

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF LOW SOCIOECONOMIC AND FIRST
GENERATION STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN AN UPWARD BOUND PROGRAM:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

MINH-HIEN VO CHIAVONE

(Under the Direction of Pamela O. Paisley)

ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study focused on students who were potential first generation college students with low SES in a pre-college program at a major US university. In depth interviews and a creative assignment were used to better understand their lived experiences. Themes that were discovered through the data suggest more career development is needed for these participants.

INDEX WORDS: Low Socioeconomic Status, Potential First Generation College Students, Pre-College Outreach Program

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF LOW SOCIOECONOMIC AND FIRST
GENERATION STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN AN UPWARD BOUND PROGRAM:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

MINH-HIEN VO CHIAVONE

B. S., The University of Georgia, 1995

M. Ed., The University of Georgia, 1999

Ed. S., Georgia State University, 2004

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2013

© 2013

Minh-Hien Vo Chiavone

All Rights Reserved

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF LOW SOCIOECONOMIC AND FIRST-
GENERATION STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN AN UPWARD BOUND PROGRAM:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

MINH-HIEN VO CHIAVONE

Major Professor: Pamela O. Paisley

Committee: Diane Cooper
Jolie Daigle

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
December 2013

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughters, Lillian and Malorie, who supported, encouraged, and inspired me in so many ways throughout the process without even realizing it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this dissertation could not have been possible without the assistance, support, guidance, and love of many people. I would like to say a sincere and heartfelt thank you to the following:

First, to my dissertation chair, Dr. Pamela Paisley. You have served as my advisor even before I officially started in the doctoral program at the University of Georgia. From interviewing for the master's program to dissertation completion in the doctoral program, you have always been a person who radiates support, love, and encouragement. Each and every time I wavered (which were many) you've remained committed to my success. You believed in my abilities more so than anyone. And when times were toughest, this belief is exactly what I needed to get me through the process. "You can do this!" was often how our conversations ended. Coming from anyone else, it might have felt hollow, but the sincerity in your voice was what always made the difference. If Pam believed I could do it, then certainly I could! And look Pam, WE did it!

To my committee members, Dr. Diane Cooper and Dr Jolie Daigle. Your support, thoughtful criticism, flexibility, and time given throughout the process, especially during the busy holiday season, are very much appreciated. Graduation on December 13, 2013, is now a reality because of your dedication, and I am forever grateful.

To Mrs. Tonia Jones and the students of Upward Bound. Your willingness to share your program and life experiences during our meetings and interviews made the data collecting process such a joy. Thank you for your openness. I was so inspired by each and every one of you.

To the faculty and staff at Harbins Elementary School. You always provided words of encouragement as I went through the process, and especially to my counseling partners, Melissa Black, Darcy Long and Nicole Provence, for your continuous understanding when deadlines were eminent and your undeniable ability to hold down the fort in my absence; and to my principal, Dr. Cindy Truett, you not only allowed me to take the days and hours needed to get chapters completed but also made a place of stress for most people, their workplace, more of a place of refuge for me. I thank you.

To my former coworker, current counselor, and forever friend, Susan Dodd. Your understanding, help and support throughout the Ph. D. process was invaluable. From your sage words of advice of “Don’t do it!” when I was considering applying for the madness, to your unending support with “What can I do for you?” throughout the years, to finally, “I am happier for your successful defense than I was for my own!” were evidence of how much you understood what I was going to be going through, what I was going through, and what I went through. Thank you. It all meant more to me than you’ll ever know!

To my three friends that I met during my graduate studies at the University of Georgia, Lenore Katz, Barb Wilson, and Paul Johnson. Lenore, my dear friend from the Master’s program, thank

you for not only providing a quiet space for me to write, but for your help in the writing process. You were always willing to take time to talk it out with me, even when you were at your busiest both professionally and personally. I think I might still be stuck on Chapter 2 if it weren't for your late night/ early morning help!

To Barb, I am so lucky to have met you through the Doctoral program. You are such a perfect combination of kindness and no nonsense. Thank you for your constant support, whether it be in the form of a pep talk or a reality check. Even more helpful was your example of toughness in the face of adversity. You have inspired me on so many levels.

To Paulie, a better partner in crime, I cannot imagine! From our first interview for the Master's program, through our late night writing sessions for our Specialist degree to the final words our dissertations, you have always been my biggest cheerleader. Our pain and suffering through our educational journey have been many, but the joy and laughter that we've shared in between the difficult moments have been so much greater. We have soared to great heights together (both literally and figuratively) and I cannot imagine anyone else riding beside me!

To my parents, Sach Van Vo and Ky Le Vo. Not only did you both instill in me the love of education and learning, you also taught me that anything is possible through determination, hope and love. Dad, your determination through times of war brought our family to a land of possibilities. Mom, your hope for your family during the lean early years in the U.S. was evident in your conversations with your children of what can and would eventually be better lives for all of us. Your love for each other as well as for me and my brothers and sisters always told me that

through it all, we always had our family. Your support throughout my life has often come at great cost to you. I can only repay you through living a life of love, determination and hope as well. The completion of this dissertation is a small part of a life that you've always wished for me. Thank you.

To my sweet daughters, Lillian and Malorie. When I began this journey, I had no idea of where it would lead me. We started this adventure as a family of two and ended it as a family of four. Although there were many twists and turns that resulted in a much longer journey than originally planned, I would not change a single thing because it has brought us all to exactly where we are today. You inspired me every single day to be more caring, more honest, more carefree, more genuine, more open, and more loving. I love you both, more than you can ever imagine!

And to my dear husband, Kenneth Chiavone. You have been all of the above and so much more for me throughout my lifetime. Your quiet patience, support, encouragement, and unwavering love have been constant through our years together and were what I drew upon, more so than anything, for strength during the most difficult times on this journey. From technical support to emotional support, you were an expert in all things that I needed exactly when I needed it. You saw my strengths and celebrated them. You knew my limitations and loved me through them. Thank you so much for knowing and telling me it would all be o.k., no matter where this particular journey ended. It has ended with a completed dissertation and two beautiful girls! I am blessed beyond measure. Thank you, My Love.

.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	V
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Problem.....	3
Current Study Research Paradigm and Theoretical Orientation.....	5
Purpose of Study	7
2 SELECTED REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	9
The Evolution of Professional School Counselor Role in Education Reform.....	9
First-Generation College Students	16
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Students	19
Promising Practices and Programs.....	21
Upward Bound	23
3 METHODOLOGY	25
Rational for Qualitative Approach.....	26
Theoretical Framework.....	27
Central Research Question.....	30
Procedures	30
Data Collection and Management.....	32
Data Analysis	36

Trustworthiness.....	37
Researcher as Analyst.....	39
4 FINDINGS.....	42
Discussion of Themes.....	45
Summary.....	59
5 DISCUSSION.....	61
Brief Summary of the Study.....	61
Themes in Relation to the Literature.....	63
What the Themes Suggest.....	66
Limitations of the Study.....	68
Implications for Practice and Program Development.....	69
Recommendations for Future Research.....	73
Personal Goals.....	75
REFERENCES.....	77
APPENDICES	
A Semi-Structured Interview Protocol.....	88
B Creative Arts Assignment Directions.....	89

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1: Participants General Information.....	44
Table 2: Participants and Their Responses within the Four Themes.....	59

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Out of my whole family, I don’t know anyone who has gone to college... I want to be the first child and the first grandchild to go off to college and succeed” (face to face interview, 2012), stated a mild mannered yet confident high school senior. She had a 3.5 GPA and was active in several clubs and groups at school. She was very aware that attending and completing college would give her more opportunities than the limited ones that the rest of her family has had in the past. Her stories about her family show that her parents and her grandparents, although limited in their own education, were not limited in their hopes and dreams for her.

The College Board stated that “a college education provides a life of options rather than of limitations” and recommends that counselors provide their students with these opportunities by making “high schools a place where college is the next step for everyone” (College Board 2011). Creating a college going culture for all students is indeed an important role for school counselors from primary through secondary schools. However, one must consider that certain populations have been historically marginalized and have faced more significant barriers than their more privileged counterparts (College Board, 2011). These students have lived a life of limitations, and success will take very deliberate efforts from those around them, including their counselors, to help them realize a life of options.

Two such groups who have historically had lower representation in college are first generation students and students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged (Levine, Arthur; Nidiffer, & Jana, 1996). According to the U.S. Department of Education, first-generation

students, those who do not have college-educated parents, are far less likely to go to college than their peers (2008). Eighty-five percent of students whose parents had college degrees enrolled in college compared to only forty seven percent of students whose parents did not have postsecondary experience (Straight from the Source, 2012). Research indicates that students whose parents did not attend college are less prepared for college themselves than their non-first-generation peers (William, 2009). First-generation college students are also less likely to successfully obtain a college degree (Horn & Nunez, 2000; Warburton et al, 2001).

Historically, children who have lower socioeconomic status have a disproportionate risk of academic failure (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990). The National Education Association found that young adults living in families with incomes in the lowest 20 percent of all family incomes were six times as likely as their peers from families in the top 20 percent of the income distribution to drop out of high school (National Education Association, 2006).

Studies suggest that students who are members of both subsets are at even greater risk of being academically unsuccessful and are not likely to apply for or attend college (Thayer, 2000). First-generation students are more likely to come from lower-income families (Choy, 2001). Forty-two percent of first-generation students, who are dependents, are from the lowest quartile for family income in the United States, which is almost twice as many as their non-first generation peers (Choy, 2001). The high percentage of potential first-generation college students who also struggle with the challenges associated with low socioeconomic status creates a challenge for educators that must be addressed.

Resources and programs built to specifically address the unique issues that these students may face are common, and many institutions are reaching out to these students in hopes to make college a more likely part of their futures (Swail & Perna, 2012). The Upward Bound Program

(Myers & Moore, 2000; US Department of Education, 2009) is one such established program available on many college campuses. Upward Bound is a part of TriO, which consists of three programs (Talent Search, Upward Bound and Student Support Services) that were originally funded by Congress under the Higher Education Act of 1965. Upward Bound is now a federally-funded program intended to help high-school students of low socioeconomic background who are potentially first-generation college students and helps them prepare for post-secondary education. (Gullatt & Jan, 2003).

Statement of the Problem

“Anyone who has ever struggled with poverty knows how expensive it is to be poor,” stated James Baldwin (1960), African American activist and author. This statement may cause one to pause and consider the high cost of living with limited financial resources. DeNeen L. Brown of the Washington Post put it simply by saying, “The poorer you are, the more things cost” (2009). She goes on to detail the specifics of paying more for daily activities and routines such as doing laundry, buying milk, and cashing checks. Discussions of the struggles experienced by people of low socioeconomic status are often a part of mainstream media coverage. However, it is important that we as educators look deeper into the detailed effects of poverty on students.

Poverty is often a term used loosely to describe the condition in which groups of people live at a lower standard than that to which most people of a particular culture are accustomed (Laderchi, Saith, and Stewart, 2003). Around the world millions go hungry and have no shelter (Pogge, 2005). Others have a life of subsistence or in conditions far worse than others around them. Ruggeri, Saith, and Stewart (2003) discussed the importance of agreeing on the definition of poverty when creating programs to best help those who are economically disadvantaged. This

study focused on the U.S. Census Bureau's guidelines for poverty, which is based on a set of money income thresholds that vary by family size and composition to determine who is in poverty. If a family's total income is less than the family's threshold, then that family and every individual in it is considered to be in poverty (United States Census Bureau, 2012). According to the U. S. Census Bureau, almost 36 million people live below the poverty level in this country. In the State of America's Children Handbook, the Children's Defense Fund reported that from 1967 to 2010, the poverty rate for young families with children more than doubled from 14.1 percent to 37.3 percent (2012).

An often-overlooked cost of having low socioeconomic status is the lack of access to a quality education. Both Eamon (2005) and Jeaynes (2002) suggested that low SES negatively affects academic achievement because the lack of financial capital prevents access to vital resources and creates additional stress at home. Much research has been conducted related to poverty and student achievement (Orr, 2008; Papamandjaris, 2000; Sastry and Pebley, (2008); Turkheimer et al, 2003). McLoyd (1998) found evidence that the longer a student has been in poverty directly correlated with having a lower level of success in school. Low socioeconomic status, compounded with the challenges that are presented to first-generation students, can create quite a difficult road to higher education for many talented potential college students.

There is a trend, not only in the United States, but worldwide, that first-generation students perform lower academically than their counterparts (Akiba, LeTandre, and Scribner, 2007). Socioeconomic, sociocultural, and school factors have all been found to correlate to some degree with school achievement (Papamandjaris, 2000). However, for first-generation students, Marks (2005) found that socio-economic status had the greatest impact. If students are first-

generation and also in a lower socioeconomic bracket, then they are at greater risk of not completing high school and even more likely to not consider post-secondary options

A better understanding of first generation students' experience living with low socioeconomic status while navigating high school and post-secondary options is needed, if counselors are to help them continue on a successful trajectory to college. How would a student describe their life experience as it relates to the world of school? Are there significant events or persons in students' lives who have contributed to their academic successes and failures? Are there themes that emerge in the students' educational aspirations and goals? These are all questions that will help direct the study in discovering the lived experience of high school students who are potential first-generation college entrants, from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who are participating in a pre-college outreach program. The students' own descriptions of their perspectives will provide insight to the correlation of life events and academic outcomes.

Current Study Research Paradigm and Theoretical Orientation

Creswell (2009) defined phenomenological research as “a qualitative strategy in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in a study” (p. 13). The purpose of phenomenology is to discover and describe the meaning or essence of participants' lived experiences (Hays & Singh, 2012) regarding a particular shared phenomenon. Since little research has focused on the essence of the lived experience of potential first generation college students who are low SES and participating in a pre-college outreach program, phenomenology provides a framework for examining this fundamental quality. Considering the continued low representation of children whose parents have no college experience and low socioeconomic background in secondary education,

phenomenological studies regarding their experiences in a pre-college outreach program may shed light on details previously unknown regarding what may help these students be more likely to successfully attend college.

The current study is constructed from the phenomenological approach and using a Critical Race Theory framework (Creswell, 2007), as both ascribe to giving voice to those who are often unheard, a fundamental approach to any work in social justice. In answering the guiding questions for this study, it is essential that the participants' perspectives are accurately understood and portrayed before any conclusions can be drawn. From these theoretical standpoints, the participants are the experts of their own experiences and worldviews, and their voices are fundamental to providing insights into their experiences.

Phenomenological inquiry goes beyond observation and allows the participants in the study to provide contextual explanations important for better understanding of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). In this study, I used in-depth interviews to gain insight into the experience of potential first-generation college entrants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who are participating in a pre-college outreach program. Information gathered from these interviews provided me a deeper understanding of the students and their lives through their descriptions of experiences through their own words, rather than relying only on observations that I might make as the researcher. Critical race theory (CRT) reminds me that I was in a position of power and privilege as the researcher (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Considering the tenets of CRT, I had to take careful measures to place the relational power into the hands of the participants rather than speak for or make assumptions that would further marginalize this population. I offered member checking and opportunities to confirm that my observations were congruent with the student's perspectives, as this congruence is necessary for providing a true

representation of the participants' experiences. I bracketed my assumptions regarding potential first generation students and lower socioeconomic status through discussions with the research team.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to give a voice to a small group of students who were successfully enrolled in an Upward Bound program as a part of a research-intensive university. In doing so, we were able to better understand their lived experience and what issues they faced due to their life circumstances. With a better understanding of their experiences, common challenges, and perceived barriers, counselors and educators may be able to help better prepare other students to reach their academic potential.

The Guiding Research Question

What is the lived experience of high school students who are potential first-generation college students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who are participating in a pre-college outreach program?

In studying this, the questions that were asked to help inform the development of the interview questions were:

1. How do economically disadvantaged potential first-generation college students define their community?
2. What circumstances do economically disadvantaged potential first generation students feel are specific and unique to their life situation?
3. What, if any, are the challenges or benefits to these circumstances?
4. Are there significant people or life events that have shaped their aspirations and goals?

5. What was it about the Upward Bound (UB) program that appealed to them, and how affective is UB in helping them become college-bound students?

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, first-generation students are defined as those whose parents' highest level of education is a high school diploma or less. In cases where parents have different levels of education, the maximum education level of either parent determines how the student is categorized according to guidelines established by the National Center for Education's Statistic's report (1998).

Students were determined to be socioeconomically disadvantaged if they met federal poverty guidelines (US Department of Health and Human Services 2011). Participants of the Upward Bound Program were eligible if they met federal guidelines for "low-income individual" meaning that the student's family's taxable income did not exceed 150% of the poverty level amount (US Department of Education, 2011) and qualified for the federal free and reduced lunch program.

CHAPTER 2

SELECTED REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter provides a selected review of the literature supporting the need for professional school counselors to be prepared to help implement improved educational experiences and outcomes for potential first-generation college students from lower income backgrounds. Specifically, this chapter reviews the literature related to: (a) the evolution of professional school counselor roles in educational reform related to advocacy and multicultural competence; (b) the defining characteristics and issues for first-generation college students; (c) the defining characteristics and issues for socioeconomically disadvantaged students; (d) promising practices in working with first-generation and socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and, (e) a more detailed description of one program, Upward Bound, designed as an intervention to address barriers associated with potential first-generation students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. This selected review of the literature provided the foundation for the current study.

The Evolution of Professional School Counselor Role in Educational Reform

The role of the professional school counselor has been defined and redefined in response to societal events and trends throughout its history (Beesley, 2004; Gysbers & Herson, 2001; Paisley & Borders, 1995). Counseling in the American public schools emerged in the late 1800's during the Industrial Revolution. School counselors were usually teachers who simply added the role of vocational counseling to their list of responsibilities as teachers (Gysbers & Henderson 1997). As vocational counselors, their roles were to help prepare students for a world of work

that was very different from those of the generations before them (Gysbers, 2001). The duties and responsibilities of the school counselor also included promoting character development, teaching socially appropriate behaviors, and vocational planning (Paisley & Borders, 1995). School counseling models remained this way until the 1960s when US schools were once again affected by a global event.

The launch of the Soviet Union's space satellite Sputnik in 1957 caused great fear throughout the nation (Her & Shahnasarian 2001). Senator Mike Mansfield famously stated, "What is at stake is nothing less than our survival." (Retrieved from internet, 2011). Citizens and policy makers felt the immediate need to engage in educational reform that would keep Americans competitive in the 'space race', which meant a focus on the science and technology fields (Wittmer, 2000). The National Defense Education Act (NDEA) was a direct answer to this need.

Passed in 1958, NDEA provided aid to United States public and private education at all levels. Although it was created to stimulate the advancement of science and mathematics education, it also provided aid in other areas, including counseling and guidance (Baker, 2001). This legislation provided significant funding for the training of school counselors to enhance their knowledge and skills, while also increasing the number of available well-trained counselors for student support in schools (Baker, 2001). The training school that counselors received at this time was very different from the educational paradigm received by previous counselors. It was a more client-centered, non-directive approach to counseling resembling more of a clinical paradigm (Bowers & Hatch, 2003).

After this boom of counselors there came difficult times for the profession in the 1970's (Beesley, 2004). The role of the school counselor was unclear, and their inability to show

positive effects of their work made them at risk of being eliminated from the school's decreasing staff roster (Baker, 2001; Beesley, 2004). To unify and strengthen the profession, comprehensive guidance and counseling programs emerged in the 1970s and 1980s (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Myrick, 2003). Promoting accountability and evaluation became an important role of school counselors to ensure that their value as school staff members was clearly understood (Baker, 2001; Gysbers & Henderson, 1994).

Recent Initiatives

In 1996, the Education Trust began a five-year initiative for transforming school counseling (Martin, 2002). The focus of this reform effort was to provide school counselors with skills and information to better help marginalized populations of students (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2008). The goal of the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI) was ultimately to ensure that "the school counselor serves as a leader as well as an effective team member working with teachers, administrators, and other school personnel to make sure that each student succeeds" (The Education Trust, 2007). The TSCI outlined five skills that a comprehensive program must include: (a) teaming and collaboration; (b) leadership; (c) assessment and the use of data to effect change; (d) advocacy; (e) counseling and coordination (Education Trust, 2007).

Building upon the TSCI framework, the American School Counselor Association's National Model (ASCA, 2012) details the responsibilities of the professional school counselor with an emphasis on developmentally appropriate curriculum implementation as well as encouragement and enhancement of individual student achievement. The three specific interrelated areas of focus are academic, career, and personal-social development (Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Dahir, 2001), with the themes of leadership, advocacy, collaboration and systemic change. "School counselors play a significant part in improving student academic

achievement and are uniquely positioned to be student and systems advocates.” (ASCA, 2003, p. 24). The shift towards the ASCA model moved school counselors towards a more student-centered focus, by attempting to answer the question of how student lives are improved by the counseling program. Rather than continuing a counseling program that maintains the status quo, following the ASCA model means that counselors are focusing on student outcomes and improved results, they are attending to goals and objectives, and are ready to make changes to their programs as needed, based on the data they collect (McGowen, & Miller, 1999). By defining the purpose of the school counseling program, along with its outcomes and objectives, counselors can then identify actions their department is taking to achieve results and how these results can best be measured. In addition to supporting students in their development of knowledge and skills, counselors strive to help students improve their academic achievement, relationships with others, and school attendance. Aside from merely monitoring student progress, counselors are taking a more active role in measuring the impact of the counseling programs, and seeking out areas of concern, such as attendance rates and discipline referrals, so no students are being overlooked. ASCA-based counseling programs provide a curriculum action plan for the benefit of all students in the school, but also establish “closing the gap” action plans for reaching students in need by targeting areas for improvement, setting concrete goals and objectives, then analyzing their results after the interventions have taken place.

The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) created a national spotlight on an achievement gap that was already apparent to most in the educational field. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001, or No Child Left Behind (NCLB) created sweeping educational reform that focused on narrowing the achievement gaps between and among minority groups and their white and Asian-American counterparts, as well as between students

with lower SES and their more affluent peers (U. S. Department of Education, 2001). School counselors, along with all other school personnel, were forced to look at their programs and practices closely and to provide data demonstrating the effectiveness of their practices in removing barriers and supporting achievement for all students. An integral component of the ASCA model involved evaluating data for program improvement, as well as closing achievement gaps between students, so the impetus generated by NCLB established a logical approach to school counseling following the standards and competencies delineated within the national model. Of these, advocacy assumed a primary role in attempting to ensure success for all students, particularly those who have been historically marginalized.

With the important role of advocate, school counselors must work to remove barriers that prevent students from being successful (ASCA, 2003). These barriers may be personal as well as systematic. With the more focused direction from the Transforming School Counseling Initiative as well as the American School Counselor Association's National Model, counselors are well positioned to help create change for students who have historically fallen victim to the achievement gap, an opportunity that the No Child Left Behind Act failed to rectify (Kim & Sunderman, 2005). As a twenty-first century social justice advocate, school counselors must use the multicultural and advocacy competencies as their guide in making purposeful and effective change (ASCA, 2003).

Social Justice

"Social justice is both a process and a goal." (Adams, Bell & Griffin, 1997, p. 15). The goal of social justice is equal rights and participation of all groups in society. To be champions or proponents of social justice, counselors must work for empowerment of all students to realize their full potential, not only in our schools, but also throughout our global community. In doing

so counselors must challenge barriers and oppression where it exists (ASCA, 2003). In challenging these obstacles, advocacy can develop and equity can become the responsibility of the entire community.

D'Andrea and Heckerman (2008) noted five main themes that have emerged in the focus of social justice for counselors: (a) sensitivity to the significant ways that cultural factors affect human development; (b) awareness of the competencies needed to acquire to effectively promote the healthy development of persons from diverse cultural groups and backgrounds; (c) an understanding of the requisite skills to encourage optimal growth in people from a variety of demographic contexts (d) thinking about types of professional training strategies that help foster the development of culturally competent counseling professionals; (e) knowledge of a broad range of research findings relevant to multicultural counseling; and, (f) understanding of the present and future challenges that the counseling profession faces within the context of a society that is undergoing a rapid transformation in its racial/cultural demography.

Rawls (1971) discussed the importance of two basic aspects of social justice. Social justice involves both the maintenance of equal rights and fundamental liberties, as well as the equal distribution of resources and opportunities to those who have historically been marginalized. Drawing from these considerations of social justice, Crethar, Rivera, and Nash (2008) emphasized the multiple levels that are necessary for social justice counseling, where one must promote empowerment of the individual while also actively confronting the injustices and inequalities in society.

The ASCA model (2003) addressed the need for a social justice approach to counseling by its emphasis on advocacy, multicultural competencies, and an action-oriented approach. The twenty-first century counselor is an advocate for all students, as well as for the profession of

school counseling. The advocacy competencies include three levels of advocacy: (a) client/student advocacy, (b) school/ community advocacy, and (c) the public arena level of advocacy (Lewis et al., 2003). These authors question whether the existing policies are in the best interest of all students, they seek out and attempt to remove barriers that impede student access, and they actively challenge changes that would result in reduced options for students in need (Ratts et al., 2007, Stone &Dahir, 2012). Counselors who follow the ASCA model desire to empower their students to become successful and lead satisfying lives that are independent of negative cultural assumptions that could otherwise impede their progress. Stone and Dahir (2012) described empowerment as a multi-faceted examination of self and endeavors, with a sense of social relations and challenges, with the ability to successfully facilitate community cohesiveness.

Having a broader conception of advocacy requires counselors to take a systems approach in discerning which common conventions may be creating barriers for students and which one are effective and should be continued (Stone & Dahir, 2012). The counselor-as-advocate model involves building and fostering relationships within the community to ensure a collective and supportive approach to student success. In this aspect, the counselor takes on the role as leader in sharing and gaining support for areas of change that will reach more students, thus building a support system not only for the students in need, but creating a network of stakeholders who can work collectively to impact change that could not be possible if left to a lone counseling department (ASCA, 2003). Uniting a varied group of people and community organizations to form a shared alliance with the goal of supporting historically marginalized students to be academically successful will help level the playing field for these students. They are in competition for opportunities against other students who may already have an abundance of financial and emotional support. Counselors can also provide insight and assistance to students

and their families on ways to advocate for themselves as they attempt to navigate colleges and other institutions (Stone & Dahir, 2012).

School counselors can increase their cultural competence in several ways. First they must begin with self-awareness. Then, when they gain knowledge about the cultural backgrounds of students who attend the schools, they will be able to appreciate the differences that may surface. If they place the students and their families in the role of experts in the areas of their own experiences, they create a space for those lived experiences within the school and to ensure that the school's vision of success is one that includes all students (Stone & Dahir, 2012). Counselors can help make certain that all students can find their likenesses represented in positive ways throughout the school, through bulletin boards, awards display cases, and other visual exhibits of pride and achievement. Negative stereotypes regarding historically marginalized population are ubiquitous, and counselors must actively challenge any negative assumptions they may have about the students with whom they work (Stone & Dahir, 2012). Finally, school counselors must work collaboratively with other educators to create multiple avenues for students to have their diverse needs met, so they may reach their highest potential.

First-Generation College Students

The probability of enrolling in postsecondary education is strongly correlated to a student's parents' education. Choy (2001) found that among 1992 high school graduates whose parents had no college experience, only 59 percent enrolled in some form of higher education within two years of graduation. Students with parents with some college experience enrolled at a rate of 75 percent, while students who had at least one parent who had a bachelor's degree, enrolled with a rate of 93 percent. Choy also found that students were significantly less academically prepared if their parents had no college experience, and many were not even

qualified to apply for and attend college. First-generation students are more likely to enter college with less academic readiness and typically have limited access to information about the college experience (Thayer, 2000).

These students are often placed in vocational or technical programs, which further limit their ability to enter four-year programs (Shom & Spooner, 1991). Shom and Spooner (1991) found that these students were overrepresented in two-year colleges and were underrepresented in four-year colleges and universities. The notion that going to any college will make them successful is unfounded. Equal representation at all levels is necessary to afford first-generation students the same career and life opportunities as other students. This difference in institutional attendance is often traced to lack of supportive and effective counseling for these students (Striplin, 1999). Adelman (1999) emphasized the impact of the enrollment in demanding classes while in high school as the most significant predictor of college completion, which highlights the important role school counselors play in the careful advisement and course assignment of historically marginalized students. Furthermore, effective school counselors should also help guide these students through the daunting college application and financial aid processes. Completion of a rigorous high school curriculum has greater impact on college completion than any other indicator of academic factor, including grade point average and test scores (Adelman, 1999).

Understanding the Financial Aid, Admissions Process, and College Experience

Students of color and first-generation students were found to not understand the steps needed to prepare for college (A Shared Agenda, 2004). They tended to overestimate the cost of tuition while underestimating the financial aid available to them (A Shared Agenda, 2004). They also were found to lack awareness of the different resources and ways to finance college and

were intimidated by basic admissions paperwork. The education requirements that were connected to their career goals were also unclear or completely incorrect in many cases (Vargas, 2004). School counselors can help students make these connections and demystify the college process (Reese & Hayes, 2002). Effective counselors strive to maintain authentic relationships with their students, helping to individualize the college selection and financial aid application processes to best suit the needs and true potential of every student.

Retention Difficulties

High school students from low-income families were found to be six times more likely than students from high-income families to leave school before earning a diploma (Board of Education, 2002). Those who did complete high school successfully and continued with their education were at a much higher risk of not completing college. The inability to afford the high and continually rising cost of tuition, books and housing creates continued financial challenges. Even for students who successfully enroll in a four-year college, first-generation students are more than twice as likely (23%) to drop out during the first year than their non-first-generation counterparts (10%) (Choy, 2001). Similarly, Nunuzand and Cuccaro-Alammin (1998) found that almost half of first-generation students who had entered a four-year college had not completed or were no longer enrolled four years later, compared to twenty-nine percent of non-first-generation students. Thayer went so far as to state that students with first-generation backgrounds are among the least likely to complete a degree (2000). After graduation, first-generation students who did obtain a bachelor's degree were also less likely to enroll in graduate schools (Thayer, 2000). A recent study by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation found that most students who drop out of college reported the inability to balance work life with academic demands (2011). Lower-income students must often work while in school to bridge the difference between

declining financial assistance and rising tuition costs. These statistics lend evidence supporting the need to examine some of the shared challenges experienced by many first-generation students, particularly those from a lower socioeconomic background.

Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Students

According to the U. S. Census Bureau (2012), almost 36 million people live below the poverty level in this country. This number is based on the poverty threshold according to the federal government's measure of money needed to maintain adequate nutrition. The poverty threshold set by the federal government for a family of four is 22,025. This amounts to almost 14 dollars per day to meet the nutritional needs of the family members. A family is considered in poverty if their income falls below this amount.

Silverstein (2009) stated that poverty is not just a lack of income. Suffering from food insecurity and hunger affects over fourteen percent of the United States population. People living in poverty also experience other hardships, such as the inability to pay for utilities and living in substandard or overcrowded conditions. Silverstein also notes that the definition of poverty is very different in other countries. For the purpose of this study, the focus is on children of poverty in the United States, specifically in the Athens, Georgia area.

The increase in the poverty rate between 2007 and 2008 was the first statistically significant annual increase since 2004 and is at the highest rate since 1997. Between 2008 and 2009, poverty rates increased in 31 states (United States Census Bureau, 2011). An increasing number of Americans appear to be at economic risk. Patterns such as weakened job security (Fligstein & Shin 2004) and higher levels of consumer debt continue to emerge. Poverty is not an issue confined to the past, but instead is a continuing challenge for more and more of our students.

Difficulties Linked to Poverty

Previous researchers found many difficulties that are linked with children of poverty (Elder, Conger, Foster, & Ardel, 1992). Behavioral problems, low self-esteem and lack of peer acceptance have consistently been found to trouble children of poverty (Patterson, Vaden, & Kupersmidt, 1991). McLeod and Shanahan (1993) found that children in situational poverty noted external problems while children with generational of poverty related it to internalizing symptoms.

Academic failure is often linked to poverty (DeCivita, 2004). In recent years, large sums of money have been spent on compensatory education programs such as Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965). A common objective for these programs was the improvement of the self-image of the “disadvantaged” child. Howard and Hammond (1985) found that when people who were confident of doing well at a task were confronted with unexpected failure, they tended to attribute the failure to inadequate effort. They would tend to work harder if a similar challenge were to arise. People who came to a task expecting to fail, on the other hand, attributed the failure to lack of ability. Many of children of poverty expect to fail in schools due to lack of ability not due to lack of effort. In turn, they do not put forth the effort needed to be successful. Student motivation has typically been studied as it relates to extrinsic or intrinsic sources of influences with little attention to the socioeconomic context (McCaslin & Burross, 2008). To better understand a student’s motivational source may enable counselors to better help a student see their academic options more clearly.

A better understanding of students’ experience living with low socioeconomic status while navigating high school and post-secondary options is needed if counselors are to help them continue on a successful track to college. What does it mean to be a student who is economically

disadvantaged? How would students describe life experiences as it relates to the world of school? What does one's self-concept look like as are a first-generation student affected by poverty? Are there themes that emerge in the educational aspirations and goals of these students? These are all questions that will help direct this study in finding a better understanding of what it means to be a first-generation student with low socioeconomic status in our schools today.

Access Issues

Many students do not attend college for reasons other than academic preparedness. The Century Foundation (2013) found that cost is a key barrier for college access for many students. Cost of tuition is on the rise while supplemental funding for students is not. Ehrenberg (2007) found that federal and state student-aid programs are being increasingly directed toward middle-income rather than lower-income students, while merit-based scholarships, which usually are awarded to higher-income families, are growing at a much faster rate than need-based grants (Kahlenberg, 2006). Pell grants, which at one time covered about 84 percent of the cost of attending college, now only cover approximately 15 percent (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). Low-income students face the challenge of finding funds to participate in what may be considered not a right, but a luxury – an advanced education. In conjunction with these bleak realities, economically disadvantaged students were found to be less informed about financial aid (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Pervasive confusion about costs and the availability of financial aid serve as other barriers.

Promising Practices and Programs

The findings noted previously can certainly be disheartening. Instead, however, counselors must use this information as fuel for their efforts to find ways to change the situations that generate these statistics, in favor of the students. Ayala and Striplen found that when asked

why first-generation students applied and enrolled in college, these students stated that it was to improve their social and economic standing (2002). However, being able to envision a different set of circumstances is often difficult for adolescents. Gullatt and Jan (2003) suggested that offering high school college preparatory classes on college campuses would help students see themselves on campus after they graduate from high school. This type of intervention would allow students to experience successes on a college campus and help bridge the disconnect between high school and college.

The primary objective of many pre-college programs is to ensure that underrepresented students achieve the same success level as their more privileged counterparts (Baskin, 2008). The Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis noted that these programs help underserved students prepare for, access, and succeed in postsecondary education by targeting students who are at risk of not applying to, attending or graduating from college (2003). These students often come from low-income families, have parents who did not attend college, and/or are students of color underrepresented in higher education (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). Outreach program services are designed to supplement the assistance students receive from their limited resources and better prepare them for college application and entry (Tierney, Colyer, & Hagedorn, 2002).

Thorough preparation is needed before entering college, if a student intends to succeed there (Carrillo, 2009). This means, in part, that students must have made informed decisions on what they want to study in college. Such decisions may be difficult to make. In this regard, pre-college programs may enrich their support methods by including tutoring services for such students, which can help students identify their areas of interest and aptitude. Improvements can also be achieved through study groups and college entrance exam preparation. These programs usually offer counseling services to the students and their families. Given hardships that these

students and their families undergo, it is crucial for them to have counseling to give them strength and hope in succeeding in their academics (Martinez, 2009).

Upward Bound

One program that is working toward this end is the Upward Bound Program (United States Department of Education, 2011). It is one of the largest and longest-running federal pre-college programs for economically disadvantaged students. The U.S. Department of Education states that the Upward Bound Program:

Provides fundamental support to participants in their preparation for college entrance. The program provides opportunities for participants to succeed in their pre-college performance and ultimately in their higher education pursuits. Upward Bound serves: high school students from low-income families; and high school students from families in which neither parent holds a bachelor's degree. The goal of Upward Bound is to increase the rate at which participants complete secondary education and enroll in and graduate from institutions of postsecondary education (2011).

TriO is a federally-funded program found at over 900 colleges and universities that helps first-generation and low-income students successfully navigate their college or university experiences. TriO's goal is to ensure retention among their supported students. According to the Council for Opportunity in Education (COE), "More than 2,900 TriO projects currently serve more than 840,000 low-income Americans. Many programs serve students in grades six through 12. Thirty-seven percent of TriO students are Whites, 35% are African-Americans, 19% are Hispanics, 4% are Native Americans, 4% are Asian-Americans, and 1% are listed as "Other," including multiracial students" (COE, 2011). Current policy requires that two-thirds of students in Upward Bound must be both low-income and potential first-generation college students. The

remaining third of students must be either low-income or potential first-generation college students.

History

Upward Bound was “designed to generate skills and motivation necessary for success in education beyond high school among young people from low-income backgrounds and inadequate secondary school preparation” (Public Law 90-222, 1967). In 2006, 925 Upward Bound projects served over 68,000 students (Akiba et al., 2007). The program has such a broad reach to students throughout the United States that it is important to fully understand the effects it has on students who participate in it.

Effectiveness

The findings of a recent U. S. Department of Education study regarding the impacts of the Upward Bound program on postsecondary outcomes were inconclusive (Department of Education, 2004). Researchers found that more significant participation in the program correlated with an increase in postsecondary enrollment. Students who stayed in the program for a longer duration were also more likely to enroll in college upon completion of high school. Because participants decided how much they participated, personal characteristics may have had a greater effect on both outcomes. The groups may have differed on unmeasured dimensions such as motivation or family support. Without this deeper understanding of the students, which could possibly have a greater effect than the program itself, it is difficult to draw conclusions regarding the effectiveness of this or any similar program.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

A literature review of studies examining the needs of first-generation college students eligible to participate in programs such as Upward Bound yielded few with a student-centered approach. There was little evidence to indicate that student voices had been used as guideposts for change, when considering the impact and desired outcomes of such programs (Department of Education, 2004). Although there have been studies measuring long-term impacts based on college matriculation and retention rates, few have examined the perceived needs of a pre-college population, as expressed by the students themselves.

The purpose of this study was to examine how students in a pre-college program reflect on and describe their life experiences leading up to and while participating in this program. A constructivist paradigm provided the foundation for this phenomenological research study. Crotty (2003) described constructivism as the assumption that all beliefs and understandings are contextualized within social constructs and are given meaning as a result of the interactions between people and their environments (p. 64). Constructivism focuses on the belief that the world is created through meanings attributed by individuals (Crotty). The feelings and beliefs expressed by students in this study are not static entities experienced by all students. The students individually constructed their interpretations of life events and experiences within the Upward Bound program on a foundation of their own histories and personalities. This variety in their backgrounds was evident in the differences in the students' accounts of similar experiences within the Upward Bound Program.

In contrast to previous research, this study instead used qualitative methodology, following a phenomenological paradigm, to develop a clearer understanding of the experiences of these students. The goal of this inquiry was to determine what life events or experiences students found most salient on their path to higher education. Instead of presenting the “researcher as expert,” in this study, the students (those not in power) were asked to tell their own story and assume the role of experts about their own lives. Instead of making assumptions about what types of pre-college experiences were most beneficial to first-generation students with financial needs, the students were asked to share their interpretations of events that they found most important and enlightening. This chapter provides the methods and procedures used to study these students and give voice to their experience.

Rationale for the Qualitative Approach

The integration of qualitative methodologies into educational research in the 1960s and 1970s introduced structures and tools that expanded the process of data collection and the depth of information being gathered (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Statistical analyses and quantitative measures do not provide the depth of information needed to answer the questions in this study. Questionnaires and checklists cannot gather data that is rich enough to give voice to potential first-generation college students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. Qualitative research provides a deeper understanding through interviews and observations made by the researcher and the participants. Creswell (2007) noted that qualitative research is necessary when the goal is understanding the contexts or settings in which participants experience a problem or phenomenon. Qualitative research seeks to understand phenomena within the context of the participants' perspectives and experiences (Merriam, 2002), and therefore, in this case, provided the most appropriate methodology to clearly hear the voices of these students. “The qualitative

researcher tries to understand the people he or she is observing from the participants' viewpoints through empathetic understanding" (Johnson & Christensen, 2008. p. 36).

Johnson and Christensen (2008) noted that the qualitative researcher also uses a wide- and deep-angle lens to examine subjects in their natural environment. This study sought to discover the essence of participants' reality in their natural world – in this case, the research-extensive Southeastern University. Qualitative methods allowed the researchers to “get close” to their participants through observations and interviews intended to discover those realities (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

The phenomenological approach to qualitative research offers insight into the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a particular group of individuals who share a common experience or phenomena (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The purpose of phenomenological research is to obtain a view into the research participants' lived experiences and the personal meanings constructed from these experiences (Creswell, 2007). The phenomenological paradigm provides greater understanding of the experiences of potential first-generation students who are of low socioeconomic status as they participate in a pre-college outreach program, and the situations in their lives that affect their school success. This information may give educators, including counselors, a better understanding of how best to support these students in their academic endeavors and as they work toward their life goals.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1995) was used as the theoretical basis for this study. Because counseling researchers have traditionally been members of the privileged community, it has mostly gone unnoticed that many of the ideas and notions of traditional counseling may contribute to, or at the very least ignore, some of the ongoing oppression within Western society.

The analysis of such oppressive power is essential when considering barriers that students may be facing (Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Particularly because this study is examining aspects of programs that have been established to support the needs of historically marginalized populations, it is crucial not to overlook any blind spots embedded in the institutional services that may be patronizing towards their consumers. For a researcher studying students who have experienced power differentials within our society, such obstacles are important to consider when performing the study, as well as when making suggestions for future research.

When considering the inequities in college access for different populations, it is important to remember two important aspects of social justice: (a) the maintenance of equal rights and fundamental liberties and (b) the equal distribution of resources and opportunities to those who have historically been marginalized (Rawls, 1971). There are new counseling paradigms that are also built on these ideas instead of seeing them as an afterthought to be considered. Crethar, Rivera, and Nash (2008) emphasized the multiple levels that are necessary for social justice counseling because one must promote empowerment of the individual while also actively confronting the injustices and inequality in society. As a social justice advocate, one must use four principles to guide research: equity, access, participation, and harmony. Researchers must investigate the individual view as well as focus on the broader systemic factors that may be negatively affecting a student's probability of attending postsecondary options. The student is an active participant in their own lives, so it is important to have an understanding of the personal expressions of these students.

Some of these same issues are the focus of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings, 2007). Many social institutions were formed in the early twentieth century during a time of racial inequality, therefore white, middle-class norms are embedded in many of our current societal

rules and regulations (Yosso, 2005). Crenshaw, et al. (1995) discussed the key components and methods of CRT for researchers to consider. These components include the exploration of the ways that institutional practices may perpetuate racial and ethnic inequalities as well as the importance of viewing policies within a historical and cultural context, often through narrative stories. Critical theory perspectives focus on empowering people to overcome the constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender (Fay, 1987). The individualistic approach of these models provides a means for self-representation by those who may otherwise go unheard.

Because the lack of a college-going culture for some populations is in many ways due to institutional practices and dated laws (Bell, 2007), CRT is well-suited as a guide for researching the challenges that socioeconomically challenged and first-generation students must overcome, and provides a clear lens to help understand the data once the information is collected.

Furthermore, if the student interviews revealed any practices that seem to impede the progress of the historically marginalized population, this insight would allow for improvements to help remove those impediments. The researcher hoped to discover meaning that would lead to better-informed practices that could improve the situation of marginalized low SES students who are potentially first-generation college students.

The theoretical stance of this research is especially crucial, since the issue at hand involves the potential for blind spots from the perspective of those in power. In this case, the persons who run the Upward Bound program and the researcher are all at risk of overlooking the true needs of those being served; the students. Therefore, the procedures of in-depth interviews and checking for understanding were of ultimate importance, to ensure that researcher bias was reduced as much as possible. The students, rather than the researcher, were treated as the experts

and the authoritative source of knowledge when determining which elements of the program may need to be altered for optimal success.

Central Research Question

Built on the foundations of Critical Race Theory within the traditions of the qualitative approach to research called phenomenology, this study was guided by the following central research question: What is the lived experience of potential first-generation college students who have low socioeconomic status, participating in a pre-college outreach program as part of a research-extensive Southeastern university? Creswell (2007) recommended following the central research question with procedural sub-questions in a phenomenological study. The sub-questions that were derived from the central research question and informed the construction of the interview questions were: What statements describe these experiences? What themes emerge from these experiences? What are the contexts and thoughts about these experiences? What is the overall essence of the experiences? This central research question and series of sub-questions provided a guide for how the researcher conducted this study and for the analysis of collected data.

Procedures

Site Selection and Description

The University of Georgia is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. It has a student body of more than 34,000 students and a completion rate of 82.5 percent (University of Georgia Bulletin, 2013). The university sponsors two Upward Bound Programs in the surrounding area. These programs provided services for approximately 140 students (Personal Interview, 2012).

Participant Selection and Criteria

Purposeful sampling and sample of convenience were both used to find participants for this study. In my first meeting with the director, I explained my area of interest involving potential first-generation college students who were socioeconomically disadvantaged. The director agreed to allow her students to participate if IRB gave approval for the study. After IRB approval, the director and I had a second meeting that involved reviewing documents to be given to participants and their legal guardians. These documents included permission letters, letters of intent, and letters of assent and consent. These letters included the purpose of the study as well as the possible risks and benefits that could result from participation.

Creswell suggested that a phenomenological researcher interview 5 to 25 participants (2009). Using purposeful sampling, the director selected 8 students who were both potential first-generation college students and of low socioeconomic status. If all 8 students did not return the documents needed, then a second round of students would be invited to participate. If saturation did not occur from 8 participants, more would have also been invited to participate. Specifically, the director had identified four additional students who met the criteria who could have been included if needed. All 8 potential participants returned the needed documentation and saturation of data was achieved, so no additional students were invited to participate. During our third meeting, the director provided me with contact information for the participants.

Once participants signed and returned all letters of permission, consent and assent, I contacted these potential participants personally by telephone to confirm that they had permission to participate in the study and to reiterate that all parts of the study were voluntary and that they could end participation at any time. I clarified the intent of the study as well as a detailed explanation of the steps that we would take together throughout the study. Participant criteria included the following: (a) students returned all forms needed for participation; (b)

parents had no college going experience; (c) students met the criteria related to socioeconomic status; and, (d) students were enrolled in the pre-college program during the time of the study.

Development of Interview Questions

Interactions during the meetings between the researcher and the participants were guided by the open-ended questions in the interview protocol (see Appendix B). I developed these semi-structured interview questions from my selected review of the literature and my theoretical framework, Critical Race Theory. The interview questions were created to help participants, who were from a historically marginalized group, to describe their experiences by answering open-ended questions that allowed them to share their personal perspective of their community, educational experiences, and future aspirations. These interview questions were designed to gather data that would provide textural and structural descriptions of the experience of a particular population, in this case, students' personal experience as a potential first-generation college student of lower SES participating in a pre-college outreach program (Creswell 2007).

Data Collection and Management

The purpose of qualitative research was to provide thick, rich information about a phenomenon with detailed descriptions, often through words directly from the participants. Rather than gathering generalizable data from a large number of participants, this study set out to learn the essence of the experiences from a small number of participants through interviews and a creative assignment.

Interviews

Face-to-face interviews were conducted within the span of two weeks on the college campus in different locations including classrooms, meeting rooms, or at outdoor locations that were familiar to the students. Interviews were scheduled to coincide with times that students

would be on campus attending classes. Half of the initial interviews (4 out of the 8) were conducted during their morning class sessions. Three out of the eight were performed in the afternoon. One initial interview was performed in a meeting room at a local library because the student was not available on the days set aside for the initial interviews on campus. It was important that I interviewed participants on or near the campus where they were attending classes for Upward Bound. Context and natural settings are important factors to consider in phenomenological studies, so it was important to interview participants at the same location where they were receiving services from the program (Creswell, 2007). The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended. The first meeting used the interview protocol (Appendix A) as a guide. However, because of the nature of the study, I allowed the participants to help guide the interview with their answers. Follow-up questions not in the protocol were posed with the intent of clarifying and better understanding participants' meanings. Initial interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour. The interviews provided a venue for students with lower socioeconomic status to share their experiences as a potential first-generation college student. The inductive method of coding and categorizing from open-ended interview questions provided data for layered, rich descriptions of the participants' experiences.

Creative Lifeline Assignment

Using the creative assignment to share their lifeline provided a novel way to collect data to tell the participants' story. Barone and Eisner (2012) encouraged the use of arts as an expressive form of enlightenment in qualitative research. Participants' were given the opportunity to self-reflect upon their life story and present their thoughts in a method that did not require language. The second meeting began with reviewing information gathered from the initial interview. Then each participant shared a handcrafted lifeline, a creative assignment made

by following the instructions (Appendix B) and using the materials (poster board, crayons, markers, glitter, and glue) given during the first meeting. Follow-up interviews were also set on campus during times that were convenient for participants. Some interviews were again during the students' class time (3 during morning session, 2 during afternoon session) in an unused open classroom near their classes. Others chose to meet during their meal times (2 during lunch, 1 during breakfast). Two of these were conducted in meeting rooms near the dining hall and one was conducted outside at an eating area that was not being used by other students. This particular participant wanted to sit outside while talking about his lifeline. The second interviews lasted between 15 to 30 minutes.

Field Notes

I took both descriptive and reflective field notes throughout the data collection process (Bogden & Biklen, 2003). Hays and Singh (2012) noted that both types are important. The objective external details of the research process as well as the researcher's subjective internal reactions to the same process have the potential to impact data analysis. Notes taken included information regarding contact with the participants, location, time, and details that I noticed during the interviews. Notes were taken immediately after each interview so that important details would not be forgotten. I also kept a reflective journal throughout the process as well. Considering that the researcher is an instrument, this journaling process was important for the trustworthiness of this study.

Data Management

Each interview was audio recorded using two digital recorders. I transcribed all audio recordings and took digital pictures of the creative assignment artifacts. All audio and photograph files were encrypted and saved on my personal computer and a portable jump drive.

Interview procedure. All interviews were conducted in person and were audio recorded. All participants provided permission letters signed by their legal guardians. Once permission letters were received, interviews were scheduled during times that were convenient for them. At the beginning of the first interview, I introduced myself and provided the participant with an informed consent document. I also gave general information regarding the study and provided opportunity for participants to ask questions regarding the study and the process before beginning. The first semi-structured interview lasted between thirty minutes to an hour. After completion of the first interview, I offered another opportunity for questions and clarification about the study and process. Written and oral directions were given and materials were provided for the creative assignment at the conclusion of the first meeting. Before the second interview began, I offered member checks regarding the first interview. Questions for clarification of the purpose of the study were asked but no changes were requested from the participants during member checking. Upon completion of both interviews and the creative assignment, I thanked the participants with a gift card for their participation in the study.

Ethical considerations. Ramos (1989) described three challenges to consider in qualitative studies: the researcher/participant relationship, the subjective nature of the researcher's interpretations of the data, and the design of the study itself. I remained cognizant of these possible problems throughout the study and took measures to ensure that issues would not arise from these challenges. The personal interaction between the researcher and the participants is important in the data gathering process. I focused the relationship on the purpose of the research and the role of the researcher was clear to the participant throughout their time together. I utilized a research team and bracketing of the researcher's biases to help ensure the validity of the interpretations of the data. Although I obtained IRB approval for the study, the

researcher is ultimately responsible for the design of the study. I carefully considered both possible risks and benefits for the participants while designing the study

Data Analysis

The analysis of phenomenological data is emergent in nature. Creswell (2007) suggested very specific steps when analyzing phenomenological data. Following these steps, I first bracketed my experiences regarding lower socioeconomic status. Although my parents were college educated, I also bracketed my feelings on being a first-generation college student in the United States. Bracketing these experiences helped me maintain the focus of the study on the experiences of the participants. I transcribed the interviews myself to help immerse myself in their experiences and perspectives,. I then read the transcripts several times to get general knowledge of the data and then identified significant phrases that pertained directly to the participants' experiences. Then the transcripts were divided into statements using a process of horizontalization (Creswell, 2007). I coded these phrases and then formulated and clustered them into themes or meaning units that I found common among the participants' responses. The research team immersed themselves in the interview transcripts and found meaning units and themes, as well. Intercoder, or interrater reliability was very high. The units that were found by all members of the research team were transformed into clusters of meaning, which then tied the transformation together to make a general description of their shared phenomenological experience. These units included textural description of the phenomena, what was experienced by the participants, and structural description of their experience (Creswell, 2007).

In analyzing the creative assignment, abstracted themes came from a process of reflection by the participants during the second face-to-face meetings. This process allowed the participants to make meaning of their timelines and offered opportunity for explanation instead

of the researcher placing meaning on the product through her own personal lens. I then reviewed the themes and the meaning units and wrote textured descriptions of the students' experiences. These descriptions included the words used directly from the participants of the study. Finally, I synthesized the data into results that provide a description of the essence of the experiences of these eight potential first-generation students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and who were participating in a pre-college outreach program. Four themes emerged from the data analysis that will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

Trustworthiness

Hays and Singh (2012) noted that theoretical and technical concerns must be considered in qualitative research. Criteria for trustworthiness include credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, authenticity, coherence, sampling adequacy, ethical validation, substantive validation, and creativity (Hays & Singh, 2012). These criteria address both the design and implementation of the research.

Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed the importance of "believability" or credibility of a study. Hays and Singh (2012) noted that credibility helps determine if the findings make sense for a particular qualitative study. Member checks and a research team were used to maintain credibility for this study. Participants reviewed transcripts and had an opportunity to add any information they felt necessary to clarify the points they were making during the interviews. The research team helped guide the data collection process as well as provided support in organizing and analyzing the findings.

My peer research team consisted of me and two members from my doctoral cohort. As the primary researcher, I am an Asian female, a practicing school counselor, and a graduate

student in my fifth year of a Ph.D program in Counseling and Student Personnel Services at a research-extensive Southeastern university. I shared my assumptions and biases about first generation students, low socioeconomic status, and pre-college outreach programs with my research team before discussing findings as a way to bracket my biases (Creswell, 2007). The two additional peer research team members are graduates of the Ph.D. program in Counseling and Student Personnel Services at the same university. Themes were found using intercoder agreement upon review of the data collected through interviews and creative assignments.

Dependability

Upon completion of reviewing of the transcripts, the research team discussed clusters of meanings and themes that emerged. All research team members agreed on the findings of the study. In doing so, it supported the consistency of study results across researchers and strengthened the dependability of this study.

Confirmability and Authenticity

Interference from the researcher was prevented through use of a reflective journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I began during my first meeting with the director of Upward Bound. My last entry was made after analysis of the data was completed. By keeping a journal, I kept the research process transparent (Ortlipp, 2008). Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggested that the researcher must notice what she already knows and what she would come to know. Through journaling, I was able to track this insight more clearly. In doing so, the findings of the study provided genuine reflections of the students and not that of the researcher (Hays & Singh 2012).

Coherence

Critical Race Theory ascribes to the idea that reality is subjective according to the experiences that may be oppressive to different populations and that knowledge is co-constructed

between the researcher and the participants of a study (Hays & Singh 2012). The participants' voices are necessary in the research while minimizing the power imbalance natural to the research processes by using appropriate data collection methods. The researcher must also consider how the process and the results found from the study may affect the participants' reality. A phenomenological qualitative study lends itself well to answering the research question through the lens of Critical Race Theory.

Sampling Adequacy

Creswell (2007) noted that a qualitative researcher collects extensive details about a few participants. Dukes (1984) recommended having 3 to 8 participants in a phenomenological study. Creswell (2009) suggested between 5 and 25 participants for a phenomenological study. This study stayed within these ranges with 8 subjects. Data collection ended upon saturation of the data.

Ethical and Substantive Validation

Ethical practices were used throughout the study by maintaining informed consent, empowering individuals, and reporting findings that will be useful in policy decisions (Hays & Singh, 2012). The research is substantive, in that it found evidence that adds new knowledge regarding the experience of the participants (Mays & Pope, 2000).

Researcher as Analyst

Husserl's idea of "epoche" in which researchers sets aside their personal experiences and biases enables them to more clearly see the perspectives of the subjects which they study. Although completely removing all biases is seldom achieved (Moustakas, 1994), researchers often begin a study by describing their own experiences and bracketing their views before proceeding with the study of other's experiences (Creswell, 2007). Hays and Singh (2012) also

discussed the importance of bracketing researcher bias and assumptions before data analysis. As the researcher, I recognized that I was an instrument in the study and bracketed my personal understanding of what it means to be a first generation student with a history of being economically disadvantaged (Creswell 2009). To make my worldview known, the following is a narrative that tells my story.

I am a child of Vietnam, the eldest daughter of Sach Van and Ky Le Vo. My parents were college educated; my father a pilot in the South Vietnamese Air Force, my mother a nurse. In April, 1975, my father flew the helicopter in which my family and hundreds of other refugees escaped our war torn home country. A few months later, after time in a refugee camp in Arkansas, a local minister sponsored my family's migration to a small town in Georgia.

I am a child of the rural South. I grew up in Cochran, Georgia. Along with my 2 younger sisters and 3 younger brothers, I worked hard to live up to parents' expectations. Both my parents worked in factories, my father building lights and my mother sewing shirts. My father worked the night shift and my mother worked the day shift. My father's plans of advancing his education had to put aside because of the complexities of providing for our family.

I appreciate the challenges of growing up poor. I also value the gifts of my family and my culture. Now, as a school counselor working with students and families, I am aware of how much my own experiences inform my desire to provide access. Much like my family, students need to learn the rules of the American culture of power despite any language barriers and low income.

My parents may have been educated but not in America. They had cultural and family values but not skills that translated to upward mobility. What made the difference for me? The

minister, the teachers, the neighbors who I formed relationships with and became resources for my family, they taught me.

This is my background. As a responsible researcher who conducted this study, I remained cognizant that every student had a unique story told within the context of culture and family. I remained respectful of people's different ways of being. Regardless of challenges, each individual had the potential, with encouragement, to value education as a realistic option. My lens needed to be one of clear objectivity as I listened to the participants' stories.

.

.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This phenomenological study presents the lived experience of high school students who were potential first-generation college students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who were participating in a pre-college outreach program. Phenomenology provided an opportunity for these students to share their life experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 1993). Participants were able to tell their stories from their perspectives (Hays & Singh 2012, Creswell 2009). Direct quotes allowed readers of the study to hear the voices of the participants and not the interpretations of the researcher (Moustakas, 1994).

This chapter presents the key findings obtained from eight semi-structured, in-depth interviews beginning with a brief description of the interviewees. Following the brief descriptions is Table 1, which gives general information including age, grades, guardians, gender and race of each student. The results of the study inform understanding of potential first-generation students from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds in four ways by showing that (a) participants viewed family as supportive in their educational experience; (b) participants had at least one educator whom they saw as a mentor and a motivator; (c) participants had high expectations and career goals; and (d) participants had little understanding of the specific career chosen and the educational path needed to reach it. The major findings will be presented in this chapter and discussed in chapter five.

This study included eight high school students who were then attending a pre-college outreach program, five females and three males. They were all identified as being from lower

socioeconomic backgrounds and were potential first-generation college students. They all lived within an hour of the research-extensive southern university where they attended the pre-college outreach program. Seven of the eight participants lived in nontraditional families. They had either single-parent homes or lived with a grandparent. Some had other families living with them as well. Following is a brief description of each participant:

Jake was a sixteen year old African-American male with a serious demeanor. He was in 10th grade during the time of the interview. He played football and was connected with his coaches both on and off the field. He had hopes of attending the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill after graduation from high-school.

Jenny attended a small high school with a class of only 100. She was a vivacious 17 year old African-American senior when she participated in this study. She was active in cheerleading and enjoyed the academic and social aspects of school. She lived with her grandparents and often complained of living too far from where the action was.

James was sixteen years old. He was an African-American male in the 11th grade. He found some teachers easier to connect with than others at his school. He focused most of his attention on music and his friends who shared his interest.

Jane described herself as a positive and friendly seventeen year old. She was African-American and in the 11th grade. She was on the A-B honor roll and expected to continue in her academic success. She enjoyed helping others and hoped to incorporate it into her career aspirations.

Jessie, an African-American female, was a 10th grader who did not like to talk very much. She was suspicious of her peers and did not trust many people. She reported that she once was a troublemaker but was now more serious about her schooling.

Jasmine was a seventeen year old African American who called herself a country girl. She was in the 11th grade when she participated in the study. She lived on a rural road between both sets of grandparents and was very active in her church community.

Josephine, an African American female, was glad to move to a bigger town when she was in 1st grade. She was 17 during the time of the study and continued to appreciate the opportunities a larger town and school offered her. She talked about being in clubs, cheering, and dancing on squads as a senior in high school.

Josh, 17 years old, was a Caucasian male entering into the 11th grade during the time of our interview. He felt disconnected from his school and community because of the location and zoning of his home. The people who he felt most connected with as well as disconnected from were his family members.

Table 1

Participants' general information

Name	Age	Grades (Self-reported)	Guardian(s)	Gender	Race
Jake	16	A's and B's	Mother	male	African American
Josephine	17	A's and B's	Grandparents	female	African American
Jenny	17	A's	Mother	female	African American
Jasmine	17	A's, B's, and C's	Mother	female	African American
James	16	B's and C's	Mother	male	African American
Josh	17	B's, C's and D's	Grandparents & Mother	male	Caucasian
Jane	17	A's and B's	Mother & Father	female	African American
Jessie	16	C's and D's	Grandparents	female	African American

Discussion of Themes

The participants' perceptions of their life experiences as potential first-generation students of lower socioeconomic status were shared through in-depth interviews. The research team and I, as the researcher, read and reviewed the interviews and transcripts multiple times. We did this in order to "let the interviews breathe and speak for themselves" (Seidman, 1998, p. 100). The following themes were the results that were found upon analysis of the data: (Following the discussion of the findings, Table 2 gives an abbreviated view of each participant and their responses that correlated to each theme.)

Strong Affective Support from Family

The questions that guided the interview (see Appendix A) were designed to encourage conversation regarding the lived experiences of the participants in this study. Participants were asked to share about any people or experiences that they felt were significant in their education. Although none of their parents or grandparents had college experience, many named their family as being strong encouragers for them on their educational journey. The participants often noted that the encouragement came in the form of pushing them to stay focused. Josh said:

My mom, she'll keep pushing me in school to do better. Like sometimes I'll slack off, and won't do my work. She gets mad and tells me to do better.

Jasmine also talked about her mother and how she kept her focused on what she felt was important.

My mom always kept me on track. She always tried to keep me, you know, focused on getting to that particular level of my diploma and getting my degree and my focusing on my future.

Her support was in a very general way. The lack of detail in her mother's comments may be due to the lack of experience of what "that particular level" of a diploma may need to be. Jasmine mentioned no help from her mom regarding specific information or guidance in her education.

Jake shared about some "tough love" that his mother gave him. However, it too was very general. His mother pushed him to make higher grades because she knew it was important. However, his comments showed no evidence that she helped him be more academically successful in any way other than high grade expectations:

My mother, she pushes me. If I make a B, she pushes me to make an A. I think that she is helping me get toward my goals for my future so in the long run, I think it is going to help.

He also mentioned his grandparents and their different ways of helping. Because they also have little experience with college, his explanation of their support was convoluted. They were dependent on him to direct them in the way that they can support him:

My grandparents, on my dad's side. They try anything to, like any programs that I can get into that would help me as far as getting into school or anything. They help me [emotionally, financially,] in any way that they can.

Jane also did not have very specific nor purposeful support from her family when it came to academics. Her encouragement was even more abstract than most students. She did not talk about family members who actively encouraged or supported her. She was encouraged to push herself academically by her father in an indirect way after he gained physical challenges because of an illness. Her determination to be academically successful came from witnessing his physical struggles:

My father [has been most significant] in my educational experience. Because this year he had a stroke, and I see him trying each and every day harder to regain his abilities. He never quits. So it has been an inspiration to watch that. He reminds me to keep trying.

Strong Connection with an Educator

Studies have found that having a strong connection with an educator as well as with family correlates with feelings of engagement (Furrer & Skinner, 2003) and having positive self-esteem and higher motivation (Ryan, Stiller & Lynch, 1994). It was encouraging for me to find that participants all mentioned an educator in their lives who had a strong influence on their educational experience and their aspirations and goals. Some talked about the positive effect that teachers had on them. Jane, who had a history of academic struggles and had previously been retained, felt that the high expectations a particular teacher put on her made a positive difference in her academic success:

My homeroom teacher, she was “Mrs. Phillips”. In her room, she made us really work on homework and made us study. She always made sure that I passed everything so that I can get to the right grade and she helped me with my homework and study and tell me to do what I need to do to pull up my classes so that I can get back on track and pass.

Josephine spoke fondly of her 7th grade teacher who not only encouraged her but spent time one on one with her to discuss areas of interest. Her positive relationship with him allowed for what otherwise might have been viewed as nagging to be seen as strong encouragement instead. Instead of his comments pushing severing the relationship, they seemed to make their connection stronger. Her teacher was also one of the few adults mentioned that gave support beyond encouragement. Although Josephine didn’t give details of what he said, she did mention that he gave her information specific to her goals and her aspirations:

He was my favorite teacher. He was a friend and a teacher instead of just being a teacher. He pushed me to do everything. To become better at things instead of just settling for okay. [His pushing] annoyed me so much. Everybody has that feeling sometimes of “Oh, I don’t wanna do this today!” I used to be like that all of the time. He just told me, “Come on. I want you to do this. It’s gonna help you. It’s not going to hurt you.” And I listened to it. It turns out he was right! I’m determined to graduate! He took time to explain things to me so that I’d know more about it, in areas that interested me.

James talked about teachers who had a positive effect on him. When I asked about people or things that have had a significant role in his life he was happy to share about his teacher, whose excitement for teaching translated into his excitement for learning. He spoke of success in a subject that he usually did poorly. His teacher’s positivity helped him overcome his dislike of mathematics and helped him pass the class, an accomplishment that he was excited to talk about with me. He had confidence in his teacher’s abilities to help him do well in the class:

Some teachers are really, really good at what they do. They know what they are doing and they don’t want you to fail. My math teacher in 10th grade. She strived to make sure that I was going to pass her class. She would get excited and talk about how important it was. I came out with a 70 something. I passed! And I hate math with a passion. It’s not that I don’t understand how to do it. It’s just that I’m not a good test taker in math and I get frustrated. Her excitement about my learning made a difference for me.

The importance of a connection is almost tangible (Gillespie, 2005). Trust and respect help create a space in which students are affirmed and are more likely to see their potential. In doing so, they are can move closer to their set goals (Gillespie, 2005). Even Jessie, who trusted very

few people and was very suspicious of others, seemed to soften when talking about her favorite teacher:

There are teachers that I do like. Ones that help me and are not too pushy. And even teachers that go overboard with the work they also help you. Like one of my teachers, her name is "Mrs. Kirkland". I didn't like her at first because she used to always try to make me sit at the front of the class. I didn't like being in the front of the class, then, she started being o.k. In the front you can focus. You can concentrate. She knew that I get distracted easily. She'd rather I sit in the front than the back. I got more work done. She would say that I was basically a good kid. When I sit in the front I got more work done, [not] trying to focus on other people and their distractions. I can understand where she came from. So I sit in the front, now. I know how I can be.

Her trust in her teacher's reasons of why she should sit closer to the front of the classroom helped her be more responsible. She began to make decisions of her own that reflected her teacher's beliefs as well. Jake talked about his teachers in a positive way, too. He interpreted his teachers' kindness as a genuine hope for him to be successful. Their focus was on him and what was best for him:

I like the teachers. They are always willing to help me. If I'm failing their classes, they always ask me if there is anything they can do to help. I can tell that they want me to succeed.

As well as his connection with his coaches who gave the message that academics were more important than sports. He not only said that they were close, he said that they were like family.

The coaches have contributed significantly to my life. My football coaches -- it's normal for coaches to accept a 2.0 to play on the team. But on our team you have to have a 2.5

or a 3.0. Then we have a little session of tutoring before we have practice. So they have high expectations for me and it's not just about the football. They are all like a second father. They take care of me. If I am going through something, they try to help me to see what is going on. Anything they do to help. They are involved with you personally, too. Although her school was small, Jenny felt that her school was readying her for college. She focused on the positives that a small school is able to provide including the intimacy and lack of anonymity that comes with a small school:

Although my school is small, it is really preparing us. You get a lot of one on one with the teachers. Everybody knows your name. They accept you and they help you out. Our school is really cool. I feel like I've had some good support through the school.

And she brightened as she spoke specifically about her school counselor who she called "a renaissance man". Although this man of many talents is someone who she saw as a good resource, the only specifics she mentioned were the SAT preparation and his ability to provide guest speakers for the school. The day to day support that teachers offer was not evident in her significant educator:

He can do a lot. He is really helpful and help with the SAT and help us with different things. He helps us with skills that we will need later in life and gives us pointers. So he's really good to me. He always brings an inspirational person to our school and they give us a message about their struggles, if they had any.

High Aspirations and Career Goals for Self

Affective support from family and connections made with educators seemed to help the students gain confidence in their abilities which in turn produced high expectations for their futures (Ryan, Stiller & Lynch, 1994). Although some participants had previously had academic

failures, everyone seemed very hopeful for the future. During all of the interviews, they were excited to talk about their career and academic plans. Participants presented positivity and confidence regarding their ability to succeed, some had it from within themselves, others talked of friends, family and teachers believing in them. James not only found friends through his love of music, he also found confidence. When telling about his passion he said:

I made a lot of friends in middle and high school because I started my whole rapping thing my 10th grade year. I know I'm good because people tell me I'm good and I'm like, you're right, I am.

Jane was also very confident in her abilities and her future. She said that the words from her friend's mother rang true to her:

She always tells me that I should become what I want to be. Not to ever let anybody stop me from being who I am and who I want to be.

Josh seemed to focus a lot on the negative things that were happening in his life and his view of himself was different from the other participants in that he didn't see himself as currently successful. He did, however, share everyone else's confidence in what the future would bring. His quiet demeanor changed when he talked about the future. He became more animated and upbeat:

How do I feel about the future? I feel great! I think I will do a lot of stuff. I'll be able to go out on my own and become something great.

It is not unusual for the feeling of high abilities to result in great expectations for career paths (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001). This study found this same trend in the participants' life views. Their confidence was clearly paired with high aspirations. Not only did they have great expectations, there was a trend in their areas of interests. Many of the students

had hopes of careers in the medical field. Jasmine was very clear in her plan. She said without hesitation:

I want to be a pediatrician. I'm interested in medicine and that why I want to be a pediatrician.

Josephine talked about going on a path that ended in both sports medicine and athletics.

Although the path had little detail, she had high hopes as well:

A year from now, I hope to be getting accepted, I hope I will be accepted into the college of my choice and will be starting to do what I want to do, starting on that pathway to doing what I want to do in life. I want to go into sports medicine and I want to be an athletic trainer.

Jake spoke nothing of his path to his future career, but he also wanted to study sports medicine:

I want to study sports medicine and become a doctor with sports and help other athletes.

Jenny gave a little more detail, but not much. Her response regarding her plan gives hints to the next theme. Although she seemed to be confident of her plans, she had little understanding of the process:

By next Fall, I should be attending classes at [the university] and that I'll be on the path to graduating early. Hopefully I'll be getting my core classes in and living the college life. I would like to then transfer to a medical school.

Jessie was considering a couple of career paths. However, she seemed to think that she didn't need to choose one over the other. Her response suggested that she would be able to do both simultaneously:

So a year from now, I hopefully will be in college, try to grow my life, and have a job. I want to be a nurse. I want to go to school for nursing and dentistry.

Not surprisingly, James talked more and related his strong interest in music to his career choice. His passion for music continued to be evident when he spoke of his future. However, he somehow connected “business school” and “music engineering”:

I think I want to go into music engineering. I enjoy music like, really, really much and I just want to go to school for music engineering and start with that. I want to go to business school, so I can learn to copyright my stuff if I want to make something like that.

Josh also connected his interests to his career of choices. He understood that they did not relate to one another and that he would need to choose between the two. His choices were due specifically to his interests and seemed to have no connection to his talents or areas of strength:

I want, I guess it would be game designer, or a sports announcer, cause I like both.

Jane, on the other hand, talked of different career paths that she hoped to merge into something she would enjoy. She wanted to help others, but felt that she should also consider her area of academic strength, which was mathematics:

Basically, a year from now, I hope to be graduated and be accepted to college to become a registered nurse and an accountant.

Limited Understanding of Educational Path for Career Goals

As noted in the previous theme, participants had great aspirations for their career paths. However, through more depth in analysis of the data we uncovered a very thin surface level of understanding and awareness of what steps would be needed to make their occupational dreams a reality. Many of their responses regarding aspirations for the future hinted at their little understanding. Upon further investigation, it became more apparent that they were equipped with very little information about their designated career choices. Some participants not only

had little understanding of educational demands that lay ahead of them, but also had very little understanding of the occupation itself.

Josh, who noted earlier of having dreams to become either a game designer or a sports announcer, said he wanted to go to a couple of southeastern universities:

I just want to go there because that state is nice.

When asked how he came to these career ideas he simply said:

I watch SportsCenter, and I play video games. I know if I do sports announcer, I'll have to have journalism because you have to be able to talk. And for video games, you have to be able to draw and stuff like that. But the biggest one is sports, because I follow sports.

I even have the app on my phone so I can keep track of [the teams].

I asked him who he had talked with regarding his educational planning. His response gave more information as to why his understanding was so limited. He not only received emotional support from his family, he was also receiving most, if not all, of his career guidance from his mother as well:

Mostly my mom. I just talk to her about it. I talk to my mom about the colleges and what I can get into. But she said that she thinks that I can do something better than that, like an architect, because I write small. I write really small.

The participants often relied on their parents or other family members to help guide them through their career ideas. Because the participants themselves will be the first to go to college in their families, they had strong support and help from people who were ill prepared to do so. James, who planned to become a music engineer said the following when I asked him for details about that particular career choice:

Basically, it's like producing. Making beats and letting people record in your studio and stuff. Basically, you'll be able to control how they sound off a track or something like that. My friend knows more about it than I do. He told me about it.

When I inquired about the steps that he would need to take to become a music engineer, his response also was littered with words that he had heard through friends or television, such as "engineering", "business school" and "copyrighting" but seemed to be unclear of what they really meant:

I think if I do this engineering first, I'm going to still end up having to go to business school. And if not, if I can copyright my stuff before then, that will be the way I try to make it up there.

Jessie had a career plan specifically to help others. Although she lacked much in understanding of her career plans, she did not lack in enthusiasm for her future. She had shared that her interests were in both nursing and dentistry and answered my question of what contributed to her plans and goals by saying:

Because I love being around kids. I love helping out others, you know. I don't know about myself. I think this is something I want to do. I want to learn more about it. What they do. That kind of stuff. Like, people may need my help. I want to go to the state university, but I'm not sure about that. I'm just very excited about the idea.

Jenny seemed to only know that she was going to attend medical school. Her clarity seemed to end there. She was unsure of what she would study there:

After I transfer to a medical school, I'll do whatever I have to do there. The most I can do is try planning.

When I asked her about the details of her plans she did not have any to share with me. She seemed to hope that things would just fall into place. This reliance on serendipity is not surprising since she did not have any specific steps mapped out to get where she was hoping to go:

You know, just whatever happens. I can never predict the future.

Jasmine wanted to become a pediatrician. She had a slightly more developed plan for doing so. She spoke of wanting to go to a couple of medical colleges in the state because:

I've been there. I am familiar with the campuses.

When asked why going into pediatric medicine, she talked fondly of experiences. However her thoughts related to the field of medicine were disjointed and showed lack of understanding of her role as a pediatrician would be:

Well I want to be a pediatrician because children cling to me. I love kids. At church, I'm a teacher with the pre-schoolers. And I'm interested in medicine. It's not that I want to cure them from sickness and disease. I want to help them and make them feel better.

And they make me smile. I like children. I want to work in a children's hospital.

Jake and Josephine both aspired to go into sports medicine. When I asked Jake why he thought he wanted to go to the southeastern school that he named, he said simply:

It's just a school that sticks out to me.

When I asked him what he felt will contribute to his career plans he said:

Definitely education... And a lot of work and determination.

But when I asked him to elaborate on what that meant, he was unable to do so. Josephine had more to say when discussing her future plans and how she had come to the area of sports medicine:

I guess because I'm a hands on type of person. I like to learn hands on and like to try new things. I combine like massage with sports. I've seen the athletic trainer at our school. I enjoy being around him a lot. He makes his job seem like it's not a job. And since my best friend tore her ACL a few years ago, every now and then I have to help her with certain things and it's just really interesting. She makes me stretch her out and massage her leg and stuff like that. And when I have classes with the football players, they always ask me to come stretch them out or something like that. At first I was like, really? But apparently they like it and they say it feels good and it helps so I'm happy to help.

Many participants chose potential colleges purely from campuses that they had visited or had personal experience. Some choices were from field trips through Upward Bound or school.

Others were close to home or other family members. Jenny said:

I want to go to either New York or Chicago. New York because I have ties there. Chicago, actually, here in Upward Bound. That is where I was introduced to it. We went for the cultural trip. And we visited the campus and I just fell in love with it. It was just like, oh I love this place, I can't imagine going anywhere, besides New York, I just couldn't imagine going anywhere. I just really fell in love with it. Chicago is a very nice place. It wasn't too city like for me. Maybe it was just the area we were in, but I really enjoyed it while I was there.

Jasmine talked about choosing a college because it was familiar. She had been on this particular campus through a program at school:

I want to move on to Emory because I'm more comfortable there and have stayed on campus.

When I asked Jake about his choice in colleges, he seemed to know that he had little knowledge of the college itself. However he did not talk of needing to investigate further. He seemed to be content with his simple answer:

It's just because it's in my home state.

No one talked of making an informed decision with help from a well-equipped adult. Career choices did not seem to be considered when colleges were being discussed. Only Josephine talked about doing research on her own regarding schools that offer programs in her area of interest, sports medicine. Her research, however, still was minimal and she seemed pleased with having made her "informed" decision:

Because I researched for sports medicine for like the top colleges and those two came up.

Table 2

Participants and their responses within the four themes

Name	Family Support	Educational Mentor	High Expectations	Low Understanding
Jake	Mother and Grandparents	Coaches and teachers	Doctor in Sports medicine	Choosing a school because it sticks out to him
Josephine	Grandparents	7 th grade teacher	Athletic trainer and Sports medicine	She likes to combine massage with sports
Jenny	Grandparents	Counselor	Medical school	Do whatever she needs to do at medical school
Jasmine	Mother	Biology teacher	Pediatrician	Choosing school because of familiarity with campus
James		10 th grade teacher	Business and music engineering	Information from friend
Josh	Mother	Upward bound counselor	Game designer or sports announcer	Nice state for college
Jane	Father	Homeroom teacher	Registered nurse and accountant	Want to work in a hospital and then own her own accounting business
Jessie	Grandparents	Teacher	Nursing and Dentistry	Because people need help

Summary

This chapter shared details of the lived experiences of eight students of low socio-economic status who were participating in a pre-college program and were potentially the first in their family to attend college. Overall, the in-depth interviews revealed that these students have support from home and school. This support seemed to translate into self-confidence and high

expectations for these students and their futures. Many of the students had plans for careers in the medical field. A majority of the participants named careers in pediatrics, nursing or sports medicine. Some participants imagined combining careers because they were in areas of interest, although the careers had no relevance to one another. Their stories showed little evidence of knowledge regarding the chosen careers. Colleges were chosen in large part due to field trips or familiarity, not according to programs related to their area of interest. The participants, in large part, relied heavily on their families, who had little to no experience in postsecondary education, to guide them to these career choices.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

My aim as the researcher in this study was to understand the lived experience of students who were potential first-generation college students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who were participating in a pre-college outreach program. In this chapter, I provide: (a) a brief summary of the central premises, methods, and findings of this study; (b) relation to the literature on which the study was based; (c) implications for school counselor practice and pre-college program development; and (d) recommendations for future research. I conclude this chapter with my own personal goals based on the findings of this study as I continue to work as an elementary school counselor.

Brief Summary of the Study

As noted in chapter one, studies suggest that students who are both potential first-generation college students and are of economic disadvantage are at even greater risk of being academically unsuccessful and are not likely to apply for or attend college (Thayer, 2000). First-generation students are more likely to come from lower-income families (Choy, 2001). Forty-two percent of first-generation students, who are dependents, are from the lowest quartile for family income in the United States, which is almost twice as many as their non-first generation peers (Choy, 2001). Potential first-generation college students who also struggle with the challenges associated with lower socioeconomic status provide a particular group in need of advocacy by all educators, and especially professional school counselors, who are charged with improving educational experiences and outcomes for all students.

The foundation of the approach in this research study was constructivism, which holds that all beliefs and understandings are given meaning from interactions between people and their environment, and are relevant in the context of their social structure (Crotty, 2003). In the case of low-income potential first-generation college students, little research has related their voices in their personal contexts, and their experience participating in a pre-college outreach program has not been fully explored. This study used a phenomenological approach to qualitative research to offer insight into the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a particular group of individuals who share a common experience or phenomena (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Critical Race Theory (Creswell, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1998) informed the development of the open-ended interview questions that provided opportunities for the students to share their perspective of their community, personal experiences, and future aspirations. Using the phenomenological methodology while being informed by Critical Race Theory, this study was designed around the central research question: What is the lived experience of potential first-generation college students with low socioeconomic status, participating in a pre-college outreach program?

Four themes were discovered in this study: (a) participants viewed family as supportive in their educational experience; (b) participants had at least one educator whom they saw as a mentor and a motivator; (c) participants had high expectations and career goals for themselves; and (d) participants had limited self-reflection on strengths and growing edges and little understanding of the specific career chosen and the educational path needed to reach it. In many cases, their parents, who had no college experience, were their primary source of information and guidance for their career goals.

These themes suggest that the students were receiving emotional support from both home and school. Their family members had higher aspirations for their students, including obtaining a college education, than they had achieved themselves (Theme 1). The students' stories also indicated that they received at least some support at their schools, from coaches, teachers, and in one case, a counselor (Theme 2). With this encouragement, the participants were considering college and had high aspirations regarding careers (Theme 3). The fourth theme, however, suggested that these students have little to no knowledge of how to move from setting these goals to achieving these goals. Even one of the more historical models of career choice articulated by Parsons (1903) suggested that to make successful occupational decisions one must have an accurate understanding of oneself (interests, strengths, abilities), a knowledge of the world of work, and a rational judgment of the relationship between the two. The participants' responses indicated that they had minimal knowledge of the world of work and no reasoned connection of how their abilities may or may not match their career choices (Theme 4).

Themes in Relation to the Literature

The literature reviewed included the need for professional school counselors to be prepared to help implement improved educational experiences and outcomes for potential first-generation college students from lower income backgrounds. Specifically, literature was reviewed regarding: (a) the evolution of professional school counselor roles in educational reform related to advocacy and multicultural competence; (b) the defining characteristics and issues for first-generation college students; (c) the defining characteristics and issues for socioeconomically disadvantaged students; (d) promising practices in working with first-generation and socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and, (e) a more detailed description of one program, Upward Bound, designed as an intervention to address barriers associated with

potential first-generation students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

However, the themes that this study discovered also call for a closer look at the support that these students are receiving. Is the emotional encouragement and building of self-esteem enough to help these students get to their aspired careers?

Strong Affective Support from Family and Connection with an Educator

This study did not review literature regarding parent involvement or educator support as it relates to student aspirations and career paths. Because the phenomenological study was driven by the participants and their experiences, it was unknown what themes would come from their stories before the data was collected and analyzed. It is however, important to review what these types of support may result in for these students.

Support from their parents and other family members was evident in the stories told by the participants. Does this support make a difference? Much research has been conducted regarding the effects of parent involvement (McNeal, 1999; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986, and Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). Studies have found that support from parents has positive effects on students and their success in college. The literature also indicated that support from parents with college experiences themselves yielded a higher success rate for college admission and college completion of their children compared to similar levels of support from parents with no educational experience (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005).

Participants in this study also expressed a feeling of connectedness and support from at least one educator in their lives. The effects of connectedness with an educator have certainly been reviewed and studied in many different forms (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Schapps, 2003; Blum, 2005). Environments with high academic standards along with positive teacher support resulted in students who were more likely to succeed academically. (Connell, Halpern-Felsher,

Clifford, Crichlow, & Usinger, 1995; Wentzel, 1998). Previous findings certainly suggest that the connections the participants feel with their educators can only help them on their academic journey.

High Aspirations and Career Goals for Self

Prior studies indicated that students with similar backgrounds to the students interviewed in this study had lower aspirations for the future (Gullatt & Jan, 2003). They were unable to envision ‘different’ or ‘better’ future scenarios for themselves than what they experienced in their own lives. This lack of hopefulness did not seem to apply to the participants of this study. One of the themes that emerged from the interviews, in fact, was a general, shared optimism and ambition that could and would result in a brighter future, a future that would include a college education and the good things that go along with that degree. In part, this outlook could be attributed to the parental and educator influences that each student mentioned as encouraging forces in their lives. Involvement in the pre-college outreach program may be the difference in students between prior studies and this one, which explains the discrepancy in how these students are able to envision a better life for themselves. Conversely, students who participate in pre-college programs as well as their family members may have higher aspirations generally which might motivate their participation.

Field trips to college campuses, especially, had a major effect on how vividly they could envision attending colleges. In multiple cases, the colleges that students visited became their default choices for where they should and would go to school, without much regard for whether the curriculum was well-suited to teach them what they would need to support their future goals. In this regard, the campus visits provided, in some ways, too much of an impact on the students,

overshadowing the other activities and making the students feel closer and more connected to the colleges that they visited, without a clear rationale supporting their choices.

Limited Understanding of Educational Path for Career Goals

One of the most striking statistics in the literature review was the statistic that students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds are six times as likely to quit school as their higher-socioeconomic and non-first-generation counterparts (Board of Education, 2002). Previous studies have indicated that first-generation students are not as prepared or ready for college as their classmates (William, 2009). This study found reason to believe that the eight students interviewed will also face challenges if and when they begin this process. Even if their grades qualify them for entry, and they somehow are able to navigate applications and financial aid required to begin college, their lack of understanding of what they may encounter as found in theme 4 regarding what specific choices they need to make to advance toward their overall post-college career goals, sets them up for disappointment, frustration, and a high likelihood of quitting college or being forced to leave. This possibility is increased when coupled with the likely stress of having to work while taking classes (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2011).

What the Themes Suggest

A substantial part of the literature review involved social justice. This study reinforces the need for social justice advocacy for potential first generation college students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The study provides more clarity on the realities of the potential first-generation college students' mindset as they participated in a program that helped them prepare to enter and succeed in college. The students, although enthusiastic and hopeful, need stronger advocates and more comprehensive access to information if they are to compete with and succeed among classmates with greater financial resources and access to advice from

college-educated parents. To succeed in this environment, especially considering additional stress from needing to work and not receiving ongoing guidance about college from family members, they are actually going to need to be more focused, and have a better plan for success, than their more affluent counterparts. Their advocates will need to encourage self-awareness, provide access to concrete and specific information, assist them with college planning, and keep them focused throughout the process if our society is to move closer to the equal opportunity ideals of social justice. Holcomb-McCoy, Harris, Hines and Johnston (2008) suggested that if school counselors truly believe that they are able to make a difference towards working for equality for diverse populations of students, then they will. This awareness of the inequality and moving forward to create change are important roles of which counselors must always be cognizant.

Finally, the day to day role of school counselors also needs to be reviewed. It is notable that of the eight interviewees, only one mentioned a counselor as a positive influence, and that counselor was primarily associated with a 'testing' role. For all of the ideals and aspirations that various committees, associations, and boards have for counselors, (ASCA, 2012) the position does not appear to have made a major impact on these eight students' lives. Counselors certainly were not seen as the primary guide, aid, or advocate assisting students on their path of preparing for, entering, and succeeding in college. One possibility may be the high student to counselor ratios (College Board, 2012) and the range of roles required of these professionals (ASCA, 2012) such that they cannot make a major impact in any one particular role. An additional possibility is that college and career counseling for pre-college low-socioeconomic status, first-generation students has not received enough focus or detail to make it an important and vital part of the school counselors' work.

Advocating for students, school and community, and in the public arena are the goals for the twenty-first century counselors (ASCA, 2012) which positions them as broadly active and influential, and needing to understand their students' experiences, to better 'clear the way' so those students can succeed. If the playing field is ever to be leveled for marginalized students, at the very least they are going to need someone to advocate for them and help them navigate the complexities, to help compensate for the barriers they face. A school counselor is in a primary position to do so. It is common that a high-school counselor's responsibilities include helping students understand the challenge of completing all the needed steps of college and financial aid applications. However, the focus needs to change to not only getting into college but understanding why they are going to college. Career guidance is an important part of the twenty-first century counselors' responsibility (ASCA, 2012). However, this study indicates that more focus must be given to it. What this study found is that students are choosing colleges and career goals without much knowledge of what those paths entail. Supporting them in the career area becomes even more critical for these participants since these are areas in which their parents have little or no experience and may not be able to effectively guide them.

Limitations of the Study

Several characteristics regarding the participant sample limit the findings of the study. The nature of qualitative study limits its generalizability to other populations since it involves in-depth understanding of a small number of individuals. All the participants were students who attended the Upward Bound Program at the same research extensive southeastern university and lived within an hour of the campus so their views and experiences are reflective of a very limited geographical area. Another limitation is that there was little diversity in terms of race among the participants. All but one participant, who was a white male, were African-American. As

mentioned before, I as the primary researcher have a personal history of being of lower socioeconomic status with parents who were not college educated in the United States. Although I bracketed my experience, my ingrained biases and preconceptions regarding this study's focus may have affected the analysis of the data.

Implications for Practice and Program Development

School Counselor Practice

In principle, the findings from this type of qualitative study cannot be generalized to the entire population, or even to students outside the group interviewed. But certain information gained from analyzing the students' accounts of their experiences does have implications for the counseling profession, and pre-college programs. There are some implications about how the school counselors in their lives have affected them. What the students related about how the Upward Bound program has affected them also provides suggestions about how the program might be able to improve upon ways to support students in their academic endeavors.

The fact that only one of the eight interviewed students mentioned a school counselor as an influential figure highlights a notable absence. Our hope as counselors is that, especially for this particular group of lower-socioeconomic status students with college aspirations, there would be a counselor who figured prominently in each of their paths through school and through college acceptance. Our findings, however, imply that this was not the case for most. Although there may have been counselors supporting their families and acting as a resource throughout their schooling, they were not named as an important resource or in the forefront of the participants' minds when discussing influential and significant figures throughout their educational process.

The ASCA national standards provide three different areas in which counselors must focus their attention for students: Academic, Career, and Personal/ Social Development.

According to the interviews, these students have found success in the academic and personal/ social areas. However, their career development was found to be lacking. The national standards that ASCA (2012) put forth for career development:

Guide school counseling programs to provide the foundation for the acquisition of skills, attitudes and knowledge that enable students to make a successful transition from school to the world of work, and from job to job across the life span.

One participant wanted to be a nurse and a dentist. Another participant wanted to obtain a degree as a music engineer and also in business. Though complex goals like these can be achieved over time, it is important that counselors help each student refine his or her goal set to something that is achievable. By using the standards outlined by ASCA, students would be able to have a better understanding of the skills needed, their post-secondary options, and a clearer understanding of their career of choice.

Although traditionally, high school counselors have focused on career education, the ASCA standards are for counselors across grade levels. Elementary and middle school counselors must also take note of these responsibilities. A retrospective study discovered that approximately 23% of adults in their forties to mid-fifties had made decisions about their current careers in childhood (Trice & McClellan, 1994). Career development theories include early childhood in their stages (Ginzberg, 1952; Gottfredson, 1981). Elementary and middle school counselors must consider that exposure, or lack of exposure, to career experiences and information can affect students' life long career goals. Gottfredson (1981) suggested that children's career aspirations begin to take shape at approximately 5 years of age. With this

knowledge along with the ASCA domains, elementary counselors have the clear responsibility of providing students as early as kindergarten a focused counseling program that includes very purposeful support in the career domain.

This study also found that students were not relying only on educators to help them in their career decisions. Parents and grandparents were often mentioned as a main source of support and information. Although these family members had little personal experience in the world of secondary education or the careers in which their children showed interest, they were very dedicated in helping in any way that they could. This help often came in the form of minimal information or misinformation about the subjects. These well-meaning adults can be great resources for these potential first generation college students if they had the correct tools and information themselves. Instead of only focusing on the students, counselors are in the unique position that enables them to work with families as well. In doing so, they can empower parents to be more effective consultants and advisors for their own children.

Social justice advocacy helps remind counselors that our work is not finished with these two responsibilities. Yes, on the individual level of advocacy, empowering children that have historically been underrepresented in higher education with the skills and tools to be better prepared to enter and successfully complete college is certainly an important role for counselors. Working systematically with parents and families to help them create change for their children certainly gives these students a higher likelihood of successfully reaching their high aspirations. However, often the most difficult level of advocacy is that of the social/ political level. Counselors must seek out and advocate for programs that focus on creating a more equal environment for those that have been historically marginalized. The BRIDGE ACT (Building Resourceful Individuals to Develop Georgia's Economy Act) (Georgia Department of Education,

2011) is one of these initiatives. Its goal is to ensure that all 6th-12th grade students are aware of available career and secondary options. Counselors must not only follow these initiatives when they are presented, they must actively search for programs from other cities, states, or countries if they do not exist in their own communities. Lewis, Lewis, Daniels, and D'Andrea (2011) said "helping individual and dealing with the social/ political systems that affect them are two aspects of the same task" (p. 206).

Pre-college program development

The pre-college program that the participants in this study attended was found to have many positive influences that were shared during the interviews. The program succeeded in giving students the opportunity to 'attend college' for tutoring and other classes, making them feel involved with higher education even before graduating high school. By attending events on campus, the students could see that college was not off-limits to them, and they developed the ability to envision themselves as capable and likely to continue their educations. Field trips to other colleges also inspired the students. The trips had such an impact, that one of the colleges they saw on their trips immediately became many of their 'first choices' of schools, simply by having experienced being there. This particular Upward Bound program seemed to be very successfully in providing great inspiration and supporting high aspirations for their students. However, we know from previous studies (United States Department of Education, 2004) that even students who participate in pre-college outreach programs such as Upward Bound tend not to complete college. These statistics, combined with what the students told us about their experiences in the program and their future plans, imply that there is still much room for improvement if outreach programs are to successfully help students with such disadvantages attain a college degree.

When reviewing the themes that emerged from the participants' interview responses, as a counselor I am encouraged that they have 'high hopes' for the future. However, I am also concerned that we are still not doing enough to help guide them onto a successful career path. A section of the Career Standards set forth by ASCA (2012) calls for a more direct focus on acquiring career information for these students. The focus includes demonstrating knowledge of the career planning process, identifying personal skills and how they relate to career choices, as well as using research and information resources to obtain career information. Although pre-college outreach programs are not held to these standards, they can certainly use these standards as a guide for serving their participants in a more effective manner.

The pre-college programs may be providing much support and information before students start school, but findings from prior studies and this one imply that the effectiveness of the programs is limited by their nature of being 'pre-college' and that the scope of their assistance would have to expand, if we are to see first-generation student retention rates increase. The advantages that other students have, such as affluence or parents with college experience, do not end when those students start college, instead they continue to provide support throughout their college career. It makes sense that programs intended to 'level the playing field' and help students without these advantages be successful would also be there consistently, to help freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, until they attain the first college degree in their families.

Recommendations for Future Research

For this study, the research team focused on students in a pre-college program at a major US university. These high school students were motivated enough, and from a family background that, while disadvantaged economically, provided enough support to enable the

students to participate in the program, and hold aspirations of further education. The population from which the participants of this study were drawn is a group that, for discussion purposes, I would call ‘college possible’. The path I can see extrapolated from this study extends outside of that population, into much larger groups of students who could currently be classified in general categories of ‘college unlikely’ and ‘college improbable’. Where are the opportunities for those even more disadvantaged than the students in this study? How can those from even less supportive circumstances, those missing critical experiences that the four themes uncovered in this study suggest are related to motivation and means to move into college, be helped?

It is my hope that with further study and understanding of those with the potential of being the first in their family to pursue an advanced education, despite coming from low-income households, educators can learn the essential factors that facilitate this critical step for all students. If we can do that, we can better help students progress from being ‘college possible’ to becoming ‘college probable’. If we understand how these students can best be supported in aspirational and skill development, we can then start extending our approach and processes to the broader population of students. We can build improved systems that can help those students who now have little or no chance of going to college become people who at least have awareness of their options. We can offer better opportunities for all students to participate in postsecondary education, and potentially even help establish the internal belief that they can and should achieve a college degree.

Although the findings of this study shed light on how counselors and educators may better prepare students to reach their high aspirations and goals, they also lend themselves to further conversations and possible future studies. More qualitative and quantitative research can be conducted that would enhance the understanding that this study. This study told us that the

participants have little awareness of how to reach their aspirations and goals. Comparing the planned college goals of students of different socioeconomic statuses and family backgrounds would tell us whether or not other students have similar awareness of the steps needed to reach their goals. Correlating rates of college matriculation between students in pre-college outreach programs with those from different socioeconomic backgrounds would help give information regarding the effectiveness of the outreach programs. A more direct study focusing on the factors that lead students to enter and complete pre-college outreach programs would help counselors find ways to encourage enrollment for hesitant students. A similar study with career development theories as a guide would help clarify whether or not these students indeed have a lower level of college and career awareness compared to their more affluent peers. A longitudinal study following these college hopefuls to their academic end could also give insight on whether or not lack of understanding of the college process and details about chosen careers affect college completion.

Personal goals

I realize my study is just a very small part of the body of educational research, but I think there are practical applications that can be taken from its findings. The four themes emerged in conversation with these students can help me better understand students with similar backgrounds. I am now aware that simply giving encouragement is not enough. Helping students believe in themselves is not enough. Ensuring that students set high goals is not enough. The students' stories tell me that they also need a clear set of directions on how to reach their goals. I understand the long road from discovery of a dream to making it a reality. Our students must also have this understanding. The formative years are not too early to start providing some sense of what students need to be developing as they grow, if we want them to

attend and be successful in college. I must help my students develop the tools and the knowledge that are needed to give them a fair chance to climb from the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder to the top where their aspirations and dreams await them.

REFERENCES

- Adams, M., Bell, L. A., & Griffin, P. (1997). *Teaching for diversity and social justice: A sourcebook*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Adelman, C. (1999). *Answers in the toolbox: Academic intensity, attendance patterns, and bachelor's degree attainment*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Akiba, M., LeTendre, G. K., & Scribner, J. P. (2007). Teacher quality, opportunity gap, and national achievement in 46 countries. *Educational Researcher*, 36(7), 369-387.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/0013189X07308739>
- American School Counselor Association (2012). *ASCA National Model: A Framework for school Counseling Programs, Third Edition*. Alexandria, VA: Author
- Ayala, C., and Striplen, A., (2002). *A Career introduction model for first-generation college freshmen students*. Thriving in Challenging and Uncertain Times, ERIC ED469996.
- Baker, S. B. (2001). Reflections on forty years in the school counseling professions: Is the glass half full or half empty? *Professional School Counseling*, 5(2), 75-83.
- Bandura, A., Barbaranelli, C., Caprara, G. V., & Pastorelli, C. (2001). Self-efficacy beliefs as shapers of children's aspirations and career trajectories. *Child Development*, 72, 187-206.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00273>
- Barone, T., & Eisner, E. W. (2011). *Arts based research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Baskin, D. M. (2008). *The influence of pre-college interventions on underrepresented minority student persistence and graduation: Evidence from a Midwest comprehensive university*. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin). Retrieved from

www.worldcat.org/title/influence-of-pre-college-interventions-on-underrepresented-minority-student-persistence-and-graduation-evidence-from-a-midwest-comprehensive-university/oclc/681773800/referer=fi&ht=edition

- Beesley, D. (2004). Teachers' perceptions of school counselor effectiveness: Collaborating for student success. *Education*, 125(2), 259-271.
- Bell, D. (1995). Who's afraid of critical race theory? *University of Illinois Law Review*, 1995(4), 893-910.
- Bell, L. A. (2007). *Teaching for diversity and social justice*. New York, NY: Routledge/ Taylor & Francis Group.
- Blum, R. W. (2005). A case for school connectedness. *The Adolescent Learner*, 62(7), 16-20.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Pearson Education Group.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: an introduction to theories and methods* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education.
- Choy, S. P. (2001). Students whose parents did not go to college: Postsecondary access, persistence, and attainment. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/2001126.pdf>
- Chrenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G., & Thomas, K. (1995). *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- College Board (2011). *Supporting a college-going culture: Inspire the best in every student*. Retrieved from <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/guidance/counseling/culture>
- Connell, J. P., Halpern-Felsher, B., Clifford, E., Crichlow, W., & Usinger, P. (1995). Hanging in there: Behavioral, psychological, and contextual factors affecting whether African-American adolescents stay in school. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 10(1), 41-63.

- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Crethar, H. C., Rivera, E. T., & Nash, S. (2008). In search of common threads: Linking multicultural feminist, and social justice, counseling paradigms. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 86*(3), 269-278.
- Crotty, M. (2003). *The Foundations of Social Research*. London: Sage
- Dahir, C. A., & Stone, C. (2012). *The transformed school counselor* (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/ Cole .
- DeCivita, M., Pagani, L., Vitaro, F., & Tremblay, R. E. (2004). The role of maternal educational aspirations in mediating the risk of income source on academic failure in children from persistently poor families. *Children and Youth Services Review, 26*, 749-769.
- Dollarhide, C. T., & Saginak, K. A. (2008). *Comprehensive school counseling programs: K-12 delivery systems in action*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Dukes, S. (1984). Phenomenological methodology in the human sciences. *Journal of Religion and Health, 23*(3), 197-203.
- D'andrea, M., & Heckman, E. (2008). A 40 year review of multicultural counseling outcome research: Outlining a future research agenda for the multicultural counseling movement. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 86*, 356-363.
- Dennis, J. M., Phinney, J. S., & Chuateco, L. I. (2005). The role of motivation, parental support, and peer support in the academic success of ethnic minority first-generation college students. *Journal of College Student Development, 46*(3), 223-236.

- Eamon, M. K. (2005). Social-demographic, school, neighborhood, and parenting influences on academic achievement of Latino young adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 34(2), 163-175.
- Elder, G. H., Conger, R. D., Foster, E. M., & Ardel, M. (1992). Families under economic pressure. *Journal of Family Issues*, 13(1), 5-37.
- Ehrenberg, R. G. (2007). The economics of tuition and fees in American higher education. Retrieved [8/2/12], from Cornell University, ILR School site:
<http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/workingpapers/67>
- Ekstrom, R. B., Goertz, M. E., Pollack, J. M., & Rock, D. A. (1986). Who drops out of high school and why? Findings from a national study. *Teachers College Record*, 87(3), 356-373.
- Fay, B. (1987). *Critical social science: Liberation and its limits*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Fligstein, N., & Shin, T. J. (Eds.). (2004). The shareholder society: A review of the changes in working conditions and inequality in the United States, 1976-2000. *Social inequality*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Furrer, C., & Skinner, E. (2003). Sense of relatedness as a factor in children's academic engagement and performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 95(1), 148-162.
- Gillespie, M. (2005). Student-teacher connection: A place of possibility. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 52(2), 211-219. <http://dx.doi.org/DOI: 10.1111/j.1365-2648.2005.03581.x>
- Gullatt, Y., & Jan, W. (2003). *How do pre-collegiate academic outreach programs impact college-going among underrepresented students*. Boston, MA: Pathways to College Network.

- Gysbers, N. C. (2001). Comprehensive guidance and counseling programs: A rich history and a bright future. *Professional School Counseling, 4*(4), 246-256.
- Gysbers, N. C. (2001). School guidance and counseling in the 21st century: Remember the past into the future. *Professional School Counseling, 5*(2), 96.
- Gysbers, N. C., & Henderson, P. (1997). *Comprehensive guidance programs that work-II*. Greensboro, NC: ERIC Counseling and Student Services Clearinghouse.
- Gysbers, N. C., & Henderson, P. (2000). *Developing and managing your school guidance program*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Hays, D. G., & Singh, A. A. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry in clinical and educational settings*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Herr, E. L., & Shahnasarian, M. (2001). Selected milestones in the evolution of career development practices in the twentieth century. *The Career Development Quarterly, 49*, 225-232. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2001.tb00564.x>
- Holcomb-McCoy, C. C., Harris, P. C., Hines, E. M., & Johnston, G. (2008). School counselors' multicultural self-efficacy: A preliminary investigation. *Professional School Counseling, 11*(3), 166-178.
- Horn, L., & Nunez, M. (2000). *Mapping the road to college: First generation students' math track, planning strategies, and context support*.
- House, R. M. & Hayes, R. L. (2002). School counselors: Becoming key players in school reform. *Professional School Counseling, 5*, 249-256.
- Howard, J., & Hammond, R. (1985). Rumors of inferiority. *New Republic, 72*, 18-23.
- Georgia Department of Education (2011). *What is the BRIDGE law?* Retrieved from <http://www.gcic.peachnet.edu/Content/HelpYourself/BridgeAct.aspx>

- Ginzberg, E. (1952). Toward a theory of occupational choice. *Occupations*, 30, 491-494.
- Gottfredson, L. S. (1981). Circumscription and compromise: A developmental theory of occupational aspirations. *Journal of Counseling Psychology Monograph*, 28, 545-579.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105-117). London: Sage
- Jeynes, W. H. (2002). Examining the effects of parental absence on the academic achievement of adolescents: the challenge of controlling for family income. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 23(2).
- Johnson, B., & Christensen, L. (2008). *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Johnson, B. R. (1997). Examining the validity structure of qualitative research. *Education*, 118(3), 282-292.
- Kim, J. S. & Sunderman, G. L. (2005). Measuring academic proficiency under the no child left behind act: Implications for educational equity. *Educational Researcher*, 34, 3-13, doi:10.3102/0013189X034008003
- Kuh, G.D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J. H., & Whitt, E. J. (2005). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Laderchi, R., Saith, C. R., & Stewart, F. (2003). *Does it matter that we don't agree on the definition of poverty?* Oxford, United Kingdom: Queen Elizabeth House
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice place like education? *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11(1), 7-24.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2005). The evolving role of critical race theory in educational scholarship. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1). 115-119. Doi:10. 1080/1361332052000341024

- Levin, A. & Nidiffer, J. (1996). *Beating the odds: How the poor get to college*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Lewis, J., Arnold, M. S., House, R., & Toporek, R. (2003). *Advocacy competencies [electronic version]* . Retrieved August 2011. <http://www.counseling.org/publications>
- Lewis, J. A., Lewis, M. D., Daniels, J. A., & D'Andrea, M. J. (2011). *Community counseling: A multicultural social justice perspective* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/ Cole
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Martin, P. J. (2002). Transforming school counseling: A national perspective. *Theory Into Practice*, 41(3), 148-154.
- Martinez, J. A., Sher, K. J., Krull, J. L., & Wood, P. K. (2009). Blue-Collar scholars?: Mediators and moderators of university attrition in first-generation college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(1), 87-103.
- Mays, N., & Pope, C. (2000). Qualitative research in healthcare: assessing quality in qualitative research. *British Medical Journal*, 50-52.
- McCaslin, M., & Burross, H. (2008). Student motivational dynamics. *Teacher College Record*, 110(11), 2319-2340.
- McLeod, J., & Shanahan, M. (1993). Poverty, parenting, and children's mental health. *Am. Social*, 356-366.
- McLoyd, V. C. (1998). Socioeconomic disadvantage and child development. *The American Psychologist*, 53(2), 185-204.
- Mcgowen, P., & Miller, J. (1999). Changing the entitlement culture. *The American School Board Journal*, 43.

- McNeal, Jr., R. B. (1999). Parental involvement as social capital: Differential effectiveness on science achievement, truancy, and dropping out. *Social Forces*, 78(1), 117-144.
- Merriam, S. (2002). *Qualitative Research in Practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Myrick, R. D. (2003). *Developmental guidance and counseling: A practical approach* (4th ed.). Minneapolis, MN: Educational Media.
- Natriello, G., McDill, E. L., & Pallas, A. M. (1990). *Schooling disadvantaged children: racing against catastrophe*. Columbia University: Teachers College Press.
- National Education Association, NEA (2012). *Research talking points on dropout statistics: High school attendance, graduation, completion, and dropout statistics*. Retrieved from www.nea.org/home/13579.htm
- Nunez, A., & Cuccaro-Alamin, S. (1998). *First generation students: Undergraduates whose parents never enrolled in postsecondary education*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).
- Orr, D. (2008, July 19). For many in Glasgow East, Labour picked up where Thatcher left off. *The Independent*.
- Ortlipp, M. (2008). Keeping and using reflective journals in the qualitative research process. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(4), 695-705.
- Paisley, P. O., & Borders, L. D. (1995). School counseling: An evolving specialty. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 74(2), 150-153.
- Papamandjaris, A. (2000). *Breakfast and learning in children: A review of the effects of breakfast on scholastic performance*. York Ontario: Breakfast for Learning Canadian Living Foundation.

- Patterson, C. J., Vaden, N. A., & Kupersmidt, J. B. Family background, recent life events, and peer rejection during childhood. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 8, 347-361.
- Pogge, T. (2005). Severe poverty as a violation of negative duties. *Ethics and International Affairs*, 19(1), 55-84.
- Ramos, M. C. (1989). Some ethical implications of qualitative research. *Research in Nursing & Health*, 12, 57-63.
- Ratts, M. J., DeKruyf, L., & Chen-hayes, S. F. (2007). The ACA advocacy competencies: A social justice advocacy framework for professional school counselors. *Professional School Counselor*, 11(2), 90-97.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press.
- Ryan, R. M., Stiller, J. D., & Lynch, J. H. (1995). Representations of relationships to teachers, parents, and friends as predictors of academic motivation and self-esteem. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 14(2), 226-249.
- Sastry, N., & Pebley, A. R. (2008). Family and neighborhood sources of socioeconomic inequality in children's achievement. *Demography*, 47(3), 777-800.
- Schapps, E. (2003). *The role of supportive school environments in promoting academic success*. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education Press.
- Shom, C. L., & Spooner, S. (1991). Minorities and the egalitarian-meritocratic values conflict in American higher education: New answers from an old problem. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 9(3), 182-190.
- Striplin, J. C. (1999). Facilitating transfer for first-generation community college students. Retrieved from ERIC Digest. [ED430627]

- Swail, W. S., & Perna, L. W. (2012,). Pre-college outreach and early intervention. *The NEA Higher Education Journal*, 99-110. Retrieved from http://www.nea.org/assets/img/PubThoughtAndAction/TAA_01Sum_10.pdf
- Thayer, P. B. (2000). Retention of students from first generation and low income backgrounds. *Opportunity Outlook*, 2-8.
- Tierney, W. G., & Hagedorn, L. S. (2002). *Making the grade in college prep: A guide for improving college preparation programs*. Los Angeles, CA: Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis.
- Trice, A. D., & McClellan, N. (1993). Do children's career aspirations predict adult occupations? An answer from a secondary analysis of a longitudinal study. *Psychological Reports*, 72, 368-370.
- Turkheimer, E., Haley, A., Waldron, M., D'Onofrio, B., & Gottesman, I. (2003). Socioeconomic status modifies heritability of IQ in young children. *Psychological Science*, 14(6), 623-628.
- U. S. Department of Education. (2004). *The impacts of regular upward bound: Results from the third follow-up data collection* (Doc. No. 2004-13). Retrieved from www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/highered/upward/upward-3rd-report.pdf
- U. S. Department of Education. (2011). *Upward Bound Program: A program description*. Retrieved from www2.ed.gov/programs/trioupbound/index.html
- Vargas, J. H. (2004). *College knowledge: Addressing information barriers to college*. Boston, MA: College Access Services: The Education Resources Institute (TERI). www.teri.org.
- Watts, R. J., & Flanagan, C. A. (2007). Pushing the envelope on youth engagement: A developmental and liberation psychology perspective. *Journal of Community*

Psychology, 35(6), 779-792.

Wentzel, K. R. (1998). Social relationships and motivation in middle school. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 90(2), 202–209.

Wittmer, J. (2000). *Managing your school counseling program: K-12 developmental strategies* (2nd ed.). Minneapolis, MN: Educational Media Corporation.

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A Critical Race Theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Review in Research in Education*, 28, 69-91.

APPENDIX A

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. Tell me what your community is like.
2. Tell me about your school experience up to now.
3. Are there any significant experiences or people or events that have contributed to your school experience?
4. What do you hope to be doing a year from now?
5. What are your plans for the future?
6. What has contributed to these plans?
7. Are there any significant experiences or people or events that have contributed to your plans?

*Follow up questions to these prompts were used as necessary.

APPENDIX B

Creative Arts Assignment Directions:

Lifelines: To obtain a better perspective on your developmental history, represent your life-to-date in a creative way. Choose a metaphor that makes sense for you and your life. Depict your life creatively in any way you like representing the most significant occupational daydreams or personal/ educational experiences past to present. You may use the art supplies that are provided by the researcher as well as any other materials you have that you may want to include. Your hobbies, interests, awards, special skills, role models may be helpful. Please include a daydream for the future.