I had to put limits on it,” b) “I always have something to fall back on,” c) “I think I interacted more with the teachers,” d) “It was the two of us... always studying all the time,” e) “once I say I want it, I get it,” f) “I want to have that kind of life,” but it’s not all about getting.”

“I Enjoy Doing Things For People, But I Had to Put Limits On it”

The first behavioral theme emerged from statements that Sheila enjoyed helping others, but had to learn to prioritize and monitor her helping efforts in order to maintain her health, household, and persist in college. Although Sheila continued to providing help to her family and friends, she realized how important it was to take care of her health, bills, and focus on her studies. This insightful theme provided an example of how Sheila
began to discover ways to manage social challenges and minimize stress by prioritizing and monitoring issues that occurred in her social life.

I think between a lot of people, I do and do and do, but I don’t let them do for me, so then I’m tired, and I can’t do for myself. I enjoy doing things for people, but I had to put limits on it, because I was suffering myself by not taking care of myself...taking care of my home, taking care of my bills, taking care of health.

“I Always Have Something to Fall Back On”

This behavioral theme revealed a coping strategy that Sheila used over the years to primarily deal with negative academic and social experiences in her life. For example, Sheila talked extensively on how she spent time doubting her abilities and using the phrase “I didn’t do my best,” to help her cope with confronting difficult situations. In the interview, this behavioral theme became an “ah” moment that qualified as a critical incident in Sheila’s life. She shared how she realized that her way of thinking had negative drawbacks. As she talked, she also shared how she began to gain a better understanding of why she doubted her abilities. She discussed family issues as a means of helping her identify the origin of her doubtful nature. This behavior theme implied that Sheila believed that family crisis can impact academic performance and pursuits, but that it is important to think positively. This experience theme also implied that it was acceptable for Sheila to have a “safety net,” as long as she did not limit herself. “Self-doubt,” Sheila said, “can be a big problem.” The first paragraph below is a continuation of the statement about her sister under the experience theme “I Will Miss All the People.”

So my mother and father I think sometimes ...I don’t take it out on them, but they were never the kind of parents that would say “did you do your homework?” and check you homework right behind you. They just left it up to you to complete it. So I think that that was a lot to do with...I mean I did ok in high school. I didn’t do my best. So, when I talk to you about, how I say “I didn’t do my best…”when I do something, I still feel that way. I think my problem…looking back on things that I have done, is that I don’t want to put all my effort into it, because if I don’t succeed, I can say “well I didn’t really try.” I always have something to fall back on. I was limiting myself by not setting my goals high enough or working hard enough to get what I wanted.

[Sheila’s comments when the interviewer said that she too had a safety net]

Thinking that way, I can see how that could propel you to even do better then you would have if you didn’t think that way, because you’re always prepared for the worse. You always had enough ammunition to face what was the worse. My problem is that I think of the worst. I always think of oh “that’s going to happen,” or “what’s going to happen with that situation.” Usually I come through with flying colors.

So I can say, “I didn’t really try that, that’s why it didn’t work out that well.” It’s a safety net. I still find myself doing that. Before, I wasn’t aware of that...until I got older. Talking to you and revisiting my college education and my whole four years before this last degree and even my high school years, helped me realize that that was my safety net. And even now that affects what I do today. I feel that if I don’t give my hundred percent to it, then...if I don’t get a good grade or
whatever happens, then I can say “oh well, I really didn’t put all my all into it, so I deserve what I got.”

“I Think I Interacted More With The Teachers”

The third behavioral theme reflected statements indicating how Sheila’s academic involvement in the teaching-learning process contributed to her success as a college student. During her first college experience, Sheila believed that she missed out on the value of participating in the teaching-learning process. She commented that she would sit in the back of the class and would not have eye contact with the instructor or participant in classroom discussions.

This behavioral theme revealed how Sheila’s first college experience helped shaped her into a much more insightful and confident individual, who became, during her second college experience, an active participant in the teaching-learning process. She shared how classroom participation became a valuable way for her to clarify, share, interpret information, while building relationships. Implications of what it meant for Sheila to engage in the teaching-learning process during her second college experience, were reflected in these comments:

This time around, I think I interacted more with the teachers, than I did the first time...asking questions...volunteering the answers. If I didn’t understand something, or if I felt that the teachers weren’t presenting the materials properly, then I would ask the teacher about that. Sometimes I would be an interpreter of the students.

“It Was The Two of Us... Always Studying All The Time”

The four behavioral theme emerged from statements regarding Sheila’s study methods. She talked specifically of successful study techniques that she employed in college. However, she emphasized that what “works” for her might not work for someone else. She successfully prepared for exams by routinely pairing up with a study partner, and by using visual, auditory, and tactile techniques to encode information.

This behavioral theme revealed that using a hands-on approach when studying, had proven to be successful for Sheila. She used this approach to study the same way all the time, particularly for the science courses.

There has always been another classmate that was in my major who is graduating this year, Janice... It was the two of us... always studying all the time. People would always comment on us studying together because we pretty much got decent grades.

Sheila described how she engaged in the study process. For example, she recognized that she was a talker, and benefited from verbally reading her work out loud. In addition, she recognized that visually observing the muscle as well as, feeling and moving parts of her body to learn more about a particular muscle group was very helpful.

I was more of the talker, so if we were reading notes, I was usually the one reading notes and she was listening, and I would say, ‘now you tell me what I said differently...tell it back to me.’ For me, I like to write things. I have to write
things over and over, over again...the same thing, just to remember it...say it over and over again. During a test, you might see one of us start making the motion, because that’s the way we learned it. I learned that this muscle does this, or it is inserted here, or its origin is here. When we studied, we talked it out. We talked out everything. We made the motion and we palpated the muscle. So we really...it was very interactive.

Sheila also made comments that reflected a perception that some classmates wanted to benefit from her study techniques, but this time in college, She had no time to deal with people who were not serious about doing well in college. Sheila’s comments indicated that she was determined to successfully complete the required course work, and do her best.

Sometimes there were some students who were really having a problem with a certain topic and we would say, you can study with us, but you have to study like us. If you can’t study the way we study, we are not going to change our study patterns. We do the same thing all the time. So if you can’t do what we do, we are not going to throw ourselves off track trying to accommodate you. We’re sorry to say it like that, but we were very up front with anybody who wanted to come and study with us, because we had a system and it seemed to be working and we didn’t have time for it to fail.

I had to get through this and I had to pass this. This time I don’t have time to play. I said, if you happen to come to where we are studying...usually we would study over Janice’s house or over her cousin’s house where Janice lives. We would study sometimes all night long, if we had to. I would leave her house a half and hour before we went to school. I would go home, take a shower, and sometimes take myself back over there. We would leave right from there to go back to school.

“Once I Say I Want it, I Get it”

The fifth behavioral theme reflected Sheila’s commitment to complete college, despite life challenges. Sheila’s growth process as a student came with many challenges, yet she was persistent and overcame many obstacles, despite adversity. Bit-by-bit, she conquered one hurdle after another, sometimes experiencing moments of gratification and other times, difficulty and distress. Her statements reflected that life has been strenuous for Sheila--filled with critical moments of change. Nonetheless, she displayed commitment, determination, and willfulness to engage in the educational process, until completion. During the interview, she described herself as “persistent,” and attributed her persistence to her mom and her aunt. She also said: “Once I say I want it, I get it.” Yet she maintained a delicate balance between the concept of getting what she wanted and giving. When asked if she planed to maintain her persistence, Sheila commented: “Oh, definitely.”

I made up my mind that I was going to go back to school and I was telling my friends ‘yeah I think I’m going to go back to school’ and [I’m going to] do this that and the other. So after I started putting words behind...telling people I’m going to do this I said: I’ve got to do this (laugh). I’ve told so and so that I was going back to school and I just can’t just say ‘oh now, I can’t do it.’ I have to do
it, and I did it… all these things that I worry about and things that I can’t do, eventually I do, if I keep plucking away at it and get it done.

I’ll say [I’m] persistent, because once I say I want it, I’ll get it. I might not go after it right then, but once I say it, especially if I tell someone…I have a big issue with someone trying to throw something back in my face. I’ll do it. I think maybe my family…my mom, but especially my aunt…my great aunt, she was persistent. She got what she wanted. She showed how if you… you didn’t always have a lot of money, but if you are persistent in saving the money, eventually it is going to be a great amount of money. Persistence can get you a lot, just by staying still or trying to get it all at one time… if you work a little bit you stay longer. You have more longevity when you are persistent instead of going out headstrong trying to knock down the wall. Sooner or later, you’re going to get tried. Oh, definitely [I will maintain persistence].

“I Want to Have That Kind of Life” but…“It’s Not All About Getting”

The last behavioral theme emerged from statements that Sheila wants to be in a position where she can live comfortably and give to others. The demonstrated desire and commitment to help others supports this statement: “It’s not all about getting.” Also reflected in this behavioral theme was Sheila’s desire to be happy with her life. Through the longevity of encountering both negative and positive experiences in her life, Sheila has realized that people’s goals should align with what makes them happy. Even her definition of success embraces this concept.

[Success is] happiness, how happy you are with your life. That’s it.
Sheila plans to work in the area of mental health when she graduates, and used her parents as an example of how she would like to live.

Well, I really want to, I think…well I think since I’ve come into college I always said I wanted to work in mental health. So I really want to give mental health a shot. I really want to work with the welfare to work programs. So I’m interested in that. It’s not all about getting.

So I would like to be in a position…my mother and father travel. They do whatever they want. They are retired, and I want to have that kind of life. When I get 65 or whatever, 70, I would like to be able to do what I want to do. But, I really don’t want to wait to travel, because they waited until I finished college. You know [my parents had] to put the kids through college, and all that expense before they were able to live their life.

Sheila’s experience as a second career college student provided a portrait of a unique desire to persevere that emerged from previous college experiences where she knew this time, she really wanted to do her best. Her repertoire of experiences reflected a developmental shift in her life, where emotionally she was able to conquer difficult college subjects in order to persist in college. While Sheila expressed her pre-college anxieties, as well as at-college anxieties as a first-time student, and as a returning student, she also displayed a mature perspective regarding life’s challenges and a commitment to excellence that illuminated the data. As she navigated higher education’s life path, she shared her growth process, the trials and tribulations she encountered, and strategies that she used to help her minimize stress and obtain the necessary grades to graduate from
college. She especially shared her appreciation for the educational experience that she was exposed to, and her personal reflections that spoke to her burning desire to remain committed to her family friends.
Lloyd: The Winsome

Winsome is quite the word to describe Lloyd. His reserved philosophical perspective on life and passion for success can indubitably win one’s heart. Lloyd has learned to overcome obstacles by examining life challenges introspectively. For him, a “focus on your dreams” and a deeply rooted character of determination are ingredients needed to navigate difficult challenges of college life.

Initially, Lloyd struggled with the right words to capture his college experience. He primarily provided personal demographic information, with little focus on his experience as a college student. However, with some probing, Lloyd began to discuss his college experience in-depth.

An Examination of Academic and Social Challenges

From the interview with Lloyd, six experience themes emerged: a) perceived pre-college status good, but I thought “I might flunk out,” b) “It was real time consuming” “a lot of hard work and sweat,” c) “that was a big bridge I had to cross over,” d) “my family, friends and church,” e) “there was always stuff going on, and that was a cool thing.” and, f) “absolutely not,” I would not do anything different. .”

Pre-college Status Good, But I Thought “I Might Flunk Out”

The first experience theme emerged from several statements indicating that Lloyd expressed pre-college anxiety as a first-year college student, despite his perceived pre-college “good” academic status. When asked how he felt attending college for the first time, he commented “scared.” Lloyd used terms such as, “cut throat” and “really, really hard” to describe his anticipated perception of what college would be like for a first-year student. He also made statements indicating that he had experienced pre-college academic challenges in high school unlike some students, and he knew he had to compete against students who had higher grade point averages then he. This experience theme depicts how Lloyd questioned his readiness for college and portrays intense feelings of pre-college anxiety that Lloyd experienced as a late adolescent transitioning from high school to college, even though he commented that his pre-college preparation was good.

Coming into college, I guess I was really scared. I thought it was going to be really, really hard. I thought it was going to be cut throat. I might flunk out…all of those types of things. Yeah, I guess [I felt this way] because uh, some thing’s in my high school were kind of challenging too. It wasn’t a fly by night easy thing. I remember, I was thinking that the 4.0 students or the valedictorian…I was competing against now and all that kind of stuff.
Yes, I did. I felt like I was prepared well academically. I didn’t fulfill any of those requirements coming into college. I felt like there was so much static that I had to deal with because I was 17 and the first time I was 3000 miles away from home and I had to live in a dorm. I had some roommates and stuff. It’s a lot of factors and a lot of different… I guess pressures are involved in the whole thing. You not only have the academic pressure, but there is a lot of social pressure. You are in a new environment, you are away from home, you are kind of …you don’t have you parents holding you by the hand any more.

“It Was Real Time Consuming,” “A Lot of Hard Work and Sweat”

The second experience theme reflected statements indicating that Lloyd believed that college was very time consuming. In the interview, he talked about the long hours of studying he encountered on a regular basis. He also talked again of how he did not have a high grade point and gave an example of how he would get only three and four hours of sleep per day, and routinely stayed up all night to prepare for an exam. He also commented that he would stay in the labs during Spring Break and study the information. Similar to Joel’s experience, Lloyd used the term “sacrifice” as he described his experience studying during Spring Break and engaging in long hours of studying in the labs.

Related to this experience theme were also memories that college involved “hard work and sweat.” More specifically, this experience theme captured a gut feeling of diligence that Lloyd expressed, working “hard” countless hours in the lab to learn information and completing course assignments.

Academically, ugh… academically, college was very challenging. I guess I didn’t have the 4.0 or 3.5 like a lot of students. It was real time consuming. A lot of hard work and sweat.
[I had to] sacrifice…a lot of time and studying it over the Spring Break. I took some…a couple of anatomy and physiology courses over the summer. Staying up all night…yes hard work and sweat, getting three and four hours of sleep a day. Staying up all night. Doing an all nighter once a week. I consider that to be kind of hard work and sweat. Staying in Spring Break in the labs and studying over information.

“That Was a Big Bridge I Had to Cross Over”

The third experience theme captured, memories of discouraging incidents during Lloyd’s college experience, where he was able to persevere, despite adversity. His discouraging experiences included receiving a low grade in a course, not achieving the GPA that he needed to remain in good academic standing, and listening to a faculty member questioning his ability to pass a national board examination. Nonetheless, Lloyd saw these critical moments as opportunities to prove to himself and others that he could, in fact, accomplish what others might view as unachievable.

Yeah, I remember before I started going to this college, I was having problems with a science course a long time ago, that was a big bridge that I had to cross over at one point. I remember writing all this stuff for graduate school. I
remember taking anatomy in the College of Medicine for the first time and it was the first time I was taking a class at that type of level. That was the first class and the only class in my college career that I actually failed with a “D.” I just remember that was like a disappointment, but it was something that helped me and made me a stronger person because I could...15 credits and all this anatomy stuff the following summer. When it came around to taking the higher level anatomy, I was able to out do a lot of my counterparts, just because of failing the first anatomy and taking the other classes in the summer.

Oh, I remember doing my exist interview and I remember one of the faculty, I guess shared with me that you know you need to find a way… how you are going to...figure out how you are going to pass these boards. ‘We don’t know how you are going to pass.’ ‘You’ve got to figure out a way.’ ‘What is your plan?’ ‘What are you going to do?’ ‘How are you going to pass?’ I remember that was discouraging, but it gave me fuel to make it happen, because I came up with a plan, and it was like well, I guess I have to show these people that I can pass this thing too. It was kind of like that.

“My Family, Friends and Church”

The fourth experience theme unfolded a strong support system available to Lloyd during his enrollment in college. While away from home, he experienced support from his parents, sister, friends and Christian faith. His family, in particular, showed an education value that was influenced through their encouraging words and also in their pursuit as college graduates. For example, Lloyd would call up his mom for encouragement, and she would tell him stories of how his dad handled situations in college. He also maintained his faith as a Christian and sought out friends and family while in college. Lloyd commented that his faith-believing that things would happen, helped him cope with the difficulties of college life. He also commented that there was always a lot of unity among students in small university programs.

Lloyd had to adjust culturally to the friends he had at home after leaving college, and believed that even though he remained in touch with his friends at home, he developed a closer relationship with his peers in college. Emerging from this experience theme were also statements indicating that although Lloyd had a strong support system, he believed that he used his support system at the last minute. He perceived that getting help at the last minute was a characteristic seen “mostly with men.”

My support, I guess was my family. My parents, friends, and church. It was always a place where I could go to. I could always call home and talk and get a little pep speech from my mom. She’d tell me about college and my father. And I guess other people around me. There is always a lot of unity around students, especially in small schools where you have people who are willing to help each other out and talk to each other about how they did and what to get through. The same thing with going to church, you always tied in with the Christian faith. Having faith to believe in things that will happen for you, the trial and tribulations, and all that kind of stuff helped me out a lot. I know that there was always a tendency to use them [parents, church] at the last minute. I think that’s
mostly with men. They kind of like to do things on their own, until they have no choice but to go and get some help.
My sister was in graduate school while I was getting my undergraduate degree at the same school. We had a room together the last two years of school. My family, they were on the East Coast. They would do the regular…go to work and come home stuff.
I had my friends. I went to high school when I was still at home, and then I had new friends that I met when I went to college. I think that it is cool. You know you come to college and you meet these new friends and most of the friendships that I have in college seem to be more of a closer friendship compared to the ones that I had at home. It’s really different because…culturally and just the whole bit. My friends at home are like nothing like my friends in college. It’s always like funny to go to school and then go to a totally different environment when you go home.

“There Was Always Stuff Going On, and That Was a Cool Thing”

The five experience theme emerged from expressions of memories that Lloyd was enriched with social experiences of campus life even though he perceived science majors as not having as much free time as other students. He acquired a taste of both lives as a college student, living on campus his freshman year, and then as a student living off campus with his sister. His most memorable social experiences were expressed as an on-campus college student. He commented that what he remembered the most as pleasurable times were not expensive college events, but little things, like playing ping pong until 5:00 a.m.

Campus life was pretty cool. It seemed like everybody else who had non-science majors were free. But there was always stuff going on and that was a cool thing. There was a lot of stuff that wasn’t a whole lot of money. To me, you have your most memorable experiences when you go to the art festivals and you go to your dorm and you become a part of a speed tournament.
I remember one night it was my freshman year. [While I was] just watching TV, there was a ping pong table and there were a bunch of guys in the dorm playing ping pong. [They were] just playing ping pong all the way until like...it must have been about 5:00 in the morning, and then they still went to class.

“Absolutely Not” I Would Not Do Anything Different”

The last experience theme emerged out of statements indicating that despite academic challenges of college life, Lloyd was pleased with his college experience. When asked if given another chance, would he do anything different to change his college experience, he commented, “absolutely not.” He further stated that he recognized that he was in the middle of change. This experience theme unfolded a rich description of how Lloyd viewed his college experience as an integral part of a changing life cycle, where he learned to endure the challenge of college, and accomplish the goal of graduation.
An Examination of Academic and Social Strategies that Yielded Success

As revealed from the interview with Lloyd, seven behavioral themes emerged: a) “a focus, and focusing on your dreams,” b) “I had something to prove…,” c) “I have a box and I look at it, and say…,” d) “I learned from other unique strategies,” e) “it was just practice, practice, practice,” f) “campus life…but “it should be as important as work,” and g) “it’s all about finishing the race.”

“A Focus, and Focusing On Your Dreams”

The first behavioral theme emerged from Lloyd’s belief that it is important for college students to have a clear focus on their dreams. Lloyd commented that successful people accomplish dreams in life that look like they are impossible, despite adversity. He particularly talked of how establishing high goals and dreams played an important role in his life, by helping him stay focused during difficult times in college.

I never did bad enough to flunk out of college or anything, but I guess I really had high goals and dreams. And so, the difficulty was to accomplish the goals and the dreams that I had.

Lloyd’s goals and predictions reflected high aspirations and the acknowledgment that goal attainment is a multidimensional challenge that requires having the right ingredients or “mixes” to succeed. His ingredients for success in life were well grounded in these statements:

I think that determination, good character, and a clear focus on your dreams are the key to graduating from college.

Success, I think success is accomplishing your goals, dreams and with all the adversity. I think that’s true success, when you are doing things and accomplishing things that, that look like they are impossible and then you accomplish it. To me that’s success. Yeah, I think for this point in my life [I am successful]. I don’t have a job, but… (laugh) I see myself as being successful.

[My goals and predictions consist of] doing well enough in college to go to graduate school, and get a Ph.D….do lots of research and hopefully write a couple of textbooks and involving all of the ingredients that you have to have in the mix to make that happen.

“I Came Up With a Plan…”

The second behavioral theme reflected statements indicating that Lloyd developed an action plan to overcome critical obstacles during his college experience. He provides an example of this behavioral theme as he shared his response to a comment made by a professor who questioned his ability to pass a national board examination. His statements reflected a determination to succeed in college and a will to show others that he could persevere. It was evident in this behavioral theme that his will to succeed helped motivate
him to problem-solve through difficult times and to develop ways to overcome life barriers.

I remember that was discouraging, but it gave me fuel to make it happen, because I came up with a plan, and it was like well, I guess I have to show these people that I can pass this thing too. It was kind of like that.

“I Have a Box and I Look in it, and Say…,”

Lloyd described himself as tenacious. He shared several critical incidents where he did not give-up easily, even though there were setbacks. These reflections implied that his drive to succeed in college also helped him learn to be resourceful in order to address academic, as well as nonacademic issues that he encountered. The magnitude by which Lloyd shared his ability to be resourceful illuminated the data when he vividly described a “box” that he reached into to make things happen. This pictorial illusion portrayed a reservoir of creative ideas, where he made things happen out of what he had that others could never image possible. Even though Lloyd acknowledged in the interview that he often sought out support at the last minute, this behavioral theme demonstrated how his resourcefulness and creative nature helped him yield success.

Because I feel like I’m always going after it, going after things and going forward. It’s like, I get a lot of setbacks and I look at them, and I say, well this is not the first setback that I have ever had in my life. Let’s get the clock rolling and see what we can do with this. And I guess because things are not like a perfect painted picture for me, I don’t have this stuff and all these things. I don’t have a whole lot of hardware. So I have a box and I look at it and I say, ‘hum I’ve got to work with this.’ ‘Let me see what I can do with this.’ And I use my resources to work with it and make things happen.

Lloyd also talked of how he sought out advice, emotional support, and ways to overcome his life challenges from his parents, sister, friends, and church. He commented that he particularly sought out advice from people “who experienced challenging times themselves.” He further commented that he wanted to find out how they’d overcame them so he could use this knowledge to help him overcome whatever he was trying to go through.

I guess advice, [I sought out] meaningful and emotional support and ideas of what I should do or how do I overcome this challenge that’s in my life…just basically things. I was just looking for people who experienced challenging times themselves. How they overcame them so I could use their knowledge to help me overcome whatever I’m trying to go through.

“I Learned From Other Unique Strategies”

The fourth behavioral theme reflected statements indicating that Lloyd learned from observing his classmates use a wide range of interesting methods to master the course materials. This behavioral theme also reflected statements indicating that Lloyd realized that, in many ways, his classmates were experiencing the same challenges that he was experiencing. For example, Lloyd commented that it was humorous to observe the unique way that his classmates used acronyms to remember information.
I guess because you are with people that are going through the same thing that you are going through, dealing with the same challenges that you are dealing with as far as learning the information and managing their time...trying different methods and strategies in order to process the information. Sometimes it can be very humorous to find the unique ways that people process information. Coming up with acronyms for remembering muscles or using a past experience to figure out a certain theory...something that they learned on their rotation...and they say, “oh I remember this.”

“It Was Just Practice, Practice, Practice”

The fifth behavioral theme indicated that mastery of course work and completion of assignments involved Lloyd engaging in long hours of practice to learn course information. This behavioral theme also revealed a commitment to learn the course materials well enough to “play around with it, play games with it, mess around with it, and still conceptualize it as a whole.”

To me it was just practice, practice, practice. Just doing it over again until it was in the back of my head.

For me, I think the strategies were you’ve got to just invest some time into it. Some one-on-one time just going over all the information over and over again, and knowing it well enough so that you can play around with it...so that you can play games with it, mess around with it and still be able to conceptualize it as a whole.

Campus Life…but Service “It Should be as Important as Work”

The six behavioral theme emerged out of expressions that successful completion of graduation from college involved Lloyd’s participating in extracurricular activities. Lloyd specifically commented that his participation in campus activities helped him cope with his academics. He described participation in extracurricular activities as “part of the package.”

To me, you have your most memorable experiences when you go to the art festivals and you go to your dorm and you become a part of a Speed tournament. That’s a coping method to deal with your academics. It’s like part of the package.

Also emerging from statements regarding extracurricular activities were Lloyd’s deep felt expressions that described how community service was an important part of his college experience.

I feel like community service is such a vital aspect of a person’s growth as a regular human being in our society. I feel that it should be as important as work, as important as getting an oil change...something that you schedule and plan and take time out for or take a day off work for. That’s how I feel about community service.
“It’s All About Finishing The Race”

The last behavioral theme exemplified Lloyd’s will to continue in college until completion of graduation. To Lloyd, college is about perseverance. In several statements, he discussed how completing college required perseverance and also shared how enduring the difficulties in college was part of reaching a final point of graduation. He exclaimed: “It’s all about finishing the race.”

You have to persevere to make it through there, persevere to deal with some of my classes, persevere to deal with some of the… a lot of the stuff there you just have to stick it out. I feel like that’s what makes…that what makes the difference between someone’s success or someone who doesn’t. It’s all about finishing the race. It doesn’t matter how you get there, but as long as you get it done. I’ll say the key to graduating from college is determination, a focus, and focusing on your dreams. It’s determination, kind of a deep root character that you have in yourself to shoot for the stars. It’s kind of like that type of thing.

In summary, Lloyd was challenged with adjusting to college life during late adolescence. As part of life transition, he shared the stress and anxiety of experiencing a new educational environment, as many first time freshman students. His Christian faith, strong family support, and friends helped provide him with comfort during these transitional times. Lloyd also participated in campus activities to help him cope with his academic challenges. Unlike some college students, Lloyd clearly described that his college experience was hard work and sweat. He was aware that academics did not come easy for him and spent many extra hours in the lab, at night, preparing for exams. His display of an undying need to be resourceful, creative, content, yet passionate about his dreams in order to succeed, were most revealing in his story.

Summary

In summary, these students had their own educational path that they chose to travel. How they navigated this path, is uniquely understood by examining the stories that they share. Individually, they spoke of their academic challenges and ways that they coped and managed during their higher education experience. They shared what was painful and enjoyable, as well as what worked, and what did not work. Although these students spoke of their unique experiences collectively, they shared several similar experiences. The next chapter will consist of a cross-case analysis of the emerging themes that provide an examination of the experiences and strategies that these four students shared.
CHAPTER V: CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

This chapter presents a cross-case analysis of the study’s findings that contribute to the understanding of these four successful, yet academically at-risk students who graduated from postsecondary institutions. Specifically, this study analyzed the process by which they persisted from college entry to graduation; the task of accomplishing requirements for course work and earning sufficient grades; the management of social issues of home and campus life, and the strategies they employed that yielded success.

To achieve this goal, this chapter provides an analysis of emerging themes and presents a visual sketch for conceptualizing the experience of these students as described in Chapter 4, followed by an analysis of the persistent contours that emerged from the students’ experiences. These analyses provide a multidimensional interpretation of the lives of these students as they speak for themselves. These analyses are grounded in the shared experiences of the students and considers the literature on academically at-risk students, attrition, and persistence stated in Chapter 2. Chapter 6 will conclude with a summary of the study and implications for research and practice.

Framing the Analysis

In this section, the theoretical framework that emerged is introduced to support the research findings and its conclusions. This study reaches conclusions that lend support for involvement theories, such as Tinto’s Model of Attrition, which suggests that persistence is shaped by interactions that occur within and between students and faculty, and the various communities that make up the academic and social systems of the institutions. These students experienced a supportive, enjoyable, yet highly stressful college experience that was shaped by interactions within their academic and social communities. These students also perceived their college experience as hard work, and presented with the defining feature of a unique will to continue in college during high levels of stress, corroborating previous research on behaviors associated with student resiliency.

The students in this study used many management and coping strategies, both academic and nonacademic, to help them deal with difficult and demanding situations, where other students might have failed. Peng, Lee, Wang, and Walberg (1992) contend that successful at-risk students possess temperamental characteristics that elicit positive responses from individuals around them. These behaviors exist during early childhood and are believed to manifest in adolescence as students seek out new experiences and become self-reliant (McMillan and Reed 1993, 1994). A collective account of strategies that these students employed consisted of: a) self-appraisal, b) mirroring of parental values, c) long range goal-setting, d) positive use of time, e) monitoring of extracurricular activities, f) practice, visual and hands-on learning, g) resourcefulness, and h) extra effort. Underpinning these strategies was a deeply rooted positive value on education that was highly influenced by their parents. With an acculturation of positive and negative experiences that comprised many critical life events, these students learned to develop appropriate adaptive skills and a manifestation of behaviors that permeated their ability to diligently give extra effort, nurturing positive values on education and a will to succeed, despite adversity. These strategies resulted in consequences that inevitably helped them
cope and manage social issues of home and campus life, while successfully completing the task of accomplishing requirements for graduation. This process was viewed as a developmental shift in their lives from late adolescence to adulthood, where emotionally they learned to become responsible and mature adults.

When these management and coping strategies were not employed, however, the cumulative effects that composed of a multitude of negative experiences shared by these students compromised their emotional, social, and/or physical health. This compromise in health seemed to perpetuate an existing pre-college, at-risk status that increased their chances of academic failure.

**Visual Sketch of Analysis**

This section consists of two figures that provide visual sketches in accordance with this study’s findings and literature review, to unfold “what the experience was like” for these college students, and “how did they navigate higher education’s life path.” Figure 1 provides a description of the pre-college and at-college experiences and strategies that produced a collective account of emerging themes that were categorized as: (a) pre-college preparation, (b) at-college experience, and (c) academic and nonacademic behaviors.

Figure 2 presents the Grounded Theory Model for examining the core phenomenon “stressful,” based on findings from Chapter 4, and in accordance with Strauss and Corbin’s (1990, 1997) framework. This framework provides a visual concept of the multiple interactions that occurred relevant to the proposed causal conditions, the context, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences that led to “stressful” as a core phenomenon.
Open Codes

Pre-college Preparation
- academic underpreparedness
- transitional anxiety

Academic/Nonacademic Behaviors
- monitor parents
- self-appraisal
- use of time
- goal-setting
- extra effort
- manage activities
- use of resources
- practice & visual hands-on learning

At-college Experience
- supportive
- fun enjoyable
- stressful
- hard work

Figure 1 A Description of Pre-college and At-college Experience Themes
Figure 2: Grounded Theory Model For Examining the Phenomena

- Social norms
- Academic norms
- Personal characteristics
- Stress
- Academic/social strategies
- Coping
- Surviving
- Satisfaction
- Empowerment
- Completion of graduation requirements
- Age
- Resources
- Personal attitudes
- Institutional values

- Types
- Situation
- Intensity
- Frequency
- Duration
A Collective Account of Emergent Themes

This section presents a cross-case analysis of emerging themes to illuminate what the college experience was like for these students and how they navigated higher education’s life path. Furthermore, this section specifically addresses the following research questions of this study:

1. How do these students deal with the task of mastering material, accomplishing requirements in course work, and earning sufficient grades/GPA?
2. How did they deal with social issues of home and campus life?
3. How did the strategies they employed yield success?

The first component on academic and social challenges will describe five common experience themes. The next component on academic and social strategies that yielded success will describe eight common behavioral themes.

An Examination of Academic and Social Challenges

Five collective experience themes emerged from the student interviews: a) perceived pre-college preparation status “good, but?,” b) stress, stress, and more stress, c) the concept of “hard work,” d) supportive: “the voices of my parents,” and e) fun, enjoyment, parties, and satisfying.

Pre-College Preparation: “Good Status, But?”

The first prominent theme was the prevalence of the student’s perceived good pre-college preparation status. Throughout the interview, all students agreed that they were academically prepared for college entry; however, they also agreed that at some point, they had difficulty with a particular subject and/or anticipated difficulty in college. During the interview, Jennifer shared statements that described herself as a poor math student and expressed difficulty with math as early as third grade. However, she commented that she was academically strong in other subject areas, such as English and science, and agreed that her pre-college preparation in high school was good. Although these students felt that their pre-college preparation was good, they entered college either academically underprepared in specific subjects or with strong indicators of pre-college transitional anxiety (or both). Jennifer said:

I thought it [college preparation] was pretty good. I went to an all girls catholic preparatory school. I didn’t have an issue with going at all. That wasn’t difficult…I did well in most of my science courses. I understood them. So I liked science. I didn’t care for math. English was fairly easy.

Similarly, Sheila described her pre-college preparation as good, but expressed anxiety and difficulty with math and science courses.

I don’t know [why I thought I couldn’t do math or science]. I did it in high school. I mean in my state they have regents programs and non-regents programs. I had a regents diploma. I took all of the classes I need for regents. I did well in school. I took physics in high school. I mean it wasn’t my favorite thing. I found it to be a little difficult, but I just didn’t think that I could do it on a college level.

Joel also talked about his challenge with English in high school and how college appeared to be a different world.
In high school, it wasn’t bad. It was good, but as a whole...high school and college is a different world. [In college] the performance is kind of bent out of you. You can slide by with that. You don’t have to give all your effort [in high school]. In college, you could not do that. I had to be on top of things with science. Yeah, I had to put a lot of work in those classes. Math is easy for me versus English. It’s a challenge, but it’s not a challenge that will challenge you to a point of your utmost.

Sheila and Lloyd in particular, expressed the greatest pre-college anxiety entering college. Their perception of how difficult college would be as a first-year student became a central issue in both stories that spoke to Sheila’s lack of self-confidence and Lloyd’s readiness to attend college as a late adolescent. Lloyd said:

Coming into college, I guess I was really scared. I thought it was going to be really, really hard. I thought it was going to be cut throat. I might flunk out. I felt like there was so much static that I had to deal with because I was 17 and the first time I was 3000 miles away from home and I had to live in a dorm.

Sheila’s shared reflections regarding her anxieties returning to school the second time included:

I made up my mind that I was going to go back to school and I was telling my friends ‘yeah I think I’m going to go back to school and [I’m going to] do this, that, and the other. So after I started putting words behind...telling people I’m going to do this I said: ‘I’ve got to do this (laugh).’ I’ve told so and so that I was going back to school and I just can’t just say ‘oh now, I can’t do it.’ I have to do it, and I did it.

**Stress, Stress, and More Stress**

High levels of stress emerged as the most prominent experience theme. Students used a wide range of terms to express various stressors in their lives. The students expressed several negative life events and chronic strains that comprised emotional, social, and physical challenges that caused the potential for them to fail academically. Sub-themes of this category included: a) workload stress; c) the stress of meeting expectations of self and others; d) physical stress, and e) financial stress

**Workload Stress**

All of the students expressed a feeling of work overload where conflicting demands in their lives required them to mange a full-time course load and juggled either an athletic schedule, family issue(s), or an employment schedule. For example, Jennifer was required to carry a very high course load (18 credit hours), as well as a strenuous athletic schedule. Similarly, Joel juggled a sometimes full work schedule, full time enrollment in college, and family chores. Sheila and Lloyd, on the other hand, did not talk specifically about managing a job or an athletic schedule; however, Sheila spoke of how things were so disorganized in her home, and how she was required to manage her household chores, including paying her household bills.

Although not expressed in the interview, both Sheila and Lloyd were enrolled as full-time students with credit hours of 18 and above; according to their grade reports, so
to were Jennifer and Joel. The external demands of full-time college students with high credit hours, seemed to leave little time in these students’ daily schedules.

There were times when they expressed concerns indicating that these external demands were causal factors that contributed to their “at-risk” for failure status. They shared comments such as: “Having so many hours and having practice and class work, sometimes… it’s hard to be productive at both,” “you have to perform at work or you get fired,” “it’s just life in general, and trying to fit something into a life that you already had…” “Staying up all night.”…and “doing an all nighter once a week.”

**Stress of Meeting Expectations of Self and Others**

Similarly, the external pressure of meeting expectations from family and program requirements, as well as meeting other expected requirements emerged as a sub-theme for these students. For example, high expectations and requirements existed when Jennifer’s coach demanded her to perform when she was injured. “Coach C. said, “well you’re not hurt, so why…” but I was. But, I was hurt, my ankles were always hurting, and they were bad and I had stress fractures, but you could not see them.”

Also, high levels of external expectations were evident when Joel shared comments from his professors, who said: “You need to step it up,” “now you know you can do better.” Lloyd also shared comments of an expected performance when one of his professors questioned his ability to pass a national examination, and when he talked of the extensive time that he had to spend studying in the labs to complete his assignments.

Oh, I remember doing my exit interview and I remember one of the faculty, I guess shared with me that you know you need to find a way...how are you going to...figure out how you’re going to pass these boards. ‘We don’t know how you’re going to pass.’ ‘You’ve got to figure out a way.’ ‘What is your plan.’ ‘What are you going to do?’ ‘How are you going to pass?’

On the other hand, Sheila talked about existing external and internal expectations when she shared comments of helping her family and friends, as well as trying to complete her course work and manage at home:

I think between a lot of people, I do and do and do, but I don’t let them do for me, so then I’m tried, and I can’t do for myself.

I’m studying or writing this and I need to be more organized in my household chores because my house is a mess. When your house is a mess it takes forever to find the assignments...those are the books you need.

There were also high levels of family expectations, where all of the students indicated in some way that it was important to their family that they finish college. Internal expectations were evident when all students shared very high career goals and plans to pursue these goals after graduation. However, most revealing were passionate comments shared by these students, when they talked about completing college: ‘I’m not the kind of person to give up,’ ‘It all about finishing the race,’ ‘once I say I want it, I get it,’ “I want to graduate on time and everything, and that was my motivation” and “I really want to do my best.”
Physical Stress

There was also the encounter of physical stress among these students. All students except one commented that sleeping became an issue due to the long hours of studying for exams. Joel and Sheila, in particular commented about the physical fatigue that occurred after staying awake long hours at night studying. Similar expressions were shared by Lloyd, who talked of getting only three and four hours of sleep per day and “doing an all nighter.” Jennifer, however, did not express physical fatigue from staying up long hours studying. However her painful and stressful experience that resulted in physical injuries supported this experience theme. Sheila also talked about the physical stress she experienced, because she was not taking care of herself.

I enjoy doing things for people, but I had to put limits on it, because I was suffering myself by not taking care of myself...taking care of my home, taking care of my bills, taking care of health.

Financial Stress

All of the students talked of some type of financial concern during their college experience. Jennifer experienced financial concerns primarily during her freshman year and during her last year of college. Financial distress occurred when she was threatened with the loss of a scholarship her freshman year and also during her sixth year in college when her dad elected to take out a loan. Financial concerns were also expressed when Joel spoke of how he had to work to pay for his college tuition and how he had to contribute to the family income.

Sheila discussed her financial concerns early in the interview when she commented that she was not going to work when she attended college for the second time, and that her second college experience would probably be the only time that she would be able to do so. She also talked about the challenge she encountered going to school and paying her bills. To a lesser degree, Lloyd talked about how he needed to be resourceful, as an indicator that he had financial concerns in college, he stated that he did not have all of the frills in life. All students were career-oriented and had high aspirations of pursuing their goals after graduation. Joel, in particular, discussed his need to work after graduation to pay for his financial aid. He also talked about how the longer he stayed in college, the more money he would have to spend. He said, “The longer you stay in school, the more money you spend, it’s coming out of your pocket.”

The Concept “Hard work”

The third emerging theme based on all of the student’s statements was the concept of “hard work.” The illusion that college was this huge mountain to climb was, to some extent, real for these students. The presence of multiple external demands, and the need to give extra effort and time served as the heavy backpack to support this concept. Hard work was apparent with Jennifer’s efforts to perform as a student and athlete, and with Joel’s efforts to perform as a student, worker, and son. Jennifer talked about hard work in her statement when she commented that “It’s hard to be productive at both.” Joel made statements indicating that college, from his parent’s perspective, involved hard work. He
said; “They exposed me to work hard to succeed, to see what you can do.” “Life is up to you.” “If you want the best out of something, you are going to have to work hard.”

For Sheila, expressions of hard work were revealed through statements that focused on her difficulty juggling life’s tasks while trying to complete course requirements. She specifically said that college was not hard, but it was the task of trying to fit everything together that was difficult:

But college is not that hard, it’s just life in general and trying to fit something into a life of something that you already had... it’s taking up a big chunk of your time.

Lloyd provided the clearest indication that college was hard work. This concept became evident when he said:

‘Staying up all night.’ ‘Yes, hard work and sweat, getting three and four hours of sleep a day.’ ‘Staying up all night.’... ‘Doing an all nighter once a week.’ ‘I consider that to be kind of hard work and sweat.’

These students were surrounded by many unforeseen demands in a new environment with high expectations and standards of meeting course requirements, just as any other new college student. However, they presented with expressions of anxiety and academic challenges that made their college experience unique. Thus, the difficulty in completing college was by no means an illusion, but a mammoth task that involved sacrifice and a commitment to work diligently voluminous hours learning course material in the labs, with study groups, and at night. This experience theme indicates how difficult college was for these students, because of the presence of multiple internal and external demands superimposed on pre-college anxiety and academic underpreparedness that required them to work harder then others to complete the requirements for graduation.

**Supportive: “The Voices of My Parents”**

The fourth theme was the prevalence of support, particularly parental involvement. The students’ comments regarding parental involvement portrayed strong emotional support from their parents from college entry to successful completion of graduation requirements. Jennifer, Joel, and Lloyd specifically talked of supportive conversations that they had with their parents, particularly their mothers. On the contrary, Sheila did not talk specifically about having supportive conversations with her parents, but discussed extensively how family support was there, if she needed it, even if she did not use it. She also discussed how her parents sacrificed for her to attend college:

I have a family, and a lot of good friends, but I don’t ask for help.

You know [my parents had] to put the kids through college, and all that expense before they were able to live their life.

On some level, all of the students perceived their parents as role models while in college. Joel’s comment that his parents were his “idol” strongly supported this theme. Equally true was Sheila’s comment that she wanted to retire like her parents, She also said that she learned how to be persistent from her mom and especially her aunt. Jennifer’s frequent statements that she talked to her mom for support and also her comment that she gave credit to her parent for her success strongly supported this theme.

I think to my own success I’ve been... but my mother, my parents are probably my best support. I talk to my mother three times a week.
 Also inclusive were Lloyd’s conversations with his mom regarding his dad’s experience, and how his dad handled situations while in college, indicating a parental modeling that was expressed by Lloyd.

Friends, other family members, and the community were highlighted as the other prevalent support systems. For example, Jennifer talked about the support that she received from her teammates, friends, and the community. Joel talked more about support from his coworkers and classmates. On the other hand, Sheila shared supportive comments from her aunt, friends, study partner, and other classmates. Lloyd talked about support from his sister, classmates, and the community. Indicated to a lesser degree, were expressions by these students of support from their professors. Joel was the only student who spoke specifically of university support, such as support from his professors.

**Fun, Enjoyment, Parties, Satisfying**

The fifth experience theme consisted of reflective memories indicating that college was fun, enjoyable, and satisfying. Although there were stressful times in the lives of these students, they shared expressions of pleasure in attending college, i.e. campus events, such as parties and other extracurricular activities. For example, when asked to describe her college experience with one word, Jennifer commented:

Fun. I had fun. I had fun. Despite all the class work and all the ups and downs, I have a good time, or I had a good time. I don’t think I missed out on too much I wanted to do.

Joel shared his experience participating in campus activities while trying to complete the course requirements. “Yeah party, let’s go out and party,” yeah, but I have to study.” He also provided comments that revealed a sense of stress and sacrifice, yet pleasure and accomplishment when he talked about the challenge he experienced completing college:

College can be fun. You just have to study. Enjoy college life.

When you have to work and go to school it’s a bit more stress and pressure. It’s a challenge, a good one.

Sheila commented that during her first college experience, she primarily focused on parties and the “big socialization” of campus life. However, as a second career student, she focused more on performing well academically in college.

Although Sheila was focused more on performing well academically, she also acknowledged with a sense of contentment, the value of her experience navigating higher education life’s path when she spoke of her new “confidence gains” and of how she would miss all of the people in college.

Lloyd did not discuss attending campus parties in particular, but he shared pleasurable experiences in college such as “playing ping pong until 5:00 a.m.” Evidence that Lloyd’s college experience was satisfying, became most revealing when he talked about how he did not “give up,” and if given the opportunity, how he would not have done anything differently to change his college experience.

Probably, absolutely not [I would not have done anything differently in college]. The encouraging thing is...if anything I would have probably…. I’m in the middle of change. I see myself as having academic challenges, but, I guess to me, I didn’t give up.

Overall, the data revealed that these students experienced a supportive and pleasurable, yet stressful college experience that involved hard work. The students’ comments regarding parental involvement portrayed a harness of strong emotional
support from their parents as they were challenged with the immense task of graduating from college. Friends, other family members, and the community were also highlighted as the other prevalent support systems.

In general, high levels of stress were most revealing throughout the students’ interviews. Stress was most evident when students spoke of the cumulative effects trying to meet the competing demands of course requirements, while balancing home and social life.

**An Examination of Academic and Social Strategies That Yield Success**

A thematic analysis of the data revealed a collective account of eight behaviors that were identified as strategies used by these students to achieve success, namely: a) self-appraisal, b) mirroring parental values, c) long-range goal-setting, d) time management: a student’s juggling act e) monitoring extracurricular activities, f) practice, visual, and hands-on learning, g) the use of resources, and h) extra effort.

**Self-appraisal**

These students learned to self-appraise and modify their behaviors as they developed effective ways to complete their college course work and manage social and home activities. There were moments when they spoke of the “learning experience.” They talked of how they changed behaviors after reassessing their life position in relationship to their long-range goals, after they experienced insightful incidents where they realized the value of a particular positive and/or negative experience. For example, Lloyd revealed how he successfully self-appraised difficult challenges in his life when he talked about his reflections on handling “setbacks.”

> Because I feel like I’m always going after it, going after things and going forward; it’s like, I get a lot of set backs and I look at them, and I say, well this is not the first set back that I have ever had in my life. Let’s get the clock rolling and see what we can do with this.

Similarly, Joel discussed how he engaged in self-appraisal when sharing how he reflectively examined what went wrong when he did not perform as expected.

> I have high expectations of myself. If I don’t perform well, I go back and say ‘something is not right.’ I’m a little competitive, trying to excel and keep going.

Sheila’s ability to self-appraise her performance in college was most evident when she talked about her second college experience. As a more experienced student, she became very self-reflective and goal-oriented in her comments. During Sheila’s first college experience she talked of how she really did not think of how her academics would affect her career. Nonetheless, as a second degree student, she elected to use her first college experience to learn how to modify her performance in order to achieve the goal of performing at her best. She also shared her ability to engage in a self-appraisal process when she talked about the value of her educational experience, the origin of her doubtfulness, the confident gains that she experienced, and how her doubtful perspective had limited her potential to succeed.

> I was limiting myself by not setting my goals high enough or working hard enough to get what I wanted.
I think I’ve gained so much more from the process, to carry over to other areas of my life, than the degree could ever give me and the job could never give me.

On the contrary, Jennifer shared several negative experiences from her freshman year, where she was forced to examine her behavior and adjust to the challenges that she encountered. She had to learn to live in a new environment away from home, to build closer relationships with her friends through compromise; and to develop ways to manage a difficult college schedule of high credit hours and athletic practice, unlike high school. Jennifer shared statements indicating that she engaged in a self-appraising process when she talked about how she believed in no regrets:

Oh Jennifer you quit, you did not try, or give an honest effort. So if I didn’t do something, I know I didn’t do it like the way I want to do it, that’s ok because I don’t believe in regrets. But I don’t want to look back and realize that you really should have completed such and such, and you could have and you didn’t.

Mirroring Parental Values

Although these students shared their personal value statements as they spoke, their comments seemed to mirror statements from their parents that emphasized the need to stay focused on their educational pursuits, despite adversity, until completion of their long-range goals. From this behavioral theme, students personal value statements shared their parents’ perspectives on responsibility, commitment, perseverance and/or the meaning of success that supported their positive value statements on education. For example, as a means of justifying her educational pursuit, Jennifer talked about how she did not like the classroom process, but she saw value in education. As she spoke, she also talked of how finishing college was an “only choice” for her and how important her education was to her parents:

I never looked at that [not finishing school], because it wasn’t like you can’t finish school. That was your only choice, to finish school. I know I’m getting out.

Joel’s self-talk strategy used many phrases that mirrored value statements from his parents. As Joel tried to stay focused, he would use phases such as: “Keep your eye on the prize, and You’re almost there;” “Staying in shape, but focusing now on my career,” and “Be disciplined and focus on what you’re doing.” He particularly shared echoing statements from his parents such as, “make sure you don’t go overboard,” “Don’t burn the candlestick,” “it will catch up,” and “Do your work.”

Sheila elaborated on her meaning of success and goals in life, by mirroring her parent’s values when she commented that she wanted to retire just like her parents. Lloyd’s search for examples of how people dealt with similar challenges by listening to stories about his dad’s college experience further supported this behavioral theme.

Long Range Goal-Setting

Related to the second behavioral theme was their ability to establish personal and professional long-range goals. Establishing long-range goals was critical to the success of these students. Their goals served as a platform for their personal mission statements and offered them a mechanism to justify their determined behavior towards completion of
graduation requirements. For example, Jennifer’s distinct skills in goal-setting reflected a portrait of a focused nature deep within her, and offered her ownership of a road map to success, despite various struggles that she encountered.

If you have it [goals] written in your mind exactly what you want to do and you write it down and you can see it, then that kind of helps you say where you want to go…or at least have an idea by mapping it out.

Equally true, was Lloyd’s determined nature. He believed that successful people accomplish dreams in life that look like they were the impossible, despite adversity. He particularly talked of how establishing high goals and dreams played an important role in his life, by helping him stay focused during difficult times in college.

I never did bad enough to flunk out of college or anything, but I guess I really had high goals and dreams and so the difficulty was to accomplish the goals and the dreams that I had.

Joel also revealed how he engaged in long-range goals-setting when he specifically talked about his plans for the future:

[My goal is to] graduate on time with my class, which I will be doing, and doing well; getting my hands wet, being top notch, take care of my responsibilities, starting my own business. So right now, I’m just getting some experience, and get an idea of how things feel, pay for finances and start a career. Start my own business, that’s my goal.

Although Sheila presented with a hesitant nature, her goal-setting skills were evident early in the interview when she talked about her plan to re-enter college, pursue a career in the sciences, and help people.

Well, I really want to, I think… well I think since I’ve come into college I always said I wanted to work in mental health. So I really want to give mental health a shot. I really want to work with the welfare to work.

All of these students’ goals seemed to be passionate, career-oriented, and reflected high aspirations with plans to pursue a career after graduation.

**Time Management: “A Student’s Juggling Act”**

Time management skills inside and outside of the classroom emerged as a fourth theme. Time management concerns highlighted the students’ need to be adaptable in handling a multitude of academic and nonacademic activities. Because these students had such difficult schedules and often expressed the need for extra time to complete course work, they had to be adaptable in order to handle multiple tasks. They found ways to manage difficult schedules and complete course work to succeed in college. Whether they developed these skills over time or came to college with the skills to handle multiple tasks, they were present well enough for them to persevere. They had to engage in the mental challenge of cognitively shifting from one task to another and prioritizing what tasks would receive 100% participation verses 80 % or 20%.

They became skillful in juggling a multitude of tasks, primarily because that was what they had to do to graduate. Thus, the traditional meaning of good time management skills was reframed to mean: adaptable in handling multiple tasks well enough to successfully accomplish the goal of completing course assignments, studying for examines, managing personal health, home, and social life. For example, Joel who became skillful in the management of multiple activities, struggled with handling the
magnitude of commitments and responsibilities that he encountered. There was no way that he could consistently give 100% to every designated task that he embarked upon. Even with Joel’s tenacity and sacrifice, there was just not enough time in the day nor available energy, yet he persevered.

You have to perform at work or you’ll get fired. You have to go home and study and perform well to stay in the program. Every day you have to be on your toes.

Lloyd also commented on how college was time consuming. Unconventional to some, he found ways to adapt to his difficult schedule by routinely: “staying up all night,” and “doing an all nighter once a week.” However, with the sacrifice of much sleep, he completed all of his course requirements, and took advantage of campus activities, that helped him cope with his academics.

Sheila and Jennifer probably struggled the most to develop ways to manage their difficult schedules. Initially, Sheila focused primarily on her academics and helping her family and friends. However, after realizing that she was not managing her own personal life, such as paying her bills on time and maintaining her health. She began to set limits on helping others, and refocused her attention on taking care of herself.

Jennifer struggled to manage her time in college and commented that she was accustomed to a strenuous athletic schedule from high school, but having so much freedom in college was difficult to manage:

I got here and I was just like out. A freshman when you get here and have all this freedom…not that I was locked down at home, I didn’t have any time management, so that affected my grades.

Yet, she was able to persist in college by correcting this behavior the second semester:

Well, first semester I didn’t do so well in classes, but I fixed it second semester.

Overall, time management was a difficult juggling of tasks for these students that required them to be adaptable and adjust to a multitude of situations. Through positive and negative experiences they learned positive ways to manage both tasks and time, well enough to handle their challenging schedules and succeed in college.

**Monitored Extracurricular Activities**

All of the students agreed that they were involved in some type of extracurricular activities, whether it was going to parties, an art show, athletics, or community service. Two students in particular, indicated that extracurricular activities helped them cope in college. Jennifer talked about participating in exercise to relieve stress. Lloyd shared his experience attending campus activities to help him cope with his academic challenges. Jennifer and Lloyd also shared the importance of community service and how being involved in service to the community, helped change their life perspective. Jennifer, Sheila, and Joel specifically talked about the campus parties.

Nonetheless, in some way, all of the students also expressed their ability to monitor extracurricular activities while in college. There were also intense expressions from students that indicated that there was little time to participate in outside activities because of external demands. Jennifer commented:

My volunteer work was off campus, I didn’t pledge anything. I didn’t party every day. I had practice, so after a competition was usually when I went out to parties.
I usually didn’t go out on Fridays because we would have to compete on Saturday, and I really wouldn’t go anywhere. Similarly Joel said:

I went to parties, but you had to make sure you didn’t go every weekend… It was fun.

Sheila spoke little about participating in extracurricular activities as a second degree student; however, she made comments indicating that activities outside of class work should have been monitored during her first college experience.

This is my second time getting a degree, but it is totally different than what I did the first time, I don’t think the first time I was thinking about the grade. I was thinking about getting out of class, but I didn’t care what the grade was.

Lloyd commented that he enjoyed participating in campus activities, but non-science students seem to have more freedom:

It seemed like everybody else who had non-science majors were free. But there was always stuff going on and that was a cool thing. There was a lot of stuff that wasn’t a whole lot of money. To me...you have your most memorable experiences when you go to the art festivals and you go to your dorm and you become a part of a Speed tournament. That’s a coping method to deal with your academics. It’s like part of the package.

Practice, Visual and Hands-on Learning

The sixth behavioral theme emerged from statements that these students believed that they learned best when they participated in visual and hands on learning opportunities. Jennifer talked specifically of how she learned from seeing things and then doing them herself.

I am probably a better hands-on learner. I read the books, but it doesn’t present a visual picture for me versus seeing it done and doing and then reading, or reading and then seeing done and doing it yourself.

Joel also talked about how he needed to see the information in order to understand what he was studying. His comments implied that Joel felt that he comprehended the information better when he was able to concretely visualize and re-read the words; thus, this technique became a successful academic strategy that helped him learn and understand his classroom material.

I’m a visual learner verses abstract. It takes time for me to understand things.

Sheila talked more about how she had to write things down, and also read out loud. While she talked of how she used multiple ways to encode information, she particularly talked about how she practiced looking at the muscle that was being tested, touch it, and move it.

During a test, you might see one of us start making the motion, because that’s the way we learned.

Lloyd was the only student who did not talk specifically about visual or hands-on strategies. However, he did talked about how he would practice and practice repeatedly to master his course material. He also stated that he learned by observing the unique ways that his classmates studied. Moreover, Lloyd stressed how he needed to process
information abstractly by learning the course work well enough to play around with it and conceptualize it as a whole.

In general, all of the students talked of how they engaged in long hours of practice and repetition to master the course materials and spoke of how they made attempts to maximize what they perceived as their best learning style to master the course material.

Use of Resources

While the challenge of completing assignments in college requires students to seek out supplemental textbooks, journals articles, computer hardware/software, and internet services, the ability to seek out appropriate human resources was critical to the success of these students. All of the students viewed their parents as a key resource in their life, and spoke of how they made use of other human resources such as, family, peer guidance, and/or small tutorial groups. To a lesser degree, Joel talked about encouraging words of support from his professors. However none of the students spoke about receiving university academic support services.

Lloyd was able to seek out advice from his parents and others who experienced similar situations. He also revealed the magnitude by which he was able to be resourceful when he vividly described a “box” of creative ideas where he was able to make things happen.

Jennifer’s resourcefulness was revealed when she commented that, if she absolutely needed help, she would find help and use it. As indicated earlier, she chose a small group of human resources that primarily consisted of parental and teammate support. She also made use of close friendships and individual tutoring throughout her educational experience, but did not comment on the use of study groups or other university support.

On the contrary, Joel displayed resourcefulness by using one-on-one and small group studying. He sought out members who as a strategy would challenge him.

One-on-one, with one student covering the material that he needed to study. They would present material that I wasn’t sure about. That would make me go over that chapter again I’d say “ok I need to refocus on this section of the chapter.

Joel also talked about how he was enriched with advice from his coworkers, professors, and friends. Comments from his professors included:

“You need to step it up,” “now you know you can do better;” if you need help, we’re here to help you.

Sheila was the least among the students that sought out help from others. She specifically exclaimed that she would not allow people to help her. She also made comments that she believed that her unwillingness to accept help from others contributed to her high levels of stress. Nonetheless, what yielded great success for Sheila was her resourcefulness in teaming with an ideal study mate to conquer difficult course work.

There has always been another classmate that was in my major who is graduating this year, Janice. It was the two of us... always studying all the time...People would always comment on us studying together because we pretty much got decent grades.
The Extra Effort

An eighth theme also emerged from the voices of these students, indicating that their methods of studying yielded success when extra study time and effort was given. Working extra time to complete the class assignments and preparing for exams became routine for these students, and in fact, the only conceivable way that they could manage difficult schedules and meet the requirements of graduation. Despite their interest in campus life, they sacrificed Spring Break, weekends, and countless hours of sleep to engage in long, vigorous hours of studying; repeatedly practicing and learning the course work. This behavioral theme depicts a strong, personal commitment from these students to diligently give extra effort, engaging in hard work to complete course requirements for as long as it took to graduate from college. Lloyd talked about the extra time that he spent in the labs and over Spring Break to study and prepare for exams. Equally so, was Joel who discussed how he sacrificed Spring Break to catch up with assignments and how he worked extra hard to manage his difficult schedule:

Your body gets physically and mentally tired. But you have to do it. Sooner or later it became a routine. If you didn’t do it, and you decided to take Saturday off, and go out and party all night, it’s going to catch up with you...you are tired and you’re not able to perform.

Sheila’s reflective statements also revealed examples of how she gave extra time and effort when preparing for exams with her study partner:

I said, if you happen to come to where we are studying...usually we would study over Janice’s house or over her cousin’s house where Janice lives. We would study sometimes all night long, if we had to. I would leave her house a half an hour before we went to school. I would go home, take a shower, and sometimes take myself back over there. We would leave right from there to go back to school.

On the other hand, Jennifer used statements such as “just do your work” and “It’s hard to be productive at both” to articulate her efforts to work hard and complete the requirements for graduation. She believed that working hard until the job got done was the only way for her. She expressed that she wanted to graduate from college and she knew she could do so, yet it was difficult to be productive at both academics and athletic competition:

Having so many hours and having practice and class work, sometimes it’s hard to be productive at both.”

I don’t think I had a strategy. Work, I just believed that if you did your work, then you passed and if you didn’t, you failed.

An Examination of Contours and Qualities of Persistence

As revealed in the data, these students worked very hard and displayed various behaviors that showed strong qualities of persistence. This section shares a collection of persistence statements and behaviors already revealed in the analysis, and provides a metaphor of a mountain climber to capture the essence of these statements. Indicated below, are comments that largely support their persistence nature:

All these things that I worry about and things that I can’t do, eventually I do, if I
keep plucking away at it and get it done (Sheila).
I would say (pause) I’m not the kind of person to give up. I would have done it anyway (Jennifer).
You have to persevere to make it through there, persevere to deal with some of my classes, persevere to deal with some of the… a lot of the stuff there you just have to stick it out (Lloyd).
Keep your eye on the prize. You’re almost there (Joel).
Once I say I want it, I get it (Sheila).
I would hate to look back and say, ‘Oh Jennifer you quit, you didn’t try, or give an honest effort’ (Jennifer).
I think that if I can do that, I can do whatever else will come my way (Sheila).

I came up with a plan…and it was like well, I guess I have to show these people that I can pass this thing too. It was kind of like that (Lloyd).
The longer you stay in school, the more money you spend; it’s coming out of your pocket (Joel).
I have a big issue with someone trying to throw something back in my face. I’ll do it (Sheila).
It’s all about finishing the race (Lloyd).
I think maybe my family…my mom, but especially my aunt…my great aunt, she was persistent (Sheila).
[I’m] staying in shape, but focusing now on my career (Joel).
Persistence can get you a lot, just by staying still or trying to get it all at one time… if you work a little bit you stay longer You have more longevity when you are persistent instead of going out headstrong trying to knock down the wall (Sheila).
I remember that was discouraging, but it gave me fuel to make it happen (Lloyd)
Be disciplined and focused on what you’re doing (Joel).
Oh, definitely [I will maintain persistence] (Sheila).

The task of mountain climbing involves the vigor of enduring the rocky road of pain, agony, and possible defeat; yet the joy and reward of accomplishing the goal of finally reaching the top. As each student took on the challenge of conquering the enormous task of reaching the mountain top with fear, sweat, and tears, they began to climb one step after another. One might ask if they were experienced mountain climbers. Well, they knew that it would not be easy, but for most of them, this was a new adventure. Nevertheless, experiencing what it felt like to accomplish such a goal really did not matter for these climbers. They knew they had to get to the top and they knew that there were too many people counting on them to do what they said they would. They would hate to look back and say, “Oh you quit, you didn’t try, or give an honest effort. They also knew that close friends and family had done it before and well they had survived. As they climbed up the rocky terrain, there were many unforeseen rocks, indentations, cliffs and over paths. They experienced bruised knees, cuts, stumbles, and sometimes they almost fell. It was a scary process--adjusting to the altitude--but they finally did. Yet, they knew that if they were to fall, a strong harness of support would be there to catch them. Although they were inexperienced mountain climbers, they did have some pre-existing skills that they used. For example, they knew not to look down or they
would get scared. As they navigated the terrain, they learned how to stay disciplined and focused on what they were doing. They gained new knowledge and developed strategies, such as where and how to strategically place their feet, or when to grab on to the right ledge at the right time. They used their knowledge as best as they could. For years, they climbed this mountain, sacrificing rest and sometimes water. The demands were overwhelming, but it gave them fuel to make it happen. Indispensable, was their need to give extra effort that served as a heavy backpack they carried. One mountain climber yelled, “I think that if I can do this, I can do whatever else will come my way.” With strong determination, and perseverance, they made it to the top. Although this probably will not be the last mountain that they will have to climb, it is assured that climbing this mountain will be an experience they will never forget.

This section provides a cross-case analysis of four academically at-risk student participants. The first component on academic and social challenges described five experience themes. The second component on academic and social strategies that yielded success revealed eight behavioral themes. The third component provided a collective account of persistent qualities and ended by providing a metaphor of how these students successfully navigated higher education life’s path.

A Collective Account of the Whole

This section presents an intellectually creative journey of “putting data back together in new ways…” (Strauss & Corbin 1990, p. 97), and integrating categories towards the discovery of what the experience was like for four academically at-risk students.

From a grounded theory methodological approach, findings from this study were understood by examining the grounded theory model. Three types of causal conditions emerged from the data, that led to the phenomena related to the experience of four academically at-risk students who graduated from postsecondary institutions. These causal conditions were: a) social norms, b) academic norms and, c) personal characteristics.

Social norms consisted of family values and expected behaviors and beliefs reflective of the social community, such as taking care of family members, educational pursuits or obtaining a job at the age of 18-years. Academic norms consisted of values and expectations of the academic community, such as expected requirements within the educational system.

The third causal condition consisted of personal characteristics such as the student’s pre-college skills and abilities. Although there is little evidence to suggest that there is a certain personality profile for academically at-risk students, research has shown that each student will present with unique characteristics, such as learning abilities, temperament, and motivation.

These causal conditions resulted in a core phenomenon of “stressful.” Stressful, as a phenomenon, was viewed as positive, negative, and sometimes paradoxically. Findings from this study supported trends suggested from Astin’s (1998) research, indicating that today’s freshman are experiencing more stress than previous classes. Findings from this
study to indicate that stress could be associated with negative and positive outcomes were also supported by research contending that events in a person's life that might otherwise serve to reduce stress, (e.g. peer events and social activities) can actually increase feelings of stress during college (Hudd, Dumiao, Erdmann-Sager, Murray, Phan, Soukas, Ypkozuka, 2000, p. 1; Dill & Henley, 1998). For example, evidence of paradoxical stress was revealed in the code on supportive: “the voices of my parents.” The students comments regarding their parents revealed feelings of strong, emotional support from college entry to successful completion of graduation requirements. The parent’s level of education and the shared stories of the student participants unfolded a social value on education that was portrayed by their parents who positively influenced the educational pursuits of these students. These findings were consistent with the work of Levin & Levin (1991) who reported large effects of persistent behavior for at-risk students to include family characteristics, such as the family’s level of education. Although stress was not verbally expressed by the students regarding their parental involvement, there was evidence to suggest that high expectation as a form of stress could be viewed as both positive and negative or eustress.

Similar evidence appeared in the code “fun, enjoyment, and satisfying.” For example, Joel shared his experience participating in campus activities while trying to complete the course requirements. “Yeah party, let’s go out and party.” “yeah, but I have to study.” He also provided comments that revealed a sense of stress and sacrifice, yet pleasure and accomplishment when he talked about the challenge he experienced completing college, “College can be fun.” “You just have to study.” “Enjoy college life…” “When you have to work and go to school it’s a bit more stress and pressure.” “It’s a challenge, a good one.”

Other codes such as “hard work” were nested as a descriptor of the phenomenon stress to depict the student’s intense feelings of the multiple external demands and expectations that led to many stories supportive of negative stress that was shared by these students. The concept “hard work” also provided strength to a core strategy, “extra effort.” After all of the codes were categorized, sorted, compared and contrasted, stress was identified in the core phenomenon in this study.

The context in which these student’s experiences developed, consisted of contextual markers of: a) types, b) situation, c) intensity, d) frequency, and e) duration. Various forms of stress have already been discussed. New types of stress codes were categorized as positive and negative. Other stress codes such as, pre-college “transitional anxiety,” and at-college “workload stress” were used as descriptors to help further describe what the students were experiencing during this phenomenon.

Stress experienced by the students varied depending on the situation and ranged from mild to severe intensity. As part of life transition, students are generally very stressed and anxious when they are experiencing new educational settings (Crockett, Peterson, Graber, Schulenberg, and Ebata, 1989; Felner et al., 1983; Santrock, 1997).

The intensity of stress was most revealing when these students shared their attempts to work diligently to accomplish the task of meeting the competing expectations and demands of course requirements, while balancing home and social life. This descriptor of stress resulted in work overload, that seemed to compromise their physical and emotional health, placing these students at-risk for academic failure. These types of stress derived from an interacting of the intervening conditions such as: a) age, b)
resources, c) personal attitudes and d) institutional values shared by the college they attended. Contextual markers such as the frequency and duration of stress was dependent on the situations or events that occurred in their daily lives. However, negative stress was often present in the lives of these students and sometimes on a daily basis. As a result, high levels of negative stress became the outgrowth of a cumulative effect from the lives that these students shared and their day-to-day struggles.

These students used many management and coping strategies, both academic and nonacademic, to help them successfully handle stressors in their lives, when other students might fail. Peng, Lee, Wang, and Walberg (1992) contend that successful at-risk students possess temperamental characteristics that elicit positive responses from individuals around them.

Mezirow (1981), Merriam, and Clark et al. found links between transitional times created by life events and learning. They observed that more learning happens in periods that people perceive as good and bad times. Learning that is more likely to transform occurs in the bad times. Similarly, findings from this study showed that these students learned from positive and often negative experiences and developed management and coping strategies to deal with the high levels of stress shared among them.

Core strategies that these students employed consisted of: a) self-appraisal, b) mirroring of parental values, c) long-range goal-setting, d) positive use of time, e) monitoring of extracurricular activities, f) practice, visual and hands-on learning, g) resourcefulness, and h) extra effort. Underpinning these strategies was a deeply rooted value system that existed early in life.

Coping strategies exhibited by these students corroborated with the literature on “protective factors,” characteristics such as, optimism, risk-taking, academic self-confidence, and skill acquisition to explain the success of at-risk students (Yellin, 1997; Bennett, Novotny, Green & Kluever 1998; Morales, 1999). Also relevant to these students’ strategies was research conducted by Maxwell (1981) that suggested that high-risk students who succeed are better at adapting to the college environment than are those who fail. They have more clearly defined aspirations and greater goal commitment, and are more willing to study hard.

This process nurtured their positive values on education and the will to succeed, despite adversity that resulted in consequences that inevitably helped them cope and manage social issues of home and campus life, while successfully completing the task of accomplishing requirements for graduation. These students survived a difficult path in their lives and shared a sense of empowerment and satisfaction upon completion of their college experience. This process was viewed as a developmental shift in their lives, from late adolescence to adulthood, where emotionally, they learned ways to cope and manage the new role of a responsible and mature adult.

However, when these strategies were not employed, the cumulative effects of casual conditions that composed a multitude of negative experiences shared by several critical events compromised their emotional, social, and/or physical health. This compromise in health perpetuated an existing pre-college, at-risk status that increased their chances of academic failure in college.

The emotional, social, and physical health issues that these students continued to share were real and could have led to severe emotional strains, physical distress, poor academic performance, and student departure. Yet, these students were determined to
complete the requirements for graduation. Despite the multiple demands of college life as a student with academic challenges, they chose to echo the voice of Jennifer who said, “I’m not the kind of person to give-up”.

According to the work of Tinto (1993), these students were able to persist because they adjusted both socially and academically, to the new and sometimes quite strange world of college. More specific to his research, these students experienced a strong enough interplay between involvement with their academic and social systems while in college to develop the necessary skills and support needed to matriculate in college. In other words, their formal and informal worlds of the academic and social systems were both linked and interconnected through the academic and social experiences that these students shared. The experiences of each student had a distinct impact upon academic and social integration and, therefore, upon their persistence in college.
CHAPTER VI: IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

This study yielded information that has the potential to advance research and practice on the experience of academically at-risk students who graduate from postsecondary institutions. Using a grounded theory case-study approach, it particularly highlighted how at-risk students persist from entry to graduation; the tasks of accomplishing requirements for course work and earning sufficient grades; the management of social issues of home and campus life, and successful strategies they employed.

Specific to adult education research and practice, this study provided educators with a deeper understanding of the lives of college students who have succeeded, despite academic challenges, and served as a resource to illuminate issues for educators to consider certain kinds of teaching strategies and programs that might improve the retention rate of college students, and to consider if these programs and strategies are effective.

Summary

In this study, a comparative iterative analysis of the data revealed that these students experienced a supportive, enjoyable, yet highly stressful college experience that was shaped by interactions within their academic and social communities. Findings also revealed that these students perceived their college experience as hard work and presented with a defining feature of a unique will to continue in college during high levels of stress that was central to research on student resiliency (Yellin, 1997; Bennett, Novotny, Green & Kluever 1998; Morales, 1999). Consistent with the research on resiliency, this study also supports literature that has begun to explain how some students present with unique resilience behaviors (Peng, Lee, Wang, & Walberg, 1992). Findings from this study also lend support to the work of Tinto (1993), and other researchers who show evidence that student persistence involves an academic and social integration within the academic environment.

Successful strategies that these students employed consisted of: a) self-appraisal, b) mirroring of parental values, c) long-range goal-setting, d) positive use of time, e) monitoring of extracurricular activities, f) practice, visual, and hands-on learning, g) resourcefulness, and h) extra effort.

The students in this study learned to self-appraise and modify their behaviors as they developed effective ways to complete their college course work and manage social and home activities. There were moments when they spoke of the “learning experience,” particularly when they talked of how they changed behaviors by reassessing their position in life in relationship to their long-range goals, after experiencing insightful incidents where they realized the value of a particular positive and/or negative experience.

In this study, these students also shared personal statements reflective of their parents’ perspectives on responsibility, commitment, perseverance, and/or the meaning of success to support their positive values statements on education.

Related to the students’ ability to mirror their parental values, they were also advantageous in establishing personal and professional long-range goals. Establishing long range goals became an integral part of these students’ success stories. Their goals
served as a platform for their personal mission statements and seemed to offer them a mechanism to justify their determined behavior towards completion of graduation requirements.

Time management also emerged as a strategy in this study. Time management issues highlighted how these students needed to be adaptable in handling a multitude of academic and nonacademic related activities. Because these students had such difficult schedules and often expressed the need for extra time to complete course work, they found positive ways to manage time and adapt in order to handle multiple tasks.

Other strategies that emerged from this study consisted of the students’ ability to monitor extracurricular activities. All of the students agreed that they were involved in some type of extracurricular activity, whether it was going to parties, an art show, athletics, or community service, and some students specifically indicated that these activities helped them cope with their academics. However, the students also shared comments that indicated that they learned how to monitor extracurricular activities and remain focused on achieving the goal of graduation.

In addition to their ability to monitor their extracurricular activities, these students shared how they made use of their learning styles. Several students shared how they learned best when they participated in visual, hands-on learning opportunities, and when they practiced learning the material repeatedly. Critical to their success, these students also viewed their parents as a key resource in their life, and spoke of how they made use of other human resources such as peer guidance and small tutorial groups.

From the voices of these students, also emerged behaviors indicating that their methods of studying yielded success when extra study time and effort were given. Working extra time to complete the class assignments and preparing for exams became routine for these students, and in fact, it seemed to be the only conceivable way that they could manage difficult schedules and meet the requirements of graduation.

Most revealing was how they sacrificed Spring Break, weekends, and night hours; and engaged in long, vigorous hours of studying, repeatedly practicing and learning the course material. It seemed significant that none of these students seemed to “complain” about having to work harder than others.

They learned how to adjust their behaviors during difficult experiences in life, and continued to endure the juggling of very challenging college schedules, over long periods of time. While some were employed, others performed as athletes, or maintained a home and social life. The academic challenges from college entry to graduation, in part, created for these students a commitment to continuously work harder giving extra effort, until completion of graduation requirements. These students’ persistence ability became a way of life, and was shaped by interactions in their academic and social life that seemed to be deeply rooted in their positive value on education. Their stories shared a resilient nature and the use of coping and management strategies, particularly during unpleasant or stressful experiences, that helped them persist in college.

A number of issues relevant to this study arise for future dialogue and research inquiry. The findings from this study provided four prime issues and recommendations related to: a) university accountability b) the definition of “at-risk” status c) adult development, and c) longitudinal studies.
Recommendations for Research and Practice

First, these students were able to cope and succeed despite the multiple demands of college life; however, stress was revealed as the highest prevalent theme among these students. Research indicates that as part of life transition, students are generally very stressed and anxious when they are experiencing a new educational environment (Crockett, Peterson, Graber, Schulenberg, & Ebata 1989; Felner et al. 1983; Santrock, 1997). However, the stressful demands experienced by these students existed over long periods of time, and could have severely compromised their physical and emotional health. High levels of stress have been associated with suicidal ideation, smoking, and drinking (Naquin and Gibert, 1996).

Clearly, issues regarding the personal health of college students is an area that warrants further dialogue and research inquiry. For example, research such as the work of Pascarella and Terenzini (2000) contend that a major response to pressure for accountability of institutions, is to produce evidence that universities do, in fact, foster the cognitive and personal growth of their students. Central to this issue is the role of the university as a major player in promoting a viable learning environment that does not compromise the personal health of students, and strives to minimize intervening conditions such as: a) requiring students to carry extremely high credit hours, b) lack of financial support, and d) the competing expectations of completing voluminous assignments.

Perhaps closer attention should be given to the effects of stress on academic performance and student achievement. Students in this study were able to succeed against the odds, when many other college students were not. However these students shared many critical incidents where high levels of stress could have created a vacuum for academic failure and departure from college. While attributes of personality may help to account for why these students were able to succeed, it is evident that support and student involvement contributed greatly to their success. On some level, all students discussed campus activities and study groups or tutorial services; however, discussion of university academic support such as assistance from professors and university student services was sparse. Whether academic support systems were readily available to them or not, it became clear that these students did not perceive or chose not to discuss the academic support that they received from the university as a collaborative and integral part of their successful experience. They talked about their struggles in college as if they were fighting to survive. If academically at-risk students are to survive the rocky and often long journey to successful graduation, how universities better engage in the struggle of helping these students succeed in college, could involve exploring more effective ways to minimize barriers that cause undo stress.

Today, a vast number of college students are older, employed, of various ethnic backgrounds, and present with a wide variety of learning needs. In addition, disparities continue to exist among various cultural groups. Colleges and universities must be more sensitive to the changing culture of the college student and the competing demands that are being placed on these students--from their families, friends, workplace, and academic institutions; and invest in programs and curricula that consider stress reduction as an integral part of the curriculum. Uniquely so, not all students will meet the profile of a “Blue Chip” student. Moreover, not all students will arrive at college financially well supported or with strong parental or family support. With postsecondary education
becoming increasingly important to the US and its citizens, both from an individual and corporate perspective, the complex problems with which higher education must deal will become increasingly challenging (Jones, 1997). While community colleges continue to carry the heavy load of dealing with many of the complex problems of academically at-risk students, four-year educational institutions must do a better job of reaching out to these students. As shown by the success stories from the student participants in this study, they were hard working students who showed great potential to achieve, but did not shine academically. They were passionate, caring, dedicated, resilient, and well worth the “risk” of admitting to a four-year institution.

Second, this study raises an important challenge faced by higher education—the redefinition of the term “at-risk” students. As major shifts in the number of diverse student populations unfold, educators will need to revisit what the concept “at-risk” means to higher education. Academicians concerned with the increasing number of academically underprepared students will perhaps need to take a more global view of what constitutes at-risk in the context of today’s changing student. Certainly, a myopic view of this term may underscore the extent to which educators are willing to identify the new culture of college students as “at-risk.” Thus, it is important that current research and practice revisit the effectiveness of admission and retention policies, curriculum designs, and teaching methods, beyond the traditional values of higher education, if the desired outcome is to make research and practice relevant for today’s college students. As universities continue to strive to achieve high academic excellence, these issues will be particularly salient for policy makers and others who continue to deal with the complex issues of the nation’s college dropout rate.

This study suggests the need for universities to further consider strategies that foster students persistence, particularly for college students who need skill development, and lack resources or family support. This study also confirms the need for recommendations that others have suggested, and offers additional ways to strengthen existing programs by:

1. **Offering Opportunities to Infuse Nonacademic Attributes as Part of the University Admissions Process**

   While it is not hard to see how academic attributes are used as predictors of academic success, a review of the literature (White & Sedlacek, 1986; Braxton, Vesper & Hossler, 1995, Tinto et al.), as well as findings from this study, support the need for the university to offer admissions criteria that consider nonacademic attributes such as ambition, self-concept, adaptability, social integration, resourcefulness, and determination.

2. **Offering Strong College Bridging Programs with High Schools and Community Colleges**

   In discussing the concept of bridging programs, it is necessary that educators be willing to reach beyond the notion of distributing brochures, recruiting ventures at high schools and community colleges, and weekend or summer programs on college campuses. Certainly, these programs are well needed and often serve as a catalyst for helping students make informed decisions about college selection, and transition from
high school to college. However, unless these programs offer continuous academic and emotional support, and monitor the student’s progress, the number of students’ enrolled in universities across the nation is likely to increase, but the attrition rates will remain high.

3. **Developing Comprehensive Freshman Orientation Programs**

Year-round student orientation programs offer a comprehensive way to provide ongoing support to students and help monitor student progress. These programs should be partnered with bridging programs to include study skills, mentoring, and as suggested by Stewart, Russell, and Wright (1997), should be coupled with academic advisement and follow-up with good tutoring. In addition, the implementation of positive stress reduction methods should be an integral part of the orientation programs and should serve as a foundation for a university wide program.

4. **Fostering Peer Support Groups and Learning Communities**

Students in this study found ways to support each other, and in many ways, developed their own learning community. However, not all students will be able to achieve such a goal. Organized learning communities provide universities with a proactive way to help students form study groups and experience the curriculum beyond the classroom (Tinto, et. al. 1998; Tinto, Goodsell & Russo, 1993).

5. **Encouraging Parental Involvement**

For parents who might perceive college as a time to minimize or relinquish the offering of financial and/or emotional support, this study clearly showed how the benefit of parental involvement underscored the extent to which these students were able to persist in college. Educators should consider creating more opportunities to foster parental involvement within the academic setting.

6. **Offering Opportunities for Students to Explore and Make Use of Their Learning Style Strategies**

With the increase in student diversity, it is likely that more students will share unique and specific learning strategies that yield success. The students in this study shared several ways they preferred to study course material. However, they seemed to prefer engaging in visual hands-on learning opportunities. Whether students present as concrete-active (hands-on) or abstract-active (doing and thinking) learners, assessment of learning styles and learning strategies, as well as adapting assignments to match their learning can prove to be an effective way to foster student success. This will require retraining of faculty.
7. Providing Scholarships and Grant Opportunities to Students with Less Than 3.0 Grade-Point-Average

All of the students in this study expressed some type of financial concern. Often scholarships are only available to students with high grade-point-averages. Grants for students who achieve less than a 3.0 GPA and scholarships that highlight a student’s nonacademic attributes could help minimize the stress and financial burden of many students who otherwise may have to stopout or dropout of college. Also, critical to this concept is the cost-benefit related to the “giving back” phenomena. Perhaps students are more likely to become active alumni supporters and give back to the university when the university has shown an earnest effort in helping to minimize their financial burdens.

8. Encouraging Students to Seek out University Counseling Services

Student counseling services are available as a part of the university student support services. However, some students may need help seeking out such services, because they are unaware that these services are available to them, or they might fear that a stigma might be attached to students who seek out such services. This could particularly hold true for minority students. College students need to be advised that it is all right to seek out such services as a proactive measure, and not be “stigmatized” by faculty for doing so.

9. Examining Accountability Measures to Reexamine High Credit Hours, and Voluminous Course Assignments

While some policymakers are still in search of ways to provide acceptable indicators of “why universities do what they do,” a passion for more faculty training on non-traditional curriculum designs and other resources relevant to today’s college students could prove to be beneficial. The development of non-traditional curriculums that maintain high standards, but particularly consider the financial needs, work schedule, and diverse needs of the late adolescents as well as the adult learner, will challenge educators to reassess and revise instructional methods that might often require students to enroll in high course credit hours, or complete voluminous assignments. Virtually, such a change could not simply be replaced by the volatility of instructional technology to solve the complex issues that permeate the university classrooms. Initiatives that provide funding and research to examine the effectiveness and cost-benefits of technology-based instruction as they related to the students’ learning style, academic preparedness, and day-to-day struggles should be emphasized.

Third, this study provides an example of how students experience a developmental shift from late adolescence to adulthood; where the transition to adulthood often involves an overwhelming amount of responsibility that some students might not be equipped to fully handle. Levinson (1978), assert that development is bound by very specific ages. One’s life structure tends to be established and maintained during stable periods and then questioned and changed during transitional periods. Although several developmental models could be examined to further depict issues germane to this transitional period, Kegan’s (1994) work provides a comprehensive, psychological-contextual approach to address the emotional issues and demands of late adolescents and
adulthood relevant to this study. He contends that the demands of life may require a new conception of consciousness threshold that academicians will need to coach. He believes that the demands of work do not require that a new set of skills be “put in,” but that a new threshold of consciousness be reached (p. 164). By observing the work of constructive-developmentalists and others, Kegan reminds educators that it is not enough to know what students understand, but educators must also know “the way they understand it.” (Kierkgaard, 1959). In other words, if education is to consist of collaboratively building a “consciousness bridge,” then the bridge builder must firmly anchor the bridge by having an equal respect for both ends. Coaching that facilitates the emotional-development of college students could be a catch basin to prevent at-risk students from developing a university “love-hate” relationship. Inviting students to join the educator in constructing what they would only gradually come to see as “a bridge they could choose to walk out on” would, in essence, help students develop a new threshold of consciousness that is often needed to manage the multiple demands of college life (Perry, 1971 & Kegan, 1994). How educators truly serve as coaches to facilitate the emotional-developmental needs of late adolescents transitioning from high school to college, and the unique needs of the older adult, particularly those who might be at-risk for academic failure is an area that also warrants further research inquiry.

Moreover, longitudinal qualitative studies are needed to determine long term effects of stress on these students. This study attempted to examine, from the student’s perspective, the issues regarding the experience of at-risk students who successfully graduate. However, whether these students employ these strategies beyond graduation from college is unclear. While this suggestion is only speculation, these students may have developed or reinforced attributes that are unique and helpful to work life such as, stamina, or stick-to-it-ness. Further investigation on how and whether these students continue to succeed and go on to manage stress, including how their college undergraduate experience shaped their learning and career path post-graduation is recommended. In addition, findings from this study revealed that the student participants in this study presented with strong parental support while in college. Further research to involve students with no parental support in their immediate environment is recommended. This study was also limited to the examination of four minority students in health sciences at a large urban university. Thus, similar qualitative studies with other diverse populations are recommended.
Appendix A
Narratives of Students

This section provides a summary of each student participant. Most, importantly, this section consists of abridged narratives based on transcribed data of the students’ interviews, that provide a rich text of the life stories shared by each student. Because several students in this study were presently in the lived-student experience during the interview process, yet were seniors preparing to graduate, the use of past, present, and future events should be viewed as a dynamic dialectic interchange, with breaks and shifts. For example, statements that quickly shifts from “will” to “is” to “was” and so forth.
Jennifer: The Nonconformist

Very much so [I am a college jock]. I got recruited by coach C. in the early 90’s. I got up here, well it paid for five years. Coach C...It was a learning experience. I came here by myself. I didn’t have any friends here except for a couple of people that I talked to, but were really not that close with. So, when I came to the university, I came by myself.

The team members were my friends and that’s where I spent the majority of my time [in college]. That was a learning process. I’m the only child. To live with somebody...they were on the team, so I saw them at night and all day, and had class with them. So it was interesting.

Well, first semester I didn’t do so well in classes, but I fixed it second semester. But, second semester I got into a fight with my suite mate. So moving out of there, away from her probably was better. I had to relax. Then I did better that following semester, getting her out of my way. I almost lost my scholarship. I got over that. That was all in my freshman year.

Not really [my relationship with my roommate did not affect my performance in college], I just...I got here, and I was just like out. A freshman...when you get here and you have all of this freedom, not that I was locked down at home, I didn’t have any time management, so that affected my grade. So we had a confrontation and I got kicked out of my dorm.

She was on the team [my roommate], so I was kind of off to the side for the rest of the semester...from the team. I was on the team, but I really didn’t…Right [I didn’t travel]. So, that was an issue. I got over that too. Coach C. said, ‘Well you’re not hurt, so why…’ but I was. But, I was hurt, my ankles were always hurting, and they were bad and I had stress fractures, but you could not see them. So he tried to take it away [scholarship].

In college, I had a normal course load, very high, 18 credit hours per semester. So we had a full load plus practice in the morning and in the afternoon. So, it was time management. It was an adjustment. The schedule wasn’t an adjustment, because I had the same kind of schedule in high school. Being able to do what you wanted was an adjustment. It wasn’t an awkward adjustment. Because it was like I just wanted to be out there, but just an adjustment of time. Having so many hours and having practice and class work, sometimes it’s hard to be productive at both.

Not until this year. My first five years, I was on an athletic scholarship. Last year I had a loan. Well, actually my father had a loan. This year we don’t have a loan. That was his choice. Now, I have some struggles. All to struggle for a Masters later.

I thought it [college preparation] was pretty good. I went to an all girls Catholic preparatory school. I didn’t have an issue with going at all. That wasn’t difficult. Just like the schedule, if I had a break, that wasn’t difficult because I had that in high school. I’m a poor math student. So, I didn’t get past algebra. I’m not very good at math so I struggled throughout math. I didn’t really pass any of my math classes, so that was a major issue. I probably would have done better if I would have tried harder. I thought it [college preparation] was pretty good. I think that I never got the complete basics of math. So I passed math, but as it gets more complicated as you go further on in math, if you don’t understand where it comes from, you can’t do it always correctly or efficiently. I
probably would have had to have the intervention, I would probably say third grade. I’ve
gotten some, but it wasn’t focused. It wasn’t like this is a real problem or it can be a
major problem…I did well in most of my science courses. I understood them. So I liked
science. I didn’t care for math. English was fairly easy. I chose the ones I liked generally.
I had tutors here. I had tutors over the summer, at home, and in college just focusing on
algebra and the fundamentals of algebra. So we went back to fractions on up, but I just
didn’t get the concept.

A typical day was…I probably had class at 8:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. or 3:00 p.m.
Probably after 2:00 p.m., I was sleeping. If it was longer than that, it was bad, because I
wasn’t retaining too much information after that. [The classroom experience was]
interesting. If its interesting its ok, but if I get bored.... Its ok. I sit in the back. Teachers
don’t like that. But I don’t like to be in the front. I don’t like having a bunch of people
sitting behind me. I guess I get a little paranoid...if you can see them. They all…I’m
always turning around to see what they are doing. I can’t see what they are doing if they
are behind me and that’s why. I don’t like that. I’m sitting in the back too because I don’t
like sitting in the front.

I am probably a better hands-on learner. I read the books, but it doesn’t present a
visual picture for me versus seeing it done and doing and then reading; or reading and
then seeing done and doing it yourself. It leaves more of an imprint. So I have to actually
do it to learn it. No, not really [professors were not tuned in to this]. Sometimes.
I would [volunteer this information] and sometimes I wouldn’t. I just figured
that I would have to seek it, learn it, so I would have to know it, then when I get to see it
then I can reference it, and then I know that it would be more informative to me after I’ve
actually seen it.

The team members were my friends and that’s where I spent the majority of my
time. Well, I was an athlete, so when you exercise that was a stress relief. I had plenty of
friends. So if you needed to talk to somebody here, then I could do that...that wasn’t a
problem. I think to my own success I’ve been...but my mother, my parents are probably
my best support. I talk to my mother three times a week. If I didn’t want to talk with them
[friends, teammates], then I’d talk to my mother. I think it’s a bigger thing to my parents.
I’ve been...but my mother, my parents are probably my best support. I’d talk to my
mother three times a week.

Because I was moody, some people didn’t like it and they were not my friends, and
for those who didn’t care, they would just ignore me until I got over it, but I was nice.
That wasn’t a problem. I was set in my ways, being the only child. I had to learn to
compromise.

My volunteer work was off campus [was my social life], I didn’t pledge anything. I
didn’t party every day. I had practice, so after a competition was usually when I went out
to parties. I usually didn’t go out on Fridays because we would have to compete on
Saturday, and I really wouldn’t go anywhere. Probably that I like to help people, and I
did it in high school and I feel like I do it now.

So, I think volunteering with people who were in a different role showed me that
life comes in many forms and that just because you have this doesn’t mean that others do.
Not that I didn’t know that, but seeing it and talking to people who are maybe less
fortunate is different then just seeing it. If you sit down and talk to them, you can
understand why, how they got there, why they got there, and they will even tell you what
they need to change. So, I think that probably made a big difference in what I decided to do. It affected me in terms of how I treat people most of the time.

Well, I was part of a summer program my first year in college. It was a program to help inner city children pass the PRESS exam which is an aptitude test that they had to pass to get out of eighth grade and high school. So the program was focused at actually having kids come most of the day, probably four or five hours a day. Some people taught where they were good at. So, I taught vocabulary and English and somebody else taught math.

[I describe myself as] Independent. Because I am a nonconformist and I kind of do things to my own drum. I don’t have a set way of doing anything, but I am extremely independent in my thinking which is good and bad, but I don’t feel the need to always lean on someone unless it’s absolutely necessary.

I do ok in a multitude of situations. I don’t really have a problem with that. As long as I can read the situation, I’ll figure it out…things that present a difficulty for me. I would consider myself independent. I’m a product of an only child. I’m a very independent thinker and all that other stuff. You have to survive on your own. There is no one there to take care of you. I feel like I can do things for myself to a certain extent in a multitude of areas, until it is absolutely positive that I can’t do it.

If you have it [goals] written in your mind exactly what you want to do and you write it down and you can see it, then that kind of helps you say where you want to go…and at least have an idea by mapping it out. [Success is] obtaining the goals that you have set for yourself that no one else has set for you. I kind of feel that some people are trying to pull you towards what their definition of success is and that’s not my definition of success. I think that individualism is lost at certain points when people are like, you should be right here, or right here, or right here, but that’s not were you want to go.

Oh Jennifer you quit, you did not try, or give an honest effort. So if I didn’t do something, I know I didn’t do it like the way I want to do it; that’s ok because I don’t believe in regrets. But I don’t want to look back and realize that you really should have completed such and such, and you could have and you didn’t.

I never looked at that [not finishing school], because it wasn’t like you can’t finish school. That was your only choice, to finish school. I know I’m getting out. I think it’s a bigger thing to my parents.

I probably should have had one of these moments (laugh) [a wake-up call] So, I really didn’t have one. I don’t think so. If I like it, I like it; if I don’t I don’t. I kind of roll with the punches. I don’t know. I just didn’t want to be one of those people, friends who have kids with no means of support. I can’t understand it. I’m like, you all are stupid, and I am not. So maybe that is it. I had goals, or I have goals.

I don’t think I had a strategy. Work, I just believed that if you did your work, then you passed, and if you didn’t you failed. You either do your job or you don’t. I would say (pause) I’m not the kind of person to give up. I would have done it anyway. I would hate to look back and say, ‘Oh Jennifer you quit, you didn’t try, or give an honest effort.’

Fun, I had fun. I had fun. Despite all the class work and all the ups and downs, I have a good time, or I had a good time. I don’t think that I missed out on too much that I wanted to do.
Joel: The Timekeeper

Thank you for inviting me to come and join in on the experience in college. [College was] fun, a lot of growing up to do personally and a challenge. [I had to] be a little bit more of a responsible individual, get to class, get the assignment down, plus get...balancing life correctly.

In high school, it wasn’t bad. It was good, but as a whole...high school and college is a different world. [In college] the performance is kind of bent out of you. You can slide by with that. You don’t have to give all your effort [in high school]. In college, you could not do that. I had to be on top of things with science. Yeah, I had to put a lot of work in those classes. Math is easy for me versus English. It’s a challenge, but it’s not a challenge that will challenge you to a point of your utmost.

I worked through school, I had loans and PEL grants. I was in a work study program most of the four years of institution. So I had to schedule class, so that I was able to go to class and go to work. It was also a challenge, especially in undergraduate, to fit in…. I needed to take this class to get into this program...will I have enough time to go to work so I could pay for my school? So, it was kind of a challenge.

I stayed home. I had to pay for everything, books and tuition. So I could pay for them and then I would continue to pay all my loans off. It’s a little bit more pressure because you’re paying for it and you don’t want to repeat any classes. It’s not like, ok I can switch my major and have another year or two. Whatever I say I’m going to do, I go hard and I make sure that’s what I’m going to do.

You always had to put your best foot forward, even with that it wasn’t enough. With professors, you have to excel every time, be outstanding. Your level of work was harder. It wasn’t that easy. In an hour you’re weren’t done. You had to put the time in so many weekdays to get what you really wanted to present…to get that ‘A’ in class. You have to perform at work or you get fired. You have to go home and study and perform well to stay in the program. Every day you have to be on your toes.

When you’re at home, you have to go by the rules and you can’t break them. Being able to walk in and out. When you’re on campus, there is a security guard. You show them your ID and you go in...you come in at 3:00 in the morning 6:00, but you can’t do that at home. You can’t disappear for the weekend and expect to come back to school...and get ready for school on Monday. So, there were responsibilities that you had to live up to at home. It wasn’t stressful, it was just more responsibility.

It really wasn’t a day were I could sit back, even if I wanted to. If I did, things just piled up. [I had] a lot of growing up to do. Your body gets physically and mentally tired, but you have to do it. Sooner or later it became a routine. If you didn’t do it, and you decided to take Saturday off, and go out and party all night, it’s going to catch up with you...you’re tired and you’re not able to perform.

[I managed by] staying focused basically, knowing what I wanted to do and keeping my eye on the prize. I want to get into a program. I want to graduate on time and everything, and that was my motivation. Keep it up, you’re almost there, the light is not that dim. It’s getting brighter. The time will go fast. There were days when I would say, oh man it’s Spring Break. Some of my classmates went home or just enjoyed the Spring Break.. But for me, that was the time I used to catch up. I had to work full-time to get enough money for next semester. So, you learn how to be an adult quicker. There are rules and regulations with your parents. You have a lot of responsibility. It was my
responsibility to pay. You have to abide and you have responsibilities being at home to do certain things, chores, and responsibilities, helping with things at home, bills, and stuff like that.

Freshman year was kind of tough. When I wasn’t in school, I wanted to get involved with a lot things that were happening on campus, but I couldn’t because of my schedule. Basically, you try to stay focused. I’m here for school. Yeah party, let’s go out and party, yeah, but I have to study. It wasn’t that easy. In an hour your weren’t done. The level of work is harder. My professors pointed out what I needed to do to be the best. They always did that. [My professors would say] ‘Work wise’ and I could do better; they expected better work from me. If I turned in a paper, they would step outside and say ‘you need to step it up’ ‘now you know you can do better’ ‘if you need help, we’re here to help you.’

[My relationship with my friends] it was good. Pretty much they had their own stress, and work so... they wanted me to do well, they wanted me to do well on the exam, but it was my responsibility to take that time to study. If you kind of slacked, they will let you know… ‘stop that,’ ‘you know that,’ ‘you were not supposed to go out and hang out last night.’

My parents, they were there. I didn’t want to stay on campus. It would be too distracting I thought. [My parents said], make sure you don’t go overboard, don’t burn the candlestick, it will catch up. Do your work. My parents were especially there. I guess they went through the same thing. They had to go to work and go to school. That was kind of inspirational. My parents were focused. If someone else could do it you can do it. Keep focused, when things were down and hard, “it’s rough; but if you don’t do this now, you are going to do this the rest of you life.” Take the hardship now, deal with it while you’re young. They were there, my parents. Yes. They exposed me to work hard to succeed, to see what you can do. “Life is up to you.” “If you want the best out of something, you are going to have to work hard.” Keeping it up [if] you want to get into a program and graduate on time, you had to keep it up.

Seeing people around me doing well, my parents pushed me when times were rough. My parents were my idol. So, if they did it, I know I can do it. It was all right. The pros and cons of being at home. Pros, if you have a special time or if you were having a bad day, you were able to talk to your parents versus if you were away. Pick up the phone...it was a difference when they were on the phone.

I went to parties, but you had to make sure you didn’t go every weekend… It was fun. The little functions during lunch, maybe or that weekend we had off and there was not an assignment due for two weeks, we went to a little party that they had on campus or like the football game, but that wasn’t every weekend. I had friends that stayed off campus and on campus. They would keep me aware of the things on campus, if I missed it...the parties, so they would invite me to go.

[If I] come in late, knowing that I had to go to work, or do things to perform that I didn’t get a chance to at home...my parents, my parents [keep me focused]. ‘Enjoy yourself.’ Even my co-workers would say ‘college life is great,’ ‘enjoy it while you are in college,’ but I was kind of like ‘oh yeah’ it’s kind of hard to work and go to school. I just think they just went to school.

College can be fun. You just have to study. Enjoy college life. It was a little difficult because you didn’t get a chance to enjoy campus life like the other students. They didn’t
have to work. They just attended school and went to different parties, Fridays and Saturdays, and to Homecoming and things like that. When you have to work and go to school, your time is limited. You didn’t have a lot of time to waste…When you have to work and go to school, it’s a bit more stress and pressure. It’s a challenge, a good one.

[My] time management [was], good. It had to be. If I had a class, it’s eight o’clock in the morning. You have to travel. Take the bus and metro to work. I worked 20-30 hours per week or whatever time you were allowed to work, and then you had to travel and take the bus home. So I didn’t get home until late, it was a long day. I’ll get home, eat, and hit the books until early in the morning. It was an every day schedule. My body gets physically and mentally tired. But I have to do it. Sooner or later it became a routine. If I didn’t do it, I decided to take Saturday off and I’d go out and party all night, it’s going to catch up with me. I’m tired and I’m not able to perform. Time matters. It’s very important. I have to prioritize things, school, work. The longer you stay in school, the more money you spend, its coming out of your pocket.

I have high expectations of myself. If I don’t perform well, I go back and say something is not right. I’m a little competitive, trying to excel and keep going. [My goal is to] graduate on time with my class, which I will be doing, and doing well; getting my hands wet, being top notch, take care of my responsibilities, starting my own business. So right now, I’m just getting some experience, and getting an idea of how things feel; pay for finances and start a career. Start my own business. That’s my goal. [Success is] motivation, having that motivation…internal motivation, wanting to do well…having high expectations of yourself and always trying to do your best.

I try to study in a study group. I’d study with members whom I felt continued to do better than me, so they would challenge me with certain things. They would present material that I wasn’t sure about. That would make me go over that chapter again. I’d say “ok.” “I need to refocus on this section of the chapter.” Having someone who is a little better than me was challenging…quizzing me. On a quiz, I would often do better.

[I think the best way for me to learn is] one on one, with one student to cover the material that I need to study; then during exam time, what I’ve learned with that individual to study on my own, and go over the material at least 20 minutes to a half and hour everyday. So, be prepared for when you have to take the exam. It wasn’t cramming. I went over it Monday thru Friday. So it’s pretty much like I reviewed Wednesday and Thursday. It was stretched out.

I like to see everything [in] the classroom. Sometimes some one behind me is asking a question and you know you have to turn around. You can see things better I think…. If you step back and look at the whole picture. If you are right in the front of the class, you only see part of the picture.

I’m a visual learner verses abstract. It takes time for me to understand things. I have to read it over and over again verses some people who you could tell them one time and they could pick it up and understand it. That was more... I have to see things.

[I managed by] staying focused basically, knowing what I wanted to do, and keeping my eye on the prize. I want to get into a program, I want to graduate on time and everything, and that was my motivation. ‘Keep it up,’ ‘you’re almost there,’ ‘the light is not that dim.’ ‘It’s getting brighter.’ ‘The time will go fast.’ I had to put the time in so many weekdays to get what I really wanted to present. To get that ‘A’ in class. Discipline is a big thing. Be disciplined and focus on what your are doing.
Looking back now, I think that if I didn’t have to work, my grades would have been better. Some material would not sink in because of fatigue. So if you don’t have to work, don’t do it.
Sheila: The Friend

Yeah, it’s scary not to be with your friends. This summer was hard. I’m use to…if I’m not busy, it like depresses me. Even though I didn’t want to be here with all of the school work, I missed all of the people.

I said I’m not going to work. This will be the last time in my life that I will have the opportunity not to work. I said I’m not working. For some reason after…I guess the job…working, this wasn’t it. There is more to life than this eight hours here at this job, and not liking it. So I’m going to try and I started one class at a time.

I didn’t think of a job as…I just thought of it as a job I didn’t…it was a paycheck. It wasn’t a career until I got out and graduated and got a job and started working. Then I really realized that for me, I had to do something that I really liked. Because I didn’t want to spend eight hours miserable, or doing something I didn’t like. I it was just too stressful. I came from a very stressful job before I came back the second time to school. So I didn’t link the two together. School and getting a job…you go to college, and get a degree, and of course you get a job, and it’s just going to be there, no matter what job. You get a job.

So, I didn’t link the two together. So to me it was this time, I’m spending four years in college. This is my second time getting a degree, but it is totally different than what I did the first time. I don’t think the first time I was thinking about the grade. I was thinking about getting out of class, but I didn’t care what the grade was. You know, I wanted an ‘A,’ but if I didn’t get an ‘A’ I didn’t get an ‘A.’ I just didn’t put my all into it. I wasn’t really pressed about the grade. I knew I would pass the class, but I wasn’t pressed about the grade because I didn’t think about graduating Summa Cum Laude.

I’m from the West Coast. I came here. I lived on campus. There were a lot of parties. Not in my dorm per say, but other places that we went. You meet a lot of people from different areas and it was a big socialization. You know. Big parties (laughing). I have a lot of my same friends now. A lot of my best friends were my friends back in the 1980’s. So I got an ‘A’ in that. I got an ‘A’ in socialization (laughing). But this time, I really want to do my best.

I don’t know why I thought I couldn’t do math or science. I did it in high school. I mean in my state they have regents programs and non-regents programs. I had a regents diploma. I took all of the classes I needed for regents. I did well in school. I took physics in high school. I mean it wasn’t my favorite thing. I found it to be a little difficult, but I just didn’t think that I could do it on a college level.

I don’t think… anything that I can think of or anybody telling me I couldn’t do it. My freshman year…in college, my school doesn’t have this class any longer...there was a class called Operations. Oh yeah, ok…and a lot of people didn’t graduate on time because of Operations. ok. I took Operations three times and dropped it, and by the time I was getting ready to graduate, they started this new class. I was able to get in that class and I passed. But, that Operations class it didn’t look like it, it just looked like he was writing something foreign, foreign language on the board. I knew…well, I thought that I couldn’t do it. If that was supposed to be Basics of Operations, the first class you are suppose to take, [then] I knew anything that came after that was way beyond my grasp. So, I knew math had to tie in closely with science.

So, if I couldn’t get the math, which was a lot of the foundation for chemistry and all of the formulas that you have to compute in school, there was no sense in doing
anything like that. So, I never went into... and then I never knew about this field. I never researched a lot of the science fields. So, the science and math was...if I could avoid it I did. And I did. I was able to avoid it for four years by taking one math class, which was a requirement to get out of school.

It’s a big difference for a younger student than an older student. But college is not that hard, it’s just life in general and trying to fit something into a life of something that you already had.... it’s taking up a big chunk of your time....and trying to make those mixes or blends and have an equal amount of both.

I paid for everything. You’re just more responsible…it’s everything else that you have to deal with on top of school work that makes it so hard, especially when you are an older student. When you are 22- or -21-years-old in college and you are living on campus and mom and dad are paying for everything, you don’t have the same responsibilities as the older student that has to pay for their bills and keep up their apartment, as well as a family...maybe not children, but you still have family and responsibilities. It’s a big difference for a younger student than an older student. I really want to do my best, and it’s funny, a lot of the work.... and I might still get an ‘A’ out of it, but I still think I could have done some more...worked harder on it. I went to Biology I and Biology II. It took me a while, but I’m finishing. Never in a million years could you tell me that.

You either have to step-up and meet it or fall by the wayside. [When handling stress I] stress some more probably. I try...I mean I’ll get into a routine. I like to walk, I like to go to the park, out by the water. I’ll get into the routine of doing it, something will come up and will stop it, because I should be sleeping...because I don’t get much sleep. I’m studying this or writing this, and I need to be more organized in my household chores because my house is a mess, when your house is a mess it takes you forever to find your assignment...those are the books you need. So that’s gotten in the way. But it’s just been so much. Especially the last month. Before this last month, you know finals time is always rough. Stuff starts going haywire. So, I guess I’m a little disorganized.

When I was in college the first time, I would say that my sister, who is four years older than me...she is dyslexic and she has always been in slower classes. There were issues there. As a teenager, she got on drugs and remained on them most of her...until a year or two ago...when she started getting treatment...being the problem child for my mother and father. So a lot of attention was being placed on her as far as issues that she had. In college, the first time I really didn’t know about her problem or the severity of her problems. I might have known that it was something, but I didn’t know how bad it was until probably right before I decided to go back to school the second time.

I feel responsible for her, because she needs so much assistance and I really used to worry about that a lot the first year up until this last semester. I’m a worrier and I worry about everybody but myself. It would really affect my sleep and my work, but then I got to a point where I said, I’m getting ready to have a nervous breakdown worrying about her. She is a grown woman and she has to make these decisions for herself that she wants to do better and get better. All I can do is be a support. I can’t live her life and she is not going to do what I do. After I started to let those things go and stop worrying about what was going on in her life, things really started to get better.

I always had...I think I knew I had a big support system, but I’m not the type of person to ask for help. So you really don’t have the opportunity to give me support. I don’t allow it. So, I didn’t feel alone. I have a family, and a lot of good friends, but I
don’t ask for help. Family is a big part of my life that’s why I guess I claim all six, where
sometimes people say half brothers and half sisters. I really don’t get into that. Not that
we have a close knit family...they are much older then me. I’m 34. As far as the other
three from the previous marriage, I see them every once and a while and I talk to them on
the phone during the holidays. I wish we could be a lot closer. Maybe some day we will
be. I think family is a very important part of my life. That’s why I stress that there is a
total of six, not just three.

So my mother and father I think sometimes ...I don’t take it out on them, but they
were never the kind of parents that would say ‘did you do your homework?’ and check
you homework right behind you. They just left it up to you to complete it. So I think that
that was a lot to do with...I mean I did ok in high school. I didn’t do my best. So, when I
talk to you about how I say I didn’t do my best when I do something, I still feel that way.
I think my problem...looking back on things that I have done, is that I don’t want to put
all my effort into it, because if I don’t succeed, I can say, well I didn’t really try. I always
have something to fall back on. I was limiting myself by not setting my goals high
enough or working hard enough to get what I wanted. [Sheila’s comments when the
interviewer said that she too had a safety net] Thinking that way, I can see how that could
propel you to even do better then you would have if you didn’t think that way, because
you’re always prepared for the worse. You always had enough ammunition to face what
was the worse. My problem is that I think of the worst. I always think of oh “that’s going
to happen,” or “what’s going to happen with that situation.” Usually I come through with
flying colors.

So I can say ‘I didn’t really try that, that’s why it didn’t work out that well.’ It’s a
safety net. I still find myself doing that. Before, I wasn’t aware of that...until I got older.
Talking to you and revisiting my college education and my whole four years before this
last degree and even my high school years helped me realize that that was my safety net.
And even now that affects what I do today. I feel that if I don’t give my hundred percent
to it, then...if I don’t get a good grade or whatever happens, then I can say oh well, I
really didn’t put all my all into it, so I deserve what I got.

I think between a lot of people, I do and do and do, but I don’t let them do for
me, so then I’m tired, and I can’t do for myself. I enjoy doing things for people, but I had
to put limits on it, because I was suffering myself by not taking care of myself...taking
care of my home, taking care of my bills, taking care of health.

I made up my mind that I was going to go back to school and I was telling my
friends ‘yeah I think I’m going to go back to school and [I’m going to] do this, that, and
the other. So after I started putting words behind...telling people I’m going to do this I
said: ‘I’ve got to do this (laugh).’ I’ve told so and so that I was going back to school and I
just can’t just say ‘oh now, I can’t do it.’ I have to do it, and I did it. all these things that I
worry about and things that I can’t do, eventually I do, if I keep plucking away at it and
get it done.

I think with this degree and the whole process...its not even the degree. I know that
the field is kind of tight and I worry about that, but then I think about this whole
process... the whole process of me having enough courage to go back to school and do it,
and working hard. I think I’ve gained so much more from the process, to carry over to
other areas of my life, than the degree could ever give me and the job could never give
me. Just the skills that I’ve developed, the confidence, even though it’s still lacking, the
confidence gains that I have achieved from this whole process of the struggles...staying up all night...things that I never thought I could do. By accomplishing that, it’s just setting me up to do much better in the future. I think it’s just a building block of what is to come.

This time around I think I interacted more with the teachers, than I did the first time...asking questions...volunteering the answers. If I didn’t understand something, or if I felt that the teachers were presenting the materials properly, then I would ask the teacher about that. Sometimes I would be an interpreter of the students. There has always been another classmate that was in my major who is graduating this year, Janice... It was the two of us... always studying all the time. People would always comment on us studying together because we pretty much got decent grades.

I was more of the talker, so if we were reading notes, I was usually the one reading notes and she was listening and I would say, ‘now you tell me what I said differently...tell it back to me.’ For me, I like to write things. I have to write things over and over, over again...the same thing, just to remember it...say it over and over again. During a test, you might see one of us start making the motion, because that’s the way we learned it. I learned that this muscle does this, or it is inserted here, or its origin is here. When we studied, we talked it out. We talked out everything. We made the motion and we palpated the muscle. So we really...it was very interactive.

Sometimes there were some students who were really having a problem with a certain topic and we would say, you can study with us, but you have to study like us. If you can’t study the way we study, we are not going to change our study patterns. We do the same thing all the time. So if you can’t do, what we do, we are not going to throw ourselves off track trying to accommodate you. We’re sorry to say it like that, but we were very up front with anybody who wanted to come and study with us, because we had a system and it seemed to be working and we didn’t have time for it to fail.

I had to get through this and I had to pass this. This time I don’t have time to play. I said, if you happen to come to where we are studying...usually we would study over Janice’s house or over her cousin’s house where Janice lives. We would study sometimes all night long, if we had to. I would leave her house a half an hour before we went to school. I would go home, take a shower, and sometimes take myself back over there. We would leave right from there to go back to school.

[Success is] happiness, how happy you are with your life. That’s it. Well, I really want to, I think...well I think since I’ve come into college I always said I wanted to work in mental health. So I really want to give mental health a shot. I really want to work with the Welfare to Work Programs. So I’m interested in that. It’s not all about getting.

So I would like to be in a position...my mother and father travel. They do whatever they want. They are retired, and I want to have that kind of life. When I get 65 or whatever, 70 I would like to be able to do what I want to do. But, I really don’t want to wait to travel, because they waited until I finished college. You know [my parents had] to put the kids through college, and all that expense before they were able to live their life.

I’ll say [I’m] persistent, because once I say I want it, I’ll get it. I might not go after it right then, but once I say it, especially if I tell someone...I have a big issue with someone trying to throw something back in my face. I’ll do it. I think maybe my family...my mom, but especially my aunt...my great aunt, she was persistent. She got what she wanted. She showed how if you... you didn’t always have a lot of money, but if you are
persistent in saving the money, eventually it is going to be a great amount of money. Persistence can get you a lot, just by staying still or trying to get it all at one time… if you work a little bit you stay longer. You have more longevity when you are persistent instead of going out headstrong trying to knock down the wall. Sooner or later, you’re going to get tried. Oh, definitely [I will maintain persistence].
Lloyd: The Winsome

OK, hum, my college life, oh well, I went to college and graduated last year...this year May. I got a bachelor’s degree in my major and...let’s see... that’s all I can think about right now. Academically, ugh... academically, college was very challenging. I guess I didn’t have the 4.0 or 3.5 like a lot of students. It was real time consuming. A lot of hard work and sweat. Staying up all night...yes hard work and sweat, getting three and four hours of sleep a day. Staying up all night. Doing an all nighter once a week. I consider that to be kind of hard work and sweat... staying in Spring break in the labs and studying over information.

Coming into college, I guess I was really scared. I thought it was going to be really, really hard. I thought it was going to be cut throat. I might flunk out...all of those types of things. Yeah, I guess [I felt this way] because uh, some things in my high school were kind of challenging too. It wasn’t a fly-by-night easy thing. I remember, I was thinking that the 4.0 students or the valedictorian...I was competing against now and all that kind of stuff. Yes, I did. I felt like I was prepared well academically. I didn’t fulfill any of those requirements coming into college. I felt like there was so much static that I had to deal with because I was 17 and the first time I was 3000 miles away from home and I had to live in a dorm. I had some roommates and stuff. It’s a lot of factors and a lot of difference... I guess pressures are involved in the whole thing. You not only have the academic pressure, but there is a lot of social pressure. You are in a new environment, you are away from home, you are kind of ...you don’t have you parents holding you by the hand any more.

[I had to] sacrifice...a lot of time studying it over the Spring Break. I took some...a couple of anatomy and physiology courses over the summer.

Yeah, I remember before I started going to this college, I was having problems with a science course a long time ago, that was a big bridge that I had to cross over at one point. I remember writing all this stuff for graduate school. I remember taking anatomy in the College of Medicine for the first time and it was the first time I was taking a class at that type of level. That was the first class and the only class in my college career that I actually failed with a ‘D.’ I just remember that was like a disappointment, but it was something that helped me and made me a stronger person because I could...15 credits and all this anatomy stuff the following summer. When it came around to taking the higher level anatomy, I was able to outdo a lot of my counterparts, just because of failing the first anatomy and taking the other classes in the summer.

Oh, I remember doing my exit interview and I remember one of the faculty, I guess shared with me that you know you need to find a way... how are you going to...figure out how you are going to pass these Boards. ‘We don’t know how you are going to pass.’ ‘You’ve got to figure out a way.’ ‘What is your plan?’ ‘What are you going to do?’ ‘How are you going to pass?’ I remember that was discouraging, but it gave me fuel to make it happen, because I came up with a plan, and it was like well, I guess I have to show these people that I can pass this thing too. It was kind of like that.

My support, I guess was my family. My parents, friends, and church. It was always a place where I could go to. I could always call home and talk and get a little pep speech from my mom. She’d tell me about college and my father. And I guess other people around me. There is always a lot of unity around students, especially in small
university programs where you have people who are willing to help each other out and talk to each other about how they did and what to get through.

The same thing with going to church, you always tied in with the Christian faith. Having faith to believe in things that will happen for you, the trial and tribulations, and all that kind of stuff helped me out a lot. I know that there was always a tendency to use them [parents, church] at the last minute. I think that’s mostly with men. They kind of like to do things on their own until they have no choice but to go and get some help.

My sister was in graduate school while I was getting my undergraduate degree at the same school. We had a room together the last two years of school. My family, they were on the East Coast. They would do the regular… go to work and come home stuff.

I guess advice, [I sought out] meaningful and emotional support and ideas of what I should do, or how do I overcome this challenge that’s in my life… just basically things. I was just looking for people who experienced challenging times themselves. How they overcame them so I could use their knowledge to help me overcome whatever I’m trying to go through.

I had my friends, I went to high school when I was still at home, and then I had the new friends that I met when I went to college. I think that it is cool. You know you come to college and you meet these new friends and most of the friendships that I have in college seem to be more of a closer friendship compared to the ones that I had at home. It’s really different because… culturally and just the whole bit. My friends at home are like nothing like my friends in college. It’s always like funny to go to school and then go to a totally different environment when you go home.

Campus life was pretty cool. It seemed like everybody else who had non-science majors were free. But there was always stuff going on and that was a cool thing. There was a lot of stuff that wasn’t a whole lot of money. To me, you have your most memorable experiences when you go to the art festivals and you go to your dorm and you become a part of a speed tournament. That’s a coping method to deal with your academics. It’s like part of the package. [While I was] just watching TV, there was a ping pong table and there were a bunch of guys in the dorm playing ping pong. [They were] just playing ping pong all the way until like… it must have been about 5:00 in the morning, and then they still went to class.

Probably, absolutely not [I would not do anything different in college]. The encouraging thing is… anything I would have probably… I’m in the middle of change. I see myself as having academic challenges, but, I guess to me, I didn’t give up.

I never did bad enough to flunk out of college or anything, but I guess I really had high goals and dreams. And so, the difficulty was to accomplish the goals and the dreams that I had. I think that determination, good character, and a clear focus on your dreams is the key to graduating from college.

Success, I think success is accomplishing your goals, dreams, and with all the adversity. I think that’s true success, when you are doing things and accomplishing things that, that look like they are impossible and then you accomplish it. To me that’s success. Yeah, I think for this point in my life [I am successful]. I don’t have a job, but… (laugh) I see myself as being successful.

[My goals and predictions consist of] doing well enough in college to go to graduate school and get a Ph.D.… do lots of research and hopefully write a couple of
textbooks and involving all of the ingredients that you have to have in the mix to make that happen.

Because I feel like I’m always going after it, going after things and going forward. It’s like, I get a lot of setbacks and I look at them, and I say, well this is not the first setback that I have ever had in my life. Let’s get the clock rolling and see what we can do with this. And I guess because things are not like a perfect painted picture for me, I don’t have this stuff and all these things. I don’t have a whole lot of hardware. So I have a box and I look at it and I say, ‘hum I’ve got to work with this.’ ‘Let me see what I can do with this.’ And I use my resources to work with it and make things happen.

For me, I think the strategies were you’ve got to just invest some time into it. Some one-on-one time just going over all the information over and over again, and knowing it well enough so that you can play around with it…so that you can play games with it, mess around with it and still be able to conceptualize it as a whole. To me, it was just practice, practice, practice. Just doing it over again until it was in the back of my head.

I guess because you are with people that are going through the same thing that you are going through, dealing with the same challenges that you are dealing with as far as learning the information and managing their time...trying different methods and strategies in order to process the information. Sometimes it can be very humorous to find the unique ways that people process information. Coming up with acronyms for remembering muscles or using a past experience to figure out a certain theory...something that they learned on their rotation...and they say, ‘oh I remember this.’

I feel like community service is such a vital aspect of a person’s growth as a regular human being in our society. I feel that it should be as important as work, as important as getting an oil change...something that you schedule and plan and take time out for or take a day off work for. That’s how I feel about community service.

You have to persevere to make it through there, persevere to deal with some of my classes, persevere to deal with some of the… a lot of the stuff there you just have to stick it out. I feel like that’s what makes…that what makes the difference between someone’s success or someone who doesn’t. It’s all about finishing the race. It doesn’t matter how you get there, but as long as you get it done.

I’ll say the key to graduating from college is determination, a focus, and focusing on your dreams. It’s determination, kind of a deep root character that you have in yourself to shoot for the stars. It’s kind of like that type of thing.
Appendix B

Writings of the Graduates

Note: This section provides interpretive letters written by the researcher in collaboration with the students titled: Writings of the Graduate. Specifically, these writings offer a summary of reflective thoughts shared by the student participants upon completion of their graduation requirements.
Writings of a Graduate

I came to college by myself on an athletic scholarship. It paid for five years. It was full-time. You couldn’t ask for anything more. Yet, there were moments, some difficult moments that challenged me to the utmost. College was clearly a place to learn, a learning process full of experiences that helped prepare me for life. You see, I’m the only child. You know strong willed independent, and stuff like that. I had to perform both as an athlete and as a student. So, adjusting to the demands of college life was hard. There were many teachable moments. Times when I thought I knew, but then I learned. Yet, with determination, and commitment, I persevered. I’m now a graduate, with a B.S. degree and the world is before me. I knew that when I needed someone to talk too, you know during those times of difficulty, my mother was always there. Mid-way across the country, I could call her at anytime. She’s not only my mother, but my friend and my confidante.

People who may have had doubts about my finishing college, probably needed to get to know me. You see, I know that I do things to my own drum, but I’m an independent, caring, and honest person. I will tell you the truth. Maybe some people just don’t appreciate honesty anymore. Well, I knew I would finish. It wasn’t like I couldn’t finish school. I’m not the kind of person to give up. I would have done it anyway. I value education. I have goals with high expectations, and I write them down, so I can see where I want to go. Thanks Mom and Dad for being there. Don’t worry about me, but I know you will. I have goals and I’ll be back. A career and graduate school, to say the least. But for now farewell and much love.

Jennifer
Writings of a Graduate

I’d like to thank everyone for all of your help. College was rough, but I did it. I had to work and go to class. So balancing life...you know, I had challenges. I think that the professors were supportive and the students...we had a lot of fun. I’ll kind of miss campus, but I will be around. I’ll come back and see my friends, and say hello to my professors.

My mom and dad, oh they’re happy. They were behind me all the way. You know, encouraging me and making sure I stayed focused. This last semester has been pretty stressful. Things don’t always work out like you plan. So, I’m going to take a little break this summer, but just a little breather. I know that I still have some work to do. It will be rough finishing up and everything, and I still have to pass my boards. I’ll do it. It will take a little work, well a lot of work, but I’ll do it... you know, by staying focused basically. I know what I wanted to do, and I know that time matters. I’ve been job hunting. Well, that’s been working out o.k. I think I have some jobs lined up, so as soon as I finish, I’ll be out there working...trying to start my career.

Well, no more parties, no more studying over Spring Break. Yeah, college has been fun. You just need to study. So enjoy the college life, but if you don’t have to work, don’t do it. My mom and dad, they were my inspiration. They were focused,. so I’ll keep my eye on the prize. Well thanks for everything. It’s been great. Hey, I graduated on time.

Joel
When I began to navigate higher education life’s path, I never thought that what you do in school would really reflect what you do after school. You see, this is my second college degree, and I really want to do my best. Yes, I have responsibilities, bills to pay, and family to care for, and I know that the field is kind of tight. I worry about that. But when I think about the whole process of my having enough courage to go back to school, do it and work hard, I think that I’ve gained so much more from the process, to carry over to other areas of my life, then the degree could every give me, and the job could never give me. Just the skills that I’ve developed and the confidence gains that I have achieved from this whole process of the struggles...staying up all night...things that I never thought I could do. By accomplishing that, it’s just setting me up to do much better in the future.

Never in a million years could you have told me that I could have done this. Yet, I persevered. It’s going to be a little scary, not being with my friends. Even though I don’t want to be back at school, with all of the school work, I will miss all of the people. I know that I am successful. Being persistent has taken me far. Yet, the world is still before me. I have a challenging path that I must continue. I will hold on to my precious memories. During times of difficulty, they will remind me of what I can do. Thank you Mom, Dad, sister, Great Aunt, Janice, all my family and friends for being such an important part of my life. With God’s will, I shall continue to navigate life’s path. I will persist. Most definitely, I will persist.

Sheila
The Writings of a Graduate

Wow, graduation. I’m excited and relieved that I’m finished. It was great having all my friends and family there. The graduation ceremony was so serious. I mean, I really felt a sense of accomplishment. Gosh, I remember putting on my cap and gown, Wow. It was great. Well, to graduate...I put a lot of hard work and sweat into college. When I came to college, I thought I was going to flunk out. Yeah, I probably thought that, because something’s in my high school were kind of challenging too. I guess knowing that I had to compete with people who had 4.0’s gave me a bit more endurance. It made me work a lot harder to prove to myself and everyone around me that even though I didn’t have all that high class stuff, I could do as well as everyone else. Well, I did pretty good in college. I did just as well as everybody else, or even better. And the encouraging thing is that I don’t think I would have done anything differently. I know I’m in the middle of change. I see myself as having academic challenges. But, I guess to me, I just never gave up. I really have high goals and dreams. And so, the difficulty was to accomplish the goals and the dreams that I had.

I think that my goal is to do well enough in college to go to graduate school and get a Ph.D., do lots of research and writing, and involve all of the ingredients that you have to have in the mix to make that happen. I really persevered through a lot to make it in college. I think I had to stick it out, be tenacious and resourceful. I know that if it weren’t for my parents, family, friends, and Christian faith—having faith to believe that things will happen. I don’t know there was always a lot of unity around students in small programs. I guess other people were always around me, and I’m thankful for that.

Lloyd
## Appendix C

### Composite of Personal Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnic Background</th>
<th>Highest Level of Parental Education</th>
<th>Type of High School</th>
<th>Academic Risk Status</th>
<th>Difficult Subject(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>College Graduate (mother)</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>• Pre-college: Academic Difficulties</td>
<td>Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joel</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>College Graduate (mother)</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>• At-college: Academic Probation in Major</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheila</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>College (mother)</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>• First Degree At-college GPA 1.9</td>
<td>Math &amp; Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lloyd</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>College Graduate (mother &amp; father)</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>• At-college: Academic Probation in Major</td>
<td>Science</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D

INFORMED CONSENT

Doctoral Dissertation Research
Felecia Moore Banks
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Informed Consent

Dissertation Title: Success Against the Odds: The Experience of Academically At-Risk Students who Graduate from Postsecondary Institutions

I. Purpose of Proposal

The purpose of this study is to examine the experience of academically at-risk students who graduated from postsecondary education and to discover how they successfully navigated higher education life’s path, despite academic adversity.

In order to gather data for this study, the researcher will interview individual graduates from college, or students preparing to graduate from college. Participants selected for this study will engage in a series of at least two interviews. In addition, the researcher will review the participants’ academic records. The data results from this study will serve as a resource to illuminate issues for educators to consider certain kinds of teaching strategies and programs that might improve the retention rate of college students, and determine if these programs and strategies are effective.

II. Confidentiality Statement

A. The participants’ interviews will be audiotaped and undergraduate transcripts will be reviewed. All information from audiotapes and transcripts will remain confidential and anonymous. Information such as, names of the interviewees, locations of work or organizations, and names of events will be excised from this document. Pseudonymous such as, George changed to Bobby or blue BMW to black Lexus will be used to maintain anonymity. Individual stories of participants will be summarized. Final analysis of this study will be based on a group composite of all participant’s in the study.
B. The participants will be given the final version of the analysis. The participants have the right to make any corrections, including names and events. The researcher will receive written or verbal verification from participants to assure accuracy and protect their rights. Participants may withdraw, at any time, from this study without penalty.

C. Audiotapes will be placed in a secure area and will be kept beyond completion of the dissertation for purposes of verification and in the event that there is a need to continue to expand the research. Once that has been accomplished, the tapes will be erased.

III. Subject’s Permission

I have read and understand the Informed Consent and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent for participation in this project. I understand that I will receive financial compensation (book voucher) in the amount of_____ for participating in this project.

_______________________________________________________
Signature          Date

Should I have any questions about this research or its conduct, I may contact:

______________________________    Phone: 202/806-5696
Felecia Moore Banks, Investigator    E-mail: felbanks@aol.com

______________________________    Phone: 703/538-8492
Marvin G. Cline, Ph.D.            E-mail: mcline@vt.edu
Department of Institutional Review Board Officer
Virginia Tech University

I ________________________, agree to be audiotaped for this study.

    Signature
Appendix E

Success Against the Odds: The Experience of Academically At-Risk Students who Graduate from Postsecondary Institutions

Interview Topics

I. Social
1. Tell me about your social life.
2. Tell me about your friends.
3. Tell me about your activities outside of school.
4. Describe your overall family relationship.
5. Who in your family were strong supports?
6. Have any of your family members completed college?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding your social life?

II. Emotional
1. Can you use an adjective or words that describe you?
2. When do you feel most anxious? Least anxious?
3. What do you think contributes to your stress?
4. How do you deal with stress?
5. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding your emotional development?

III. Vocational
1. Tell me about your work experience.
2. Did you work while you were in college?
3. Did you have any problems on you job?
3. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding your work experience?

IV. Educational
1. Describe your college experience.
2. How did it feel going to college your freshman year?
3. How would you assess your academic skills?
4. What subjects gave you trouble?
5. Describe your pre-college preparation.
6. Describe your relationship with your teachers?
7. What was the most rewarding experience in your education?
8. What was the most disappointing experience in your education?
9. What did you do to cope with such disappointing experience?
10. Why do you think you had academic difficulty in school?
11. Did you receive any support services?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding your educational experience?

V. General Follow-up Questions
1. How do you define academic difficulty?
3. What are goals and predictions for the future?
4. How would you define success?
5. What has been the key to your graduating from college?
Appendix F

Success Against the Odds: The Experience of Academically At-Risk Students who Graduate from Postsecondary Institutions

Guidelines for Ethical Considerations

Guidelines for ethical considerations center around protecting participants from harm, preserving their right to privacy, making sure that their consent to participate is informed, and eliminating or minimizing deception (Merrian & Simpson, 1995). In particular:

1. Participants should be told the purpose of the research and how data they are being asked to provide will be used.

2. Participants should be informed of the nature of the research before data are collected and should be allowed to withdraw at any given time.

3. There should be no unpleasant or damaging effects on the individual, the setting, or others close to the participant either during or subsequent to the research.

4. The investigator must respect the privacy of the respondents and, whenever possible, ensure anonymity or confidentiality.

5. There should be no unprofessional behavior required of the participants.

6. The participants should be given an opportunity to learn from the research.
References


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Mangrum, C & Strichart (1998). Peterson’s College with Programs for students with learning disabilities or attention deficits disorders (Fifth Ed) Princeton, N.J.


Vita

Name: Felecia Moore Banks

About the Author: Felecia Moore Banks is completing her doctoral studies in Adult Learning and Human Resource Development. She earned her baccalaureate degree in Occupational Therapy in 1983, and her Masters degree from the department of Curriculum and Instruction in Special Education in 1991. Currently, she is an Associate Professor at an undergraduate program in the Department of Occupational Therapy. Her area of specialization consist of, adult physical disabilities, curriculum, and student leadership development.