

NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY:  
LIVED EXPERIENCES OF TRIO UNDERGRADUATE  
STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

by

SHERONTAE MAXWELL

(Under the Direction of Gregory Wolniak)

ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of nine TRIO Student Support Students (SSS, i.e., low-income, first-generation) who persisted in college during the COVID-19 global pandemic. A basic interpretive, qualitative approach was used for this research. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews of students attending a public university. Analysis of the data exposed three overarching themes: (a) stress and a sense of the unknown; (b) social experiences, including the importance of personal connections; and (c) TRIO SSS support during COVID-19, with the belief that TRIO played a role in their support and ultimate success. The core finding from this study was that TRIO SSS assisted TRIO participants in persisting during COVID-19 despite challenges from the global pandemic. The unique opportunity to talk with students about their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic provided eye-opening insights experience on the challenging circumstances for many students, especially underrepresented students. The research can serve as a foundation to further explore the impact of COVID-19 on students' persistence and retention and assist with plans for the next pandemic by giving

insight into the needs of underrepresented students and how institutions can support them.

INDEX WORDS: access, cece model, college, covid-19, lived experiences, pandemic, tinto, trio

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## DEDICATION

*Lord, you are good  
 You've been so good  
 Lord, you are good  
 You've been better than good.  
 I can't praise you enough , I owe you my life , can't praise you enough even if I  
 tried!!*

—Todd Galberth

***Thank you GOD for your hands never leaving me.***

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Society must face the fact that the statistics we track show systemic inequality at every step of the college journey for low-income and first-generation students, and students of color. These longstanding inequalities are unmasked and made more challenging by the COVID-19 pandemic. As we recover and rebuild there is a need for bold ambitious new plans to seize this slightly more open moment as a portal to a more equitable, resilient, and environmentally sustainable system.

—Pell Institute, *2022 Indicators Press Release*

In March 2020, many elements of society shifted. The emerging novel coronavirus—in what seemed like a matter of hours—spread into a wrenching, nation-altering change to daily life and routine (Graff, 2020). Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, there was no work, no church, and no school in the modalities traditionally experienced. Even my 87-year old grandmother whispered, “I never thought I would live to see anything like this.” This crisis greatly affected students, spanning K–12 and postsecondary levels. Many educators worried what would happen to their schools and, especially, their students. The U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights Research (2021) noted several observations about the pandemic’s impact on students, including, “COVID-19 has raised new barriers for many postsecondary students, especially for students of color, students with disabilities and students who are caregivers

both for entry into higher education and for continuing and completing their studies” (p. iv). The COVID-19 global pandemic exacerbated well-documented opportunity gaps that put low-income students at greater disadvantage than their peers (Garcia & Weiss, 2020). At the postsecondary level, concerns mounted over how students who need the most support will fare during such trying times. The present study emerged to explore this unforeseen context.

Davis et al. (2021) portrayed the pandemic’s horrific impact on students in the postsecondary arena, stating, “Unlike hurricanes that strike and leave disaster in their wake, the pandemic itself disrupted social, emotional, economic, and physical security for millions of college students” (p. 2). Davis et al. explained college personnel were urged to dissolve a physical presence on campus and send practically all students home, resulting in disparate implications across campus communities—including living conditions, health, and access to educational resources. First-generation college students, particularly 1st-year students, were thrust into a whole new learning environment they had not or could not prepare to navigate. The new learning environment lacked many of the resources needed to provide equity in postsecondary education (Barrot et al., 2021).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Existing inequities among postsecondary students were highlighted during the COVID-19 global pandemic, particularly among racial and socioeconomic lines (U.S. Department of Education, 2022b). Overall, U.S. college enrollment fell by 603,000 students in 2020–2021, from 17.5 million to 16.9 million—a drop seven times worse than the 2019–2020 academic year when the pandemic first hit, and the steepest year-over-year decline since 2011 (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021). Latino

and Black student retention also decreased following the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic; from Spring 2020 through Fall 2020, there were significant declines in enrollment and retention (Li et al., 2021). These declines in retention have further contributed to longstanding systemic inequality (Li et al., 2021).

Disruptions from the COVID-19 global pandemic further complicated students' lives by impacting finances, affecting learning, and spotlighting mental health issues (U.S. Office for Civil Rights, 2021). The U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights Research (2021) stated the COVID-19 global pandemic raised new barriers for many students to earn a degree and made old barriers harder to overcome. For those already pursuing a degree, the COVID-19 global pandemic took a heavy toll—financially, academically, and emotionally. Early evidence showed impact disparities for students who faced the greatest hurdles to entering and staying in school before the pandemic, especially students from historically underserved and marginalized groups who are served by federal TRIO Programs (e.g., United States Office for Civil Rights Research, 2021). The COVID-19 global pandemic has been significantly disruptive to disadvantaged students across all levels of education (e.g., Aucejo et al., 2020).

This study aimed to understand the lived experiences of TRIO-participating undergraduate students during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Informed by prior research and grounded in student integration theory (Tinto, 1975) and the culturally engaging campus environments (CECE; Museus, 2014) model, the results contribute new information from which to better understand the challenges confronted and the effectiveness of campus support among low income, first-generation, or disabled college

students—those who are most susceptible to negative educational consequences of the pandemic and similar future crises.

The study's participants were selected from college students who participated in TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) programs during the COVID-19 global pandemic. TRIO SSS programs became especially important in the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic. In a Gallup survey of approximately 4,000 students pursuing bachelor's degrees from September 22–October 5, 2020, 49% of all respondents answered it was *likely* or *very likely* the COVID-19 global pandemic would affect their ability to complete their bachelor's degree; the number was even higher for Black and Hispanic students, at 56% each (Marken, 2022). Students from underrepresented groups (e.g., low-income students, members of racial or ethnic minority groups, students with special needs) have been uniquely impacted by the COVID-19 global pandemic economically, emotionally, and in terms of the digital divide (Salmi, 2020).

### **Problem Statement**

Simply, there was a considerable need to understand the lived experiences of TRIO SSS students during the COVID-19 global pandemic (Benner et al., 2021). Shutting down most in-person activities during the initial phases of the COVID-19 global pandemic began in March 2020. Since then, researchers have begun studying the pandemic and its effects on students (Davis et al., 2021); yet, this research has remained somewhat limited and emergent. For example, a recent study by Wolniak and Burman (2022) provided causal evidence on the impacts of campus closures on students' academic self-efficacy and motivation that were largely due to changes in their sense of campus belonging. The researchers called for more studies examining how the pandemic

affected college students (Wolniak & Burman, 2022). Although the COVID-19 global pandemic's effects will be studied for many years to come, Dorn et al. (2022) found the educational gaps that existed before the pandemic—spanning access, opportunities, achievement, and outcomes—have widened. Therefore, in the present study, I addressed how participating TRIO students (e.g., students who are low-income, first-generation, have a disability, or exhibit academic need) experienced college in general, and through TRIO program support, while faced with the crisis of a global pandemic. The resulting findings can be used to inform future programming and enhance program effectiveness for students who are the most vulnerable and susceptible to challenges during the COVID-19 global pandemic and beyond.

### **Research Design and Research Questions**

In conducting this study, I followed a “basic qualitative design” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017, p. 22) focused on TRIO SSS program participants' views on their experiences as enrolled college students during the COVID-19 global pandemic, and particularly sought information on how those experiences may have influenced students' educational persistence. Merriam and Tisdell (2017) defined the basic qualitative design as an approach that aims to understand how people make sense of their lives and experiences. I interviewed a group of TRIO SSS students through a qualitative design using semistructured, in-depth interviews. The study focused on students classified as 1st-year, TRIO SSS students as of March 2020 (to align with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic) enrolled at a large, urban, public, 4-year, Research 1 (R-1) institution located in the southeast region of United States. The institution houses several federally funded

grant programs, including TRIO SSS, rendering it well-suited for achieving the study's aims. Through this approach, I addressed the following research questions:

1. How do TRIO SSS students reflect on their lived experiences in college during the COVID-19 global pandemic?
2. How do undergraduate students perceive the role of the TRIO SSS program in helping them persist through college during the COVID-19 global pandemic?

### **Significance and Implications**

The effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic will not be fully understood for years to come, and its scale still is not well understood (Bevins et al., 2021; McCann, 2020). By focusing on college students who participated in the TRIO SSS program, I explored students' attitudes, motivations, and other internalized perspectives stemming from their experiences as college students during the COVID-19 global pandemic and the support they received from TRIO SSS. My overall objective in conducting this research was to contribute new evidence on how students experienced the pandemic and their views on the support received by the TRIO SSS to inform educators and policymakers who design and deliver support services to TRIO students, or those from similar populations (i.e., low-income, first-generation, and disabled), particularly during times of crisis. The information stemming from this research may prove useful to campus stakeholders, administrators, political policymakers, and TRIO professionals as they continue to navigate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, try to understand the "new normal," and prepare for potential system-wide adversities that may arise in the future.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The COVID-19 global pandemic disrupted every area of higher education, including instruction, housing, enrollment, finances, and student motivation (Dunbar-Smalley et al., 2021; June & Ellis, 2021). A recent study by Means and Neisler (2020) found 79% of college students indicated staying motivated during the pandemic was a problem. For decades, TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) programs have been delivering support and increasing postsecondary persistence and graduation rates of low-income students, first-generation college students (i.e., students whose parents have not received a bachelor's degree), and students with disabilities. Given the populations served, TRIO SSS programs were uniquely positioned to support historically underserved students during the COVID-19 crisis, leveraging its established hands-on, student-centered support. With the following review, I addressed (a) the background and history of TRIO, (b) programs aimed to serve underrepresented college students; (c) the factors that contribute to student persistence; and (d) the effects of COVID-19 on historically underserved college students.

#### **Background and History of TRIO**

Since 1964, with hopes of boosting the stagnant and depressed U.S. economy, federal TRIO programs have sought to assist first-generation students, people stricken by poverty, and disabled U.S. citizens with entering college, persisting, and matriculating (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). As of 2022, eight federal TRIO programs exist.

These federally funded programs are designed to support underrepresented populations across the pipeline from middle school to terminal degrees. TRIO Programs include precollege programs of Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Upward Bound Math and Science that work with middle and high school students. TRIO Programs also include McNair, which focuses on pathways into and through graduate education, and SSS, which focuses on undergraduate students. Additionally, there are several adult-based TRIO Programs, including Educational Opportunity Centers and Veterans Upward Bound (U.S. Department of Education, 2022a). The federal TRIO program has grown to fund over 3,000 programs that assist students in overcoming economic, social, and cultural barriers to education (U.S. Department of Education 2022a).

TRIO SSS—the focus of the present study—is a college-based program aimed at enhancing undergraduate persistence and graduation (U.S. Department of Education 2022a). According to a 2010 report from the U.S. Department of Education, 51% of SSS participants completed a bachelor’s degree after 6 years of college at 4-year institutions, compared to 43.4% of eligible nonparticipants (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Given college graduates earn over \$300,000 more over their lifetimes than those with some and no degree (Carnevale et al., 2011), SSS may therefore be viewed as providing an important return on the investment of federal funds.

All students who participate in the SSS program are enrolled in a postsecondary institution must meet at least one of the eligibility criteria (e.g., low-income status, first-generation status, or disability status), and exhibit academic need for support, including a grade point average (GPA) below 2.5 and low test scores (U.S. Department of Education, 2022a).

TRIO program funds are federal grant funds, not institutional funds. As a result, projects vary considerably in terms of which specific services are offered through SSS and how they are organized. Although all SSS projects provide academic advising as one of their core services, advising varies greatly concerning the form the services may take, such as (a) tutoring, (b) labs, (c) workshops, (d) special instructional courses, and (e) services specifically for students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Harry S. Truman, the only U.S. president in the 20th century who did not have a college degree, formed a commission on higher education that resulted in one of the first national conversations on college access for the underserved. Nidiffer and Bouman (2004) wrote that the United States did not officially acknowledge poverty as a barrier to higher education until late in the 1940s. The Truman Report identified five barriers to enrolling in college and subsequently obtaining an undergraduate degree: (a) race, (b) gender, (c) religion, (d) geography, and (e) socioeconomic background. Noftsinger and Newbold (2007), in writing about the historical foundations of higher education, stated, “For the great majority of our boys and girls, the kind and amount of education they may hope to attend depends, not on their abilities, but on the family or community into which they happened to be born” (p. 4). These considerations led to the development of TRIO programs.

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 established the Office of Economic Opportunity and developed social programs for health, education, and the general welfare of the impoverished, such as local community action agencies Head Start, Job Corps, and Upward Bound (Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, 2010; McElroy & Armesto, 1998). Shortly thereafter, the Higher Education Act of 1965 aimed to increase the

educational resources of colleges and universities and to provide financial assistance for students in higher education. TRIO programs began with Upward Bound, which emerged out of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 in response to President Lyndon B. Johnson administration's war on poverty. Then, in 1965, Talent Search—the second outreach program—was created as part of the Higher Education Act. In 1968, SSS, which was originally known as Special Services for Disadvantaged Students, was authorized by the Higher Education Amendments and became the third in a series of educational opportunity programs. As the development of programs continued, Upward Bound, Talent Search, and SSS became known as the TRIO program (U.S. Department of Education, 2022a). I discuss the goals and objectives of all TRIO programs in the following sections.

Over the years, the TRIO programs have been expanded and improved to provide a wider range of services and to reach more students who need assistance. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2022a), The Higher Education Amendments of 1972 added the fourth program to the TRIO group by authorizing Educational Opportunity Centers. The 1976 Education Amendments authorized the Training Program for Federal TRIO Programs, initially known as the Training Program for Special Programs Staff and Leadership Personnel. Amendments in 1986 added the sixth program, the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program. Program development continued and in 1990, the U.S. Department of Education created the Upward Bound Math and Science Program to address the need for specific instruction in the fields of math and science. The Upward Bound Math and Science program is administered under the same regulations as

the regular Upward Bound program, but institutions must apply for this program separately (U.S. Department of Education, 2022a).

As of 2023, there are more than 3,100 TRIO programs currently serving over 812,000 students across the United States. In 2022, eight Federal TRIO programs existed, providing a collection of services designed to work with underrepresented and underserved populations to ensure postsecondary access, graduation, and retention. Most TRIO programs are housed and sponsored by higher education institutions across the country and U.S. territories. Additionally, many nonprofit agencies and school boards are eligible and receive grants for these programs.

### **TRIO SSS Program Description**

As of 2022, TRIO programs altogether serve more than 844,000 students from middle school through adult education (U.S. Department of Education, 2022a). TRIO provides academic tutoring, personal counseling, mentoring, financial guidance, and other supports to promote college access, retention, and graduation, ultimately aiming to help students overcome economic, social, academic, and cultural barriers, from middle school to terminal degrees. In the context of the full scope of the federal TRIO programs and given the focus of the present study, I next provide more specific detail on the SSS program.

SSS was established in 1968 to assist (a) undergraduates who are first in their families to attend college (e.g., first-generation college students), (b) students who meet low-income standards as specified by the federal government, and (c) students with both physical and learning disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The low-income standards are defined as 150% below the national poverty level (U.S. Department of

Education, 2022a). TRIO SSS address issues of persistence, retention, and matriculation, and can provide critical support for disadvantaged student populations.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2022a), the goal of SSS is to increase the postsecondary graduation and retention of low-income students, first-generation college students (i.e., students whose parents have not received a bachelor's degree), and students with disabilities. All students in the SSS program are enrolled in postsecondary education, meet at least one of the eligibility criteria (e.g., low-income status, first-generation status, or disability status), and exhibit academic need. The U.S. Department of Education (2022a) defines academic need as a student who needs one or more of the SSS program requirements. If the host is a 2-year institution, along with academic standing and persistence, the SSS project's goal is to graduate and transfer participants to baccalaureate institutions. If the host is a 4-year institution, the goal is to graduate its participants and to have them enroll in graduate programs.

Specific SSS programs in higher education institutions have great latitude to customize their services to fit the needs of the students enrolled at the institution. As a result, projects vary considerably in terms of which specific services are offered through SSS and how they are organized. SSS projects must provide academic advising as one of their services, although advising varies greatly concerning offering other services, such as tutoring, labs, workshops, special instructional courses, and services specifically for students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

The U.S. Department of Education (2022a) provides three mandatory student outcomes for TRIO SSS programs to meet: (a) retention in postsecondary education, (b) students in good academic standing, and (c) completion of a baccalaureate degree. For

program purposes, retention in postsecondary education is defined as the percentage of all participants served by the SSS project who persist from 1 academic year to the beginning of the next academic year, or earn a bachelor's degree. The students in good academic standing outcome at grantee institutions is based on the percentage of all enrolled SSS participants served who are in good academic standing based on each grantee institution's definition. Completion of a baccalaureate degree is based on the percentage of participants served each year who graduate from the grantee institution with a bachelor's degree or equivalent in 6 years of enrolling at the institution.

Each SSS program serves an average of approximately 140 students, although some serve as many as 1000 students. At least two thirds of participants served by each grantee institution must be either students with disabilities, first-generation, or low-income students, and one third of all participants with disabilities must also be low income. Services provided by SSS include (a) academic tutoring, (b) guidance in selecting academic courses, and (c) assistance with financial aid applications (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

### **Evaluation of SSS**

In 2023 literature contained only four national studies on the effectiveness of TRIO, highlighting the need for more attention and different approaches to examining TRIO, specifically SSS. The inaugural 1997 investigation dedicated to TRIO SSS was undertaken by Westat, presenting findings through an evaluation report that compared participants of SSS with nonparticipants. The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education (Pell Institute, 2009) study indicated a statistically significant, favorable impact of the SSS program on student success, persistence, and retention where

student success was measured by student graduation rates, retention rates, and students' overall GPAs. A subsequent study by Mathematica (2006) assessed the Talent Search program, showing participants were more likely to enroll in postsecondary education (Pell Institute, 2009). Another national study by Mathematica (2009) assessed Upward Bound programs, yielding evidence suggesting a significant and substantive positive effect of participating in Upward Bound (Pell Institute, 2009). The Upward Bound Math and Science programs were also evaluated during the same period, with findings indicating significant and positive effects including enrolling in college and improved GPAs for participating students (Pell Institute, 2009). Altogether, the studies showed participation in a TRIO program, including TRIO SSS, had a significant impact on the educational outcomes of underrepresented students.

Furthermore, Chaney (2010) examined the SSS program's impact on persistence and graduation rates; however, this study faced limitations, as it could not definitively establish a causal relationship between SSS participation and these outcomes. This ambiguity arose because students had the autonomy to choose the services in which they engaged, and not all students opted to participate (Chaney, 2010). Two additional studies from the 1990s focused on the effects of SSS participation in single institutional contexts. Thomas et al. (1998) examined the graduation rates of SSS cohorts at Rutgers University, with results showing SSS participants graduated at higher rates than other Rutgers students, and at higher than the national average. Additionally, Mahoney (1998) studied the SSS program at California State University, Long Beach, leading to the recommendation that SSS programs must be responsive to student needs and to the changing needs of students.

In addition to studies that formally assessed aspects of TRIO programs, the U.S. Department of Education annually assesses these programs, for example, The George W. Bush presidential administration established in 2005 the “Expect More” study to foster accountability for all federal agencies and programs. The study included reviews of the SSS program’s purpose and design, strategic planning, program management, and accountability. Such an effort led to an overall TRIO SSS rating of “moderately effective” which, for the study, was meant to show that the programs were effective; still, moderately effective was not an extreme rating, showing there was room for improvement with funding and additional reviews needed.

## **Populations**

### **Low-Income College Students**

Prior studies have clearly shown a student’s family socioeconomic status is a strong predictor of their likelihood of graduating college (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Cahalan & Perna, 2015). Furthermore, low-income, first-generation, and minority students are often underrepresented on college campuses relative to society as a whole and face unique challenges both in applying to, attending, and completing college (Studentcaffe, 2022). Not only is improving college outcomes of low-income young adults important to meeting national postsecondary attainment goals (Nichols, 2011), but effective policymaking must extend beyond financial support. For example, Pell Grant recipients were 20% more likely to lose a job due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, and were 17% more likely to experience earning losses (Rodríguez-Planas, 2022). These numbers stress the importance of broad-based programs like TRIO SSS.

Low-income students, as with each population aided by TRIO SSS, are important to the discussion of underrepresented college students. In 1947, President Harry S. Truman formed a commission on higher education that led to one of the first national conversations about college access for low-income students (Nidiffer & Bouman, 2004). The Truman Report was developed out of the commission meeting and showed a federal commitment to access in higher education; the war on poverty was one of the U.S. government's most ambitious attempts to eradicate poverty. Cevallos (2014) stated:

Congressional actions occurring between 1964–1972 contributed to recommended changes that did not occur for nearly two decades. First came the large gains in college access for low-income and minority students—specifically The Higher Education Act of 1965 and the Title IX Amendment in 1972. (pp. 7–8)

On November 8, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Higher Education Act of 1965, which firmly established the federal government as the primary provider of financial aid for college and secured support for low-income students and TRIO SSS students. In his remarks, President Johnson (as cited by Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013) said, “It means that a high school senior anywhere in this great land of ours can apply to any college or any university in any of the 50 states and not be turned away because his family is poor” (p. 2). Before financial aid legislation, low-income students (i.e., TRIO) largely did not and could not attend college due to a lack of family income (Thelin et al., 2004). Before the Higher Education Act of 1965, federal aid for students in higher education had been targeted to specific students (e.g., veterans through the GI Bill) or specific areas of study (e.g., math and science through the National Defense Education Act; Cohen, 2009). Title IV represented the first generally available

financial aid program for postsecondary students. With Title IV and the subsequent Pell Grant, for the first time in U.S. history, financial barriers to a college degree were reduced. From the 1970s through the mid-1980s, there was an uptick in enrollment among low-income and other disadvantaged populations (Cahalan, 2015).

The federal commitment to helping low-income families pay for college shifted in the 1980s to policies designed to aid the middle class (Mortenson et al., 2009). Federal Pell Grants are need-based funds that do not have to be repaid; these grants help low-income students pay for college costs including tuition, fees, room and board, and other educational expenses (Kerr, 2021) to reduce the financial burden that hampers the ability of low-income students to graduate college (Mortensen et al., 2009). Despite almost 50 years of financial aid appropriations by Congress, beginning in 1965, low-income students still do not graduate at the same rates as their middle and higher income counterparts (Bowen et al., 2009; Dorn et al., 2022; Rumberger, 2010). Since 1970, degree attainment for low-income students has only increased by 3%, from 6% to 9% (Cahalan, 2015). Degree completion rates have almost doubled for higher income students since 1970, from 40% to 77% (Cahalan, 2015).

Despite more than a half-century of research, recognition of low socioeconomic status as a barrier to college access, and federal financial aid to students, low-income students are still less likely to earn a baccalaureate degree than their wealthier peers (e.g., Cahalan, 2015). McFarland (2019) found only 67% of low-income high school completers enrolled in college in 2019, compared to 83% of middle- and high-income high school completers. Furthermore, just 14% of students with low socioeconomic status

attained a college degree in 8 years of high school graduation, compared to 60% of students with high socioeconomic status (McFarland, 2019).

Walpole (2003) posited if U.S. higher education were genuinely for all, the experiences and outcomes of students from low-socioeconomic status and high-socioeconomic status backgrounds would be comparable; however, the persistent and widening disparities in persistence and graduation rates between low-socioeconomic and high-socioeconomic status students imply U.S. postsecondary institutions have continued to fail in this area (Bourdieu, 1977; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2017). According to Jury et al. (2017), higher education is far from fair or consistent, as it is constructed and organized based on unspoken norms rooted in middle- and upper-class cultural values. Low-socioeconomic status students may encounter obstacles in emotional well-being, identity management, self-perception, and motivation (Jury et al., 2017). Additionally, low-socioeconomic status students may grapple with internal conflicts arising from the transition from a disadvantaged or working-class family background to academia (Soria, 2015).

### **First-Generation College Students**

It is crucial to consider first-generation students and every subgroup in the TRIO SSS population when discussing underrepresented college students. To explore the lived experiences of this population, it is important to understand the history and circumstances of each population. A first-generation college student is defined as (a) an individual whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree and (b) in the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree (Higher

Education Opportunity Act, 2010; U.S. Education Act of 1965). Many first-generation college students come from low-income families and belong to underrepresented ethnic or racial groups (Yenko, 2023). During the 2015–2016 academic year, 56% of undergraduates nationally were first-generation college students (i.e., neither parent had a bachelor's degree), and 59% of these students were also the first in their family to go to college (Center for First-Generation Students, 2023). Additionally, 6 years after first entering postsecondary education, 56% of first-generation college students and 40% of continuing-generation students had not earned any postsecondary credential (Center for First-generation Students, 2023). First-generation students and the history of the population were important to this research on underrepresented students.

Booth Watkins and Beresin (2023) identified many challenges faced by first-generation students that can prevent persistence, including: (a) psychological challenges of anxiety, (b) confusion, and (c) shame and family conflicts and guilt. Additionally, first-generation college students experience academic challenges with navigating the unfamiliar academic system and financial concerns. Also, social challenges—including greater social isolation and stigma and discrimination—go along with being a first-generation student (Booth Watkins & Beresin, 2023).

First-generation college students face many shared experiences that affect persistence and retention. Additional concerns include first-generation students being more likely than their peers to assume financial responsibility for college (Aspelmeier et al., 2012.) First-generation college students are more likely to work while in college (Martinez et al., 2012). First-generation college students are also more likely to experience imposter syndrome and experience feelings of being socially marginalized or

not belonging, and are less likely to speak up in class or take advantage of office hours offered by faculty (Davis, 2010). Additionally, first-generation college students do not have the privilege of having college knowledge, so they often do not know how to access resources, financial aid, or any other expectations (Davis, 2010).

TRIO programs play an important role in supporting the success of first-generation students. McElroy and Arnesto (1998) found TRIO programs were one of the first programs to support first-generation students. First-generation status serves as one of the requirements for TRIO students in addition to prior poor academic performance for college access.

### **Disabled Students**

Including disabled students in the TRIO SSS community is vital to the conversation concerning underrepresented college students. To explore the lived experiences of this population, it was important to understand the history of this population. Disabled college students are students who report (a) deafness or serious difficulty hearing; (b) blindness or serious difficulty seeing; (c) serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition; or (d) serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Data indicated 19% of all enrolled undergraduates reported having a disability, compared to 12% of all enrolled postbaccalaureate students in 2014; according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015), among people 25 years old and older in 2014, 16% of people with a disability completed at least a bachelor's degree, and 35% of people with no disability completed at least a bachelor's degree.

Disabled students have specific obstacles to college success. Navigating campus procedures, classroom and instructional barriers, negative interactions with fellow students—along with applying for accommodations for learning disabilities—are some of the obstacles disabled students face (Internal Revenue Service, n.d.). For this reason, academic support programs such as TRIO SSS and disability resource centers are needed and provide resources and support. TRIO SSS provides one-on-one support for students and individual program planning that can help assist disabled students to be successful. Disability resource centers have been established in higher education to provide specific support, resources, and services that assist disabled students with retention.

### **Factors Related to Persistence**

The student experience in TRIO SSS centers around supporting students with persistence and the factors that affect persistence. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2021), *persistence* is defined as a student's ability to continue to the next term. Based on findings from several studies, DeWitz et al. (2009) showed motivation can predict persistence. Early studies on college student departure, persistence, and degree completion were conducted by Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993). In general, Tinto's foundational research highlighted that students' commitment leads to persistence.

Early studies on various types of student motivation consistently found a significant relationship to persistence (e.g., Stage, 1989). Tinto (2017) reported persistence and motivation work together and university personnel should focus not only on retention, but also on ways that can influence students' motivation to stay, persist, and complete their degrees. Morrow and Ackermann (2012) reported evidence indicating

“students that reported being motivated were more likely to intend to persist” (p. 489) than those students who had no motivational goals. This finding has been reinforced by other studies; for example, Alarcon and Edwards (2013) provided supporting evidence that ability and motivation are the two trait predictors of college retention. The researchers defined *ability* as the “knowledge and skills that enable the individual to perform successfully” (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013, p. 129), whereas “motivation is the drive an individual has to perform the behavior in question” (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013, p. 130). Alarcon and Edwards’s study investigated the relationship between ability and motivation in 1st-year university retention and found (a) evidence of the importance of predicting retention and (b) that motivation had a stronger relationship with retention than ability. Ultimately, motivation is linked to persistence, and persistence leads to graduation (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013; Cox, 2012; Guiffrida et al., 2013).

### **COVID-19 and College Students**

Inequality among postsecondary students was highlighted during the COVID-19 global pandemic, indicating racial and class differences in student persistence (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Rodríguez-Planas (2020) reported low-income college students were far more likely than their wealthier peers to face a diverse range of financial hardships during the pandemic, particularly around regular access to food, housing, sudden unemployment, and the loss of financial aid. The burden of the COVID-19 global pandemic experienced by first-generation, low-income, and students of color carried over into the academic realm.

According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2020), postsecondary freshmen enrollment decreased by an unprecedented 13.1% in Fall 2020.

Postsecondary enrollment in Spring 2021 dropped 4.2% from the previous year, with the community college sector seeing the largest decline at 11.3% (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021). COVID-19 clearly impacted college persistence. At 56%, the overall college enrollment drop during this period was higher for Black and Hispanic students than white students. Additionally, low-income students were 20% more likely to lose a job due to the pandemic, and 65% more likely to have faced food and shelter insecurity (Rodríguez-Planas, 2022).

The themes that have emerged from research on the effects of COVID-19 include: (a) mental health effects, (b) academic effects, and (c) financial effects. Evidence on each of these is summarized in the following sections.

### **Mental Health Effects**

During the COVID-19 global pandemic, college students experienced myriad stress and psychological issues, including self-harm and suicide (Liyanage et al., 2021; World Health Organization, 2022). Additionally, studies have shown 80% of college students reported their mental health had been impacted adversely by COVID-19, and 20% of students reported their mental health had significantly declined (Active Minds, 2020; Giuntella et al., 2021). Mental health issues lead to the development of intensive mental health services and a need for counseling services (Abdu-Glass et al., n.d.; National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2020). College students reported increased anxiety and heightened levels of stress due to the COVID-19 global pandemic (Li et al., 2021; Quattrocchi, 2022; Sahu, 2020). Haikalis et al. (2021) found the rate of depression among students rose from about 13.8% to about 30.4% from 2018–2020.

### **Academic Effects**

A major academic effect of the COVID-19 global pandemic was the instant move to remote learning. Students attended classes remotely and used video resources, but students and faculty were not prepared for this abrupt change. As students transitioned to online learning, many struggled and faced difficulties accessing technology, concentrating, and balancing responsibilities at home (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020; Weldon, 2021). Additionally, students had difficulty with social isolation, which has been tied to life disruptions that impact student learning abilities (Filho et al., 2021; Pavin Ivanec, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2022b).

### **Financial Effects**

During the COVID-19 global pandemic, some families lost everything and had no income for months at a time (Despard et al., 2022). Markowitz (2020) summarized for many students, real financial insecurity happened during the pandemic, particularly for low-income students. Lusardi et al. (2021) noted many families were already financially at risk before the onset of the pandemic, which made them unequipped to deal with the financial burdens of the pandemic. Although the U.S. government assisted millions of U.S. citizens through stimulus checks, many college students were left out of the financial assistance (Cox et al., 2022.) Additionally, there was support offered to millions of students through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, which sought to offset student debt and the crises affecting students during the COVID-19 global pandemic; however, students allocated funds through the CARES Act had to provide evidence of need (U.S. Department of Education Cares Act, 2022), which was a

problem for many underrepresented students and their families who had no records or evidence.

### **COVID-19 With the Underrepresented Population**

Data show between 14% and 34% of underrepresented students considered dropping a class during Spring 2020, 30% modified their graduation plans, and the freshman fall retention rate dropped by 26% (Rodríguez-Planas, 2022). Additionally, these students were 20% more likely to lose a job due to the pandemic and 17% more likely to experience earning losses than other students (Rodríguez-Planas, 2022). Marginalized students were also 65% more likely to have faced food and shelter insecurity, and 15% more likely to expect lower annual household income. Educational and employment outcomes for these students were negatively impacted by the pandemic.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framing**

To study the richness and the experiences of students during the COVID-19 global pandemic, understanding the critical elements of the campus environment in which students engage was necessary. The concepts of student integration and persistence are rooted in Tinto's (1975) student integration theory, providing the foundation on which numerous other models have evolved, offering updated perspectives and prompting more inclusive research. For example, and of relevance for the present study, is Museus's (2014) culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) model, which addressed shortcomings embedded in Tinto's (1975) theory. To frame my examination of diverse student experiences during the COVID-19 global pandemic, I first review the theoretical development of inquiry into student persistence that historically stemmed from Tinto's work. Next, I describe the relevance and importance of Museus's CECE model.

### **Student Integration Model**

In Tinto's (1975) student integration model, two main components frame how students engage with their college culture: (a) academic integration and (b) social integration. Academic integration includes (a) student and faculty interactions on class material; (b) the use of campus tutoring services; and (c) research opportunities, such as passing grades and following policies. Social integration includes student–peer relationships, student organization participation, and faculty–staff mentorships. Programs such as TRIO SSS represent a form of social and academic integration.

Tinto's (2004) subsequent work has highlighted that institutions must emphasize academic integration and social integration among first-generation students to enhance their likelihood of persisting toward degree completion. Tinto's (1975) model posits for students to persist, they need integration into formal and informal academic systems and formal and informal social systems. Tinto's theory suggests the more students integrate into college life, the more successful they will be, and the more likely they will be to remain enrolled. Specifically, Tinto's theory informed the present study, given TRIO SSS aim to support students in socially and academically integrating through its programs and offered resources.

Tinto's (2012) work also points to important linkages between (a) learning and persistence, and (b) involvement and the quality of student effort. Tinto's work suggests a student's involvement with peers and faculty relates to the quality of that student's subsequent effort, which increases the likelihood of persistence. Tinto identified four conditions in colleges and universities that promote retention and persistence, including

(a) expectations, (b) support, (c) assessment and feedback, and (d) involvement. Tinto's work underscored that these conditions are vital to student success.

Although Tinto's (1975) theory serves as a key starting point for advancing research and practice focused on college persistence and engagement, it has been widely criticized (e.g., Attinasi, 1989; Jun & Tierney, 1999; Rendon et al., 2000). These critiques have argued Tinto's theory is culturally biased and limited in the extent to which it is useful for explaining persistence among students of color. Central to this critique is that Tinto's theory places the primary responsibility of engaging socially and academically on the student, rather than recognizing the roles and responsibilities of institutions. As such, to examine the experiences of diverse college students and broader notions of success, it was important to discuss alternative models of persistence and engagement in combination with existing research focused on the experiences of diverse students.

### **Evolution of Alternative Models**

In the years since Tinto's (1975) foundational work, models have evolved in several important ways (e.g., Jun & Tierney, 1999; Museus, 2014; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Rendon, 1994). For example, Jun and Tierney (1999) discussed the cultural integrity of institutions and how intentionally engaging with a student's cultural background can support college success. Also, Rendon (1994) discussed the importance of cultural validation of students' backgrounds and identities in promoting success in an institution. Museus and Quaye (2009) similarly found that underrepresented students shape their college experiences through their cultural experiences. Each of these models offer alternatives to Tinto's theory for understanding the experiences of underrepresented student populations in relation to their opportunities for success. Additionally, Smart and

Paulsen (2011) argued Tinto's earlier work failed to incorporate aspects of diversity that support all populations. This more recent scholarship stemmed from Tinto and directly informed the CECE model (Museus, 2014).

### **CECE Model**

Although various models and frameworks have emerged to better incorporate the rich diversity found in college student populations, Museus's (2014) CECE model was particularly well-suited for conceptually grounding the present study. CECE is a highly relevant and informative model that expanded on Tinto's (1975) foundational work. The CECE model embodies TRIO's history and explains how TRIO and CECE focus on the institutional support that is necessary for students to persist. The CECE model provides important information on how and why external influences and precollege factors together may shape students' experiences. External influences can include (a) financial factors, (b) employment, and (c) family characteristics. Precollege factors include (a) academic preparation; (b) academic dispositions at the time of entry; and (c) college success, including learning, satisfaction, and persistence (Museus, 2014). The CECE model emphasizes college students' access to culturally engaging campus environments, which has been found to positively correlate with student success (i.e., graduation) and increased probability of succeeding in college (Museus, 2014). Student success includes graduation, and succeeding while in college includes students having a sense of belonging and enjoying college. Derived from the voices of racially diverse populations, the CECE model offered an excellent basis to cultivate further inquiry into the experiences of students served by TRIO SSS programs.

More specifically, the CECE model posits students who have access to more culturally engaging campus environments are more likely to persist than those who do not (Museus, 2014). The CECE model is comprised of nine indicators (see Table 1) that are thought to contribute to college success among racially diverse populations.

**Table 1**

*CECE Indicators*

Nine indicators of CECE	Descriptions
Cultural familiarity	college students have opportunities to physically connect with faculty, staff, and peers with whom they share common backgrounds on their respective campuses are associated with greater likelihood of success
Culturally relevant knowledge	institutions that offer opportunities for their students to cultivate, sustain, and increase knowledge of their cultures and communities of origin can positively impact their experiences and success
Cultural community service	institutions provide students with spaces and tools to give back to and positively transform their cultural communities via various mechanisms, including activities aimed at spreading awareness about issues in their respective communities
Opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural engagement	opportunities to engage in positive and purposeful interactions with peers from disparate cultural origins can have a positive impact on college experiences and success
Collectivist cultural orientations	students who encounter institutional environments that are based on more collectivist cultural orientations, as opposed to more individualistic ones, are more likely to succeed
Culturally validating environments	students who are surrounded by postsecondary educators who validate their cultural backgrounds and identities will have more positive experiences and be more likely to succeed in college
Humanized educational environments	humanized educational environments refers to campus environments that are characterized by institutional agents who care about, are committed to, and develop meaningful relationships with their students

Nine indicators of CECE	Descriptions
Proactive philosophies	faculty and staff go beyond making information and support available to making extra efforts to bring that information and support to students and maximize their likelihood of success
Availability of holistic support	the extent to which postsecondary institutions provide their students with access to more faculty or staff members that they are confident will provide them with the information they seek, offer the help that they require, or connect them with the information or support that they need

*Note.* Adapted from *The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments* by S. Museus, 2014, *Handbook of Theory and Research* (Vol 29). Springer. ([https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8005-6\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8005-6_5))

Importantly, Museus's (2014) model addressed the cultural critiques of Tinto's (1975) work by reframing the concept of academic and social integration as one related to cultural integration, where educators integrate experiences of cultural exposure to empower students and achieve success. The model frames understanding of the specific environmental characteristics that are well-situated to support the success of students from diverse populations. The nine indicators highlight the environmental components that, together, enhance opportunities for diverse populations to thrive.

The first five indicators of CECE focus on cultural relevance and ways institutional environments are relevant to the cultural backgrounds and environments of diverse populations (Quaye et al., 2020). First, cultural familiarity is the extent to which students have opportunities to connect with others who understand their backgrounds, including faculty, staff, and peers (Museus et al., 2017). Second, culturally relevant knowledge refers to students who can cultivate and sustain knowledge about their

communities. Third, cultural community service addresses students who have spaces and tools to support and positively transform their cultural communities through activism and research. Fourth, meaningful cross-cultural engagement refers to the opportunity students have to engage in positive and purposeful interactions (Museus et al., 2017).

The remaining four indicators focus on cultural responsiveness and how campus environments respond to the needs of diverse students. First, a collectivist cultural orientation refers to students who encounter institutional environments based on more collectivist cultural orientations (Museus et al., 2017). Second, humanized educational environments refer to campus environments that are characterized by institutional agents who care about, are committed to, and develop meaningful relationships with their students (Museus et al., 2017). Third, proactive philosophies refer to faculty and staff who go beyond making information and support available to make extra efforts to bring information and support so students can succeed. Fourth, holistic support refers to institutions that provide access to faculty or staff members with whom students can connect and gain support in all situations (Museus et al., 2017).

### ***Studies Based on the CECE Framework***

The CECE model was designed to focus on the specific experiences of diverse students as a framework and assessment tool to mitigate the barriers to success for diverse students (CECE, n.d.). Numerous examples exist that highlighted the efficacy of the CECE model (e.g., Azevedo et al., 2017, Glass et al., 2021, Reyes & Duran, 2021). For instance, Williams et al. (2022) used the CECE model to inform their focus on the affirming practices faculty and administrators use to cultivate supportive environments in the context of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Williams et al.'s

findings are particularly informative given their explicit focus on culturally affirming practices for underserved populations and the resulting evidence on promising institutional strategies for creating inclusive spaces. Among the 16 HBCU faculty and staff study participants, the findings highlighted the value of centering student experiences and prioritizing specific educational practices in alignment with the CECE model (Williams et al., 2022). Another relevant example came from Azevedo et al.'s (2017) study, which focused on the intersection of student experiences and a sense of belonging among students of color. Based on study participants who were academically gifted students from historically underrepresented populations at a single institution, the findings indicated the importance of cross-campus collaboration that map to many of the CECE indicators. Glass et al. (2021) extended similar themes to international students, with emphasis on the kinds of learning that happens as students integrate, whereas Reyes and Duran's (2021) examination of 85 peer-reviewed journal articles illustrated the influence of cultivating asset-based thinking for culturally diverse populations. The CECE model provided a useful framework for these informative studies, highlighting its relevance in framing my investigation of TRIO SSS students in a single institutional context.

With the present study, I explored the lived experiences and educational successes (and challenges) of TRIO SSS students during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Using Tinto's (1975) theory, I brought an awareness of, and attention to, the importance of students' integration into formal and informal academic systems, as well as formal and informal social systems. Tinto's (1975) theory substantiates the important connections between students' academic and social integration and their likelihood of persisting in

college. One of the key mechanisms through which the TRIO SSS program supports diverse college students is by helping them become more socially and academically integrated. As such, studying the lived experiences of TRIO SSS students during the COVID-19 global pandemic required attention to how they were socially and academically integrated and the challenges encountered amid disruptions brought on by the pandemic.

In addition, Museus's (2014) CECE model informed the present study by highlighting the ways in which campus environments shape the experiences of diverse student populations. The value of using the CECE framework as a lens through which to examine the lived experiences of diverse TRIO SSS students stemmed from its centering on the institution's role, specifically the ways the nine indicators shown in Table 1 align with the holistic, student-centered approach of the TRIO SSS program. The CECE framework embraces a critical perspective that is useful for studying diverse students' experiences in culturally diverse campus environments. The framework also informed my understanding of the lived experiences of students through the nine CECE indicators that contribute to success for diverse populations and by guiding engaging diverse populations in a positive college experience.

### **Summary**

Research on TRIO SSS has provided information on programmatic outcomes (Mahoney, 1998; Thomas et al., 1998), but has lacked focus on the lived experiences of students. Mahoney (1998) discussed responsiveness, synergism, and support as factors that contributed to the overall effectiveness of TRIO SSS at California State University, Hayward. Additionally, the literature contains limited research to understand the full

effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic, particularly how the crisis was experienced by the most vulnerable people in these communities; evidence to date remains scarce (Rodríguez-Planas, 2022). There was also a need for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the pandemic on students' learning and development (Wolniak & Burman, 2022). How COVID-19 affected the lived experiences of students is not well understood and in need of further inquiry. Studies have not examined the role of TRIO SSS in supporting students through a particularly challenging global pandemic, leaving several important questions unanswered and the need to better understand students' experiences engaging with TRIO SSS.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODS

This study focused on the experiences of TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) program participants during the COVID-19 global pandemic to address the two research questions:

1. How do TRIO SSS students reflect on their lived experiences in college during the COVID-19 global pandemic?
2. How do undergraduate students perceive the role of the TRIO SSS program in helping them persist through college during the COVID-19 global pandemic?

To address these questions, I employed a basic qualitative approach to capture information on (a) how students interpreted their experiences, (b) how they constructed their worlds, and (c) the meaning they attributed to their experiences. Although the overall purpose of qualitative research is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences, basic qualitative design is particularly well-suited for studies with the primary purpose of understanding “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017, p. 6). In this chapter, I describe the study’s research design, research approach, site selection, interview protocols, data collection, and data analysis. Additionally, I detail the steps taken to establish trustworthiness.

### **Institutional Context and Description of the Site**

The institution selected for this study was a, public, 4-year, Research-1 (R-1) institution in the Southeast. The institution houses several federally funded grant programs, including TRIO SSS. A public university was chosen because public institutions tend to serve a socially vulnerable and ethnically diverse population (Rodríguez-Planas, 2022). Additionally, the selected university has one of the largest outreach and public service programs and houses many federally funded grant programs. TRIO programs have been a part of the campus for over 40 years and have a history, support, and a strong track record of supporting the underrepresented population. These characteristics made this institution and the TRIO programs relevant to this study.

The institution had 12 colleges and schools making up the university community. To assist in anonymity, no reference to the university's actual name was made. The institution had one of the most diverse student populations in the southeastern United States at the time of this study, with institutional data reporting a student body of 41% Black, 21% White, 15% Asian, 13% Hispanic, and 7% other and 3% foreign national students; about 52% of students enrolled at the selected institution were classified as low-income. Approximately 33% were classified as first-generation students who were self-identified. As of 2023, the academic offerings ranged from the bachelor's degree to the doctoral degree, with over 1,500 faculty.

The TRIO SSS program for this study enrolled approximately 140 students annually as of 2023. As determined by the U.S. Department of Education, students who are enrolled or accepted in a program at a higher education institution are eligible to join the TRIO SSS program if they are low-income students, first-generation students (i.e.,

students whose parents did not graduate from college), or students with disabilities who can verify there is an academic need. All study participants were enrolled in the TRIO SSS program at this higher education institution at the time of data collection.

### **Participant Selection**

Given the study's goal of establishing a deep understanding of the lived experiences of college students during the COVID-19 global pandemic, a small number of participants were chosen who met specific criteria. To assist with recruitment, I used my professional network, or gatekeepers, at the institution (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Each participant in the study was required to be enrolled at the institution and be a participant in the TRIO SSS program.

Once key informants in the institution were engaged, I sought to recruit and then select participants for the study. I used purposeful sampling, which "may be defined as selecting units (e.g., individuals, groups of individuals, institutions) based on specific purposes associated with answering a research study's questions" (Teddlie & Yu, 2007, p. 77). Purposeful sampling involves selecting research participants according to the needs of the study and purposeful sampling is best when focusing on small samples (Nikolopoulou, 2022). I only sought participants who were TRIO SSS students in their 4th years of college, or recent graduates. Specifically, the population sample consisted of low-income, first-generation, or disabled college students who participated in the federal TRIO SSS program while in school. The criterion of participation in TRIO SSS helped recruit potential participants.

As required by federal regulation, 67% of participants in the TRIO program must be low-income individuals (U.S. Code of Federal Regulations, 2022). The study

participants, by virtue of participation in TRIO SSS, met all criteria to participate in the study. Purposeful sampling is useful when seeking to intentionally select information-rich cases to learn about the dynamics most important and relevant to the aims of a particular study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

The sample consisted of bachelor's degree-seeking students attending the selected institution. Beginning with a TRIO program population of over 200, participants were delineated with several overarching characteristics, including (a) enrollment in a TRIO SSS program; (b) enrollment in TRIO and the institution before March 20, 2020; and (c) continued enrollment at the institution after COVID-19 global pandemic was declared over in April 2023 by the head of the United Nations World Health Organization.

Participants in the study were current college students in the TRIO SSS program. TRIO SSS works with low-income students, first-generation college students, and/or students with disabilities. Relying on the TRIO SSS program's selection mechanism, these critical student classifications were defined according to the U.S. Department of Education (2022), where (a) first-generation student's parent has not obtained a bachelor's degree, (b) low-income students have families with annual taxable income that does not exceed 150% of the poverty level, and (c) disabled students are those who can verify a physical or intellectual impairment.

During the end of the Spring 2023 semester (i.e., April–May, 2023) the SSS director helped identify students who met the criteria of the study. The director made recommendations regarding who would be appropriate for inclusion in the study on the basis on current classification. The director and I targeted 12 students, and 10 students responded.; however, only nine students completed interviews. The TRIO director

forwarded the recruitment email (see Appendix A) to these potential students inviting them to participate in the study and informing them they would receive further study information from me. The students also received an informed consent form which explained their rights to decline participation at any point in the study and explained data would be kept confidential. Once student participation was confirmed, interviews were scheduled and I followed up with an email to confirm the date, time, and Zoom link for each interview. Students received a brief eligibility survey (see Appendix B) to capture basic demographic information, which helped ensure there was enough time for each interview. The survey included demographic data, including: (a) gender, (b) age, (c) ethnicity, (d) years involved in TRIO, (e) current classification, (f) terms until degree completion or completion date, and (g) current major and degree program. Table 2 describes participant demographics. Names or titles offered by participants that detailed identifiable information were removed.

**Table 2**

*Participant Demographics*

Name	Gender	Age	Race	Years in TRIO	Class	Major
Sue	F	40	MR	3	SR/Graduate	Social work
Mary	F	23	B	3	SR/Graduate	Nursing
Bob	M	22	B	3	SR/Graduate	Biology
Jane	F	23	B	3	SR/Graduate	Nursing
Kim	F	38	B	3	SR/Graduate	Psychology
Lisa	F	51	B	3	SR	Communications
Jack	M	35	B	5	SR/Graduate	Exercise science
Tom	M	22	B	4	SR	Business economics
Kate	F	63	B	3	SR/Graduate	Legal studies

*Note.* M = Male, F = Female, B = Black, MR = Mixed Race, SR = 4th year or Senior.

## Data Collection

My primary approach to data collection included in-depth, semistructured interviews among the participant sample. Semistructured interviews are conversations that rely on targeted questions asked of all participants, are carefully scripted, and are tailored to the aims of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The interviews were conducted over Zoom to accommodate student schedules and protection amid an increase in COVID-19 cases at the time of data collection. Penner and McClement (2008) explained face-to-face interviews allow for immediate clarification. Although not in person, the interviews still allowed for access to nonverbal cues, such as gestures and facial expressions. Using audio and video from each interview allowed me to note physical responses and pick up on visual cues from each participant. The interviews lasted 30–45 minutes and were recorded via Zoom and professionally transcribed before analysis. Each participant was given an informed consent form (see Appendix C) to review before deciding whether or not to participate in the interview. The consent form explained the students' rights to decline participation at any point and explained all data would be kept confidential. Each participant was asked predetermined questions (see Appendix D), with additional follow-up and clarifying questions asked as needed. The interviews flowed well and the questions and the theoretical framework guided the interviews. Students were reminded they may be contacted for a follow-up interview if clarification was necessary.

Jacob and Furgerson (2012) said interviews help “gain insight into lived experiences, learn the perspectives of individuals participating in a study, and discover the nuances in stories” (p. 1). The goal of each interview was to create a dialogue for

participants to describe their experiences and allow for an essential understanding of multiple perspectives.

### **Data Analysis**

My analysis of interview data focused on uncovering themes for understanding the lived experiences of the students in their own words. Specifically, I identified key themes and narratives around lived experiences, persistence, and the engagement of TRIO SSS that were grounded by prior theories and frameworks related to student integration and cultural engagement.

I continually evaluated this study through reflective commentary, which included initial impressions of each interview and the patterns that began to emerge (Shenton, 2004). At the end of each interview, I started the process of transcribing by submitting audio files to Transcription Wing.com and then relistening in full while cleaning each transcript. Cleaning entailed identifying inaudible statements, fixing typographical errors, and deleting unnecessary language that distracted from readability. I next uploaded transcripts to MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software program. Analyzing each interview ensured I was able to capture and learn from the participants' lived experiences and discover nuances (Jacob & Ferguson, 2012.) Using MAXQDA allowed me to code the transcripts to identify emerging themes.

I initially read through the text while (a) dividing the text into large segments of information, (b) labeling these segments of information with codes, (c) reducing overlap and redundancy codes as much as possible, and then (d) collapsing the codes into themes (Creswell, 2007). Miles et al. (2020) suggested coding in two major stages: first- and second-cycle coding. First-cycle coding is a way to initially summarize segments of data,

and second-cycle coding is a way of grouping the initial codes into larger categories or themes (Miles et al., 2020). In the first cycle, I developed a flexible list of deductive codes, including descriptive codes informed by the literature and theory, and added inductive codes (e.g., in vivo codes, which derived from participants' language) as I progressed through the analysis (Miles et al. 2020). During second-cycle coding, I grouped initial codes into larger categories to condense data and identify larger themes (Miles et al., 2020). I also used subcoding in the second cycle of coding to assist with assigning after the primary code to detail or enrich the entry (Miles et al., 2020). During the process, I also used jottings and analytic memos to document my reflections and thinking process (Miles et al., 2020). Going line by line, I labeled text segments by key ideas, which were then coded. The identified codes were grouped together to capture broader concepts and categories to create some meaning.

The interpreting of the data occurred through the text descriptions and the structural descriptions (i.e., the students' experiences). The categories were reviewed and then placed into these large overarching themes, which helped identify commonalties and connections between the students. The data that were gathered and then analyzed reflected selected themes that best captured the essence of the interviews. The process of reducing the data, displaying the data, and then drawing conclusions helped guide this process. Data reduction involved selecting, simplifying, and extracting themes and patterns from the transcripts. Data display was then done in a matrix, which included printing transcripts and then cutting out sections and spreading them on the floor to really help me see a holistic data display. The data display's hard-copy map layout was based

on the themes that emerged from the coding and provided a great visual for me. Through these steps, I drew conclusions from the data.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is paramount for sound qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016), requiring high standards of rigor among researchers because research is based on assumptions about reality (Creswell, 2007). To ensure trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. I used interview transcripts and notes I collected (Yin, 2014). I also employed two distinct recording devices to ensure the reliability of the interview recordings: (a) one for Zoom and (b) one for my personal computer. Subsequently, I used specialized software to transcribe all interviews. Participants received a copy of transcripts to review and were asked to send any clarifications, corrections, and additions as needed. I maintained a comprehensive journal encompassing all notes and interview records, which were securely stored to ensure documentation and accessibility for future reference, if needed.

Additionally, four areas represent trustworthiness: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Credibility was ensured through member checking during the interviews by asking the participants clarifying questions and repeating responses. Participants were given an opportunity to cross-check the initial summary analysis of their interview for accuracy. Transferability was attained by giving thick descriptions of the participants' stories, which included detailed accounts, times, locations, and direct quotes to transport me to the experiences of the time. Additionally, an audit trail ensured both dependability and confirmability and was provided using MAXQDA software. An audit trail helps

authenticate the findings by following the trail of the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Furthermore, I practiced high ethical standards during and after data collection (e.g., the use of informed consent) such that all participant identity markers were removed and pseudonyms were assigned, and all of the participants' information was kept confidential.

### **Limitations**

One of the limitations of this study was my potential bias stemming from my experiences with similar student populations at another institution. I have been a long-term champion for TRIO students and always want to tell the story of students; I feel that I know a lot of the stories very well. The second limitation was the interviews were all conducted via Zoom, which may have limited observation of in-person cues. Additionally, time constraints was a limitation. The third limitation involved ongoing analysis of the effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic on higher education, as it may be years before the effects are truly analyzed and determined through data. The fourth constraint pertained to the fact all participants in this study were self-selected volunteers, which restricted the range of responses. A fifth limitation was securing students for the study. Initial contact was made late in the Spring 2023, semester and many students were not available due to finals and end-of-semester responsibilities. Additionally, trying to conduct interviews during the Summer 2023 semester proved limiting, as many students do not respond to emails or requests and are busy with full-time work, internships, study abroad, and research. I targeted 12 students and 10 students responded; however, only nine completed interviews.

### **Researcher Positionality**

My interest in conducting this study stemmed from my many years working with college students, specifically TRIO students, as well as my personal beliefs. I have worked with federal TRIO programs for over 20 years, and I have always felt the need to succeed and make my family proud. This belief comes from the way in which I was raised. Understanding low-income, first-generation, disabled, and underrepresented students has long been my passion, and my loyalty has always been to help everyone succeed. This research was inspired by my interest and work with the population. I believe everyone should have college access no matter the color of someone's skin, the neighborhood in which they live, or the high school they attended. My interest in this subject was further sharpened due to the recognition of the large disparity in degree attainment and persistence for low-income students. Additionally, the failure of the academy to treat socioeconomic status as an equal diversity issue increased my interest in this area. The long-term effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic ravished underrepresented communities and drew larger lines in the sand for college access and success between these populations and those with greater privilege. I brought a particular interest in these issues and viewed them as an alarming concern for the nation.

As a researcher, I can be overly empathetic to my community and my students. I acknowledged these challenges and realized I must work through them, and did so by using a reflexive journal and having continued conversations with allies and colleagues who stood with me on advocacy for these issues.

## Summary

This chapter included the research methodology used for this study, the detailed explanation of the research design, and my reason for choosing this study. Additionally, the chapter included a description of the participants, site selection, recruitment, and techniques used for data collection and the data analysis procedures.

The effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic will not be fully understood for years to come, and its scale is not well understood (Bevins, 2021; McCann, 2020). By focusing on college students who participate in the TRIO-SSS program, I designed the present study to explore their experiences during the COVID-19 global pandemic and the support received from TRIO. In doing so, I aimed to contribute new evidence on how students experienced the pandemic and their views on support received by the TRIO SSS program.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The study sought to address two research questions: one focused on how TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) students reflected on their lived experiences in college during the COVID-19 global pandemic, and the other centered on how students perceived the role of the TRIO SSS program in helping them persist through college during the COVID-19 global pandemic. In this chapter, I present the findings from this basic qualitative research study that began to answer these important questions.

The study's methods created opportunities for student participants to share their perceptions related to navigating the process of obtaining a postsecondary degree while being a student in a college access program during a global pandemic. The interviews gave students the space for flexibility and transparency in their responses; many expressed the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic and the pressures of life and school. Students often spoke of the essential role of TRIO SSS staff, faculty, staff of support offices (e.g., admissions, financial aid, housing), and the peers who helped them persevere.

Each participant shared common characteristics, but each was unique in their answers and the perspectives shared during the interviews. The participants involved in this study each provided rich descriptions of their experiences, specifically their lived experiences as college students during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Ample information was extracted from the nine student interviews as they discussed their lived

experiences. From the data representing participants' interviews, three overarching themes emerged: (a) stress and a sense of the unknown; (b) social experiences, including the importance of personal connections; and (c) TRIO SSS support during the COVID-19 global pandemic, with the belief that TRIO played a role in their support and ultimate success. In this chapter, I present a discussion of the major themes that emerged from student interviews.

### **Theme 1: Compounding Stress During COVID-19**

Throughout the course of conducting interviews with participants in this study, the significance of stress emerged as a consistent and recurring theme. Booth Watkins and Beresin (2022) found the challenges of anxiety can prevent student persistence. Coping with the sudden and rapid onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic was quite distressing. The student participants in the study were all participants in TRIO, and students in TRIO are served based on federal requirements that they have a disability, are first-generation, or have low-income status, thereby already starting with a deficit (Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021). Numerous student participants were already contending with significant stresses and challenges related to their college responsibilities, including attending classes, working, and managing family commitments. Nevertheless, the abrupt onset of a national shutdown and the COVID-19 global pandemic further compounded their preexisting stressors, intensifying feelings of anxiety and overwhelming them.

Compounding stress started with the initial entrance to college as an underrepresented student; each participant being in their 2nd semester of college, and already steps behind their peers, stacked the stress for them. The initial stressors associated with gaining admission to college—and shortly thereafter, the additional

stressors stemming from the pandemic-induced shutdown—compounded the already demanding experience of entering college. These initial stressors and concerns contributed to the overall experiences of the student participants during that period. Moreover, academic challenges such as demanding class schedules, the need for effective time management, and rigorous coursework consistently weighed heavily on the participants, causing ongoing distress. This stress aligns with data that showed academic challenges for TRIO students—who often come from disadvantaged backgrounds—can vary, but commonly include the following: time management, study skills, and financial barriers (e.g., Cushman, 2007). Sue, age 45, discussed her experiences, noting, “What I am saying is we don’t have support and COVID-19 was a really, really tough time for everybody.”

Jane, a 23-year-old female student, also talked about how she did not know how she would make it in college during COVID-19 and said:

I had bills to pay for. I had other things like academic related to pay for. So, it was quite difficult my job on campus with civic engagement [office] closed so when school shut down, I lost my job and had no way to supplement that. I was a little stressed and I was kind of worried about how to pay for certain things like school supplies that were more expensive because of my prenursing courses, so that didn’t help at all. It was just a lot. I felt very stressed.

Kim added her stress compounded and was evident through depression. Kim recalled:

Oh, I just—yeah, I—I just—it was a bad time period those couple of months [during the start of COVID shutdown]. Like, even my friends at school was like, I was a totally different person. The person that I was then and the person that I am

now, like, is completely different. Like, I was showing up with my hair all wrapped, looking like I just rolled out of bed. I was depressed.

Lisa, a 51-year-old female student, added even more about the stress and unknown, and how stress was compounded during COVID-19 shutdown. Lisa noted:

It was a combination of things, because of my mature age and society pressures and stresses, a lot was coming across the news. So, I had to shut that down a little bit and just try to stay up to date with the current events, you know, just for knowledge, but I realized it was starting to take effect on me, and not just me, a lot of students as well.

Almost all participants shared a common perception that their college experiences during the COVID-19 global pandemic were marked by significant stress that was overwhelming on top of existing stress. As one participant said, “It was challenging, it was very challenging.” Lisa shared, “It was really interesting because it was a very rushed situation. So, we weren’t able to really comprehend what was actually happening.” She went on to say:

So, that was—it was—it was challenging [COVID-19], and it was new because of the fact that everything was online, and I’m an in-class, hands-on student. So, that was my first challenge was the fact that because of the pandemic, you had to have classes online.

Lisa continued, noting, “So, communicating with everyone on the administrative level, registrar, you know, finance departments, and things like that was—it was a navigating experience.” Lisa discussed her time with COVID-19 and adjustments during this period.

Compounding stress served as a major theme for the experiences described by underrepresented student participants; before the COVID-19 global pandemic, they were already stressed and trying to figure out life and making it as underrepresented student in college, and then they had to deal with COVID-19. Study participants' comments about stress and a sense of the unknown generally fell into two broad categories: (a) not learning as before COVID-19, and (b) navigating financial problems. Studies have also shown the change of the pandemic created chaos and confusion for students, in general and specifically, concerning where they lived, how they learned, and how they interacted with classmates and faculty (e.g., Haskett et al., 2022; Hotez et al., 2021; Sahu, 2020).

### **Not Learning as Before COVID-19**

Education and learning constituted a significant aspect of the students' experiences during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Being underrepresented (i.e., low-income and first-generation), the study participants already dealt with learning gaps and lack of resources. The continuous global health crisis and simultaneous demands of managing personal life, family, and academics created formidable challenges many students found difficult to navigate, especially underrepresented students. The students in this study were concerned with the loss of learning, struggled to understand how to learn online, and often found their professors did not teach them as effectively online. As a result, the students often noted they could not understand the concepts, especially with lab classes and teaching math online with no way to show working through a problem. One participant explained:

That's when I kinda felt a lot less motivated to be the best scholar. . . . Once COVID hit, we all got online and I truly feel that the coursework became very

watered down. Kinda felt like—like high school where they just give you busy bookwork. I didn't have the connection and it became lackluster. . . . The COVID period kinda, like, removed any type of confidence and the ability to be successful as I could be.

A positive academic experience is essential for personal growth, career opportunities, and long-term success. Academic experiences are a significant component of the overall college experience and have a lasting impact on a student's life. Several study participants referred to their pre-COVID-19 academic experiences. One participant described their education as “good,” another mentioned that they “appreciated the social aspect of meeting peers,” and a third participant expressed they “loved their teachers.” These students were adjusting and learning the concepts and learning the skills before COVID-19. The overall sentiment during the COVID-19 global pandemic then switched, as one student noted, “to maybe this is not for [them], maybe [they] need to leave school.” They could not adjust to the structures of online and hybrid learning, adjusting to time management concerns, and not being in person for classes. They felt they were not learning and struggled academically.

Many students talked about how no one was prepared for this crisis, and as a result, no one knew what to do, how to teach, or how to help students learn online. Jane stated:

I did face many academic challenges because of COVID . . . I just felt like I was better at learning in person because I knew I had to be attentive compared to when the lectures were online. I was falling asleep, especially since I had to work more

since the campus shutdown I lost my job, so everything became harder and more difficult.

Stan, a 22-year-old male student, also described his academic challenges:

[I was] unable to really connect face-to-face with professors. I had a whole plan in place before COVID, going face to face to meet with professors using office hours, then COVID, so it was a challenge. Just being around family again was a challenge for me, just not only academic standpoint because I needed the space and I needed the kind of peace of mind to do homework and stable internet, but also from a social standpoint, like I said I wanted to be around my peers. I wanted to be able to enjoy the college experience. The inability to be really focused on our coursework.

The participants' academic experiences mirrored the profound challenges and disruptions of life during this period. Multiple participants engaged in conversations about the assistance provided by the institution and faculty, which came amid an extreme crisis for all underrepresented students (i.e., low socioeconomic status and first-generation). This finding aligned with the concern of academic learning, as studies have shown the changes of the pandemic complicated students' ability to be successful academically (e.g., Russell et al., 2022).

### **Navigating Financial Concerns**

Financial matters and the expenses associated with college were significant sources of worry for numerous students and especially for underrepresented (e.g., first generation, low socioeconomic status) students. The substantial costs present before the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic were magnified as students grappled with job

losses, relocations, personal bereavement, changes in family dynamics, and transitions to a state of no income. Each study participant expressed unique financial anxieties, resulting in a pervasive sense of instability. Cornett and Fletcher (2022) found 64% of undergraduate students reported an increased obligation to support their families financially, and 71% described a deterioration in their family's finances following the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic. One study participant reflected such a reality, stating, "I had been working two jobs at the same time while going to school and I had a work-study job on campus . . . which I no longer had [after COVID hit], and that was hard."

Kate, an older underrepresented student, noted she was already overwhelmed with the financial aid process. Amid the global pandemic, she became further unsure of the next steps and how she would make it. Prior research has suggested financial well-being predicts student college persistence (e.g., Russell et al., 2022), and many student participants discussed working more than one job to pay for college and expenses. COVID-19 forced campuses to close, and with no work-study, on-campus jobs, and many other sources of jobs closed, students lost hope. Bob said, "Moving back home with my parents was hard . . . we didn't have a lot of income coming in." Jane stated, "I lost my job because of COVID. So, it made it difficult for me to pay for the rent in the city, so I had to go home."

Jack had already been dealing with housing insecurity pre-COVID and had finally gained some stability in the early part of 2020. The COVID-19 global pandemic sent him into unstable territory again. Jack stated, "I'd finally saved enough money to not have to worry about rent for about a month, but after that, what would I do?" He continued,

noting, “I had no way to get internet access or Wi-Fi, and I needed money.” Financial stability and well-being are needed for student success in college, and the chaos surrounding the abrupt closure of schools on a global scale toppled any sense of financial security for many students.

Financial well-being exists when a person can fully meet current and ongoing financial obligations, feel secure in their financial future, and make choices that allow them to enjoy life (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau [CFPB Bureau], 2015a). Jack spoke of how his financial circumstances affected his mental well-being. As with many student participants who were worried about finances, Jane also discussed support from her institution, which included an “emergency fund and another job at a local store.” As first generation, low-socioeconomic status students, the financial barriers were numerous before, during, and after COVID-19 and the study participants expressed this experience.

## **Theme 2: Social Interactions, Including the Importance of Personal Connections**

The theme of social interactions, underscored by the significance of personal relationships, emerged as participants shared their experiences, highlighting their connections with peers and the support provided by TRIO. Russell et al. (2022) similarly found as social belonging (i.e., group connection) and self-actualization (i.e., academic achievement) increase, college persistence decreases. Both needs (i.e., satisfaction and financial well-being) were important and of critical nature even before the COVID-19 global pandemic, and were amplified for students during the pandemic. For example, Lisa explained:

TRIO introduced me to a peer last semester, a young lady in my age group, so that was great, and we really connected. TRIO has these social communities, kinda

group social events, and that's been pretty cool. TRIO has also put activities online when you are not able to attend, which has been great.

Bob added, "I enjoyed the institution, it's just meeting the people you know, seeing all types of culture, talking to people." Tinto's (1975) theory substantiates the important connections between students' academic and social integration and their likelihood of persisting in college. This phenomenon was reinforced by Jane, who stated, "It was a lot going on, I was missing my friends, I was missing kind of like the structure that I had." Jane also discussed the motivation from her peers and the social connections she had prior to the pandemic. She stated:

In terms of motivation, it was just to make the people around me proud, as well as myself to get through, to just get through school because at one point. I was stressed out. I love school and love being around like-minded people my peers and just meeting others.

Tom also talked about his peers and his awareness and said:

TRIO supported me, giving me that nucleus for me to kinda go to, and to have access to the computer, you know, friends that are also a part of the program and having peer tutors, that was a really big support. The inability to be around my peers as well as missing large portions of college on campus experience was major. I serve as a mentor as well for my peers, and my peers can always come to me, and that makes me happy.

The personal toll of participants and challenges related to social connections played a major role during the COVID-19 global pandemic. One participant stated, "A lot

of students felt isolated . . . I was ready to give up, I shed some tears.” Jane made a similar point, shedding tears as she said:

There was a point where we had a family emergency [during COVID-19] and that really affected everything . . . and I was debating, should I take a break? It did stress me out a lot . . . and there was a point where I was just honestly, I was not in a good place mentally, so I was just kind of like, what’s the point? It was just a buildup of stress.

Additionally, Tom, a 22-year-old male student, summed up this issue by saying, “When COVID hit, it kinda took a big hit of my college career . . . it just drained me.”

Personal and social bonds with peers can wield considerable influence on the path to success, a point emphasized by numerous participants as they recounted their experiences during the global COVID-19 global pandemic. One study participant said, “Friends that I had at the time, a lot of them, I guess, decided school wasn’t for them, so they dropped out.” She continued, stating, “So, that was unfortunate to see, like, a lot of good friendships I had just disappear and kinda evaporate as time went on. People were on edge.”

The life circumstances of study participants who were older served to somewhat mitigate some of the social challenges of the pandemic; being underrepresented, they did not miss their personal connections as much as the younger students, but still had to deal with other important issues. Kate stated, “I have no kids and no spouse, but was dealing with the illness, care, and ultimately death of my mother.” Relatedly, Kim discussed her struggles dealing with younger kids at home and her spouse being out of work. These ongoing struggles really spoke to Kim’s lived experiences during COVID-19 and how

she was challenged being a first-generation student. Lisa, on the other hand, stated, “Different age brackets and generations for me was challenging because technology had changed. So, they were doing more social media, and I was just getting started with social media . . . [laughed very hard].” Jane summed up the theme by saying, “It was just a lot going on. I was missing my friends. I was missing the structure that I had [before COVID-19].”

Understandably, students experienced challenges with academic transitions and motivation as they faced, a lack of interaction with other students, and a lack of access to suitable study spaces (Daugherty, 2020). Many study participants grappled with personal challenges and connections during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The stories they shared shed light on the numerous adaptations they had to undertake during this period that were compounded by being first-generation and low-socioeconomic status students. Participants underscored the profound shifts brought about by COVID-19, particularly the absence of social connections with friends.

### **Theme 3: TRIO SSS Support During COVID-19**

The theme of support from TRIO SSS during the COVID-19 global pandemic, coupled with the conviction that TRIO played a pivotal role in providing support and ultimately facilitating success, emerged as participants shared their personal experiences of the program during COVID-19. Museus’s (2014) culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) model offers critical information by highlighting the ways campus environments shape the experiences of diverse student populations and embrace the critical perspectives needed to study diverse students’ experiences in culturally diverse campus environments. The CECE framework’s value in the context of TRIO SSS lies in

its emphasis on the institution's pivotal role, particularly in how the framework's indicators align seamlessly with the holistic, student-centered approach embraced by TRIO SSS programs. Consistent with aspects of the CECE model, Tom stated, "TRIO was the rock." Jane added, "Absolutely positive. I honestly love TRIO. I truly wish like they had, something similar for graduate students because I am planning to go back to school and I honestly LOVE them." The participants answered the question on the support of TRIO during COVID-19.

Participants' love for TRIO and its support during the COVID-19 global pandemic for underrepresented students came through in all interviews. According to Mary:

TRIO just really helped with, just—just—just giving me a place to sit down and, you know, do my work. Even some of my exams that were like through a locked-down browser, having a quiet place to do that.

Bob also stated, "TRIO helped me a lot, like there are no words," in response to what was most valuable about TRIO during COVID-19. Kate, an older, nontraditional student, said:

TRIO director should be a five-star, double-salary awarded person. I mean, they just need to pay her 10 times more just for helping me. I mean, I went to her for everything. I can't get registered. I can't get my financial aid. I can't get—I had so many challenges going back to school with 19-year olds. So, yeah, it was a challenge, but she was—TRIO was my lifeline through the institution. TRIO always reached out and they reached out a whole lot through emails during COVID-19.

Kim added:

I saw the benefits of TRIO in terms of having that one-on-one experience academically and also, you know, pointing you in the right direction for resources, mentorships, workshops, and all that stuff. I was with TRIO the entire time. I had issues during COVID with connecting to on-line and I had to email TRIO to just help.

When answering about the support of TRIO SSS during COVID-19, Lisa stated:

I was blessed to be able to have the TRIO department and all those within TRIO who cared enough to be able to help navigate and make it more or how can I say it, more about me and personal and not a one-size-fits-all.

Finally, Jane, Jack, and Sue each discussed what was most valuable to each of them about TRIO. Jane said, “The support, emotional and educational support that the staff offered.” Jack listed, “The people themselves, the staff members themselves, I consider [them] friends and family now, cause they’ve seen me at my lowest.” Sue continued, “The most valuable is the support I received, nothing like it.”

When asked about how TRIO aided in their persistence and how TRIO SSS supported them during COVID-19, study participants provided diverse responses reflecting the multifaceted needs of students. Nonetheless, participants consistently highlighted the instrumental role that TRIO played in their determination to persist.

The TRIO SSS undergraduate students also reflected on the role that TRIO played in their postsecondary experiences and how they were supported during COVID-19. Jane stated, “Absolutely positive, I honestly love TRIO.” She continued to talk about her experiences during COVID-19 and stated:

I honestly love them. Like, the staff at TRIO they had, the faculty, they've been so amazing. They were very supportive. They always had a listening ear. For example, I would talk with TRIO staff a lot, and she would give me the rundown of everything I needed to know. She would use great talk, say for instance, if we don't take Route A, what would happen to Route B, what would happen with thing, it would help me think through situations. They were so helpful in terms of planning, even financial during lock down. They helped financially as well, also a great computer lab that is now renovated and it looks so nice.

Jane also went on to talk about additional resources, stating:

The COVID workshop helped a lot in terms of understanding and managing my stress because one piece of advice I did carry from that workshop was like, how, if you have something you know, you're putting your energy into and its draining and you're not productive to move it.

Study participants talked about the many resources of TRIO programs, including wellness support. Kim stated the programs were "very, very helpful" when referencing the resources to which she had access. She continued, stating:

I was introduced to yoga classes [through TRIO], which helped me a lot. The counseling center helped a lot as well. I started to not feel a part of the school during COVID, and TRIO made me feel like people were interested in my success and making sure that I was ok, so I really enjoyed that particular aspect of being able to take advantage of those resources to help me keep sane so that I would stay in school.

Jack said, “TRIO was absolutely paramount in helping me navigate through—through everything and trying to—trying to persevere through these—through these hardships.” In terms of the participants’ perceptions of TRIO SSS and the support they received, responses remained positive, and resources were considered numerous. Tom stated:

TRIO was truly the rock that allowed me to rally stay consistent with school and have a sense of identity, because school, truthfully, COVID really did ruin the way I looked at school. It didn’t feel like a place of learning anymore. It didn’t feel like a place of enlightenment, of different ideas. I didn’t feel connected to school anymore and that really, from my personal understanding from my personal experience, it did ruin the way I looked at school and the motivation I had for it. TRIO helped me bridge the gap for me and I definitely would love to contribute to bridge that gap for a lot of different students like myself.

One major way TRIO supported students was through tutoring; for example, Lisa said:

TRIO had a customized program for tutors and students to be connected for whatever you need, that additional support. If you need to sit and talk for someone to help you with your homework, you have those that can be assigned to you that do an assessment to see where you are, and that helps students be accountable.

The need to earn a degree and succeed as an underrepresented student intersected critically with a need for support and the role of TRIO programs. Bob said, “I just—I just wanted a degree.” Kim drove the point home, saying, “This is gonna make my life better. So that pushed me to a whole different level in terms of resilience with making sure that I

stayed in school.” Sue added, “Even if it’s tough, you know, they’re absolutely there for you to make it, you know, to move forward, the purpose is to learn.”

### **Summary**

Throughout data collection and analysis, three themes emerged. Many participants were aware of the compounded stress and sense of the unknown and did not learn as much academically during COVID-19 global pandemic as before the pandemic emerged. Most participants also understood and took notice of their social experiences, including the importance of personal connections during COVID-19 and with TRIO. All participants shared a love for TRIO SSS, with the belief that TRIO played a role in their support and ultimate success during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

All participants interviewed were eager and willing to discuss their experiences as college students in TRIO during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Many of them described helping others, specifically their peers who were in school behind them and were trying to complete degrees who also may be underrepresented in postsecondary education; they wanted to serve as mentors and come back and share the knowledge they garnered as students. Participants also spoke as representatives of a generation who lived through a global pandemic and came out on the other side; as such, they were aware the full effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic remain unknown, but still wanted to speak and share their experiences with others to grow access programs.

The participants in this study consisted of recent graduates, 4th-years, some nontraditional and traditional-aged college students, and all participants in TRIO SSS. Participants believed their involvement in TRIO was the reason for their success, especially during the COVID-19 global pandemic. They all wanted to share how and why

they chose the institution, how they got there, how they matriculated, and how to bridge the gap for future students. When asked, “Did you ever want to give up, give in?” participants shared stressors, anecdotes for persisting, calls to friends and to TRIO staff, and lots of tears. The data collected suggested the relationships that college and TRIO bring last beyond college years. Participants even discussed opportunities to reengage with the TRIO program beyond graduation for help with graduate school, job interviews, resumes, and personal statements.

Finally, several participants described feeling frustrated at different points with the institution because they felt they could not get information, which caused anxiety and stress; TRIO seemed to fill information gaps and provide valuable support. Lisa summed up the sentiments of many study participants, noting, “I’m one of those that have had to advocate for myself all my life, so TRIO, I am thankful for what they are doing, and I hope students that come after me are even more successful.” The data collected in this study suggested the lived experiences of college students during COVID-19, though stressful and overwhelming, made them stronger, and they were able to persevere with this support.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this final chapter, I present an overview of the study and offer a discussion of the key findings. Three areas are covered: (a) discussion of findings, (b) recommendations and implications, and (c) explorations for further study. Recommendations for practice are discussed and built on prior research findings identified in my literature review.

#### **Overview of the Study**

This study focused on the lived experiences of TRIO-participating undergraduate students during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Grounded by theoretical and conceptual frameworks focused on student integration (Tinto, 1975) and the culturally engaging campus environments (CECE, Museus, 2014) model, the study was designed to address two research questions:

1. How do TRIO SSS students reflect on their lived experiences in college during the COVID-19 global pandemic?
2. How do undergraduate students perceive the role of the TRIO SSS program in helping them persist through college during the COVID-19 global pandemic?

This basic qualitative study was conducted at a public Research-1 (R-1) university in the Southeast. The nine participants recruited for this study were all 1st-year, TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) students as of March 2020 (i.e., to align with the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic). These students all participated in in-depth, semistructured interviews. The qualitative nature of the research study made it possible to gain an

in-depth understanding of participants' experiences as they navigated being undergraduate college students during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Semistructured interviews are conversations that rely on targeted questions asked of all participants, are carefully scripted, and are tailored to the aims of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2017) indicated the basic qualitative method is well-suited for studies with the primary purpose of understanding "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 6). Therefore, a basic qualitative method approach was appropriate for this research.

The exploration of undergraduate TRIO SSS college students' experiences and perceptions during the COVID-19 global pandemic yielded three overarching themes: (a) academic stress and a pervasive sense of uncertainty in the institution; (b) the significance of social interactions, including personal connections; and (c) a profound appreciation for TRIO SSS, accompanied by the belief in its pivotal role in providing support and fostering ultimate success. The conclusions drawn from this research aim to offer fresh insights into the challenges faced by college students, particularly those from low-income, first-generation, or disabled backgrounds, while also assessing the effectiveness of campus support systems. Notably, these vulnerable student populations were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, shedding light on the underlying inequities in the educational system, as noted by the American Medical Association (2020). The ensuing discussion delves into key findings and their implications.

## **Key Findings**

The study's first research question focused on understanding the lived experiences of college students during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Student participants contemplated their lived experiences, which evoked a range of emotions, including fear, sadness, anxiety, and stress.

### **The Lived Experiences of College Students During COVID-19**

The data contained a main theme of stress and a sense of the unknown academically at the institution. All participants highlighted stress, concerns, and feelings of the unknown while being college students during the COVID-19 global pandemic. These findings aligned with Tinto's (1975) original student integration model, with two main components that frame how students engage with their college culture: (a) academic integration and (b) social integration. Additionally, Tinto's (2004) work highlighted that institutions must emphasize academic integration and social integration among first-generation students to enhance their likelihood of persisting toward degree completion. Tinto's (1975) model aligned with the current study by highlighting the importance of student integration into formal and informal academic systems and formal and informal social systems. Integration supports student persistence and helped ease anxiety and stress for participant during the COVID-19 global pandemic. TRIO SSS programs aim to support student social and academic integration and offer resources to calm students' stress and anxiety by connecting students to institutional resources, TRIO resources, and community services and support. Study participants indicated some of their stress was reduced and eased with contact and communication from TRIO. The world was turned

upside down during the COVID-19 global pandemic, but the stability and social integration from TRIO proved helpful.

When asked about their lived experiences, each study participant revealed they encountered personal struggles and emotional impacts not felt by others during this time. Participants indicated they faced stress; fear; problems at home; and financial, educational, and cultural challenges that affected their education success at the time. This study offered confirmation that the COVID-19 global pandemic exacerbated well-documented opportunity gaps that put underrepresented students at great disadvantage (Garcia & Weiss, 2020).

Additionally, student participants reflected on trying to stay motivated during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Morrow and Ackermann (2012) reported evidence indicating “students that reported being motivated were more likely to intend to persist” (p. 489) than those students who had no motivational goals. This finding was reinforced by the present study.

Study participants encountered financial stress during the COVID-19 global pandemic and had to find other sources of income to pay for tuition and fees. The student participants also had to find additional money to support their families. Participants reported difficulty finding jobs due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. In Fall 2020, the Trellis Student Financial Wellness Survey found 92% of undergraduate students felt the COVID-19 global pandemic added to their levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Cornett & Fletcher, 2022). In addition to health concerns, students have reported experiencing financial instability and worries alongside a lack of academic motivation (Johnson et al., 2022; Latham & Braun, 2020; Son et al., 2020). Although the findings of

the present study underscored the influence of financial and academic stress on the well-being of the participants amid the COVID-19 global pandemic, it is important to place these insights in the broader context of inequalities among postsecondary students (Johnson et al., 2022).

Components of Tinto's work (2012) pointed to important linkages between (a) learning and persistence and (b) involvement and the quality of student effort. Similar components emerged from the present study, where three participants shared how tutoring and support from TRIO SSS provided a link for their learning and ultimate persistence. Tom reflected on how he was supported through tutoring, saying, "Having tutors, that was a really big support with TRIO, with tutoring software and in-person peer tutoring." Brown's National Student Support Accelerator (n.d.) pointed to research showing tutoring interventions can translate to between 3 and 15 additional months of learning.

Existing research has also shown college students experienced increased anxiety and stress due to the COVID-19 global pandemic (e.g., Li et al., 2021; Quattrocchi, 2022; Sahu, 2020). Specifically, Haikalis et al. (2021) found the rate of depression among students rose from about 13.8% to about 30.4% during this time frame. The lived experiences of the present study's participants were categorized as stressful, and all participants highlighted a sense of the unknown. However, with institutional support, the TRIO students noted they were able to maintain a sense of community. As school reopened, stress moved to contracting COVID-19 and keeping families and friends safe while interacting with others in person.

This connection highlighted the context of the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic on college students' mental health and well-being. The reference to previous research reflected the increase in anxiety, stress, and depression among college students during the pandemic (e.g., Haikalis et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; Quattrocchi, 2022; Sahu, 2020). The pandemic established the backdrop of heightened stress and uncertainty faced by college students due to the COVID-19 global pandemic and introduced this study's focus on the experiences of TRIO students. I also explored how institutional support, in the form of TRIO SSS, played a crucial role in helping these students maintain a sense of community and navigate the challenges they encountered. Essentially, the alignment of this study's findings with the pandemic's impact on college student's mental health underscored the vital role that institutional support systems (e.g., TRIO) play in alleviating the adverse effects of stress and uncertainty.

### **The Role of TRIO SSS**

With the second research question, I asked, "How do undergraduate students perceive the role of the TRIO SSS program in helping them persist through college during the COVID-19 global pandemic?" Study participants perceived the role of TRIO SSS as a great support that helped them persist. Study participants emphasized the importance of TRIO in creating a holistic support system that touched all areas of their lives. The students placed great value on the TRIO staff, ranging from the front desk greeters, to tutors, to all full-time faculty and staff who worked with the program. Study participants confirmed the advantageous effects of college access and success programs, as they perceived the role of TRIO SSS as positive. Several participants described how TRIO SSS went above and beyond to support them. Because the COVID-19 global

pandemic introduced a host of uncertainties into the lives of undergraduate students, it was imperative to explore how they perceived the role of the TRIO SSS program in assisting them to persist through college during these challenging times. Data have indicated that pandemic-related uncertainties led some students to contemplate delaying their return to college or considering the option of a gap year, both of which have direct implications for college persistence (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

Additionally, when it comes to college persistence, Babineau (2018) stated students face the following barriers to college persistence: (a) social and cultural, (b) economic and financial, (c) academic, and (d) situational barriers. This structure served as background information about the various barriers college students typically encounter when trying to persist and succeed in their educational journeys. Babineau's research connected to the present study by indicating the study participants recognized TRIO SSS as a valuable resource that aided them in overcoming barriers to college persistence. The participants held positive perceptions of TRIO's support and provided descriptions of how TRIO went above and beyond to address the social, cultural, economic, academic, and situational barriers mentioned earlier. The participants emphasized TRIO was effective in providing comprehensive support that helped them persist despite the challenges they faced, including challenges exacerbated by the uncertainties surrounding the COVID-19 global pandemic. Babineau's classification of obstacles to college persistence served to provide context for understanding the role of TRIO SSS in the participants' experiences, illustrating how TRIO tackles these challenges, fostering student persistence and success.

Additionally, my understanding of TRIO SSS and the present study's findings were shaped by Museus's (2014) CECE model—specifically its nine indicators, which provide important information on how and why external influences and precollege inputs together influence students' experiences. For example, the cultural familiarity and relevance indicator is relevant in understanding how TRIO students' cultural backgrounds and identities intersected with their pandemic experiences, as the support provided by TRIO SSS takes into account the cultural familiarity and needs of students, which can be especially crucial during times of crisis.

The cultural community service indicator aligns with the ways TRIO programs engage students in community service activities, which positively impact their cultural communities (Museus, 2014). TRIO programs engage in community service activities in various ways to promote social responsibility and give back to the community. A few examples of community service activities are service-learning projects, partnerships with nonprofits, and social justice advocacy. A service-learning project for TRIO programs could involve students in a community service initiative that aligns with their academic and personal development goals. For example, a project on “Education Empowerment: Bridging the Digital Divide” service learning could focus on addressing the digital divide, which has become even more pronounced during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Such a project would empower students to make a positive impact in their communities while enhancing their own academic and digital skills.

TRIO programs also serve diverse student populations, facilitating interactions and engagement in their unique institutional context even during the pandemic, which aligns with the indicators of cross-cultural engagement, collectivist cultural orientations,

and culturally validating environments. The availability of holistic support was reflected by participants in the ways they noted TRIO programs provide holistic support, including access to faculty or staff members who can address students' various needs during a crisis (e.g., pandemic). These needs are explored and supported through student programming and activities. TRIO programs provide support through academic advising, mentoring, tutoring, career counseling, crisis support, and access to technology. As an example, programming occurred through workshops titled "How to Stay in School During a Pandemic," "Help, I am Living in a Pandemic," and "Things I Wish I Knew Before This All Started." More generally, Museus's (2014) CECE model emphasizes the importance of culturally engaging campus environments, which have been found to positively correlate with student success (i.e., graduation) and increased probability of succeeding in college. The study participants expressed a desire for the sense of close-knit community they experienced with the TRIO office staff and environment to extend beyond the campus.

The third theme that emerged from the data—the support and love of TRIO SSS added for participants during the COVID-19 global pandemic—spotlighted the perceptions and roles of the TRIO team in supporting student success. Participants noted the team offered an open-door policy and worked around student hours and needs. When the campus shut down, TRIO staff met students to pick up WiFi hot spots and computers, inquired about food insecurity, and offered quiet places to study. These individuals helped students navigate the COVID-19 global pandemic by making plans and having a listening ear. Study participants often spoke of how staff went above and beyond, which was consistent with the flexibility and latitude TRIO programs must have to customize

their services to fit the needs of the students enrolled at the institution (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

The connection to prior research can be seen through Westat's (1997) study on TRIO SSS, which revealed a statistically significant and positive impact on the success, persistence, and retention of SSS student participants—a finding further corroborated by The Pell Institute's (2009) TRIO evaluation report. In their conclusions, the findings from these foundational prior studies consistently demonstrated the substantial and favorable influence of TRIO SSS on the academic journeys of student participants. Building upon the findings from these prior studies, the present study advanced understanding of the role TRIO programs play in the lives of students and, particularly, in the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Moving forward, the exploration of this study participants' insights opens the door to new horizons in understanding the evolving role of TRIO SSS during times of crisis. The subsequent section delves deeper into the specific implications of these findings, shedding light on how TRIO programs can adapt and enhance their support systems to meet the unique challenges faced by students in a rapidly changing educational landscape.

### **Implications**

Several major implications stemmed from this study's findings. The findings reinforce research that showed college access programs and supports can serve a crucial role and are necessary (e.g., Hoxby & Turner, 2013). Specifically, the data collected reinforced the importance of holistic student support. Hybrid holistic student support refers to a comprehensive approach to assisting students that combines both in-person

and online resources and services while addressing various aspects of their well-being and success. The approach of holistic student support recognizes that students have multifaceted needs, and leverages technology to provide support in a flexible and integrated manner. The current study's findings affirmed prior research (e.g., Graham, 2022) showing TRIO programs and those with similar goals are needed to provide valuable resources for students. Ramos & Sifuentez (2021) has also demonstrated underrepresented students—when provided with both social networks and access to academic and financial resources—enhance their likelihood of achieving success in college. Study participants discussed their satisfaction with the social and academic networks they were provided through TRIO. This research supported the finding that TRIO programs are instrumental to student success (Graham, 2022). Additionally, only about 38% of low-income students attended college as of 2022, compared to 81% of their peers from higher income backgrounds; low-income students still display similar talents, interests, and overall potential as their peers, so it is important to create programs that give them opportunities to excel (Nair, 2022).

### **Implications for Practice With College Access and Retention Staff**

The findings from the current study support several recommendations for campus administrators, faculty, and staff.; for example, university administrators should focus on intentionally building positive relationships and cultivating community. Relationships can start with strong communication, which will help calm concerns and anxiety during a pandemic or other stressful times. University administrators should consider ways to meet students where they are with holistic approaches, such as “No Class Fridays,” “Yoga in the Quad,” “Feeling Overwhelmed Today,” “Take a Minute to Take a Nap,” or

other measures that allow students to suggest helpful tips from things they learned during the pandemic. University administrators and faculty and staff can support and build positive hybrid educational experiences. The experiences can be built through effective communication, flexible course design, engagement, and interactions through forums and group work. Additionally, institutions can enhance student well-being by providing wellness and support services, including counseling, and by investing in professional development for faculty.

### **Implications for Research**

The study also points to important areas for future research. Additional qualitative studies on student journeys, from K–12 to college graduation, are needed to gain a deeper understanding of factors that contribute to students' educational persistence, success, and well-being. Quantitative methods could be engaged to develop better measures of student outcomes that align with components of the TRIO SSS program and longitudinal studies focused on transitions from high school to college. Quantitative studies could also focus on mechanisms for change that are embedded in the TRIO SSS program, involving such things as social and emotional networks, and educational barriers. Conducting more quantitative research could ultimately provide opportunity for assessing the effectiveness of educational programs, interventions, and policies.

Other research could further expand focus on students' experiences from a range of demographic backgrounds in different types of institutions to better understand challenges or opportunities that arose during the COVID-19 global pandemic across the United States. COVID-19 is still an emergent disease, and the need for further research remains. Additional research will help administrators and policymakers understand and

execute best practices and make plans for future pandemics or macro adversities affecting college students.

Future research could also contribute useful new information by implementing mixed-method approaches. Mixed-methods studies would provide more robust and in-depth information (Creswell & Plano, 2007) through engaging data from multiple sources and perspectives. For instance, a potential research study could investigate the satisfaction and effectiveness of online learning using students' experiences, satisfaction levels, and their correlation with performance and retention rates.

Studies could also broaden understanding by involving faculty and staff perspectives; understanding their roles is crucial for advancing insights at the intersection of student's experiences and the lasting effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Similarly, investigations into the role that family support plays in shaping student experiences to persist would provide valuable insights into how family dynamics, interactions, and support systems influence a student's educational journey. The use of qualitative interviews and surveys could lead to new understandings of how students perceive the role of family support the educational experiences.

### **Implications for Policy**

It is well documented that students in college access programs often face challenges in attaining success in higher education. For example, the First Generation Foundation (n.d.) reported only 11% of low-income, first-generation students—compared to 55% of continuing-generation students—earned a bachelor's degree in 6 years of enrolling as of 2022. Increasing graduation and persistence rates is imperative for an educated and insightful world of leaders, change makers, and future thought leaders.

Policymakers should work to increase funding to ensure adequate resources to serve more students and comprehensive support. Furthermore, there is a need to broaden the selection criteria for federally funded programs to encompass a more inclusive range of first-generation and low-income individuals. To be more inclusive of first-generation and low-income populations requires a wider and more diverse range of individuals to be eligible for federally funded programs. This range can be achieved by revising or expanding selection criteria (i.e., low-income, first-generation, and disabled) for TRIO to accommodate a broader spectrum of first-generation and low-income students, thereby increasing access and opportunities for those who may currently be excluded or underrepresented.

Additionally, to enhance TRIO programs, continuous assessment through evaluation methods and use of data to inform evidence-based improvements and recommendations for policy change is important. Also, implementing a plan to continue advocating for policy continuity and the protection of TRIO is crucial to ensure sustainability of TRIO programs. Based on the insights from the student participants in the current study, college access and support programs are clearly effective and there is importance to aligning policies with the goal of providing comprehensive support for underrepresented students, as with the students in the current study. Consequently, there is a compelling case for aligning policies and funding with the research evidence that underscores their success. Learning what motivates and keeps students in college and making and adopting strong policies is imperative. According to the study participants, these programs place a significant emphasis on social connections, suggesting that TRIO SSS programs could enhance effectiveness by incorporating additional opportunities for

nonacademic activities, including social programs and peer networking. Based on this study, many participants felt there needs to be more engagement from the federal government. The U.S. Department of Education can enhance its effectiveness by updating and aligning current TRIO regulations with current trends, offering flexibility in the delivery of services and disbursement of funds, particularly during a pandemic. Meanwhile, U.S. Congress can strengthen its effectiveness by actively supporting increased funding, endorsing policies closely aligned with TRIO, and being considerate of feedback and needs of program participants.

### **Conclusion**

I remember March 2020 very clearly, having left my office after a leadership team meeting to ensure we had a tentative timeline for the next week, which would be the last day of typical life before a global pandemic. Having the opportunity to serve students, specifically TRIO students, for over 20 years has shown me what I already knew: inequalities exist, and my love for service is my passion. When I first embarked on this study I was not sure what hard lessons may be learned, and that scared me, as we were still in the middle of the pandemic and so many people had suffered and lost so much. However, after analyzing the narratives of the participants, I discovered college students have so much to offer to this conversation, and it is essential to offer help to future generations who may deal with pandemics or natural disasters. The findings of this study further suggest the lived experiences of college students are challenging. With the added the stress and uncertainty of a global pandemic, students' experiences become even more difficult. The details shared by the study's participants offered insight and a clearer picture for future generations.

The lockdown and school closures due to the COVID-19 global pandemic were rapid transformations that left an indelible mark on the landscape of higher education. The ramifications included many students never returning to school, offices closing, and many financial resources drying up. I learned students who experienced the pandemic will never be the same, but it is important to continue to give this generation grace as they adjust to the new normal of life. I learned how necessary it is to find a person and a support on a college campus, and the major place in which this support can be found is in the offices of college access offices. This study's participants were proud they persevered; they spoke of doing whatever they needed to do to be successful and earn a degree. Most felt if they could live through COVID-19, they could do anything.

Reflecting on these lessons, I hope my research may contribute to advancing communication among college students and all who support them. I hope the information stemming from this research may prove useful to campus stakeholders, administrators, political policymakers, and TRIO professionals as they continue to navigate COVID-19, try to understand the "new normal," and prepare for potential system-wide adversities that may arise in the future.

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## APPENDIX A

## RECRUITMENT EMAIL

***Subject Line: The Real Experiences of College Students During COVID-19***

Greetings:

My name is Sherontae Maxwell and I am a doctoral student from the Executive EdD Program at the University of Georgia and I need your help!

I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about the lived experiences of TRIO participants during the COVID-19 global pandemic. You are eligible to participate in this study because you are a participant in TRIO Student Support Services and have participated pre-, during, and post-COVID. My goal is to understand some of the experiences during college with COVID and I would love to have you share your unique experience as a college student during COVID-19

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be interviewed for up to one hour about your lived experiences in college as a participant in TRIO SSS during COVID-19. In appreciation of your time, you will receive a \$20 Starbucks gift card for the interview. All information is kept confidential and I would like to record your responses and then will use the information to transcribe your responses.

Remember that participation is completely voluntary. If you would like to participate or have any questions about the study, please call or text XXX-XXX-XXXX or send an email to xxxxx@uga.edu

I look forward to hearing from you and thank you in advance for considering participating in this study.

Take care and Have a Great Day,

Sherontae Maxwell  
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Higher Education Management  
Institute of Higher Education  
The University of Georgia  
<https://ihe.uga.edu/directory/people/sherontae-maxwell>  
xxxxxxx@xxx.xxx  
XXX-XXX-XXXX

APPENDIX B  
ELIGIBILITY SURVEY

1. What is your current age?
  - a. 18-20
  - b. 21-22
  - c. 23-25
  - d. 26-28
  - e. 28-30
  
2. Are you of Spanish or Latino origin?    Yes/No
  
3. What would best describe you?
  - a. African American
  - b. Asian
  - c. Native American
  - d. White
  - e. Others
  
4. Which gender do you identify most with?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Prefer not to say
  
5. What is your current classification?
  - a. 1<sup>st</sup> year
  - b. 2<sup>nd</sup> year
  - c. 3<sup>rd</sup> year
  - d. 4<sup>th</sup> year
  - e. 5<sup>th</sup> year or more
  - f. Graduated
  
6. What is your marital status?
  - a. Married
  - b. Divorced
  - c. Separated
  - d. Widowed
  - e. Unmarried
  - f. Prefer not to say
  
7. Do you consider yourself to have a disability?
  - a. Yes, I have a disability.
  - b. No, I do not have a disability.

c. Prefer not to say.

8. Do you identify as first-generation?

a. Yes

b. No

c. Prefer not to say.

9. Do you receive the PELL grant ?

a. Yes,

b. No

c. Prefer not to say.

## APPENDIX C

## UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA CONSENT FORM

**Researcher's Statement**

I am asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called “informed consent.” A copy of this form will be given to you.

Principal Investigator: Dr. Gregory Wolniak  
Meigs Hall, Institute of Higher Education University of Georgia  
xxxxxxx@xxx.xxx

Co-Principal Investigator: Sherontae Maxwell  
University of Georgia Institute of Higher Education  
xxxxxxx@xxx.xxx or XXX-XXX-XXXX

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of TRIO participating undergraduate students during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Specifically, to learn how TRIO SSS has shaped students' ability to persist during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The interviews will take approximately 60 minutes.

**Study Procedures**

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in a video and audio-recorded interview via Zoom to discuss your lived experiences of being in college during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Your time commitment for the interview will be approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The video/audio-recording will be transcribed and you will be given a pseudonym at the point of transcription. You will have the opportunity to view the transcription for accuracy. The information you provide to me will be analyzed and compared to others at your college/university to identify common themes among participants.

**Risks and discomforts**

There are no anticipated risks from participating in this study. Although the information you will share is not sensitive in nature, you can still skip any questions that you are not comfortable responding to. You can also choose to end your participation at any time.

**Benefits**

Though you may not directly benefit from participating in this research study; others may benefit

because the study can be used to inform future programming and enhance program effectiveness for students who are the most vulnerable and susceptible to challenges during COVID-19.

**Incentives for participation**

Each participant will receive a small token of appreciation in the amount of \$20 Starbucks gift card for participation in this study.

**Audio/Video Recording**

Each interview will be video and audio-recorded through Zoom. The video/audio-recording will be transcribed in 1 week of conducting the interview, at which point the researcher will assign a pseudonym to the participants. The audio recording will be kept for one year after the interview date.

**Privacy/Confidentiality**

I plan to keep the individually identifiable information of this study for a period of 1 year. To protect your confidentiality, your real name will not be used in transcriptions or the written results. Instead, I will use a pseudonym to identify each participant. To keep your information safe, the audio file of your interview will be placed on an external drive that will be locked in a file cabinet that will only be accessible to the researcher(s). The transcribed data will be encrypted, password-protected, and locked in a file cabinet that will only be accessible to the researcher. This research involves video conferencing through Zoom. Every reasonable effort has been taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed. Though others may need to have access to the information provided by you, your name will not appear on any documents that may be shared. Researcher(s) will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law. Information from this research will be used for purposes of this research only and will not be used in future studies or shared with other researchers outside of this specific project.

**Voluntary Participation**

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Though you have decided to participate now, you may change your mind and or discontinue your participation at any time. You may also choose to not answer any question for any reason. Should you withdraw your participation the information that can be identified as yours will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information, any data collected from you will be immediately destroyed.

Audio recordings will be made to transcribe the interviews. The recordings will be destroyed immediately after they are transcribed and reviewed for accuracy. Research records will be labeled with study IDs that are linked to you by a separate list that includes your name. This list will be destroyed once we have finished collecting information from all participants.

Once the identifiers have been removed, the de-identified information may also be used in future publications, such as journal articles that summarize the research study. The de-identified transcripts may be shared with other researchers for future studies.

This research involves the transmission of data over the Internet. Every reasonable effort has been taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed.

**If you have questions**

The main researcher conducting this study is Sherontae Maxwell, at the University of Georgia. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Sherontae Maxwell at xxxxxxxx@xxx.xxx or at XXX-XXX-XXXX. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at XXX-XXX-XXXX or xxx@xxx.xxx.

## APPENDIX D

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The objective of this study is to learn how TRIO SSS has shaped students' ability to persist during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS:** How do TRIO SSS students reflect upon their persistence during the COVID-19 pandemic? How and to what extent do students attribute TRIO SSS to their persistence during the COVID-19 global pandemic?

**Opening remarks/Introduction :** My name is Sherontae Maxwell a doctoral student at the University of Georgia. Thank you for participating in this study on the lived experiences of college students during COVID-19. During the interview, you will be asked to respond to several open-ended questions. You may choose not to answer any or all of the questions. The procedure will involve audiotaping the interview and the recording will be transcribed verbatim. Your results will be confidential and you will not be identified individually. Before we get started, I ask you to review and sign this consent form.

#### **Demographic (will be in pre-questionnaire)**

Background: age, gender, classification , ethnic identification? What is your major?

#### **Opening and Introduction**

- 1) Can you start by telling me a little about how you ended up at this university? (probes: what made you choose this university? Did you apply to other institutions?)

#### **Academic Integration**

- 1) Overall, what has it been like for you here at X university? (probes: Have you enjoyed your experience so far?)
- 2) Have you experienced any academic challenges since starting here? (probes: What was that like for you? Did it make you want to leave?)
- 3) How did you address those challenges? (probes: Was there someone or something that supported you through that?)

**Social Integration**

- 4) Have you faced any personal challenges adjusting to college? (probes: What was that like for you?)
- 5) How did you address those challenges? (probes: Was there someone or something that supported you during that time? How did they help support you?)

**TRIO SSS**

- 1) So you are a TRIO SSS student, right? How did you become a part of this program?
- 2) What has your experience been like so far with TRIO?
- 3) How much contact have you had with TRIO SSS staff? (probes: How often do you go to the office? How much time do you spend a week?)
- 4) What opportunities do you have through TRIO SSS? (probes: Have you taken advantage of these opportunities? Why or why not?)
- 5) What do you find most valuable about being a TRIO SSS student? Least valuable?COVID-19

Ok let's focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, the March 2020 campus abrupt transition to remote learning.

- 6) What happened when things shut down at the university? (probe: Did you leave campus? Where did you go? What was that like? Can you describe your academic and social experience as a remote learner?)
- 7) When the campus re-opened, what made you want to go back? What was it like to go back to campus?
- 8) Did you face any additional challenges as a result of the pandemic (e.g., access to technology, internet access, instructional connections, learning, etc.)?
- 9) Have your interactions with peers, friends, or campus community members changed at all? If different, how so?
- 10) Did you engage with the TRIO SSS program during this time? (probe: to what degree? How so?)

**WRAP UP QUESTIONS**

- 11) Is there anything else that you feel is important that would help me better understand your motivation to persist to graduate from college and being a TRIO SSS student?
- 12) Do you have any questions of me?