

2018

## **Embracing success : the experiences of first-generation students in a freshman learning community**

Charnell Gilbert-Thomas

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## ABSTRACT

### EMBRACING SUCCESS: THE EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS IN A FRESHMAN LEARNING COMMUNITY

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One-third of the entering freshman class is a first-generation college student. Prior studies show that first-generation college students are low-income, they tend to graduate in six-years, and likely to leave college after their first year. Researchers have found that high-impact practices is one way to help remedy the various challenges that first-year, first-generation students' encounter. A learning community as an example of a high-impact activity makes a positive difference for students which helps first-generation students build their identities as learners. This study examined the experiences of first-generation students about how they perceive their FLC. A basic interpretive qualitative research study was conducted which incorporated personal stories from 13 first-year, first-generation college students. To help frame this study, Sense of Belonging was used as a conceptual framework. My approach to themeing the data was generating theoretical constructs. The four themes are: (a) Writing Intensively is Reflective and Impactful; (b) Academic Support is Beneficial, Utilizing Resources, and Engaging; (c) Making Connections is Relational and Transitioning; (d) Participating is Motivation, Awareness, and Structure. Findings from this study show that students' perceptions regarding their experiences in a freshman learning community were positive. Participants mentioned how they benefited from the learning community, created a sense of community and

belonging, and successfully transitioned into college. This study has important implications for expanding knowledge and informing institutional practices aimed to enhance the experiences of first-generation students enrolled in FLCs.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
DE KALB, ILLINOIS

MAY 2018

EMBRACING SUCCESS: THE EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS IN A  
FRESHMAN LEARNING COMMUNITY

BY

CHARNELL GILBERT-THOMAS  
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING, ADULT AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Doctoral Director:  
Dr. Laverne Gyant

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I want to acknowledge the presence of God within this body of work. Without his Grace and Mercy where would I be? Second, I want to acknowledge the support of NIU faculty. Their knowledge has been shared and extended to me. Finally, I wish to acknowledge all previous teachers, instructors, and faculty members that I have learned from throughout my life.

I am grateful for life events, societal changes, and my ancestors that have shaped my thoughts...Life Matters...Black Faculty and Staff Lives Matter! My family has been amazing through this process. Your love and encouragement has kept me pressing on.

Thank You

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Currently, a shift in enrollment among first-generation students is taking place in higher education. Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, and Yeung (2007) indicated that the changing face of first-generation students within the population of first-time, full-time entering college freshman at 4-year institutions have steadily declined reflecting increasing levels of education among U.S. populations. The U.S. Department of Education reported in 2010 shows that almost 50% of undergraduate college students were of first-generation students, those students whose parents had not attended college or received an education beyond a high school diploma. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2012) reported that in 2010, first-generation college students with parents who had a high school education or less were 48.5% Latino and Hispanic, 45%, Black or African-American, 35% Native American, 32% of Asian, and 28% of White.

In 2016, the Education Advisory Board (EAB) reported that 32% of all undergraduate college students in the United States were categorized as first-generation students. Hernandez (2013) reported that 89% of low-income, first-generation students leave college within 6 years without a degree; more than a quarter leave after their first year which is four times the dropout rate of higher income, second-generation students. Davis (2010) indicated that people who work with first-generation students in postsecondary institutions have known for a long time that these students are missing something regarding their academic experience. According to the EAB, part of the problem is that first-generation students are likely unfamiliar with the “hidden curriculum” that determines students’ success in their first year of college. To correct the unfamiliarity with

the hidden curriculum and to combat challenges that first-year, first-generation students experience in the classroom, learning communities have been created to connect these students to the classroom and the institution. To further define and explain the dynamics and characteristics of first-generation students, learning communities are discussed as an academic approach to help them succeed.

### First-Generation Students

Housel (2012) indicated that first-generation students' parents have attained neither a bachelor's nor an associate degree, and that these are more likely to encounter academic, financial, professional, cultural and emotional difficulties than students whose parents attended college. According to Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, and Ortiz (2010), first-generation students are often characterized, as "students from diverse racial, cultural, linguistic, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds who have experienced sustained school failure over time" (pp. 279-280). First-generation college students often have less successful high school experiences than their peers and are more likely to enroll in community colleges than in 4-year universities (Brown, Santiago, & Lopez, 2003). First-generation college students are more likely to be female, older, Black or Hispanic; have dependent children; come from low-income families; and have no parent or guardian who has earned a baccalaureate degree (Engle, 2007; Pike & Kuh, 2005). They are more likely to delay entry into postsecondary education, attend college at 2-year institutions, commute to campus, take classes part-time while working full-time, and need remedial coursework (Engle, 2007). Research suggests that first-generation students develop the following characteristics while in college:

1. They have lower first-semester and first-year grade point averages (GPAs) than their classmates.

2. They are more likely to drop out during the first year and likely to leave without a degree.
3. They are more likely to attend classes part-time and work full-time.
4. They tend to experience cultural difficulties in the transition; they often feel marginalized by both the culture they are leaving behind and the one that they are joining.
5. They encounter lower faculty expectations and have lower self-esteem. (Darling & Smith, 2007; Pascarella, Pierson, Terenzini, 2004)

Over time, students who are first-generation, socially disadvantaged, and minorities who are underrepresented in higher education are typically encouraged to pursue a college degree (Hirudayaraj, 2011). College attainment for all U.S. students has increased dramatically during past decades (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009). This improvement is due largely to increasing benefits in financial resources, college preparatory courses, and professional development opportunities (Cabrera & Castaneda, 1992). While college enrollment has increased over the years among first-generation students, especially for African American and Latino students, their rate of obtaining a bachelor's degree is lower than their matriculation rate (Gonzalez, 2012). In order to combat this disparity between graduation and matriculation rates, institutions are creating ways to help first-generation students who are incoming freshman to transition successfully into college.

#### Overview of High-Impact Practices

Colleges and universities continue to use traditional teaching practices, such as large lecture halls and the teacher being the controller of the learning environment, as platforms for today's students (Dufour, 1998). Clayton-Pedersen (2009) reported that higher education is

facing challenges to its traditional pedagogical and curricular models. Students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century enter college with an array of experiences embedded within community, cultural, career, social, and educational influences. These experiences tend to play a crucial role in a student's life.

Today, higher education institutions are directing their attention to high-impact practices that the AACU defines as effective educational practices. High-impact practices are first-year seminars, learning communities, undergraduate research, service learning, and capstone experiences, all of which engage today's college students to a greater extent than traditional classroom-based instruction (Brownell & Swaner, 2009). Institutions established high-impact practices because they are effective in connecting first-year students to the learning environment (Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Engstrom & Tinto; 2008; Kuh, 2008).

A learning community is an example of a high-impact activity that makes a positive difference for students which helps first-generation students build their identities as learners and gives them a sense of belonging on campus (Brownell & Swaner, 2009). To improve the experiences of first-year students, freshman learning communities (FLCs) were established. The academic experiences for students within FLCs is to "restructure the very classrooms in which students find themselves and alter the way students experience both the curriculum and learning within those classrooms" (Tinto, 2003, p. 1). Ellertson and Thoennes (2007) asserted that FLCs push the boundaries of education by causing a rethinking of the traditional curriculum and through an attempt to integrate and make cohesive the learning experience through attempting to provide a seamless environment for learning.

A growing number of colleges and universities have implemented high-impact practices to support the success and transitioning for first-year students. Universities are using different strategies for student success, retention, and graduation rates that are making notable gains. Kuh

(2008) indicated that educational research is likely to report college student success with regards to access, retention, graduation, and GPAs. Several universities have reported making significant gains among first-year students that have participated in one or more high-impact practices. The U.S. Department of Education (2013) reported from 2009-2011 an increase in fall-to-fall retention rates among first-year students that participated in high-impact practices at the following institutions: Drake University to 87% from 84%; Elgin Community College to 70% from 65%; University of South Florida to 90% from 88%; and Wheelock College to 83% from 81%. Higher education institutions like these demonstrate that high-impact practices lead to higher retention rates and student success among first-year students. Participating in high-impact practices such as FLCs show that first-year students are likely to have college success. Henceforth, the success of first-year students is important to their experiences when participating in high-impact practices.

### Problem Statement

Prior research shows that first-generation students who are entering college for the first time face a number of challenges (Green, 2006). These challenges include needing more support, developing positive faculty and student relationships, diversity concerns within the institution, the curriculum, and connectedness to learning environments (Barbatis, 2010; Cabrera & Castaneda, 2002; M.J. Chang, Astin, & Dongbin, 2004; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Gabelnick, et al., 1990; Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2006; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Goodsell, 1993; Yancy, et al., 2008; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Housel (2012) suggested that first-generation college students comprise a student population that is routinely overlooked at American colleges and universities. Darling and Smith (2007) indicated that they are a population that has more difficulty being successful in the

postsecondary environment. The Counseling Center at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (2007) indicated that first-generation students enter a college or university with limited knowledge about the traditions and patterns which prevent them from fully engaging in a university experience. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) found that first-generation students at Cerritos College, DeAnza College, and LaGuardia Community College “did not enter college feeling safe to learn; they were often afraid to speak in class and to participate fully in the learning process” (p. 12). According to Hale (2004):

First-generation college students provide a sense of unique challenges to leaders in higher education. As a category of students, they may not have had the advantages of being socialized and nurtured into developing the competencies and framework for competitive learning in a middle-class place called college. (p. 47)

To help rectify these ongoing issues for first-generation students, creating FLCs provides a safe place to learn and actively engage students in the learning process. However, minimal information exists about the perceptions and experiences of incoming freshman who are first-generation students enrolled in a FLC. It is important to understand the experiences of first-generation students and how they perceive their FLC in order for higher education institutions to enhance student engagement, increase student success, and respond to ongoing challenges that first-generation students face when transitioning into college.

#### Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of first-generation students’ experiences in a FLC. FLCs are designed to improve students’ ability to succeed and to create a safe place to learn within the classroom. Participating in FLCs eases first-generation students’ transitions into college by helping them build their identities as college students and find their

voices within the learning environment. I investigated how first-generation students describe their experiences when participating in a FLC.

### Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What perceptions do first-generation students have of their experiences in a FLC?
2. According to participants, how has participating in a FLC led to their success?
3. According to participants, what aspects of a FLC have helped them become integrated into the college environment?

### Importance and Rationale

This study has important implications for expanding knowledge and informing institutional practices aimed at enhancing the experiences of first-generation students enrolled in FLCs. These experiences include helping emphasize to first-generation students they matter to the institution and will be supported when entering college, incorporating support systems that will have a meaningful impact on their academic achievement, and fostering the learning environment through diversity to academically and socially engage them as students.

The rationale of this research is to understand how first-generation students perceive their experiences in a FLC. First-generation students entering college for the first time have significantly different academic, social, cultural, and psychological perceptions than their peers (Beatty, Bottoms, & Gray 2011). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) suggested that the experiences that first-generation students encounter in college are either hindered or helped by faculty, staff, and students who can encourage a student's participation in academic and co-curricular life or can create feelings of stress and isolation.



Findings from this study highlight these experiences and perceptions of first-generation students in a FLC. This study shows the importance of a FLC to first-generation students. Also, telling the story about what goes on in a learning community furthers the academic community's understanding of what works or hinders the integration of first-generation students into the social and academic life of an institution. Moreover, this research may be relevant to institutions that want to increase graduation rates as they address concerns about diversity, engagement, persistence, and transitioning among incoming freshman who are first-generation students.

### Conceptual Framework

I proposed sense of belonging as a conceptual framework because of its positionality as a form of basic human need and motivation (Maslow, 1943; Strayhorn, 2012). According to Strayhorn (2012), sense of belonging in college refers to “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by and important to the group or others on campus” (p. 55). Sense of belonging is a student’s subjective feelings of connectedness or cohesion to the institution (Maestas, Vaquera, & Zehr, (2007). Sense of belonging measures a student’s attachment to the campus community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). For college students, sense of belonging matters because it is related to their academic success and emotional well-being (Strayhorn, 2012). Hurtado and Carter (1997) specified that sense of belonging is related to a college student’s cognition, affect, and behaviors. Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, and Salomone (2002) stated, “sense of belonging is theorized to reflect students’ integration into the college system; basically, the greater a student sense of belonging to the university the greater is his commitment to the institution” (p. 228). Strayhorn (2012) indicated that sense of belonging is, at the most basic level, whether or not students feel respected, valued, accepted, cared for, included,

and that they matter in the classroom, at college, or in their chosen career path. He further explained that sense of belonging is a basic human need of motivation, sufficient to influence behavior:

It is not only an important aspect of college student life, but relevant to life for all of us, although it may take on heightened importance for college students given where they are generally in their personal development (e.g., identity exploration, vulnerable to peer influence). Sense of belonging may also be particularly significant for students who are marginalized in college context such as women, racial, and ethnic minorities, low-income students, first-generation students, and gay students. (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 17)

Strayhorn (2012) introduced seven core elements of sense of belonging:

1. Sense of belonging is a basic human need. Goals of higher education institutions cannot be achieved until students feel a sense of connectedness, membership, and belonging in college.
2. Sense of belonging is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior. Needing to belong compels individuals to act. People want to feel cared about, needed, valued, and somewhat indispensable as the object of someone else's affection.
3. Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance (a) in certain contexts, (b) at certain times, or (c) among certain populations. College students face serious difficulty in attending to the tasks at hand until they resolve one of their most fundamental needs, a need to belong.
4. Sense of belonging is related to, and seemingly a consequence of, mattering. Interactions with others which are affectively positive or pleasant are necessary but not sufficient for experiencing belongingness. To satisfy the need for belongingness, the person must believe someone cares.

5. Social identities intersect and affect college students' sense of belonging. To understand students' belonging experiences, one must pay close attention to issues of identity, identity salience or core self, ascendancy of certain motives, and social contexts that exert influence on these considerations.
6. Sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes. The goal is to develop campus environments that foster sense of belonging so students feel connected to others on campus to such a degree that severance of those bonds not only seems difficult and unpopular but impossible.
7. Sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change. Students' sense of belonging, of personal acceptance, or having a rightful, valued place in a particular social context tends to stabilize and consistently influence one's commitments and behaviors.  
(Strayhorn, 2012)

To further understand the relevance of sense of belonging as a conceptual framework, as explained in the seven core elements mattering affects certain populations. First-year, first-generation students are unfamiliar with the expectations of college, thus leading to challenges when they transition into the environment. Due to these challenges, they may feel less likely to persist in college and/or leave after their first year. Pascarella, et al. (2004) indicated that, compared to their peers who are not first-year, first-generation college students, have the disadvantage of lacking basic knowledge about postsecondary education, they have a difficult time transitioning into college, and they are more likely to leave a 4-year institution at the end of the first year. Sense of belonging is significant for students who are marginalized in college, especially those who are first-generation (Strayhorn, 2012). Using sense of belonging as a

theoretical framework provides institutions with information about addressing the needs of, offering support to, and implementing effective educational practices for first-year, first-generation college students.

### Chapter Summary

This chapter explores the characteristics of first-generation students, whose parents have attained neither a bachelor's nor an associate degree (Housel, 2012). Housel (2012) reported that American colleges and universities overlook first-generation students, and these students are more likely to encounter academic, financial, professional, cultural and emotional difficulties than students whose parents attended college. Also covered is a description of learning communities, what they are, who enrolls, and why they matter. To understand the purpose of this study's goals, it is shown that first-year, first-generation students have challenging experiences while entering college; so FLCs were one of the many ways to help combat these experiences. The problem is that there are gaps within the literature that do not fully explain how first-generation students perceive their experiences in a FLC. Research shows that FLCs are safe and promote student growth and development; however, there is little information illustrating these experiences among incoming freshman that are first-generation students. To capture what these experiences are, I have proposed three questions: What perceptions do first-generation students have of their experiences in a FLC? According to participants, how has participating in a FLC led to their success? According to participants, what aspects of the FLC have helped them become integrated into the college environment? I used sense of belonging as its conceptual framework.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Many higher education institutions have implemented FLCs to improve academic performance and retention among first-year students (Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2006). According to Barefoot (2000), “first-year programs can potentially achieve multiple positive outcomes for students and institutions, the most commonly used measure of effectiveness is improved student retention” (p. 13). American College Testing (ACT; 2010) reported that 32% of 2-year colleges, 54% of 4-year private colleges, and 66% of 4-year public colleges have established an improvement goal for retention of students from the first to second year. Prior studies found that academic success in college students is related to retention. Dennis, Phinney, Chateco (2005) stated that academic success is a function of both personal characteristics such as mental ability, academic skills, motivation, and goals, and the characteristics of the environment. Fowler and Boylan (2010) found that first-time freshman that participated in a first-year experience course retention from fall to fall increased from 29% to 52%, and student’s cumulative GPA had increased significantly. It is expected that first-year programs like FLCs are means of addressing the need for educational engagement, social transition, academic success, and student retention (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Talburt & Boyles, 2005). To understand how first-year, first-generation students perceive their undergraduate experiences, most studies illustrate the effectiveness of FLCs with a focus on student engagement and participation, persistence, and transitioning into college (Chang, Astin, & Dongbin, 2004; Gabelick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Talburt & Boyles, 2005; Tinto, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Research examining the

experiences of first-generation students participating in FLCs at higher education institutions is reviewed.

This chapter provides the background of learning communities and high-impact practices and illustrates two reoccurring topics contained in previous studies. Literature reviewed was drawn from prior studies to provide a snapshot of student experiences in FLCs and characteristics of first-generation students. Studies that are examined illustrate the relationship between participating in learning communities and student engagement, student college experiences in such areas as academic success, faculty-student interactions, and student perceptions regarding the campus culture. Two topics of the literature were critically reviewed: (a) student outcomes through high-impact practices and (b) first-generation students' experiences in college. A review of the literature on student outcomes in high-impact practices provide both qualitative and quantitative studies focus on the experiences of students that participated in a FLC, which connected their first-year in college to the learning environment. First-generation students' experiences in college illustrate such experiences of transitioning, belonging, perception, faculty-student relationships, diversity and campus culture in higher education institutions.

#### History of Learning Communities in Higher Education

Academic institutions searching for innovative ways to foster student learning have created learning communities in order to nurture these experiences (Kuh, 2008). Learning communities are effective means to connect a learner to an institution, classroom, and community (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Harper, 2009; Kuh, 2008; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Talburt & Boyles, 2005; Tinto, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). The intent of learning communities is to promote growth for all students both inside and

outside of the classroom (Harper, 2009; Kuh, 2008). Learning communities were introduced by Alexander Meiklejohn at the experimental college from 1927 to 1932 at the University of Wisconsin (Meiklejohn, 1932). Meiklejohn's experiment was a 2-year, undergraduate curriculum that integrated school subjects in order to help students construct knowledge for themselves. Applying John Dewey's (1916) philosophy that learning is democratic by nature, Meiklejohn's curriculum goal was to have students follow democratic principles (Talbert & Boyles, 2005). Both Meiklejohn and Dewey believed that schooling is a social interaction and social process and that teaching and learning are not easy and should not be mechanical (Talbert & Boyles, 2005).

The idea of learning communities reemerged by the 1960s as a result of efforts to humanize the learning environment (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). By the 1980s, the National Institute of Education, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), and other groups revealed that a growing number of institutions were reforming their educational practices and restructuring their classrooms in order to make learning more interactive (Tinto, 2003). Identified by Tinto (2003), the problem was that "students experienced universities as isolated, students engaged in solo performances, and there is little academic or social coherence in student learning" (p. 1).

By the mid-1990s, numerous institutions responded to retention concerns by improving their first-year students' academic and social experiences through implementing programs designed to enhance student learning and integration into campus life (Talbert & Boyles, 2005). Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) suggested that institutions purposefully align their resources and structures with their educational missions, curricular offerings, and student

abilities and aspirations, continually tweaking or introducing new programs and services to meet changing student needs.

FLCs intentionally restructure students' time, credit, and learning experiences to promote connections among students, teachers, student involvement, and other disciplines (J. H. Levine & Shapiro, 2000). According to Talburt and Boyles (2005), FLCs "link two or more groups of students' classes during their first semester or year, emphasizing small class sizes, curricular cohesion, collaborative teaching, interdisciplinary learning, instruction by tenured and tenure-track faculty, the formation of peer networks, and out-of-class support" (p. 209). J. H. Levine and Shapiro (2000) defined FLCs as triads of courses organized around an area of interest, interdisciplinary theme, or a particular course of study. Baker (1999) described FLCs as "a relatively small group that may include students, teachers, administrators, and others who have a clear sense of membership, common goals, and opportunity for extensive face-to-face interaction" (p. 99). Barr and Tagg (1995) stated that FLCs concentrate on what students actually learn rather than on a teaching paradigm that concentrates on the instructor as the transmitter of knowledge. Zhao and Kuh (2004) referred to FLCs as settings in which students are co-enrolled in two or more courses to ensure that students see one another frequently and spend a substantial amount of time engaged in common intellectual activities and in which the experience is enhanced through learning outcomes that strengthen the social and intellectual connections between students and their learning community.

Altogether learning communities are an approach to curriculum design that links two or more courses, can improve student success and retention, and helps students develop effective learning habits by exposing them to new teaching techniques and exploring connections between



disciplines (Cicerone, 2005). Lenning and Ebbers (1999) described four types of learning communities that support students in college:

1. Curricular learning communities: cross-curricular learning communities, curricular-cohort learning communities, curricular-area learning communities
2. Classroom learning communities: total-classroom learning communities, within-classroom learning communities
3. Residential learning communities
4. Student-type learning communities

These types of learning communities involve learning through collaboration and teams both inside and outside of classrooms. Learning communities can be used to promote integration of students' curricular and co-curricular experiences to build a sense of group identity, cohesiveness, and uniqueness; to encourage continuity and the integration of diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences; and to counteract the isolation that many students feel (Astin, 1984; J.H. Levine & Shapiro, 2000).

A curricular learning community is an important type of learning community (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). According to Gabelnick, et al. (1990):

An important aspect of developing such learning communities is to purposely restructure the curriculum to link together courses or course work so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students. (p. 5)

The second type of learning community presented by Lenning and Ebbers (1999) is classroom learning communities. In these settings, teachers work to develop a sense of family or community within the classroom; all students in the class view themselves as members of a distinctive learning community.

Residential learning communities are the third type of learning community offered by Lenning and Ebbers (1999). Residential halls and units at colleges and universities have focused on the development of a learning community to support students' academic success. The authors state, "Community living in residence halls and programming for learning communities within them was often a primary factor explaining the superior academic performance and other important factors in skill development of residence students over commuter students" (p. 40).

Student-type learning communities are designed specifically for targeted groups, such as academically underprepared students, historically underrepresented students, honors students, students with disabilities, or students with a similar academic interest, such as women in math, science, and engineering (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999).

Overall, learning communities have been an effective means to connecting students to the learning environment and are designed to enhance success within college (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Lenning and Ebbers (1999) found that the four types of learning communities create benefits for students and faculty; including higher academic achievement, better retention rates for institutions, diminished faculty isolation, and increased curricular integration.

### High-Impact Practices

First-year students who have participated in FLCs reported greater gains in learning and personal development (Kuh, 2008). Gains described by Kuh (2008) are

Deep approaches to learning, which encompass integrating ideas and diverse perspectives, discussing ideas with faculty and peers outside of class, analyzing and synthesizing ideas, applying theories, judging the value of information as well as one's own views, and trying to understand others' perspectives. (p. 23)

Kuh (2008) described that deep approaches to learning are deep-level processing that emphasizes both acquiring information and understanding the underlying meaning of information. Deep

approaches to learning are important because “students who use these approaches tend to earn higher grades and retain, integrate, and transfer information at higher rates” (p. 14). Kuh (2008) stated that high-impact activities appear to be effective for students because:

1. They demand that students devote considerable time and effort to purposeful task: most require daily decisions that deepen students’ investment in activities as well as their commitment to their academic program and the college.
2. The nature of high-impact activities puts students in circumstances that essentially demand they interact with faculty and peers about substantive matters, typically over extended periods of time.
3. Participating in one or more of these activities increases the likelihood that students will experience diversity through contact with people who are different from themselves.
4. Students typically get feedback about their performance in every activity.
5. Participation in high-impact activities provides opportunities for students to see how what they are learning works in different settings on and off campus. These opportunities to integrate, synthesize, and apply knowledge are essential to deep, meaningful learning experiences.
6. Participating in high-impact activities can be life changing in the context of a coherent, academically challenging curriculum that appropriately infuses opportunities for active, collaborative learning and increases the odds that students will be prepared to connect. (Kuh, 2008)

The effects of participating in high-impact practices are positive for students, but historically underserved students, those first in their family to attend college and African

American students tend to benefit more from engaging in purposeful educational activities than the other students (Kuh, 2008). Kuh (2008) reported that first-generation students involved in learning communities experience positive outcomes such as improved grades and persistence. Participating in learning communities eases first-generation students' transitions into college by helping them build their identities as college students and find their voices in the classroom (Brownell & Swaner, 2009). FLCs have emerged as a means to bring curricula into a structured space in order to help diverse student groups find a sense of belonging in the academy (Jehangir, 2009). First-generation students engagement in FLCs helps them engage in the learning process and ensures that their voices are heard, they are able to make sense of curricula, and they can connect learning to their worlds and/or lived experiences (Astin, 1984, Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Jehangir, 2009, J.H. Levine & Shapiro, 2000). First-generation students enter into college as participants in their communities. They are able to describe their lived experiences within the learning process by introducing culture, shared attitudes and beliefs, and diversity. Because learning communities challenge traditional methods in the way that first-year students learn, prior research suggests that first-generation students find FLCs to be safe places to learn (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

#### Student Outcomes Through High-Impact Practices

As high-impact practices, FLCs and first-year seminars are intentionally structured to help students make connections in college. Zhao and Kuh (2004) described two types of connections: first is encouraging students to connect ideas from different disciplines, which is aided by being co-enrolled in two or more courses; second is through linking students to other students through ongoing social interactions resulting from being with the same students for an extended period of time. Several studies show that participating in learning communities is

linked to a variety of desired outcomes relating to college students (Zhao & Kuh). Students involved in learning communities experience positive outcomes such as improved grades and persistence. Kuh (2008) suggested that there are three clusters of self-reported student gains when participating in high-impact practices such as a learning community: learning and personal development outcomes and engaging in deep approaches to learning. As a result, according to Zhao and Kuh, “members of a community are focused on academic content which allows them to further develop their identity and discover their voice as well as integrate what they are learning into their world view and other academic and social experiences” (p. 120).

According to Smith (2010), participating in a learning community allows students to meet peers with whom they can learn and practice together. Learning communities have the potential to reduce self-consciousness, increase intellectual confidence, and help students build relationships with peers and faculty members. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) stated that participants came into the academic environment feeling afraid, unsafe, and isolated. However, when enrolled in a learning community, they felt that the environment was “a safe place to learn because they got to know one another, and they trusted and respected each other, which allowed them to take risks and to participate and learn with each other” (p. 13). Zhao and Kuh (2004) implied that students create their own supportive peer groups, they become more involved in both in-class and out-of-class activities, and students spend more time and effort on academic and other purposefully educational activities. Hoffman et al. (2002) found that first-year students involved with learning communities indicate a higher sense of belonging than their peers who enroll in general university courses. The researchers reported that students perceive higher levels of faculty support, peer support, and classroom comfort. Learning communities are effective

because there is a collaborative learning process among its members, including faculty. The benefits allow students' voices to be heard in an intentional structure that is a safe space to learn.

Besides student learning communities in college, there has been special attention given to professional learning communities. Like the college environment, the goal of professional learning communities is to recreate structures to promote a collaborative culture (DuFour & Eaker, 2009). A recent model of professional learning communities requires a change in the institutional structures that have traditionally existed in schools (Vesico, Ross & Adams, 2008). DuFour and Eaker (1998) indicated that the core mission is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn. Morrissey (2000) indicated that professional learning communities appear to function more as families, engaging in problem solving and conflict resolution when needed. Professional learning communities focus on students' needs, the curriculum, and instructional practices that appropriately relate to their students (Hord, 2009).

McLaughlin and Talbert (2010) reported that professional learning communities are proving to have powerful impact on school culture, instructional quality, and student outcomes. Studies show the effectiveness of professional learning communities and their positive impact on student learning and outcomes. Boyer (1995) concluded that the most essential factor in a successful school is the connection. Hord (1997) found that schools must become places where teachers are involved in a community of learning, caring, and inquiring. Morrissey's (2000) results were that professional learning communities provide opportunities for (a) teaching and learning processes and (b) to learn how to become effective in working with students. Newmann and Wehlage (1995) found that an identified and clear purpose, collaboration, and collective responsibility for student learning are essential for effective teaching and have a direct effect on the improvement in student learning. Professional learning communities bring together staff,

teachers, and students to collaboratively learn together including goals for teachers to collaborate on issues directly related to students' learning and students' outcomes.

### Participation

Kuh (2008) suggested that when participating in high-impact activities provides opportunities for students to see how what they are learning works in different settings on and off campus. Tinto (2003) suggested that learning communities have changed the manner in which students experience the curriculum and the way they are taught. In addition, faculty have recognized their classrooms are to promote collaborative learning experiences among students (Gabelnick, et al., 1990; Tinto, 2003). Learning communities' classroom organization requires students to work together: students are asked to describe not only the experience of the curriculum but also the experience of learning within the curriculum. Stefanou and Salisbury-Glennon (2002) sought to extend the knowledge about learning communities by investigating the effects of participating in an undergraduate learning community on college students' motivation and cognitive learning strategies. Results show that participating in learning communities promotes college students' motivation and use of cognitive learning strategies. Students reported increases in their use of rehearsal strategies, organization strategies, critical thinking, time management, and peer-learning and help-seeking behaviors in their cognitive learning strategies. Hotchkiss et al. (2006) researched how a standard-treatment effects model determines that participation in FLCs improves academic performance and retention. The researchers concluded that there is significant correlation between participating in a FLC and GPAs: belonging to a FLC increases a student's GPA.

McIntosh (2012) examined the impact of basic-skills curricular learning communities on academically underprepared community college students to determine whether participation in

such programs significantly contributed to student persistence from Year 1 to Year 2. Being in a basic-skills curricular learning community positively contributed to student persistence due to the personal encouragement and support received from other learning community members.

Rocconi (2010) investigated the direct and indirect relationships between participating in a learning community, student engagement, and self-reported learning outcomes. He found that participating in a learning community is significantly and positively related to student engagement, and student engagement is, in turn, strongly related to educational gains. Rocconi indicated that participating in a learning community was most strongly related to interactions with student acquaintances, followed by effort in student coursework and then interactions with faculty members. Tinto and Goodsell (1993) completed a case study to understand how participation in a first-year interest group influenced students' learning experiences and how those experiences fit in with broader experiences as first-year students. Results show a balance of students' social engagement with their academic engagement and demonstrate the potential of first-year interest groups to influence students' first-year experiences.

### Persistence

Over time schools have argued that what happens in college matters most (Strayhorn, 2012). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) showed through research that the greater students' involvement or integration into college life, of the greater the likelihood that they will persist. Persistence is a balance of academic and social involvement; it is conceptually linked to student perceptions of the quality of their learning environments and their interactions with faculty about their learning (Tinto, 1997). Donovan (1984) implied that persistence is a longitudinal process about an individual's integration into the social system of a college. Tinto (1975) suggested that given individual characteristics, prior experiences, and commitments, it is an individual's



integration into the academic and social systems of a college that relates to his or her continuance in college.

Persistence has been examined by several researchers as it applies to student experiences in college. High-impact practices support both student persistence and heightened achievement on essential students learning outcomes (Kuh, 2008). The outcomes and benefits from participation in high-impact practices are wide-reaching and include gains in student persistence and GPA, increases in critical thinking and writing, greater appreciation for diversity, and enhanced student engagement (Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Kuh, 2008). Engstrom and Tinto (2008) examined which features of the learning community experience contribute to students' success both at the time of participation and over time. The researchers found that persistence caused by participation in a learning community is not due to students being more engaged in those communities but rather, there is something specific about being in a learning community that promotes the persistence of academically underprepared community college students. Tinto (1997) conducted a multimethod study at a community college which asked what strategies enhance student classroom experience as a result of learning communities and the adoption of collaborative learning strategies. Results from Tinto's study are that students reported greater involvement in a range of academic and social activities. Additionally, he found that participation in a first-year learning community enabled students to develop a network of supportive peers, learning communities helped students balance their academic and social life, and included students as active participants in the classrooms. In comparison, Shapiro and Levine (1999) reported that students participating in a learning community were valued and engaged and had higher persistence rates and greater gains from intellectual and social development than peers who did not participate in learning communities. Results from these

studies illustrate how learning communities foster students' learning and participation, including academic achievement and persistence of first-year college students.

Prior studies revealed that academic and social integration appear to be influential in students' persistence (Bers & Smith, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1997). Bers and Smith (1991) examined persistence in community college students. The researchers found that students taking courses in pursuit of a degree were more likely to persist and that community college students' characteristics, objectives, and subjective experiences are important factors affecting persistence. Donovan (1984) examined the process of persistence through a path-analysis model in higher education among low-income African American students. The model explored the role of college experiences, academic and social integration, and academic achievement. Findings are that academic integration has the strongest effect on college grades. Students are more likely to get better grades if they are academically integrated. Students who are academically integrated are those oriented towards study before they enter college, more likely to have educated parents, and who have done well academically in high school. Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, and Cantwell (2011) intended that their research would identify the attitudes and behaviors of faculty and staff which impact the success and persistence of high-risk students. The results show that faculty and staff who made a difference in the success and persistence of students articulated that it was their responsibility to relate to the students and make a difference in their life.

College self-efficacy has been linked to student persistence, academic performance, academic achievement, and academic goals, all of which are related to pursuing a college degree (Barry & Finney, 2009; Gore, 2006; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Zimmermann, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). Academic self-efficacy is a student's confidence in his or her abilities

with academic tasks (Gore, 2006; Wright, Jenkins-Guarnieri, & Murdock, 2012). Wright et al. (2012) researched first-year students' persistence and academic success after completing their first semester of college. Results indicate that increased college self-efficacy at the first semester's end was associated with significantly higher odds of persisting into the spring semester. Steward, Lim, and Kim (2015) examined demographic variables, family characteristics, precollege and college academic performance factors, and the extent to which mandatory placement in remedial courses predict persistence at a public college. Findings indicate that traditional-age college students who were academically prepared for college-level coursework at a selective public college were more likely to persist beyond the first year at the same institution as students who were placed in mandatory remedial courses. Academic performance and self-efficacy are important factors among students who persist in their first year of college. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reported a significant relationship between academic performance and persistence. Consequently, the responsibility falls both on the student and institution to prepare students to succeed and persist in college (Steward et al., 2015).

Astin (1984) found that several factors contributed to students' persistence which relate to their involvement in attending college. According to Astin, "student involvement refers to quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience" (p. 528). He indicated that connections with academics, faculty, and student peers are the most potent form of positive involvement, while noninvolvement with campus life has a powerful negative impact on student outcomes. Berger and Milem's (1999) study used a revised integrated model of undergraduate persistence. The researchers' findings suggest that by including behaviorally based measures of involvement, their model provides an explanation how students' interaction with the college environment is a precursor of students' academic and social

integration. Strayhorn (2012) implied that student involvement is related to their sense of belonging. He stated that involvement includes activities such as working on campus, living on campus, engaging peers, being a member of clubs, and socializing with faculty members (Strayhorn, 2012; Wolf-Wendell, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). Strayhorn examined the relationship between involvement and students' sense of belonging. Findings from his study reveal that students who reported being frequently involved in meaningful college activities also tend to report a greater sense of belonging in college. To that end, it has been shown that increased social integration affects students' commitment to their college; therefore, there is a greater likelihood of persistence (Astin, 1984; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1997; Wolf-Wendell et al., 2009).

### Engagement

To provide a snapshot of student characteristics when entering college, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) primarily examines the relationship between participating in learning communities and student engagement. Results from NSSE provide an assessment of how undergraduates spent their time and what they gained from attending college. Yancy et al. (2008) examined the impact of the Freshman Academy/Learning Community Program on student progress at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) by using the NSSE. Yancy et al. (2008) reported overall student satisfaction within all of the institutions due to the core practices of active learning, integrated assignments, and co-curricular and service-learning activities implemented in learning communities. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) conducted a longitudinal study of the impact of learning communities on the success of academically underprepared, low-income students. The researchers found that students in learning communities were engaged, had a positive perception of the encouragement they

received on campus, and made intellectual gains within the classroom. Zhao and Kuh (2004) collected data from 365 4 year institutions about freshmen and seniors participating in learning communities. They concluded that “participating in learning communities is uniformly and positively linked with student academic performance, engagement in educationally fruitful activities, gains associated with college attendance, and overall satisfaction with the college experience” (Zhao & Kuh, 2004, p. 124). Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008) investigated the effects of student engagement on first-year college grades and persistence; they found in that student engagement in purposeful educational activities is related positively to academic outcomes.

### Mentoring

Mentoring programs are growing on college campuses to assist first-year students transition into college. As part of this growing development, universities and colleges have sought to identify support mechanisms to improve retention, academic success, and educational experiences of their students (Terrion & Leonard, 2007). Mentoring in higher education, rather by faculty or students, have positive outcomes for college students. Peer mentoring in higher education is regarded as an effective intervention to ensure the success and retention of vulnerable students (Terrion & Leonard, 2007). The act of mentoring is to provide, advice, support, and instruction to the mentee (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Calvin and Ashman (2010) indicated that there are two most common situations that involve students helping other students which are peer tutoring and peer mentoring. The researchers’ stated that peer tutoring focuses on a more advanced student helping lower-level students with course content, whereas peer mentoring focuses on a more experienced student helping a less experienced student improve overall academic performance and personal growth.

A number of studies have been conducted to understand the benefits of peer mentoring programs. Results show that successful peer mentoring in university settings is the result of relationships among students, mentors, and instructors (Colvin and Ashman, 2010). Astin, Alexandar, Wogelgesang, Ikeda, and Yee (2000) suggested that academic involvement and interaction with faculty and fellow students increases the time and physical and psychological energy that students devote to the academic experiences. Colvin and Ashman (2010) examined how peer mentors used a set of discursive practices to locate themselves within the mentor program. The researchers' findings were that there are three areas of importance for mentoring: roles, benefits and risk, and power and resistance. Both peer mentors and students saw benefits, ranging from individual gains to helping students become connected to the campus. Leidenfrost, Strassnig, Schut, Carbon, Schabmann (2014) examined the effects of different mentoring styles on mentee academic performances. They suggested that participants in the mentoring program performed better in their studies than students who did not participate in terms of average grade and number of courses passed. And there was no specific impact of the different mentoring styles on mentee academic performance. Rodger and Tremblay (2003) examined the effect of participation of the first-year university students in a full-year peer mentoring program as well as individual differences in motivation in relation to outcome measures of retention and achievement. Results revealed that participation is not contingent on level of academic motivation, and students with high levels of participation experienced significantly higher grades. These studies show that academic success among first-year students is partially due to peer mentoring programs and student support services offered on campus. Peer mentor programs are successful because peer mentors support students by engaging them in the learning process and providing academic guidance.

### First-Year Experience Programs

As a curricular structure, learning communities can relate to any content and any group of students (Tinto, 2003). Kuh (2008) suggested that schools build into the curriculum a first-year seminar or other programs that bring small groups of students together with faculty or staff on a regular basis. He further stated, “the highest-quality first-year experiences place a strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students’ intellectual and practical competencies” (p. 10). Tinto and Goodsell (1993) suggested that freshman year is the period during which programs can have the greatest impact on subsequent student development and persistence. FYE programs’ primary goals are to increase student performance, persistence, graduation rates, and to integrate students into the university community both academically and socially (Jamelske, 2008; Strayhorn, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1997).

Like learning communities, FYE courses or seminars are high-impact practices intended to address retention and graduation rates and dropouts that occur during the first year (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1997). Jamelske (2008) explained that FYE courses generally have a regular class meeting time with a specific instructor, or team of instructors, and are credit bearing and graded. Jamelske went on to say that FYE programs include activities and resources designed to introduce new students to university life and assist with time management and study skills. Barefoot (2000) found that first-year programs, including first-year seminars, learning communities, residence-life activities, community service, and service-learning opportunities, are intentionally designed to provide students the interaction with peers necessary for group bonding and affiliation. Other researchers have suggested that FYE courses should afford students opportunities to interact socially with peers and faculty, as well as introduce students to

academic facilities, counseling staff, and other faculty during advising and planning sessions (Schrader & Brown, 2008; White, Goetz, Hunter, & Barefoot, 1995).

Several studies have been conducted to examine student experiences and outcomes related to being enrolled in a FYE course. Jamelske (2008) examined the FYE program impact on GPAs and retention after 1 year for entering freshman students. Findings suggest no positive FYE program effect on student retention, but, on average, FYE students earned higher GPAs than non-FYE students. Crissman (2001) evaluated the first-semester experiences of a group of new students who attended a first-year seminar and English composition course. Findings reveal that students in a first-year seminar had positive reactions to their first-semester experience, they gained valuable academic skills that could be used in other courses, and they were more comfortable in approaching faculty members in and out of the classroom. Tinto and Goodsell (1993) wanted to understand how participation in a first-year group influenced students' learning and how these learning experiences fit in with their broader experiences as first-year students. The researchers found that the freshman interest groups were able to address the need for both academic as well as social integration, and therefore first-year students were able to pursue learning and friendships at the same time. Sidle and McReynolds (1999) examined the relationship between participation in a freshman-year experience course and student retention and success. Results from their study are that students who participated in the institution's freshman-year experience course continued their enrollment in the fall term of their second year at a higher rate than students who did not participate in the course, and students earned higher GPAs and had higher ratios of earned hours to attempted hours. Porter and Swing (2006) wanted to understand how aspects of first-year seminars affect early intentions to persist. Findings from their study are consistent with prior studies: students persist by earning better grades and are



likely to return to their institution the following year. Additional studies have been reviewed regarding the experiences and characteristics among first-year students. Tinto (1999) suggested that institutions should think about how the first year of college should be restructured. He asserted that what is needed are learning environments that actively involve students, faculty members, and staff in shared-learning activities. In previous studies, student persistence increased due to participation in FYE programs and learning communities.

Researchers have found that students of various ethnic backgrounds have benefited the most (Kuh, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strayhorn, 2012). With the increased enrollment of Latino students in higher education, J.C. Hernandez (2002) wanted to understand the FYEs among Latino students at a predominately White institution. Findings from the study show that students had difficulty adjusting to college, and it was their family that sustained them through the first year of college. D'Lima, Winsler, and Kitsantas (2014) explored ethnic and gender differences in first-year college student self-efficacy, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and goal orientation over the course of their first semester and examined the relationship to first-semester academic performance. Findings are that students were more likely to earn higher grades in their first semester, and self-efficacy was reported to be higher at the beginning of the semester. Although it is consistent with prior literature that students persist during the first year of college, students of different ethnic backgrounds may find their first-year transition into college is challenging. Restructuring the learning environment to make it conducive to student differences may increase student engagement and learning among first-year students (D'Lima, et al., 2014; Tinto, 1997).

### First-Generation Students' Experiences in College

Studies have been conducted to investigate first-generation students' college experiences and their cognitive and psychosocial development during college. Some studies have focused on the identity of first-generation students, who they are and where they are from. Pascarella, et al. (2004) reported three characteristics of first-generation students. First, compared to their non-first-generation peers, first-generation college students tend to be at a distinct disadvantage with respect to basic knowledge about postsecondary education. Second, first-generation students as a group have a more difficult transition from secondary school to college than their non-first-generation peers. Third, first-generation students are more likely to leave a 4-year institution at the end of the first year and are less likely to be on a persistence track to a bachelor's degree after 3 years or stay enrolled or attain a bachelor's degree after 5 years.

As has been found in prior research, first-generation students face challenges and barriers in college (Green, 2006). These challenges can be from anxiety, dislocation, and difficulties of any college student. First-generation students often have increased problems due to cultural, social, and academic transition issues (London, 1989; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Weis, 1985). Billson and Terry (1982) reported that first-generation students are at greater risk with respect to both persistence and degree attainment than their non-first-generation peers, largely because of their lower levels of academic and social integration. Mehta, Newbold, and O'Rourke (2011) implied that first-generation status impacts students' ability to be involved socially on campus, which results in lower academic performance and in college dissatisfaction. L.M. Bary, Hudley, Kelly, and Cho (2009) stated that first-generation students found it more difficult to disclose and discuss feelings of stress than their non-first-generation peers. Hicks (2003) conveyed that first-generation college students may be psychologically less prepared for

college, which lower their chances for academic success and could explain why first-generation students often leave after their first year.

Some studies have reported that first-generation students are likely to drop out during their first year of college and are less likely to persist and graduate than their non-first-generation students (Astin, 1988; Tinto, 1997; Terenzini et al., 1997). Motivation and commitment have been examined to understand first-generation students' college experiences. Martin (2009) suggested that not all students are motivated by the same desires and needs. Some students are motivated by having the support of others, and some are motivated by overcoming obstacles that appear to prevent them from achieving their accomplishments (Martin, 2009; Petty, 2014). Petty (2014) found that the major challenges first-generation students face reside in their being motivated students to devote sufficient study time to achieve academic success and college completion. Woosley and Shepler (2011) wanted to understand early integration experiences of first-generation college students. Their findings are consistent with prior studies: the college campus environment is important, adjusting to university life is relevant, and students want to be accepted. Terenzini et al. (1997) examined how first-generation students' college experiences differ from those of other students. Findings are that first-generation students are less likely than non-first-generation students to have experiences associated with success and persistence. The researchers reported that first-generation students worked more hours off campus, and they were less likely to attend workshops, to perceive faculty members as concerned with student development, and to receive encouragement from friends to continue their enrollment. Mehta et al. (2011) wanted to determine whether first-generation students are significantly different from continuing-generation students. The researchers found that first-generation students are less involved, have less social and financial support, report less social and academic satisfaction and

lower GPAs. As shown in the literature, first-generation students find their college experiences complex and challenging. Additional research has been conducted to understand these experiences.

### Transitioning

Terenzini et al. (1994) suggested that transitioning into college could be a vastly different experience for first-generation and non-first-generation students. For non-first-generation students, college is a familiar concept in their families and an expected step in their life passages. On the other hand, first-generation students attending college represent a departure from their families' experiences and expectations. Tinto (1988) found that college students progress through three transitional stages of departure as they adjust and become assimilated into college life:

1. First stage of a college career, separation: requires students to disassociate themselves, in varying degrees, from membership in their past communities, most typically those associated with the local high school and place of residence.
2. Second stage of a college career, transition: a period of passage between the old and the new, between associations of the past and hoped for associations with communities of the present.
3. Third stage of a college career, incorporation: having moved away from the norms and behavioral patterns of past associations, the student now faces the problem of finding and adopting norms appropriate to the new college setting and establishing competent membership in the intellectual and social communities of college life.

Bolle, Wessel, and Mulvihill (2007) examined transitional experiences of matriculating first-year college students who graduated from high school in a homeschool setting. The study

sought to determine whether the experiences of such students corresponded with Tinto's (1988) three stages of student departure. The researchers found that academic and student support services were influential institutional interventions in their transition into college. Clark (2005) addressed how first-year students negotiate the transition to college by exploring various concepts of experienced challenges, perceived influences, and devised strategies. Clark suggested that strategy is useful for considering freshman transitions because it recognizes the part that students play in managing their experience and actions in college. Findings are that college students' transition experiences included an active process of strategizing, and students who encountered challenges throughout their first year found that the challenges ranged from positive to negative occurrences both inside and outside of college. Urquhart (2011) stated that one such challenge or transitional issue that is common for the crossover or first-generation student is the difference between how success is defined in working-class culture and in middle-class culture. Urquhart found that specific social factors (e.g., survivor guilt; crossover experience; new language, rules, and values) that centered on the family of origin, as well as preexisting relationships with family and friends, impacted first-generation college students as they transitioned into college life. Although students were encouraged to go to college, there was a sense of alienation from family and friends.

Johnson et al. (2007) found that student perceptions of the transition into college both academically and socially indicate that a smooth social transition significantly predicts having a sense of belonging. Muldoon and Macdonald (2009) examined how learning communities in colleges help first-year students negotiate the transition into college. The researchers found that learning communities foster having a sense of belonging, which is an important ingredient of student retention. Also, participating in a learning community alleviated the most common

issues faced by first-year university students: lack of motivation and sense of purpose, dealing with different modes of teaching and assessment, the effects of isolation and loneliness, and the challenge of balancing social life and new living conditions. Johnson et al. (1997) examined the relationships between having a sense of belonging and the college environment among first-year students. The researchers' findings are that having a smooth academic transition into college included items such as ease with communicating with instructors outside of class, finding academic help when it was needed, and forming study groups. Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996) examined the factors that affect Latino students' adjustment in the first and second year of college. The researchers wanted to understand the transitional experiences of the first year and perceptions and behaviors in the second year for Latino students. The researchers measured the general campus and racial climates because students face a variety of stressors in adjusting to any college, and racial/ethnic minorities face additional stressors beyond those typical of all students. The researchers found that many student behaviors during the first and second years are positively associated with adjustment. Managing such resources as time, money, and schedules and perceiving the amount of school work that is manageable in the first year were positively associated with academic and personal-emotional adjustment in the second year. Interaction with faculty in the second year was also associated with academic adjustment. Maintaining family support in the first year was positively associated with personal-emotional adjustment. The amount of time students spent socializing with friends in the first year was also positively associated with social adjustment. Overall, transitioning into college can be difficult for first-year students. However, having support from the academic community such as faculty, peers, and advisors can help first-year, first-generation students have a greater sense of belonging through inclusion social activities, the environment, and developing new relationships on campus.

## Belonging

Pascarella et al. (2004) suggested that first-generation students experience all the same anxieties, dislocations, and difficult transitions as any other college student, and additionally, their experiences often involve substantial cultural as well as academic and social transition. Jehangir (2009) reported that first-generation, low-income college students experience both isolation and being marginalized during their first year of college. To address some of these issues concerning first-year, first-generation students, recent studies using sense of belonging as a theoretical construct are reviewed. Strayhorn (2012) reported that a sense of belonging is, at the most basic level, whether students feel respected, valued, accepted, cared for, included, and that they matter in the classroom, at college, or in their chosen career path. He suggested that college students' sense of belonging matters because it is related to their academic success and emotional well-being. Maestas, Vaquera, and Muñoz Zehr (2007) implied that sense of belonging is a student's subjective feeling of connectedness or cohesion to the institution. The researchers examined factors that impact students' sense of belonging at a Hispanic-serving institution. Results from using a sense-of-belonging model suggest that background characteristics such as gender, race, and ethnicity; parental level of education; the perceived ability to pay for college expenses; and academic background are all important factors determining sense of belonging. In addition, academic and social integration are central to a student's connection with the main components of campus life, the classroom and social experiences. Feeling connected to the institution outside of its classes and developing social networks are key to creating a sense of belonging.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) tested a conceptual model of sense of belonging to examine the extent to which Latino students' background characteristics and college experiences in the

first and second years contribute to their sense of belonging in the third year. Latino students, both male and female, completed a survey provided by the researchers. Findings suggest that early transition experiences can be important predictors of sense of belonging in the later years of college. Results indicated that FYEs have positive effects, while perceptions of a hostile racial climate have direct negative effects on students' sense of belonging in the third year. Also, other students outside of class and membership in religious and social community organizations are strongly associated with students' sense of belonging. The researchers specified that a sense of belonging is related to a college student's cognition, affect, and behaviors and a sense of belonging measures a student's attachment to the campus community.

Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, and Salomone (2002) stated, "sense of belonging is theorized to reflect students' integration into the college system; basically, the greater a student's sense of belonging to the university the greater is his commitment to the institution" (p. 228). The authors' study developed and tested a sense-of-belonging instrument that could be used to more fully understand why students persist in or withdraw from college. The researchers found that, based on the sense-of-belonging instrument, learning communities facilitated the development of relationships that integrated both academic and social aspects of university life by allowing for greater interaction among peers around common challenges and stressors. Jehangir (2009) conducted a study with a learning community pedagogy design and an intentional multicultural curriculum that addressed the challenges faced by first-generation college students. Jehangir (2009) suggested that finding place, finding voice, and finding self where safe and open dialogue was exchanged among participants be examined. He found that participants in the learning community were successful, their voices were heard, they felt validated, and they discovered a sense of belonging at the institution which supports existing



literature. Strayhorn (2008) presented a study that estimated the influence of academic and social collegiate experiences on Latino students' sense of belonging, controlling for background differences. Results are that White students reported higher levels of a sense of belonging than Latinos, and age was a significant predictor of sense of belonging for White students, in that older students felt a greater sense of belonging.

### Perception

Various studies suggest that participating in a learning community has a positive impact on student persistence and behavioral and attitudinal outcomes, such a sense of belonging and perception of a positive campus climate (Brownell & Swaner, 2009). Barbatis (2010) examined participants in a first-year learning community at an urban, culturally diverse, commuter campus. Findings are that participants all expressed positive influences from high levels of academic support from the institution and in the classroom as well as from encouragement from family members. Participants agreed that it was beneficial to be involved socially and engaged on campus with activities that allowed them to work closely with peers and faculty on class projects. Maher (2005) investigated students' experiences in a cohort. The researcher's goal was to understand the meaning of cohort membership and how that membership shaped their educational experience and the development of peer and instructional relationships. Results show that both the meaning and influence of cohort membership were fluid and evolved as students progressed in their program, changing from an inconsequential to a significant meaning and from a modest to a deep influence. Their relationships within the cohort were described as "family-like," and some students reported that they felt at least some responsibility to care for and emotionally support other cohort members. Tinto (1997) conducted a study to understand what students experienced and how these experiences were associated over time with students'

behaviors, changing views of learning, and persistence. Findings from the study are that in learning communities, students helped each other, students' viewpoints were valued, faculty made collaborative efforts, there were high levels of discussion, students learned concepts better, and there was a deeper appreciation for knowledge. Pascarella et al. (2004) sought to understand how first-generation students experience and benefit from college. The researchers found that compared to other students, first-generation college students derived greater outcome benefits from extracurricular involvement and peer interaction.

Another way of understanding first-generation students' perceptions during their first year is through academic validation. Rendon (1994) suggested that validation is an enabling, confirming, and supportive process caused by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development. There are two types of validation: academic validation represents actions that foster academic development, and interpersonal validation represents actions that promote the personal and social adjustment within both the curricular and co-curricular context of an institution. Hurtado, Cuellar, and Guillermo-Wann (2011) used two validation constructs in their: student perceptions of academic validation in the classroom and general interpersonal validation. The researchers found that institutional agents can foster student-centered behaviors that enhance a sense of validation among students. Students who reported high levels of validation in the classroom were also likely to report high levels of general interpersonal validation. Higher levels of validation were related to students' intent to persist and their sense of integration. First-generation students' perceptions of college during the first year can be challenging; however, fostering an environment that validates student experiences and outcomes created a sense of belonging, and students were more likely to persist.

### Faculty-Student Relationships

For students from various backgrounds who enter college, faculty-student relationships are imperative to the teaching and learning process in higher education. Kuh (2008) stated that the nature of high-impact activities puts students in circumstances that require interaction among faculty and students. Existing literature states that the success of faculty and staff in forming influencing relationships with their students encourages students to follow their example to learn and to persist (Kuh, 2008; Gabelnick, et al., 1990; Tinto, 1997). Kim and Sax (2009) explored faculty interaction with first-generation students. The researchers examined whether the effects of faculty-student interaction on a range of student outcomes (e.g., college GPA, degree aspiration, integration, critical thinking, communication, cultural appreciation, social awareness, and satisfaction with the college experience) varied by student gender, race, social class, and first-generation status. The researchers found that differences in frequency of faculty-student interaction across student gender, race, social class, and first-generation status and differences in the effects of faculty-student interaction depended on each of these factors except first-generation status. Rugutt and Chemosit (2009) conducted a survey that investigated the nature and magnitude of relationships between faculty-student interactions, students' critical thinking skills, student-to-student relations, and student motivation. The researchers' found that faculty-student interaction, critical thinking skills, and student-to-student relations were important variables in predicting motivation. Teachers, administrators, and counselors contributed to a positive teaching and learning environment by putting in place structures that helped to provide an optimal learning environment. Chang (2005) examined student characteristics correlated with faculty contact and how interaction differed among racial subgroups of community college students. Chang found that community college students generally had low levels of engagement

with faculty. Students were more likely to interact with faculty in class and about topics specific to the course they were taking and less likely to meet with their instructors outside of class.

Another study researched faculty-student relationships of first-generation students at predominately White institutions. Guiffrida (2005) conducted a study to understand, from students' perspectives, faculty characteristics that facilitated meaningful relationships with African American students. Findings are that students did not feel that they received adequate academic and career advising from their White faculty advisors. Students did not perceive them as willing to provide the additional support that the students felt they needed. These same students perceived that African American faculty assumed a more holistic, comprehensive, and even parental role in supporting and advocating for them within predominately White institutions. On the other hand, African American faculty was perceived by students as more likely than White faculty to demonstrate positive beliefs in students. African American students in the study purposely wanted African American faculty to serve as their mentors. Some students said that they initially were more comfortable speaking to African American faculty because they felt that the faculty would understand them and their struggles. Faculty-student relationships are essential to student learning. Relationship building among same race faculty and first-generation students eases the transition into predominately White institutions. To actively engage first-generation students, the learning environment must include them as valued members of the institution (Tinto, 1999).

### Diversity and Campus Culture

An array of research about racially and ethnically diverse students in higher education has been focused on cognitive and affective outcomes and group differences (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Recent researchers have shifted their focus to ask students, faculty, and

administrators about their perceptions of the institution climate for racial and ethnic diversity, their experiences with diversity initiatives on campus, and their attitudes and interactions with others from different racial and ethnic groups (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999). Antonio et al. (2004) investigated the effect of diversity in college environments and found that race matters or is a factor in higher education and the researchers link diverse educational environments with positive intellectual and social outcomes for college students. Alongside diverse educational environments, faculty plays a large role in shaping student experiences and outcomes in college. Prior literature suggests that student satisfaction and campus climate regarding the ethnic diversity of the student body and faculty are important parts of students' perceptions about campus racial dynamics (Park, 2009). To understand better why faculty plays such an essential role in fostering diverse learning environments, Park (2009) conducted a study that tested satisfaction with the ethnic diversity of the student body and faculty at predominately White institutions. The researcher found that Black students were the most likely to be dissatisfied and least likely to be neutral in their satisfaction with the diversity of the student body. White and Asian American students were least likely to be dissatisfied with the diversity of the student body. Also, all groups of students were more likely to be either satisfied or very satisfied with having a diverse faculty. Lastly, students from all racial/ethnic groups reported satisfaction with a sense of campus community, interaction with other students, and their overall college experience.

Cabrera et al. (2002) indicated that classroom practices can be perceived by a student as discriminatory and prejudiced. An earlier study by Cabrera and Nora (1994) found that minority students who felt singled out and treated differently in traditionally structured classrooms reported high levels of alienation and isolation from the institution. Cabrera et al. (2002)

suggested that collaboration occurring both inside and outside the classroom will create environments that foster development and openness to diversity. The researchers went on to say collaborative learning restructures the classroom away from the traditional lecture to small-group work requiring intensive interaction between students and the faculty member while working on complex projects. They examined three areas regarding the role collaborative learning plays in student development and learning: (a) preferences among different gender and ethnic groups towards collaborative learning; (b) effects of collaborative learning on perceived cognitive and affective gains for White males, White females, and minorities; and (c) the potential role that collaborative learning may have in increasing tolerance and openness towards diversity. The researchers found that both White males and females and Black males and females preferred collaborative learning, and collaborative learning had the highest effect on college students' openness toward diversity.

Rankin (2014) said that a campus climate is the current attitudes, behaviors, and standards of faculty, staff, and administrators concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potential. Padilla, Trevino, and Gonzalez (1997) identified that lack-of-presence barriers reflected the absence of minorities in the curriculum, in the university's programs, and in the general university population of students, staff, and faculty. To have a healthy environment, diversity and inclusion must be addressed (Rankin, 2014). M. J. Chang et al. (2004) examined the educational relevance of cross-racial interaction and how campuses structure these opportunities among freshmen. The researchers found that cross-racial interaction has a consistent positive effect on a range of educational outcomes, including students' intellectual, social, and civic development. Reid and Radhakrishnan (2003) examined students' perceptions of racial and academic climate as being possible mediators of racial differences in

the perception of a university's general campus climate. The researchers found that racial minority students, most notably African Americans and Latinos, reported more negative perceptions of general campus, racial, and academic climate than White students. The researchers' findings are consistent with existing literature that focuses on barriers that specific subgroups of students experience before and after matriculation to college. Terenzini, Yaeger, Bohr, Pascarella, and Nora (1997) examined whether African American students who attended HBCUs had different experiences and perceived the campus climate differently than African American students who attended predominately White institutions. Findings are that African American students at a HBCU, contrasted with those attending a predominately White institutions, were more likely younger and female with wealthier and better-educated parents, have higher degree aspirations, and enter college with higher composite cognitive development scores. The two groups also differed in their reports of their college experiences. Compared to their peers at predominately White institutions, African American students at a HBCU tended to enroll for more hours; have higher expectations of completing a baccalaureate degree; were satisfied with their college experience; had more positive relationships with faculty, had experienced greater faculty concern for students and teaching; and were more involved in clubs, student organizations, and residence life. Students at HBCUs also perceived a more tolerant climate on campus and were more likely to report that their colleges promoted respect for differences. D. R. Johnson et al. (1997) examined the relationships between sense of belonging and the college environment among first-year students. The researchers' findings show there are positive perceptions of the campus racial climate that were significantly related to students' sense of belonging among all racial/ethnic groups except for Hispanics/Latinos. The researchers found that interaction with a diverse peer group was a significant predictor only for

Hispanic/Latino students. For African American, Asian Pacific American, multiracial/multiethnic, and White/Caucasian students, perception of a positive campus racial climate was a significant contributor to their sense of belonging on campus. White/Caucasian students reported the fewest positive interactions with their peers from different racial/ethnic groups, and African American students were the least likely to report positive perceptions of the campus racial climate. Rankin and Reason (2005) conducted a study that explored how students in different racial groups experienced their campus climates. The researchers found that students of color experienced harassment at higher rates than did Caucasian students. The vast majority of the harassment felt by students of color was in the form of derogatory comments about race and came from other students. In addition, students of color and White students perceived the campus differently. Students of color were more likely to indicate that the climate was racist, hostile, disrespectful, and less accepting of minority groups. White students, on the other hand, indicated that the campus climate was nonracist, friendly, and respectful. White students were more likely than students of color believe that institutional responses to the racial climate on campus were improving. The researchers found that faculty and staff were supportive of their diverse campus and helped all students with academic matters.

Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Hagedorn (1999) examined the role that perception of prejudice and discrimination played within the adjustment to college of African American and White students. The researchers include four assertions within this process:

1. Academic preparation for college is one main factor accounting for differences in persistence behavior between African American and White students.
2. Successful adjustment to college involves severing ties with family and past communities.



3. Perceptions of prejudice and discrimination are unique to minorities, and persistence decisions among minorities are shaped primarily by exposure to a climate of discrimination.
4. Current models of college adjustment fail to capture minorities' college experiences.

The researchers found that both African Americans and Whites indicated a high degree of consistency for campus/racial climate. There were no differences observed in perception of prejudice and discrimination between African American and Whites students; however, African American students were less likely to report positive experiences than White students. Both groups of students were equally committed to the institution, reported similar levels of encouragement and support from their parents, and were comparably satisfied with the faculty. The social experiences of African American students were negatively dominated by perceptions of discrimination. African American students reported that they had less prior preparation for college than their White counterparts. Perceptions that prejudice and discrimination exist in the classroom and on campus are not unique to African Americans. Both groups were equally likely to perceive a campus climate of prejudice and discrimination, although African American students' social experiences were negatively dominated by perceptions of discrimination, and both African American and White students adjusted to college in a similar manner.

Diversity has not always been a strength of American social, political, and economic institutions (Manuel, 2006). An account of diversity in colleges and universities, and an understanding of how the campus climate matters to students are relevant to social identities. Social identities of race/ethnicity and gender can be significant for first-year students. Racial/ethnic-related and gender dynamics may influence students' perceptions and interactions with people inside and outside the college environment (Clark, 2005). Critical race theory (CRT)

has been used to understand the various and complex ways that power operates to dominate and shape consciousness in academia (Zou & Trueba, 2002). CRT is based on the concept of intersectionality to describe analytic approaches that simultaneously consider the meaning and consequences of multiple categories of identity, difference, and disadvantage (Cole, 2009). Intersectionality as a concept was an important contribution of socialist feminism. Nash (2008) indicated that intersectionality is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality and is the primary theoretical tool designed to combat feminist hierarchy, hegemony, and exclusivity. Intersectionality might be more broadly useful as a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identities and the ongoing necessity of group politics (Crenshaw, 1991). Knudsen (2005) reported that intersectionality implies more than gender research, more than studying differences between women and men, and more than diversity within women's groups or within men's groups. Intersectionality attempts to capture the relationships between socio-cultural categories and identities (Knudsen). Intersectionality examines the relationships between gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, class, and nationality that point towards identities in transition (Knudsen). Lorber (2005) stated that social class, gender, and racial ethnic membership cannot be separated from each other because each of them affects the others. According to Lorber, "their interaction is synergetic together they construct a social location. Some locations are more oppressive than others because they are the result of multiple systems of domination" (p. 200).

Researchers have further investigated intersectionality as a framework to understand diversity concerns in educational settings. Studies have been conducted to answer the questions of whether, and how, racial diversity in the undergraduate student body affects the educational development of first-generation, underrepresented, and underserved students. According to

Núñez (2014), the theoretical framework of intersectionality explores “how multiple social identities and the relationships with interlocking systems of power influence educational equity, particularly for historical underserved groups in education” (p. 85). More recently, Latino race theory (LatCrit) as an intersectional approach have been explored to understand the experiences of students of color, primarily Latino students (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). LatCrit is used to reveal the ways Latinos experience race, gender, class, and sexuality, while also acknowledging the Latina/o experiences with issues of immigration status, language, ethnicity, and culture (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Pérez Huber (2010) examined how a racist nativism framework can help in understanding the experiences of undocumented Chicana college students. The researcher’s findings show that students are impacted by the complexity in understanding educational experiences at the intersections of oppressions. Núñez (2014) used a conceptual model of intersectionality for education research to understand contextual influences of Latino immigrant students’ college access. Results are that various educational practices can develop to shape Latino immigrant students’ experiences. The model can reveal intersecting processes within the systems of power. Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Hunt (2012) explored ways that Black women in college cope with intersections of subtle forms of racism and sexism using an intersectional framework. Findings reveal that Black women used a combination of coping strategies depending on contextual factors. The coping strategies represent interrelationships between resistant, collective, and self-protective forms of coping. The women discussed the importance of using their voice because they felt silenced by the dominant culture, such as in their academic department, in the classroom, or in the workplace. Using intersectionality as a framework when addressing inequities of educational practices among students introduces

strategies to deconstruct negative perceptions, behaviors, and patterns that isolate, marginalize, and excludes populations of first-generation, underrepresented, and underserved students.

### Chapter Summary

It has been shown that creating FLCs for students has been a growing trend for colleges and universities. FLCs are designed to improve students' ability to learn and to create a safe place in which to learn within the classroom. Participating in FLCs eases first-generation students' transitions into college by helping them build their identities as college students and find their voices in the learning environment. Rocconi (2010) suggested that first-generation students enrolled in a FLC have better opportunities to make meaningful undergraduate experiences at college. To understand how first-year, first-generation students make meaning of their undergraduate experiences, most studies illustrate the effectiveness of FLCs with a focus on student engagement and participation, persistence, interaction, and transitioning into college (Chang et al., 2004; Gabelnick et al., 1990; Talburt & Boyles, 2005; Tinto, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Provided in this chapter was background information on learning communities and high-impact practices. This review of literature illustrate two categories: (a) student outcomes through high-impact practices and (b) first-generation students' experiences in college that reveals first-generation students participating in learning communities have been linked to a variety of beneficial educational outcomes, including student engagement (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Greene, Marti, & McClenney, 2008; Kuh, et al., 2008; Smith, 2010; 2004; Yancy et al., 2008; Zhao & Kuh,) and participation (Hotchkiss et al., 2006; Rocconi, 2010; Stefanou & Salisbury-Glennon, 2002; Tinto & Goodsell, 1993). Researchers have found that participating in a learning community was positively related to faculty-student interactions (Chang, 2005; Guiffrida, 2005;

Kim & Sax, 2009; Rugutt & Chemosit, 2009; Schreiner et al., 2011). Researchers have also found that students had a positive experience and perceived their learning community as being beneficial to their success (Barbatis, 2010; Crissman, 2001; Hurtado et al., 1991; Jehangir, 2009; Maher, 2005; Tinto, 1997). Classroom experiences with diversity that encouraged students to explore issues of race and to interact with diverse members within the institution are essential to positive educational outcomes (Antonio, et al., 2004; Chang et al., 2004; Park, 2009). The experiences of first-generation students reinforce the importance of campus climate (Rankin & Reason, 2005; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003; Terenzini et al., 1997) and transition to college (Bolle et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2007; Muldoon & Macdonald, 2009).

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of first-generation students' regarding their experiences in a FLC. FLCs are designed to improve students' ability to learn and to create a safe place to learn within a classroom (Kuh, 2008). Participating in FLCs eases first-generation students' transitions into college by helping them build their identities as college students and find their voices in the learning environment (Jehangir, 2009). A basic interpretive qualitative research study was conducted to provide students with a means to make meaning of their academic and learning experiences in college.

This chapter provides an overview of qualitative research and a description of this study's design. An overview of the research questions that guided this study is included, along with a description of the sample and site-selection criteria. Documentation that was collected includes interviews, documents, and college data. A description of the data analysis and perceived limitations of this study follow. A section on trustworthiness highlights the strategies used to support accurate reporting of participants' responses. An outline of the themes that emerged from the data analysis is provided. In the final section, I discuss my bias and conclude with a summary statement about the chapter.

I investigated how first-generation students describe their experiences when participating in a FLC. For the purpose of this study, the following questions were addressed:

1. What perceptions do first-generation students have of their experiences in a FLC?
2. According to participants, how has participating in a FLC led to their success?

3. According to participants, what aspects of a FLC have helped them become integrated into the college environment?

### Research Design

The methodology selected for this study was a basic interpretive qualitative design. Merriam and Associates (2002) described that applied fields of practice such as education, administration, and counseling use an interpretive study approach, and because all qualitative research is interpretive, including the word *interpretive* is not necessary (p. 22). Basic qualitative studies allow a researcher to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Merriam and Associates (2002) suggested that all qualitative research is about how meaning is constructed and how people make sense of their lives and their worlds. Qualitative research involves a “systemic empirical strategy for answering questions about people in a particular social context and provides a means for describing and attempting to understand the observed regularities in what people do, or in what they report as their experiences” (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2007, p. 96). According to Creswell (2009), “qualitative researchers try to develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study that involves reporting multiple perspectives, identifying many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges” (p. 186). Qualitative methods can reveal aspects of student learning and developments that enable institutions to be more effective and efficient when understanding students’ experiences (Harper, 2007).

Students’ experiences are far too rich and instructive to overlook (Harper, 2007). While researching first-generation students’ perceptions in a FLC for this study, a qualitative method captured the participants’ experiences. The area of interest being studied was from the

participants' perspective and not mine. This research study was conducted because of my interest in examining first-generation students' perceptions of their experiences in a FLC of the college campus, and of the institution's impact on their experiences. As a conceptual framework I used sense of belonging to help focus and shape the research process. This is significant to this study because of data indicating that 40% of first-generation students tend to graduate within 6 years, and 25% of these students leave college after their first year (Education Advisory Board, 2016). Sense of belonging shows that students are connected and committed to the institution, and there is a greater level of interaction when students feel they belong (Strayhorn, 2012).

#### Research Site

To select a site for this study I contacted by phone and email various Midwest higher education institutions that host FLCs. Only two schools responded to my inquiry. Both institutions were residential colleges in the Midwest with a large population of commuter students. At the time of this study, both institutions' undergraduate populations ranged from 3,500-6,000 full-time and part-time undergraduate students. Students' race/ethnicity reported at these colleges ranged from 40%-60% Whites/Caucasian, 15-20% Hispanic/Latino, 5%-10% Black or African Americans, 1%-2% Asian-Pacific Island, and 2%-5% international. The average student-to-faculty ratio was 15:1. Both institutions were situated 30-50 miles from a large metropolitan area. Both institutions' athletic departments were members of the National College Athletic Association (NCAA), and both schools were accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and were members of the North Central Association.

One school was known to be a large regional public higher education institution in its state, with two campuses. It host bachelor's, master's, and practice doctorate academic programs. Learning communities were created at this school to increase retention rates and improve student



success and degree persistence. The school focused on learning communities for incoming freshman who had not been accepted into their intended major or had been categorized as undecided (i.e., has not decided a major). Each learning community enrolled incoming freshmen students in FYE course. The FYE course was an interdisciplinary course created by professors from different departments with the intent to introduce students to different academic fields in liberal arts, sciences, mathematics, engineering, and technology. In addition, FYE course provided students with the skills for college success and introduced students to resources on campus and various parts of college. Students who were enrolled in the learning community completed the FYE course with knowledge in three areas: interdisciplinary study through big questions, critical thinking, and a foundation and skills for lifelong learning.

The second school aspired to be a thought leader in Catholic higher education. It had three campuses, learning centers, and international programs that collectively offered undergraduate and graduate programs. Learning communities were created at this school to enable students to work together in groups and problem solve more effectively. The school's goals for learning communities were to enhance learning, heighten student engagement, and cause greater student success both academically and personally. Students enrolled in learning communities at the school had increased contact and interaction with faculty members inside and outside of the classroom, enriched educational experiences and academic success during and after college. At this higher education institution, several thematic learning communities existed; however, the learning community that generated participants for this study was designed to address the academic and social needs of first-generation freshman who had been identified as at-risk students and deficient in writing skills. The students in this learning community received

free textbooks, participated in a pre-class orientation program, received intensive writing skills tutoring, worked with a mentor, and participated in off-campus learning experiences.

### Participants

I used purposive sampling to focus on the specific characteristics of the population being studied and to help answer the research questions. This sampling format was based on contacting the program director to identify students who had participated in a FLC offered at either school. In addition, a technique of purposive sampling known as snowballing was used to attract additional participants who met the sample criteria. This sampling technique is based on asking several students who they think should be talked to as potential participants and then asking those key students to participate in a study. Using these students' names and participants recruited by a flyer, I was able to ask for referrals and reach additional students.

The criteria for the participants were: (a) those enrolled in a learning community during their first year, (b) those who continued enrollment in the school into their second year, (c) those who confirmed they were first-generation students (i.e., parents had not earned a college degree), and (d) those who confirmed they were at least 18 years old at the time of this study. These inclusive criteria did not exclude students based on their race, ethnicity, religion, or military or employment status. The rationale for using such a broad criteria was to create more inclusion and thereby encourage more first-generation students to participate in this study.

I purposely selected second-year and/or after students who had participated in and successfully completed a year to close the gaps between this study and prior research on the experiences of first-generation students. Existing literature suggests that first-generation students entering college for the first time often have challenges such as negotiating their transition into college and/or adjusting to the campus environment (Clark, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004). In

addition, students' experiences may reflect aspects of their perceptions arising from their membership in various socially constructed categories and environmental influences such as race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, campus climate, diversity, prejudice, and discrimination (Antonio et al., 2004; Cabrera et al., 1999; Chang et al., 2004; Clark, 2005; Hurtado et al., 1991; Knudsen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003; Terenzini, et al., 2001). Students purposely selected for this study gave an account of their experiences from their freshman year.

This study was approved by the Northern Illinois University Institutional Review Board. I also sought approval to conduct this research study from both site universities' Institutional Review Boards. The appropriate forms were filed, and approval letters were received.

A consent form (Appendix A), an introductory letter to the director (Appendix B), and a recruitment flyer (Appendix C) were sent to the schools. The use of an electronic format and hardcopies sent to students by the program administrator enabled for direct contact with students. The flyer described this study and provided my contact information. Students who reached out via email or phone were responded to immediately by me. The purpose of contacting students was to answer any questions students might have about this study and schedule an appointment for a screening interview. Students who responded to the flyer had the opportunity to email or call and talk directly to me to have any questions about the project answered. This interaction helped potential participants build a level of rapport and trust with me. Additional recruitment at the first school took place over 2 days, but I was unsuccessful in increasing the participant pool. I had a better success rate with the second school because emails were sent to students who had been enrolled in a FLC. At both schools, the snowballing method for referrals increased the participants because I asked students if they knew someone who also participated in a FLC.

Thirteen participants from both institutions were included in this study. Each participant provided his or her demographic information during their individual interviews. This information included each participant's ethnicity, age, gender identity, first-generation status, college major, grade level, and the year he or she participated in the learning community. This information provided a demographic overview of the participants.

Participants were all first-generation students who ranged from 19 years old to 51 years old. Participants self-identified as four African American males, four Caucasian females, two Hispanic males, one African male, one Hispanic female, and one African American female. All had completed one or more years of college seeking a bachelor's degree in their intended major at the time of this study. Their college major varied. The participants' major field of study ranged from education (3), liberal arts (3), business (2), science (2), health studies (1), nursing (1), and technology (1). Participants' enrollment in the learning community extended from Fall 2012 to Spring 2016; in which they all had completed their first year of college.

#### Data Collection

Data were collected using individual interviews. Interviews are a way for a respondent to express his or her emotions and thoughts about his or her experiences and allow an interviewer to gain a better understanding of a situation (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Semi-structured interviews were used for this study. Galletta (2013) stated "semi-structured interviews provide a repertoire of possibilities; it [sic] is sufficiently structured to address specific topics related to the phenomenon of study while leaving space for participants to offer new meanings to the study of focus" (p. 24). Regarding semi-structured interviews, according to Seidman (1991), interviewers "arrive with preset questions to which they want answers or about which they want to gather data" (p. 69). I developed a set of open-ended questions as an interview guide (Appendix D).

Data collection occurred from June 2015 to May 2017 and consisted of 90 minutes of audio-taped interviews per participant. A digital recorder was used for all individual interviews, and hand-written field notes were recorded during and after each interview. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), “field notes – the written account of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study” (p. 119). Immediately following each interview, field notes and transcripts of the interview were typed and saved.

I spent time recruiting and meeting with potential participants on campus to build trust and rapport. Additional time was spent explaining this study and its consent form and emailing students the interview transcripts to seek their input and/or changes. To create a welcoming space and maximize efficiency of interview appointments, I would arrive 30 minutes before each individual interview. All of the individual interviews were conducted on campus in a quiet and closed-off area with an entrance door.

The dialogue between the participant and me began with me introducing myself and the goals of the project. I began each interview with background information about myself, my interest in this topic, and how much I appreciated his or her participation in this study. The semi-structured interviews provided an in-depth view of the students’ perceptions about their experiences in a FLC by providing participants the opportunity to describe their experiences in detail.

Open-ended questions were asked of each participant: for example, What do you remember about the first day and what were the feelings you had while enrolled in the learning community? In what ways do you feel the learning community has supported you as a student? What are the benefits of the learning community? Such questions were asked in order to learn the

students' perceptions of their learning community experience and whether they felt successful, challenged, supported, or engaged within their learning community and the core class associated with it. Participants' stories were essential in developing a clear picture of how the participants were willing to discuss their experiences. At the end of each interview, participants were given the opportunity to reveal 10-15 minutes of additional experiences that were not previously covered. Providing the additional time for the participants to tell their stories honored the importance of individuals' voices and experiences (Knaus, 2009).

### Data Analysis

I began the data analysis after all interviews had been completed by organizing the material that had been collected through the interviews. I added the pseudonyms of the participants and kept a record about the dates, times, places, and from whom information were obtained. I transcribed field notes and all audio recordings using Microsoft Word by carefully listening and re-listening to each interview. I formatted each page to have large enough space on the right side of the document for coding. Afterwards I uploaded the transcripts into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis and research software program, was used to store and organize the data.

After printing the transcripts, I browsed through all the interviews to make comments or notes to become familiar with the data. The first cycle coding method used was Initial Coding which is referred to open coding (Saldaña, 2016). Open coding utilizes a brainstorming technique to open up the data to all potentials and possibilities contained within them (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). I began to re-read the transcripts line-by-line, then manually code relevant words and/or phrases in each sentence. Saldaña (2016) recommend that for first-time or small-scale studies, code on hard-copy printouts first, not via computer monitor, will give you more control over and ownership of the work. The second cycle coding method used was Axial

Coding, which extends the analytic work for Initial Coding (Saldaña, 2016). According to Saldaña 2016, “the primary goal during second cycle coding is to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from your array of first cycle codes” (p. 234). Before generating categories, I recoded the data because few of my codes were overlapping and very similar to the initial codes.

### Themeing the Data

Saldaña (2016) suggests that a theme is an outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection. Themeing the Data requires comparable reflection on participant meanings and outcomes. My approach to themeing the data was generating theoretical constructs. Theoretical constructs is a way of clustering sets of related themes and labeling each cluster with a thematic category of sorts (Saldaña, 2016). The four themes are: (a) Writing Intensively is Reflective and Impactful; (b) Academic Support is Beneficial, Utilizing Resources, and Engaging; (c) Making Connections is Relational and Transitioning; (d) Participating is Motivation, Awareness, and Structure.

- A. Writing Intensively is reflective and impactful. It is going deeper into the work and, critically thinking, interpreting information, getting the best from the task, and gaining confidence to write college papers.
- B. Academic Support is beneficial, utilizing resources, and engaging. It means having success, receiving help from tutoring, establishing a relationship with the academic advisor, interacting with faculty, and accessible to resources on campus.
- C. Making Connections is relational and transitioning. It means sticking together, connecting and bonding with students, having a sense of community, adjusting to college,

surviving college, and gaining new experiences when participating in a learning community.

- D. Participating is motivation, awareness, and structure. It is investing in self, being involved on campus, encouraging others, being well-rounded, understanding diversity, volunteering, acquiring new skills, having small classes, and group participation through collaborative efforts.

### Trustworthiness and Consistency

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described four general types of trustworthiness in qualitative research: creditability, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. According to Thomas (2006), “performing data analyses include conducting peer debriefings and stakeholders [sic] as part of establishing credibility and conducting a research audit (comparing data with the research findings and interpretations) for dependability” (p. 243). For this study, quotes from the interviews provide first-person voices to add to the trustworthiness of the data. I confirmed that the field notes were consistent with the audio recording of the interviews, which is important because small details and comments from the written notes about the interviews could be missed.

A common reliability strategy in qualitative research is the use of audit trail. I started to document and outline the process from the start of the research project to the reporting of the findings. All data collection and changes were included in the audit trail I developed to describe in detail how the data were collected.

To ensure validity of this study, member checking was performed throughout the course of this study. Merriam and Associates (2002) suggested that internal validity, a form of member checking, asks the question, how congruent are one’s findings with reality? In qualitative research, the understanding of reality is really the researcher’s interpretation of participants’



interpretations or understandings of the phenomenon of interest (Merriam & Associates, 2002). This is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on (Maxwell, 2005). Member checking invites participants to confirm a researcher's findings. A participant can correct a researcher's representations of his or her world (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Thomas (2006) suggested that at the completion of interviewing, data can be summarized, and respondents are allowed to immediately correct errors of fact or challenge interpretations. And during subsequent interviews, respondents can be asked to verify interpretations and data gathered in earlier interviews.

I completed member checks by asking for feedback from participants; asked them to review the accuracy of their words in the transcribed interviews and the preliminary emerging themes and the written analyses. In addition, during and after the interview, so I asked participants to clarify points of fact that were not apparent through participants' interpretation of an event, activity, or occurrence. This is another strategy to ensure internal validity and consistency of data collection trustworthiness. I collected participants' email addresses for sending transcripts to them, which served as a member check on the accurate interpretation of what was discussed. This feedback gave the participants an opportunity to tell me whether if the analysis accurately portrayed the information shared in their interviews with me. I emailed the transcripts to the participants, asking each participant to review his or her transcript and reply within 10 days if changes were desired. I informed the participants that a reply was only necessary if changes were to be made. No reply would signify a participant's acceptance of the transcribed interviews. I received no edits or requests for new information to be added to the interviews from participants.

### Challenges of Research

At the start of this project, various schools that hosted FLCs were contacted via phone and email including additional follow-ups. Only two higher education institutions responded to my inquiries. Thereafter, there were delays with the sample selection and fieldwork at one of the schools. Its Institutional Review Board (IRB) did not respond in a timely manner, thus delaying the beginning of the process. I was able to move forward after the IRB approval and notification to the site director through my continuous follow-up.

At one school, the program director invited me to an end-of-the year reception that allowed me to meet and greet various students who had enrolled in a FLC. This resulted in student inquiries, but none fit my study criteria. Afterwards, a number of emails were sent by the sponsoring department to various students who had enrolled in the learning community, but only three students who fit my criteria agreed to participate in this study.

### Researcher's Bias

I have characteristics similar to my population of interest. My educational experiences are those of a first-generation and low-income student. I am an African American female currently enrolled in a doctoral program in the Midwest. I received a high school diploma and a bachelor's and master's degrees. Currently, I am an academic advisor at a higher education institution that works with diverse student populations. Many of my students are both traditional and non-traditional students seeking an undergraduate degree in different disciplines. I have taught and facilitated face-to-face and online courses to undergraduate students seeking a bachelor's degree. Most of my professional experiences have been with adult learners either returning to college or entering college for the first time. Within the last past several years I began working closely with first-year, fulltime students. My experiences with entering college

freshmen are that students are eager and excited about their new environment. On the other hand, many incoming freshmen are overwhelmed and confused about the college expectations. Often I am encouraging students to succeed, helping them understand the college dynamics, and motivating them through their first-year transition. My attitude as a higher education professional is that I have come to value all educational systems that promote equitable and democratic environments for students. My educational philosophy expresses a commitment to engage students in the learning process through teaching and scholarship.

It has been over 20 years since I was a freshman matriculating into college. FLCs and/or FYE programs did not exist at the institution I attended. I realized that I had some common educational experiences that participants expressed during their interview. Not only did I share similar experiences of the participants when I was a freshman in college, but as a higher education professional I was able to identify commonalities like emotions, feeling, and issues participants discussed in their interview. Although, I could identify these commonalities I stayed unbiased no matter what I heard or thought. I heard some interesting and surprising responses; however, I remained unbiased and did not offer an opinion or advice to participants. I avoided bringing my own or other researcher's philosophies mentioned in the literature into this study.

### Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlines my choices about what information to gather and which ways to analyze the information related to this study. I selected a basic interpretive qualitative design. Using a basic interpretive qualitative study allowed me to uncover and interpret students' experiences. Harper (2007) stated that each student deserves to have his or her story told, and every student's experience can inform institutional action in important ways.

Procedures used for participant selection, the site information, data collection, and data analysis allowed participants to describe their experiences and perceptions in a learning community. Data collection was through the use of individual interviews. I built a rapport with the participants in order to obtain honest and open responses. During each individual interview, I summarized the information, and then reviewed the material with the participant to determine its accuracy. I recorded and wrote accurately, sought feedback, and reported fully the participant's account of his experiences. To ensure validity of this study, member checking was performed throughout the course of this study. Participants signed the consent form in two places, indicating the willingness to participate in this study and agreeing to be audio taped. The consent form indicated that all documents would be kept secured and confidential for 3 years.

## CHAPTER 4

### PROGRAM AND PARTICIPANTS OVERVIEW

This chapter provides an overview of both FLC programs and a narrative profile of the 13 participants from this study. The narrative profiles are the participant's self-reported characteristics: age, identity, academic classification, program of study, cohort term, and campus involvement.

#### The Trailblazers

The Trailblazers learning community is designed to address the academic and social needs of first-generation freshmen, who have been identified as at-risk students who are also deficient in writing. The Trailblazers learning community is a one-semester program with an intensive writing curriculum and enriched off-campus learning experiences for students. Students who complete the admissions application are accepted into the learning community and agree to take two courses for one semester. The courses, general education and writing, count towards graduation. Support from the program provides students with tutoring, a mentor to assist with college preparedness and academic success, and off-campus learning experiences such as site visits to local museums, theatres, community centers, and businesses.

Faculty from liberal arts created the two linked courses for the learning community. According to a faculty member who conducted an assessment, "the program was highly successful, and there was a 70% retention rate of these students from the freshman to the sophomore year, much better than the typical 50% retention rate for these students." As

suggested by Kuh (2008), two known benefits of a learning community are increased student retention rates and higher GPAs.

### Participants

Kevin, 21 years old African American male, first-generation student. At the time of this study, Kevin was classified as a junior majoring in technology. He participated in the Trailblazers FLC Fall 2012. Kevin was involved on campus by participating in study abroad and internship opportunities. Kevin enrolled in the university because his brother attended the college. Kevin shared that the college was one of his top choices because he wanted to be with his brother. He felt the FLC was intentionally small to make everyone comfortable. Kevin felt that the FLC helped him approach his assignments differently, “not much as a chore but an awesome learning experience.”

Lenny, 21 years old African American male, first-generation student. At the time of this study, Lenny was classified as a junior majoring in health studies. He participated in the Trailblazers FLC Fall 2012. Lenny was involved on campus by participating in the university’s athletic program. He stated that his interest in the college was because it was small, fit his personality, and located in a quiet area. He shared, “It felt like the right fit for me, so I decided to come here.” Lenny felt the FLC was to help students navigate college and stay on track. He expressed that the most helpful thing was the class size. “When you discuss important things in a small group you have a greater chance being understood... one of the main things, was to get through to us, is that college is all about effort and hard work; that is what I gained from it.”

Peter, 21 years old African male, first-generation student. At the time of this study, Peter was classified as a sophomore majoring in science. He participated in the Trailblazers FLC Fall 2013. Peter discussed how the FLC was helpful with his transitioning into college because

English is his second language. He shared that he had to figure it out on his own, in which the FLC supported his growth. He expressed, “I realized it was a small group of people where I can talk to. As I got use to everyone I got comfortable with the teachers and everyone else.”

### The Links

The Links learning community is a cohort of students enrolled in a set of core classes designated for their intended major. Students are assigned to the learning community based on academic major, high school grades, and placement test scores. Most students within the community are enrolled in three courses together: a freshman seminar, English, and communications.

The FYE course, required for incoming freshman at the school is designed to assist and guide new students in maximizing their potential for success. The FYE course helps students understand how to prepare for academic advisement sessions, degree mapping and schedule building, major exploration, and resumé development for college success. In addition, students learn to identify campus departments and resources that are helpful for college success and to gain knowledge through experiential learning that can take place inside and outside the classroom.

Within the FYE course, there is one peer mentor assigned to the entire class. The peer mentor serves as a student supporter in an advisory capacity to the students. The peer-mentor program at this school was established to assist first-year students with their academic success. The peer mentors are knowledgeable guides and role models for student success. They help students in the course successfully transition into the school. The peer mentor attends the freshman seminar classes. They record attendance and arrange student-led activities both inside

and outside the classroom: for example, a scavenger hunt, a civic engagement or volunteer program, and the school's common-read projects such as visiting elementary schools to donate books, collecting toiletries for homeless shelters, and/or contributing to food drives.

The Links learning community occurs for one semester and enrolls incoming freshmen during either Fall or Spring academic term. Each student is registered in the learning community with students who share a common academic interest on a degree path toward graduation. Congruent with the goals of starting the learning community at the school, the university's freshman-to-sophomore-year retention rate had increased to 73.5% from 68.8%. It is concluded that retention rate is an important factor in graduation rates for students enrolled in a learning community (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tinknell, 2016). In addition, Links learning community students earn a grade of B+ or above after completing the freshman seminar course have the opportunity to seek student employment as a peer mentor the following academic year.

### Participants

Anabelle, 19 years old Hispanic female, first-generation student. At the time of this study, Anabelle was classified as a sophomore majoring in nursing. Anabelle participated in the Links FLC Fall 2015. Anabelle was involved on campus through the FYE peer mentor program. She stated that her interest in the college was because "it is a local university with a great background, affordable, and the staff is friendly and courteous." Anabelle expressed that she evolved as a college student due to the FLC. She stated, "Out of the learning community I was able to gain new experiences. I was able to step out of my comfort zone and try new things."

Jane, 51 years old White female, first-generation student. At the time of this study, Jane was classified as a sophomore majoring in education. Jane participated in the Links FLC Fall 2015. Jane was involved on campus through the FYE peer mentor program and the Social Justice



Club at the college. Jane shared that the most valuable experience in the FLC was being connected to the cohort, instructors, and advisors. I felt like rather you were 20, 40, 60 you must take the class, you are all in the same boat. You are all in it together; you have to help each other out and work as a team.”

Jimmy, 19 years old African American male, first-generation student. At the time of this study, Jimmy was classified as a sophomore majoring in liberal arts. Jimmy participated in the Links FLC Fall 2015. Jimmy was involved on campus with the Black Student Union (BSU), he became a Residence Hall Assistant (RA), and an elected official within student government. Jimmy was fond of the FYE course and learned the value from being involved on campus. He stated, “I learned more about myself, the major I was intending to do, and about the college in general.”

Lemont, 20 years old African American male, first-generation student. At the time of this study, Lemont was classified as a sophomore majoring in business. Lemont participated in the Links FLC Fall 2014. Lemont was involved on campus with the Black Student Union (BSU) and Minority Male Initiative (MMI). Lemont had a rewarding experience with the FLC. He expressed, “I loved it, and it was comfortable.” He shared that it was the various personalities in the FYE course which made the class interesting. “It was really interesting knowing my peers, spending the next four years with them and it really changed my view about life because of everybody’s culture, where they come from, and their views on life.”

Lynn, 40 years old White female, first-generation student. At the time of this study, Lynn was classified as a sophomore majoring in liberal arts. Lynn participated in the Links FLC Spring 2015. Lynn was involved on campus as a FYE peer mentor and a member of the National Society of Leadership and Success. Lynn was attracted to this institution because of the location

and the college's reputation. She expressed that she found value in the FYE course after her enrollment. She stated, "Initially I was irritated about having to take this class, but I later realized how valuable the FYE course was to my journey as a student."

Mary, 21 years old White female, first-generation student. At the time of this study, Mary was classified as a senior majoring in business. Mary participated in the Links FLC Fall 2013. Mary was involved on campus as a FYE peer mentor, student athlete, and an elected official in the business club. Mary shared that the FYE taught her various skills to grow as a student. She learned that it was important to get involved; therefore, she joined one of the athletic teams at the college. She expressed, "I joined cross-country and this was the best decision I made in college. It has allowed me to achieve more than I imagined and succeed all around in my college career."

Michael, 21 years old Hispanic male, first-generation student. At the time of this study, Michael was classified as a sophomore majoring in education. Michael participated in the Links FLC Fall 2014. Michael was involved on campus as a FYE peer mentor. Michael discussed the relevance of being in college and what it meant to be the first in his family to attend college. He discussed that he was first to graduate from high school, then will be the first to graduate from college. Michael stated, "These accomplishments are not only for me but for my family's hard work for migrating into this country from Mexico... and a better future to honor their endeavoring efforts."

Paige, 19 years old African American female, first-generation student. At the time of this study, Paige was classified as a sophomore majoring in liberal arts. Paige participated in the Links FLC Fall 2015. Paige was involved on campus as a FYE peer mentor. Paige expressed that the FLC was like family. She felt that the FLC was supportive because she was a first-generation student. In addition, she discussed how the instructor of the FYE was available for them at any

time. She stated, “I can always go to him (the instructor) and talk to him, it doesn’t have to be about academics or his class, anything, any given timeframe, or any class.”

Taylor, 21 years old Hispanic male, first-generation student. At the time of this study, Taylor was classified as a junior majoring in education. Taylor participated in the Links FLC Fall 2013. Taylor was involved on campus as a FYE peer mentor. Taylor did not feel college was difficult. He suggested that college was about hard work and effort. Taylor shared that he liked his FYE instructor because he would entertain the students with stories. Taylor thought the FYE course helped him “how to do college.”

Terri, 20 years old White female, first-generation student. At the time of this study, Teri was classified as a sophomore majoring in science. Terri participated in the Links FLC Spring 2016. Terri was involved on campus as a FYE peer mentor. Terri felt the institution was affordable and close to home. Terri expressed that the FYE course supported students and gave them a sense of community. She stated, “This class is about community for new students, meet some people you stay friends with for the rest of your college career.”

### Chapter Summary

This chapter provides a snapshot of both FLC programs and participant’s narrative profile. During participant’s individual interviews, demographic information and college status was provided for this study. Highlights from participant’s interviews were captured to describe their perception and experiences in the FLC.

## CHAPTER 5

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter focuses on the participants' personal stories as they relate to the themes. The participants identified two programs that had a positive impact on their experiences and perceptions while enrolled in a FLC.

#### Themes

The four themes are: (a) Writing Intensively is Reflective and Impactful; (b) Academic Support is Beneficial, Utilizing Resources, and Engaging; (c) Making Connections is Relational and Transitioning; (d) Participating is Motivation, Awareness, and Structure.

#### Writing Intensively is Reflective and Impactful

Throughout the interviews, participants discussed the goals of their courses linked to the learning community. Members of the Trailblazers group participated in an intensive writing course that allowed them to critically reflect on inside and outside classroom activities.

Participants described their experiences as “being reflective,” “gaining confidence,” and “critically thinking.” Participants said that faculty stressed the importance of critical thinking when writing papers and considering other world views when engaging in learning activities.

Kevin shared that this was his first time writing critically:

I never thought about writing papers critically and why we had to write them. It was my first time writing in college. Writing in a college is really critical. Like everyone had their own thoughts, and they analyze things differently. The fact that we wrote so much made me feel comfortable about writing and thinking critically. There are a lot of boundaries that people don't like going past or uncomfortable with when they are writing and what they are writing about. This was one of the things I felt like increased, the skill set that I learned in the learning community.

Before arriving to college, Kevin did not know how to write a college-level paper. He discussed the importance of the course allowing him to critically reflect about topics and content that interested him. It was the writing course within the FLC that helped Kevin become comfortable with writing. Also, Kevin discussed how the writing course helped him during his summer internship:

Writing was a big impact for me. This summer I had an IT internship. One of my projects was to create a white paper on PC monitor standards. When I was creating a white paper I felt like school, like people didn't know all the writing techniques. I wrote the white paper by myself. It was for a Fortune 50 company. It was one of the biggest impacts that the learning community had on me today. I feel confident because I felt writing didn't relate to me much because my major is computer science. If you can't communicate your idea, then it is not going to get out there. If I make a creation, I can communicate through writing so people can understand it, if not, then it is not going to get out there right.

Consistent with Gabelnick et al. (1990) that learning communities curricular structure provides for students to have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning. Kevin felt strongly about the course preparing him for real-world experiences such as an internship. Kevin felt he learned a lot about writing where he connected his classroom experiences to tasks relevant to his professional experiences.

Peter explained how the writing course linked to the learning community helped him with reading and writing:

I am from Togo, Africa. I went to high school for 2 years in the United States. Most of the classes I took in high school were ESL classes. When I got here, there were no ESL classes, so I had to figure out the language myself. The learning community definitely helped me a lot. I learned to write and read, get the best out the reading, and get help when I need it. When I take other classes, it is not required, but I go to tutoring so I can get help and get the grade I want. Anything about writing or written tests, now I can actually read better and write better. I learned to be well-rounded with people. I think the program is perfect.

Peter further discussed writing techniques the instructor provided the students. He said,

The teacher made it like you really have to go into the task to get the best from the task. I remember you write papers, “gut to task,” to write about something really thoughtful about the task. I really like that, so I will always remember that. I will never forget that because when I have a paper I remember it gave me more understanding with the task in front of me.

Learning to write intensively in academia is important because learning outcomes in academia are built upon students mastering the material. Peter expounded on how the course helped him develop the necessary writing skills to succeed in college. He discussed that the faculty member in the FLC supported him as an English as second language (ESL) student. At his college ESL classes were not available like in high school, so he worked harder to acquire good writing skills.

Lenny explained that writing intensively was impactful because his assignment were a part of the field trip experiences.

My experiences were all discussions and critical thinking from the reflection papers. You reflect on what you seen or experienced, try to be detailed as possible about the different cultures you are learning about if I like it or didn't like it...why I liked it or didn't...going deeper into academic work was a big part of my experiences. They taught us how to effectively discuss this stuff, not to be ignorant to certain things, how to interpret information and listen to others, give feedback and criticism.

Not only did the writing course help Lenny become a better writer, he learned how to write and critically discuss with classmates his emotions about his experiences from the field trips. He expressed how he was open-minded to different cultures and being able to communicate effectively in the learning environment. Lenny experiences in the FLC are relevant to high-impact practices that encourage students to adopt deep approaches to learning (Kuh, 2008).

Other participants talked about writing papers by connecting personal goals to professional goals and developing how to write as a college student. Cicerone (2005) indicated that the goals of FLCs not only improves student success but helps students develop effective learning habits alongside instructors' teaching by exposing students to new teaching techniques

and exploring connections between disciplines. Lemont shared, “One of the most challenging things I had to deal with was writing essays when I was taking the first-year experience course. I had to change the way I wrote essays from high school to college.” On the other hand, Lynn indicated that the FYE course helped her with personal goals by writing extensive papers:

In the classroom, I wrote a lot of papers that forced me to assess my personal goals and thoughts and do some research about how to obtain those goals. I learned how to be a student and plan for life after graduation including making a Plan A, B, and C. I had to research the different activities and resources available to me on campus that were there to help my success as a student.

Jimmy shared that writing papers was done after each social activity in the class:

On certain days, we were given assignments such as creating a resume, creating a paper about community services, and doing discussion boards. We were tasked with creating a resumé, we had a group project based on an article about critical thinking, and we participated in a community service event and also were assigned to write a paper about it.

Lemont, Lynn, and Jimmy had similar experiences. They expressed that writing assignments allowed them to evaluate both their academic and personal goals. Assignments such as selecting the right major and understanding those choices would help them become successful in college. Participants had to reflect on what they learned after completing a task. And, create resumes to develop professional skills after graduating. Such outcomes support the literature that refers to the programming of learning communities being an approach to curriculum design (Gabelnick et al, 1990).

#### Academic Support is Beneficial, Utilizing Resources, and Engaging

Academic support was beneficial to participants in this study. Supported by Zhao & Kuh (2004), students have positive outcomes associated with academic advising and the degree to which their campus support their academic and social needs. Kuh (2017) suggests advisors encourage students to take advantage of the learning and personal opportunities their school

makes available. Participants in this study indicated that academic advising was beneficial because it helped them with academic planning and success during their first year, explore and declare a major, and choose the right courses for degree completion. For example, Peter indicated: “I always get advising; go to the advisor or counselor to get help to stay on top of it. Like pick out classes.” Lenny mentioned: “The advisor will help you pick the right courses.” Jane reflected: “The most valuable, I believe, is the connections aspect, not only to other students but instructors and advisors as well.” Annabelle mentioned: “My advisors have pushed me to continue working hard every day.” Michael shared: “students who continue to be undecided with their academic goals, there are advisors who are knowledgeable and will be able to guide you to the path you want.” Paige stated,

My experience in class was on a broader spectrum than I ever thought before. When you think about the class, all you think about is that it is an easy “A,” but actually it is more than that. From day of one integrated advising, myself now being in my major, has been a real impact. I wanted to go into nursing but the advisors told me a lot of things about going into Nursing, so I really had to think about going into nursing for my passion or because of money. So those questions the advisors gave me to think about what I really want to pursue are because every student needs that push. A lot of students don’t get that push because of the class they are put into. The freshman courses are not only a learning tool but really a way to find out what you really want to do in life.

Consistent with Kuh (2017) that academic advisors play an integral role with student success, Paige described her advising experiences as informative and providing the right tools for her success. Similar to Paige, Lynn explained how advisors helped her select a major:

I was undecided about my major and had no clue how to be a student or how to take advantage of the resources the university offers to aid in the success of students. The outcomes from this class and with advising, I was able to research and do some soul searching and declare my major.

It was the advisor that successfully helped Lynn discover her major and stay on track within the first semester as an incoming freshman.



In college, advisors are students' first contact of person. They are available for students to obtain information, resources, and plan for courses. However, Taylor shared his first impression with the advisors:

Initially, I didn't think advisors were too approachable, but that thought ultimately was the result of me still being in that transitional period from high school to college where I had yet to learn that I paid with money and time and that I actually had the ability to interact with them as professional people.

Taylor was uncertain how to incorporate the advisor's assistance into his plan. He expressed that his transitioning from high school was the reason why he did not think the advisor was approachable. On the other hand, Jimmy discussed receiving help from advising, and how the class activities and assignments required participants to seek assistance from their advisor:

I did get help from advising as a requirement for the class, but this requirement was beneficial in the long run. I didn't go to tutoring for this specifically, but my teacher did tell us to take advantage of the tutoring center. In my class, we were required to pick our top three majors as back-up plans. I had met with several advisors due to this and instructors as well. Overall, making this a requirement wasn't a bad idea. It required us to interact with the staff of our respective major. It will help students in the long run.

Jimmy experience with advising was because the FLC required students to meet with an academic advisor. Jimmy shared in his interview that academic advising required the cohort to plan and discuss major objectives with their academic advisor. Having academic advising incorporated into the FLC aligns with the intention of learning communities are structured to increase retention and graduation rates (Kuh, 2008; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Supported by the literature, advisors are especially important because they are among the first people new students encounter and should be seen regularly during students' first year. Participants in this study were successful because the academic advisors played an integral role in promoting success and assisting students in ways that encourage them to engage in the right kinds of activities inside and outside the classroom (Kuh, 2008).

Moust and Schmidt (1994) implied that offering academic support in the form of peer tutoring may provide the environment for students to play a more active, engaged role and assume greater responsibility for their learning and maybe an effective means of promoting academic success at the postsecondary level. The primary role of tutors is to facilitate the learning process by helping students to comprehend and apply information, challenge students' assumptions, probe students' understanding, and evaluate student progress (Moust & Schmidt). Participants expressed gaining “confidence” and “benefiting” from the help of tutors. For example, Lynn stated, “There are tutors and SIs and study groups/sessions that unite students in their goals and obstacles.” Terri indicated that “there is a free tutoring service that you can utilize if you need any help.” Paige implied that tutoring helped her succeed and earn good grades:

Tutoring was a blessing. When I first walked past the tutoring center, I thought it was for the kids who had Ds, Fs, but actually no, it was the smart kids on the dean’s list. They are not just going there because they are having trouble. They are going to keep their grades going. The tutors are really nice, they are our peers. They can tell you everything going on in the class. The staff is great. It is a welcoming environment.

Michael shared that the tutoring helped with his academic experiences:

My educational experience was facilitated by having the resources to go to the tutoring office for help in my classes. I attended supplemental instruction from a student who had previously taken the course and succeeded, and by visiting the writing center for help on editing my papers for my English courses. Having these resources is what helped me obtain the 4.0 GPA for my first college semester.

Lemont stated how he regrets not going to tutoring and how he tried to figure it out on his own:

The very first person I remember was Dr. E. and his speech: for every class... every credit hour requires you to study for 3 hours. So, the class was 3 credit hours, so you need to spend 9 hours studying. And I remember that still today, although I do not spend that much time studying for any of my classes, I remember he was the first person that prepped me. I was like ok, I’ll take that in. And in my FYE course, they told us, go to tutoring and use the resources. But my ego was like, I am not going to tutoring. I don’t need tutoring; I was trying to figure it out on my own. I graduated in the top 10% of my class. I will be fine. I cried a lot of nights because I didn’t go to tutoring, but now I do. One thing I learned is that you have to be a little more humble, it is okay to ask for help. I

didn't want to. I was a honor roll kid... and asking for tutoring was shunned in high school when you are in AP classes. So I didn't go to tutoring in my freshman year. I struggled with assignments. I figured them out on my own. But it could have been a lot easier if I let my ego go and went to tutoring.

The literature discussed first-generation students lack knowledge about college expectations.

Expressed by Lemont, he shared that he did not utilize tutoring services when he first arrived at college. However, Lemont learned later during his first semester, like other participants that the FLC encouraged student to receive tutoring because it is an integral component to student success.

Kevin Expressed how tutoring was a benefit, and it helped him in other classes:

I did go to tutoring. I usually don't go to tutors on my own. The fact that the program made me was actually a benefit for me, and I appreciate it. I feel much more confident writing. It prepared me for other classes that involve writing. It supported me in a way in which I feel comfortable going to a class, which is writing intensive because I hate writing; like I love math I get A's in math all day. When it comes to writing, I hated it. It was scary that I was a part of a writing-intensive program, and now I am not scared at all. Like when my friends say, "How are you going to write this paper?" Like my stepbrother, he joined a class with me and asked me for help...I would tell him to fix this, I would help you get an A. I feel much more confident writing.

Lenny mentioned that going to tutoring was a part of his grade:

We were assigned a writing tutor that we had to meet, like it was a part of our grade to meet with them. We had writing tutors, we had writing specialists, and we were well acquainted with them through the program. Tutoring, advising, and knowing which one to go to. Every year I am here at the institution improving, that is impressive, and trying to grow rapidly as possible, this helped me realize that this is a good institution and definitely have something for me to take advantage of these opportunities.

Peter shared that going to tutoring was helpful when writing papers. He mentioned that he went to tutoring for other classes outside of the learning community:

Of course, we had to get help writing papers. We had a tutor who we can always go to and ask questions. She would give us critiques. She's a teacher and writing tutor where we made an appointment to get tutoring. When I take other classes, it is not required, but I go there so I can get help and get the grade I want. This is what I got from being in the learning community.

Academic success such as tutoring was relevant to participants success. Tutoring was mandatory for the Trailblazers participants, whereas Link participants were encouraged to receive tutoring. Participants indicated that tutoring was a key factor for obtaining a high GPA in their first semester.

Utilizing resources relates to the school's commitment and willingness to invest resources and provide the incentives and rewards needed to enhance student success (Tinto, 2003). Students in a first-year seminar have positive experiences in their first year in college (Kuh, 2008). Experiences they gain are valuable academic skills that can be used in other courses (Crissman 2001). What students do in college and how they use their school's resources for learning are essential to their success, academic achievement, satisfaction, and persistence (Kuh, 2000). Utilizing resources on campus was found to be useful and necessary to participants. They expressed how the learning community courses engaged students in ways to interact with the academic community by utilizing resources on campus. Annabelle mentioned: "My learning community helped with academic support because they encouraged me to attend tutoring services or meet one-on-one with my instructor. With their support, I was able to take advantage of our school resources." Mary expressed that the learning community "helped me improve and achieve my goals by offering many resources to use, like the writing center, tutoring, peer mentors, library, etc." Jane explained her biggest challenge was technology; however, utilizing the resources on campus helped her overcome these struggles:

What's most valuable, I believe, is the connection aspect, not only with students but instructors and advisors as well. I utilize everything on campus to make sure that I was getting every possible little bit of help and not struggle. After the first semester, I felt like I was a pro, especially in technology because I had never seen Microsoft Word before. My biggest challenge was technology. In class we had to make a PowerPoint presentation, and the class helped me figure out the challenges I faced with technology.

First, starting out, I had no computer experiences. I had a lot of technology challenges. I didn't grow up using technology like my children did; so, coming into college to make a Power Point I had no clue. Using the different resources on campus like the writing center helped me. I didn't know how to write a paper, what to include how to put all together. I had lots of thoughts, but I didn't know how to put it together to make sense. There were a lot of people, I mean a lot of people that helped me.

Jane indicated when she came into college she lacked the basic technological skills that would support her when writing or presenting a paper. However, she was motivated to get help and utilize campus resources to become successful. Jane motivation to seek and utilize resources on campus is supported by the literature by having the support of others and motivated by overcoming obstacles that prevent first-generation students from achieving their accomplishments (Martin, 2009; Petty, 2014).

Additional participants shared their success as a student was because they used the resources offered to them. Lynn stated that the institution wanted students to succeed by using the resources that are available:

My approach to learning changed because this class taught me how to utilize the resources that were available to me. One thing I discovered is that the university gives students every opportunity to succeed, the student just has to take advantage of those resources.

Michael explained that faculty and staff are available to help students and the institution provides free services:

The institution is well aware that some courses may be challenging. To help students succeed, they provide free tutoring for those struggling with a course. Also, students who continue to be undecided with their academic goals, we have advisors who are knowledgeable of the majors offered here, so they will be able to guide you to the path you want. For example, an English course where we write quite a few papers, we can use the library for academic resources such as scholarly articles and journals.

Paige shared how her goals can be supported by the learning community and institution:

I attended a financial aid seminar. I wouldn't have learned about loans if it hadn't been for the learning community. The workshops that were about academic majors, trying to

declare our major helped us decide, do I really want to do this? My goals are key components to where as you are networking with the institution, you're just not here. You are actually surrounded by the institution.

Campus resources utilized by the participants illustrate the desire for them to succeed in college. They were encouraged through the FLC to attend workshops and events on campus not only to connect to the college but to get the help that is needed for college success.

Pike and Kuh's (2005) perception of the campus environment is associated with a variety of general institutional characteristics including size, control, mission, and location. Three participants discussed how location was an important factor and resources when selecting a college to attend. Lynn mentioned the location of the campus as being a factor: "I was initially attracted to this institution and program because of the location and the reputation that is associated with the university's name." Terri identified that a free campus resource was the campus being close to home so she could avoid paying room and board:

The university had been one of my dream colleges and was about a half hour away from my old house, when I moved out of state and lost my residency, then I started looking at the university. It was cheaper than the main campus and is about 20 minutes from my grandparents' house, so I do not have to pay for room and board. You also still get that beautiful university degree. The institution has showed me all of the different free resources that I have to be able to succeed and get my degree. They also have taken time to show me how to manage my time along with other things all in one course.

Lemont expressed that the school was a resource for his major: "This is the only institution that I found where I could major in business entrepreneurship. I couldn't find any place that had this major." Other participants described affordability, programs, and learning materials were important factors to their success. Annabelle described campus resources as being affordable: "I was attracted to this university because it was a local university with a great background. It was affordable, and the staff is friendly and courteous." Kevin felt the learning community provided free resources that benefited the students:

Free books, some of the books you didn't need. All of the books were free. That benefited a lot. Although I learned a lot, I didn't have to pay. Even the field trips were free. Going on an awesome adventure with your classmates and learning stuff outside the class and getting hands-on, like immediately in your face, you learn that right there, it was all free. It is not something that I would see in college a lot. Everything you need was free, that was the huge benefit.

Campus resources are important to student success. Lynn, Terri, and Lemont thought the college programs and location were important resources for their decision to enroll, whereas Annabelle and Kenny expressed affordability of the college and free books in the FLC were resources that were helpful to their success. Participants expressed that the FLC introduced them to the various resources offered on campus that connected them to the college. It was the activities and programs in the FLC that had required them to seek and utilize campus resources for their success.

Engaging refers to the faculty taking a holistic, comprehensive, and even parental role in supporting and advocating for students (Guiffrida, 2005). Participants perceived faculty as being very supportive of their academic endeavors. Expressions about faculty interactions were "supportive," "engaging," and "welcoming." Mary expressed that the "professor was always willing to help and meet with students; this allowed me to ask any additional questions I had and get the help I need." Jane stated: "The professor made you feel connected. Over time you felt connected with others so it was more engaging in the class." Terri indicated: "while in college I've come to notice that the professors love what they teach as well as offer you the help if you show that you need it and try to get it." Taylor shared: the professors' "stories taught me that the relationship we have with the idea of higher education do orient and reflect on our attitudes as people." Terri stated: "The mentor and instructor were both very supportive of my classes, and

when I had trouble they both pushed me to do better.” Lenny expressed how he felt proud and successful with the help of faculty and academic support:

As a college freshman three pages is a lot to a college freshman. Like completing 3-4 page papers and really putting my thoughts on paper where my professors can understand it, and get the paper back with an A or B is pretty much that’s when I felt successful. It was mainly because of the learning community because of the things they provided for us, with the writing tutors, extra time, and extra time with the professors.

Success for Lenny was engaging with faculty. His experiences with professors, mentors and writing tutors in the FLC supported him along the way. Since learning communities emphasize collaborative learning, Lenny reflected on how this type of interaction supported his success.

In Peter’s interview, Peter felt the instructors pushed him to do better and encouraged him to succeed:

The teachers could always ask you questions if they don’t think you are on task. When I have papers, rough drafts, I would always go to the teacher to discuss it. The teachers were like mentors: you can ask questions, you can tell them you want to do things, and see how they can help. They would give you advice. The teacher would help us get connected.

Peter mentioned that English is his second language and because of the FLC he learned how to write college papers. With the intent of creating FLCs that challenges traditional pedagogies, Peter shared that the support of faculty within the learning community helped him to succeed.

Other participants shared how they engaged with faculty. They stated they would approach faculty or faculty would approach them regarding course content. Kevin shared that he approached the professor when he needed it the most:

We were on this philosophy topic where it made me change some of my morals. I approached my assignment differently. Not much as a chore but an awesome learning experience. It made me think about when it came to my school work. I utilize my teachers, emailing them when I don’t understand and when I didn’t want to fail. I took the extra step to learn it.



Kevin learned that developing a relationship with faculty was a learning experience for him.

Annabelle expressed how she grew as a college student because of her interaction with the instructor in the FYE course:

The learning community connected me to faculty both the inside and outside the classroom. They urged students to meet with their instructors because first impressions last. My instructor insisted that we join a club or go to school, which allowed me to grow as a student. Starting this class as a freshman I was unaware of how things were approached in college. The course allowed me to engage with my instructors and gain a new understanding of college.

Like many first-year college students, Annabelle indicated that she was unfamiliar with the college environment. Her experiences with the FYE instructor helped her engage in the learning environment. Michael shared that the instructor of the FYE course was personable with students; he wanted them to feel comfortable:

My FYE course instructor, Mr. Fred, was always motivational and shared his life experiences with the class. He made the class entertaining enough for us to come to class every day. The optimism of my first semester of college gave me a positive vibe to obtain a degree. The instructors make themselves available to help you with your concerns with the class or other registered courses. They aren't counselors; therefore, they can't advise a student what to do, but they will listen and will help if needed. This is useful because sometimes life may decide to come at the wrong time and it is important not to lose track, but it is understandable if you do. Instructors understand this, so they will work around your situation.

Existing literature states that the success of faculty and staff in forming influencing relationships with their students encourages students to follow their example to learn and to persist (Kuh, 2008; Gabelnick, et al., 1990; Tinto, 1997). Michael experiences with the instructor made him feel comfortable his first semester and persist to the following semester.

Like Michael, Paige too enjoyed having Mr. Fred as a FYE instructor. She reflected on how the instructor helped her through the transitioning stages of college:

Mr. Fred helped me by taking a load off my shoulders. Not only with academics but mentally because I cannot talk to my family for they do not know what I am going

through. With Mr. Fred having a degree he knows what students are going through. Not only can he feel our pain, he can also feel that we are trying to accomplish one big goal which is graduating. And I can always go to him and talk to him, it doesn't have to be about academics or his class: it can be any given thing, any given time, or any class. And I feel all instructors should be like that.

The FYE instructor was inspirational to Paige. He had an 'open-door' policy that allowed Paige feel like she belongs in college. The intent of the learning community is to combat feelings such as isolation and being afraid that first-year, first-generation students experience when matriculating to college. Jehangir (2009) suggested that learning communities help first-generation students find their voice in the classroom. Lemont implied that his instructor stressed the importance of communication:

My professor extremely was warm and welcoming she made her doors open for us. To be able to have that open line of communication where she sat down and had lunch with me, which made my freshman year. That was kind of cool but the experience for all of was great. I loved it. It was comfortable. She made the intro stage very easy and relaxing. It wasn't very stressful.

Lemont learned the importance of interacting with faculty. During the interview, Lemont discussed that his FYE instructor taught him how to communicate. Having an open dialogue with his instructor, Lemont felt comfortable his freshman year.

Consistent with Kuh (2008), high-impact practices are positively linked with more frequently interaction among faculty members. Participants expressed that the FLC faculty were supportive of their academic goals. Kevin expressed:

They supported me in a way I feel comfortable going to a class. They offered a lot of help. They had no problems with us talking to them. They had an impact on my life that I never will forget them.

Kevin experienced what FLC faculty intended to do, which is engage students in the learning process so they can connect their learning to their worlds and/or lived experiences (Astin, 1984).

Similar to other FLC participants, Lenny expressed how supportive faculty and staff were when entering college:

We had required meeting times with our professors to go over our papers. We were assigned a writing tutor that we had to meet, like it was a part of our grade to meet with them. We were assigned a mentor that would help with transitioning into college. I keep in contact with my professors I had. They helped me to help them by promoting the learning community.

Lenny experiences with faculty are associated with higher levels of academic effort and academic integration (Tinto, 1997). Lenny was able to get the help he needed to ease his transition into college. Peter indicated that the faculty was instrumental to his learning when completing assignments:

In the learning community you can easily talk to the teachers. The teachers could always ask you questions if they don't think you are on task. We had a tutor that we can always go to and ask questions. The teachers were very helpful; they were really patient and helped us. They definitely supported me academically, they pushed me really hard. I got the value and I'm stuck with it. When I have papers or rough drafts I would always go to the teacher to discuss it. They would help me with it, push me harder, they would say you can do better, with the paragraph...you can do this...you can do that.

The FLC emphasizes participants having higher order thinking skills (Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Therefore, Peter developed a connection with faculty that aided him in his success. Lynn reported that faculty as available for the student in the FYE course, she stated:

The learning community connected me to faculty in several ways. My instructor made sure we could connect with him at any time via phone, email or text as well as in person, both during and outside of class. It was nice and reassuring to know I had a backup if I needed to use him.

Like Lemont, Lynn felt that the lines of communication were opened for students. Participants developed a sense of belonging because the instructor supported their learning and growth as college students. To that end, participants experienced high-level of interaction with faculty within their learning community. FLCs are structured so that both the student and faculty could

engage in the learning process together. Researchers found that learning communities are associated with higher levels of academic effort, academic integration, and active and collaborative learning (Tinto, 1997). Learning communities are positively linked with more frequently interacting with faculty members, engaging in diversity-related activities, and having classes that emphasize higher order thinking skills (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Course-related faculty interaction significantly and positively predicts students' degree aspirations, sense of belonging on campus, gains in critical thinking and communication, improvement in GPA, and overall college satisfaction (Kim & Sax, 2009).

Mentoring was mentioned within participants' interviews. For example, Lenny said, "We were assigned a faculty mentor that would help me with transitioning into college." Peter shared: "The teachers were like mentors, you can ask questions and get help, and they would give you advice." On the other hand, Links mentors are peer mentors that are other college students hired, trained, and assigned to each FYE course. The peer mentors are knowledgeable guides and role models for student success. They help Links students successfully transition into the institution. The peer mentor attends the FYE course at its meeting times. They record attendance and prepare student-led activities both inside and outside class around instruction. Peer mentors in this context were only mentioned in two participant's interviews. Paige reflected about she received help from her peer mentor:

I loved my peer mentor because I would always call him about the learning community, English, and everything else. I feel like if you can do that for your peer then you can do that for anyone on campus and everywhere. Everyone always needs help.

Peers have such an impact on one another (Colvin & Ashman 2010). Paige connected with her peer mentor. The peer mentor assigned to Paige's learning community supported her transition

and assisted her with obtaining resources she needed to succeed as a freshman. Similar to Paige,

Terri stated that having a peer mentor was surprising:

I specifically remember thinking this is my first semester of college and I had to meet a professor. Imagine, to my surprise, there was a peer mentor. I really didn't know who he was. On the first day of class he comes in late and says, "What's up gangsters?" I thought oh my goodness, who does he think he is? Later I learned who he was, and learned what he did. I ended up loving him.

Terri discussed in her interview that she was surprised that there was a faculty member and a peer mentor in her class. The peer mentor was supportive to the students in the learning community. The benefit of the peer mentor was to help Link members navigate college.

#### Making Connections is Relational and Transitioning

This theme refers to the students' perceptions and experiences within a learning community described as "family-like," and some students report they feel at least some responsibility to care for and emotionally support other cohort members (Jehangir, 2009; Maher, 2005). Participants shared that belonging to the learning community and involvement in class helped them develop relationships with other students. Annabelle shared that "opportunities I had as a result of my participation in the learning community is gaining great relationships." Jane indicated that she benefited from connecting with other students: "It was the first class where I made connections with other students, worked on a group project and a presentation, so it helped me learn how to do these things." Kevin indicated: "everyone was talking to each other, everyone talked to me, like we were all friends." Peter felt it was "helpful to talk to teachers and make friends with students." He also said, "We were friendly. We were happy to be there and a nice environment to be." Michael said, "It's a temporary home." Mary stated, "My main

challenge was making friends and getting to know people. I was awkward when I started college so one of my successes was going outside my comfort zone to meet people and make friends.”

The learning community made an impact on student’s development in college. The goals of learning communities foster students’ sense of belonging and create a culture of togetherness.

Lenny explained how everyone got along in the FLC, and the following semester students wanted to continue take classes together:

Lots of people from my learning community were local kids from the city or from other suburbs. I was in a new environment. As we got comfortable with each throughout the semester, then the next semester we didn’t have class together. Even if we were not best friends we would see each other and say “hello, how’s it going?” Even though some people from our section, a few registered together, they wanted to stick together. They reached out to our professors and asked, “what classes are offered and what other classes they teach?” The way it was set-up with the professors was an awesome experience. The students I see around are doing well.

Making a connection is a part of the FLC experience. Lenny and other members of the learning community were comfortable being together but the semester ended, so the learning community ended. Lenny and other cohort members took it upon themselves to register for classes together in order to have that same communal experience again.

Jimmy reflected on his experiences being connected to students in the learning community:

The other students and I connected because of the course material group assignments. We had several other classes together as well. Attending the same classes created a bonding situation between all of us. My class had amazing people in it, and some of the students we are still friends until this day.

Jimmy and his cohort members shared other classes together, which is the intent of the learning community, allowing them to form a sense of attachment with one another. The learning community awarded them the opportunity to learn together and create lasting friendships.

Participants expressed making a connection in the FLC creates a sense of belonging.

Paige implied that belonging to the learning community was a “second home” and students can discuss and share information with each other:

Well, in class it was more like what happens in class stays in class. We were all one big happy family. Mr. Fred was the type of person that made it like this, it was our second home. We would tell each other what class you going to... oh... I can walk with you. Oh, you need help with this subject, and then someone would say... oh... I have the book. We were always willing to help each other. Now to do this day, we still speak. I still talk to the people from my learning community.

In addition, she expressed the camaraderie among students within the FLC:

When someone needed help, we would help each other out. The people you built the relationship with in the learning community would never leave your side, they got your back. You can see that person walking down the hallway; you would say “Hi.” Not only do they know your face but they know who you are and your personality.

Paige’s attitude towards her learning community supports existing literature that learning communities foster relationships within the cohort, they are described as “family-like,” and students emotionally support other cohort members (Maher, 2005).

Collaborative learning is seen as making a connection in FLCs. DuFour and Eaker (2009), suggested that learning communities is to recreate structures to promote a collaborative culture.

Jane shared her connection with other FLC students by offering advice:

I was at ease with other freshmen that were in the same circumstance. I was trying to figure out things. With the class I felt like rather you were 20, 40, 60 you have to take the class, you are all in the same boat. You are all in it together. You have to help each other out to work as a team. For example, when other students say they have to write this paper for science, then complain about it and don’t know what to do; I then would say “I went to the writing center, they were amazing.” just giving other students advice helped. It was like a back and forth thing, we constantly bounced ideas off each other, and I am still Facebook friends with several of the students. It gave me the connection, who knows I might know these people forever because of that connection in that class. We decided to stay on Facebook, we still chat back and forth here and there.

As a first-year, first-generation student Jane felt comfortable learning with other cohort members because she saw them in the same way. Regardless your age, your experiences in the FLC is

similar. Jane utilized resources on campus, so she felt strongly encouraging others to do the same because it worked for her.

High-impact practices is one way to help rectify challenges first-year, first-generation students' encounter (Strayhorn, 2012). Lynn shared that belonging to the FLC helped her overcome struggles she faced as a student:

The learning community helped because it made me realize that I am not alone in my struggles and frustrations which are associated with being a student. Sometimes it's nice to know that others are having the same struggles as you are.

Similar to other participants in this study, Lynn knew she was not alone. Lynn knew she could receive help from other members in the FLC.

Establishing friendships in the learning community is another way students feel connected. Terri expressed the learning community allowed her to establish friendships:

I really enjoyed being in a class with freshman like myself, I made some friends. Some other students and myself are still in contact and getting together to study, most of us are in the same classes now because the learning community classes.

Like Terri, Lemont felt the learning community helped him belong and develop friendships:

It really created a good sense of community. I learned how to deal with people on different bases. And we still keep in contact. We are good friends still today. We learn how to use each other services. If they need anything requiring business, then they call me. Or if I inquire anything like papers, English, I would call them.

Lemont connected with other members in the FLC. Their friendship extends beyond casual communication; he was able to receive academic help from them and vice versa.

Overall, the goals of a learning community are to make a positive difference for students to help first-generation students build their identities as learners and give them a sense of belonging on campus (Brownell & Swaner, 2009). Defined by Strayhorn (2012), sense of belonging in college refers to "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or



sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group or others on campus” (p. 55). Levine and Nidiffer (1996) suggest it is the human contact that makes a difference. Participants in this study, made a connection because of the collaborative nature of FLCs and the support they received from each other.

Transitioning was mentioned in participants’ interviews. Transitioning in this study refers to the academic transitions to college including items such as ease with communicating with instructors outside of class, finding academic help when it was needed, and forming friendships and study groups (Johnson et al., 1997). Learning communities create a sense of belonging for students, allowing them to develop support systems on campus to ease their transition to college. Jane shared that the FLC was supportive of her transition: “I believe the learning community was so helpful to me because I was a little lost coming in to college, not knowing what to expect and it made my transition into college very smooth.” Terri shared similar experiences of first-year students, unaware of the college expectations. Terri stated, “When I started I didn’t know anything about college. I was not involved in anything extra but I did have peer study groups with some friends.” Feelings such as these mentioned by the participants’ addresses the goals of FYE courses.

The FYE course introduced participants to university life (Jamelske, 2008). Lemont explained: “The student is very timid coming straight from high school. To come here is a culture shock for them because they were not prepared for the university lifestyle.” Feelings that Lemont had shared are what first-year students experience when entering college for the first time. Lemont reflected on his growth from high school to college, and that transitioning into college helped him adjust to college life:

Before I got to college I was really shy. I didn't know how to talk to people. I hadn't figure that out, I was socially awkward. Honestly, being in a classroom setting and finding myself along the way has created the way I really wanted to be. In that it wasn't heavily academic base. It was really classes to get you involved on campus and adjust to college life. It allowed me to be myself. Going through high school I had to live by a specific way, I had be something I really wasn't because of my parents. Growing up as a PK (preacher's kid) I couldn't live freely; I had to live by certain standards and rules in life. But coming to college no one really knew that about me so I can really be myself. I had the chance to express myself the way I wanted to; although there were challenges to do so because I wasn't allowed to in high school. So now letting down the wall, unlocking that gate, letting down the barriers and letting people see who really I am, was kind of difficult at first but I really adjusted and it has got a lot easier on campus. It helped me make more friends and put me in a position to meet more people.

Michael expressed how the FYE course “is dedicated to transitioning students from the high school environment to a university environment, students learn about the resources provided to them to succeed in their future courses.” Michael discussed his experiences as a first-generation college student, and the first to graduate from high school:

I am a first-generation minority student. I really didn't know much about school such as scholarships or how to apply for college due to being the oldest in my family that reside in the United States. I was able to make those mistakes and slowly push myself knowing how to take the next step. I would be able to advise my siblings since I didn't have anyone to guide me; they at least would have me. I'm the first to graduate from high school. When I graduated from college I will also be the first to graduate. These accomplishments are not only for me, but also for my family. Hard work for migrating into this country from Mexico for a better future and honor their endeavoring efforts.

Paige shared how class discussions in the FYE course helped the feeling of being alone and afraid:

The conversations in the class really helped me because being first-generation student you really don't know the ropes, where to go, and resources to use. And, me personally I was scared because being a first-generation student I couldn't call my mom...on how you do this or how you do that? Going to class I was scared to the fact that I was wondering if I don't make it. Your family is on your shoulder pressing down thinking if she doesn't make it, so what's going to happen...what are the next steps, and she's the last child. It is like you have all the pressure on you, so you think how you can take the pressure off. I feel like the learning community took that pressure off me. You really don't have to be on your own. The instructor and the peers helped me realized that I am not alone. And actually, they help me decide what I wanted to do, not what my family wanted me to do.

Taylor described transitioning from high school into the college environment for the first time:

I felt disoriented by being around so many people. I do however remember from the instructor and peer mentor guiding me throughout the semester, showing me how to do college, a lot of us grow into adulthood during our first years attending.

Annabelle shared that transitioning into the college environment allowed her to gain new experiences:

Out of the learning community I was able to gain new experiences. I was able to step out of my comfort zone and try new things. It allowed me to approach my fears of college and push them aside. I was no longer afraid of asking for help.

Lenny shared that college was much different from high school:

It's not like being in high school like the teacher not going to coddle you and ask you did you do this or that. They are going to give you the grade you deserve so I had to realize that really quickly that college is much different from high school, it works much differently. After I realized it, I whipped up in shape.

Kevin discussed how he adjusted to the learning community:

I usually go with the flow. I felt really comfortable. When we first got there, we introduced ourselves I realized how so many lives are different but yet similar to mine when it comes to struggling sometimes. If anything, I can go to my mom and say we are not the only ones.

Peter shared how comfortable he became with the teachers and other learning community members as an ESL student:

It was really helpful participating in the learning community because English is my second language, so it was really nice to get help with the transition from my high school to college. And, we didn't have that big of a group so it was really helpful to talk to teacher and make friends with students.

Other participants experienced their college transition differently. Mary implied how transitioning into college was successful:

Transitioning into college for me is that I learned the importance of getting involved as stressed in the FYE course. I joined cross country, and this was the best decision I made in college. It has allowed me to achieve more than I imagined and succeed all around in my college career. I ran my first full season of cross country for the university, and to me, which was an accomplishment in itself. I had also switched majors and completed my

first full semester in the college of business. I had brought my grades and GPA up, was engaged as a student-athlete, and this caused me to receive the Daktronics-NAIA-Scholar Athlete award. I have also received this award again this past season. It was an accomplishment where I felt very proud of myself.

Transitioning for Jane is consistent with Tinto (1988) stages of departure. Tinto's third stage address students face the problem of finding and adopting norms appropriate to the new college setting and establishing membership in the intellectual and social communities of college life. Jane expressed that transitioning into college as an older adult and sharing space with younger students:

I don't know if you were younger when you first started college, I am assuming you are. When I talk to other students: you just don't know what to do, where to go, how to do it- you feel so lost. And coming in after 35 years of school I was so lost. I was like I don't know how to study. I can read a book, but how do I write a paper about it? What do I do with my life? You have all these questions and you really don't know where to go. So this class helps you focus. No matter what you want to do first you have to start here, it is like baby steps. You don't have to make a decision today about what you want to do but you want to think about the future, think about a year from now, and think about two years from now, three years from now, what you want to do with your life and how you want to put it all together. It is really scary. I felt like the people helped, faculty helped, and the peer mentor.

Similar to Jane, Lynn indicated her experiences as an older student entering college:

Connecting with others in the classroom was a little awkward for me because of the age difference. Even my Instructor was much younger than me. Eventually I discovered that age didn't matter when you all shared the same goal, which was graduation. I also learned that the younger generation could be quite helpful when I needed assistance with technology or other stuff that wasn't an issue 20 years ago when I went to school the first time.

Both Jane and Lynn transitioning into college was learning how to navigate college and being successful. The FLC foster their diverse experiences and supported their college goals.

Generally, high-impact practices are intended for students to successfully integrate into college life and engage students in educationally purposefully activities (Kuh, 2008). Illustrated by participants in this study, Mary expressed being involved on campus was successful to her

transition into college. While other participants reported their transition was partly because of the learning community. For example, Taylor shared the FYE course helped him “do college,” in other words, navigate college. Taylor felt the support of the FLC helped him successfully grow as a college student and navigate college. Annabelle felt the FLC provided her the space to find place, voice, and self in college (Jehangir, 2009). Participants like Michael and Peter, the FLC supported them as ESL students transition into the college environment. The intent of learning communities to restructure traditional teaching methodologies, fostering collaborative learning, and embrace diversity supports first-year, first-generation students successfully navigate and transition into college.

#### Participating is Motivation, Awareness, and Structure

Participating theme means investing in self, being involved on campus, encouraging others, being well-rounded, understanding diversity, volunteering, acquiring new skills, having small classes, and group participation through collaborative efforts. Courses linked to the Trailblazers and Links learning community included activities and projects that taught participants: how to succeed in college, become knowledgeable about college expectations, and how to grow as a student. For example, Lynn said: “I later realized how valuable the program was to my journey as a student. I discovered a lot about myself as a student and as a person.” Anabelle stated: “I was able to gain experience both inside and outside the classroom.” Mary said: “The classes within the learning community wanted all students to achieve, get good grades, stay well above a 2.0, get involved, make friends, have a positive experience, and graduate.” Such experiences awarded participants the opportunity to get involved on campus and grow as college students.

Participants were motivated to get involved their first-year. Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) suggested that student involvement encompasses the time and energy students devote to purposeful educationally activities of their learning and personal development. Student involvement was mentioned in several participants' interviews. Mary explained: "Involvement on campus benefited me the most during my college life, and I believe only positive things will be the outcome from that type of experience." She further discussed her experiences joining campus organizations:

Joining organizations did help me grow personally and professionally. I did get more engaged, and I did succeed and excel because of it. Freshman year I didn't get really involved. Starting my sophomore year I joined the cross country team because I was selected as a member of the student athletic advisor board committee. We do a lot of stuff on campus or in the community. Rather it is volunteering, community engagement, student engagement, meetings, and other volunteering activities. And, I am a member of the Society of Human Resources Management but then I was elected as the treasure, later I was elected as the Vice President. We do a lot of stuff for the HR students helping them get involved on campus. Rather it is professionally or personally: we help them develop, career development, rather it is resume' writing workshops or cover letter workshops. We bring different organizations and employers to talk to the students about how they can grow in their academics and career. It was important because I think the FYE course helped. I also didn't get involved freshman year, I feel like I was a loner and didn't feel engaged to the campus. Getting involved on campus, I have become more invested in myself and in my college career. I have been able to surround myself with like-minded individuals who support each other and only want to see one another succeed both academically and athletically. This has helped me improve my grades and social life.

Mary experiences are consistent with Astin (1984) involvement theory- the greater involvement in college the greater amount of student learning and personal development. Mary acquired the skills that helped her evolve as student by participating in campus activities.

Student involvement was strongly encouraged for FLC students. Lynn mentioned she became involved on campus because she was nominated and recognized by staff at the college:

I was nominated to The National Society of Leadership and Success. You had to do a series of different workshops and you had to go to three speaker events to hear

motivational speakers. The different programs you went through is where you demonstrated your leadership skills. There is a ceremony thing where you get your certificate to make it official. I am active today because there are programs open to me, and there are scholarships and job listings only for this. There are a lot of celebrities. Like every Monday or every other Monday they do these speaker things you can go to or watch online. I think they are fascinating. It opens a lot of resources and connections when you ready to join that world. It is the best of the best; you have to be pretty darn smart to make it into this.

Lynn's nomination encouraged her to become active on campus. She shared that this provided her the opportunity to connect with other students on campus. Michael mentioned that he didn't get involved until after he became a peer mentor:

My first year of college I did not do anything more than attend my classes and go home. After my first year I was accepted to becoming a peer mentor. From there on I was an active student on campus.

One of the challenges that first-generation students experience on campus is the feeling of isolation (Strayhorn, 2012). This can stem from many reasons such as missing home or not belonging. However, Michael learned that becoming a peer mentor to other students was a way to get involved. Lemont reflected on meeting the he had with the Vice Chancellor of the school which helped his decision to get involved and enroll in the university:

The thing that changed it for me when I met Vice Chancellor, Sharon, she asked me was I coming to the school? I told her I don't think you have a band. I am a music head. I love music. I wanted to march in school's band where I was trying to go. She said we just started a drumline, so how does that sound? I was like ok, I drum, and I guess I can do that.

Lemont participated in a student organization encouraged by the administrator at the college. He shared this helped his decision to engage in campus activities. Similar to Lemont, college personnel had influenced Jane's involvement on campus:

I felt like it was important to feel connected to the university. I met people that I otherwise would not have. Basically, I joined a club at the end of my freshman year. It

was the social justice club because I wanted to see what type of things they were involved in the community. Then I became the treasurer in my sophomore year. We've done a lot of volunteer work. We raised money for Haiti victims of the hurricane. So far I haven't joined any other clubs. But I felt like it was important to feel connected to the university. I met people that I otherwise would not have. I met advisors, professors, as well as other students. And I learned a lot of things about what's going on in the world that I otherwise would have not, if I hadn't been involved. I got involved through my sociology class. My professor had a student pass out fliers in the class to ask if anyone was interested to find out what they were about, so I did. I felt the learning community class had something to do with it because I felt like I was such an odd ball when I first started because I am an older person. It was harder to connect with younger people and most of my classes had only younger people. I said let me get involved in something. Obviously, I couldn't do a sport or something like that. I started looking around to find something that fits, and this was perfect.

Jane shared that her sociology professor encouraged her to join their student organization. She knew she wanted to participate on campus because the FYE course strongly encouraged students to do so. Jane's involvement connected her to diversity issues and civic engagement activities that integrated her into the college environment.

For a college student, having a sense of belonging helps you connect to the college (Strayhorn, 2012). Jimmy felt that being involved made him well-rounded:

I've been a part of the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE) and Residence Hall Association (RHA). These organizations are important to me because they allow me to better myself as a whole. Joining NSBE as a Communications major makes me well-rounded and I can work more on my hobbies. Joining RHA allows me to give back to the community I live in. I've helped residents with different problems and helped with several different events that make student residents excited about college.

Consistent with the theoretical framework of sense of belonging, Jimmy expressed that being involved made him feel valued as a student. His level of involvement helped him grow as a college student.

Within the Links learning community, a peer-mentoring program was mentioned in participants' interview that connected them to the university as incoming freshman. The learning



community promoted involvement on campus, giving Links students' an opportunity to apply for a peer-mentor student position the following academic year. The peer-mentor program at this school was established to assist first-year students in their academic success within the FYE course. Astin (1984) indicated that the importance of fellow students interacting and encouraging other students to become involved on their campus. Jane stated that her experiences with her peer mentor in the FYE course encouraged her to become a peer mentor:

I felt like the people helped, faculty helped, and the peer mentor. And this is why I became a peer mentor; the peer mentor was helpful to me. If I could do this for someone else that would be everything.

Taylor shared that the job as a peer mentor helped him to grow as a person:

Getting my job as a peer mentor really was successful because I've been able to briefly meet other people from different walks of life, countries, and ages who are here for the purpose of learning, both in terms of fellow students *and* coworkers. Giving me a job to put me in a position where I feel obligated to do better. To quote one of my favorite songs, we're here "to build up [our] mental", whether it be our base of knowledge or characteristics as people.

Lynn commented how doors opened for her when she became a peer mentor:

I've had many additional opportunities as a result of being in this class. So many doors were opened for me. It started with an A+ which was great for my self-confidence. Then I was offered a position working for the university which opened many doors for me as far as training opportunities and networking among the different departments at the university, which can be very beneficial to my future.

Michael described his experiences as a peer mentor that helped other students:

As I work on campus as a peer mentor, I am part of the community where I am assigned to an instructor and be a useful resource to students. Often students come back to me with questions or concerns after the semester is over, or we find ourselves registered for the same course and I would help them with their assignments.

Paige mentioned how the peer mentor position encouraged her as a first-generation student:

When I applied for the job I always said that I am willing to help other people. So I feel like that should be everyone's motivation, they should want to grow with each other and not bring everyone down. Not only being a peer mentor has increased my academics, it

has increased my passion. It has helped me move toward that goal as a first-generation college student.

Consistent with existing literature, Links participants shared that the peer-mentor program they were involved helped incoming freshman overcome academic and social challenges they might have encountered when they were a freshman. Colvin & Ashman (2010) suggested that peer mentoring focuses on a more experienced student helping a less experienced student improve overall academic performance, encourages mentors' personal growth, and provides advice, support, and knowledge to the mentee (Colvin & Ashman). Participants shared that they developed meaningful relationships with FYE students and instructors to help them succeed in college.

Participating in cultural awareness activities in this study refers to the cross-racial interaction of among student populations having a consistent positive effect on a range of educational outcomes, including students' intellectual, social, and civic development (Chang et al., 2004). It is the idea that the experiences with diversity encourage students to explore issues of race and to interact with diverse members within the institution, both in and out of the classroom (Antonio, et al., 2004). Such experiences are essential to positive educational outcomes (Antonio, et al., 2004; Chang et al., 2004; Park, 2009).

The Trailblazers learning community program was design with the intent to explore various cultures and communities outside the institution. Participants stated they had the opportunity to experience different cultures by tasting food, communicating through language, and embrace the environment and climate of each community they visited. For example, they visited cultural museums, plays on diversity, and ethnic restaurants. Kevin shared:

I got to see stuff and critically and have thoughts about why it is there and who made it. We went to museums, we tried different food that I never tried before. It really broadened my horizon. Every time they said we were going on a trip... awesome! Finally, a field trip you don't have them often in college, and when you do they are big and for a competition or something. For me it is not like we were going into a ghetto community, I trusted their judgement. In my opinion, I was happy we were going to different places. It didn't have any effect on me negatively. I thought it was awesome because we got free food and free experiences.

Peter mentioned that there were scheduled days for trips into Chicago:

We got to go places. It was very cool to experience. We could always go somewhere like the museum to something. Went to a play and it was about gentrification in Chicago. And we would learn about different communities in the city of Chicago. We saw people that were not from the area like on Devon Ave. We saw people from Pakistan. And there were different restaurants that had good food.

Lenny stated that they learned about the various cultures and communities they visited:

We talked a lot about race and ethnicity. We visited three places: Pilsen, Chinatown, and Washington Park. What we did at those locations we walked around and took in the environment, the people, and the scenery. We go into the restaurants and eat the area's food. Pilsen was predominately Hispanic. We went to a Mexican restaurant. In Washington Park it was an African American community, so we went to a soul food restaurant. They were culture based trips. It was what they wanted us to get out of those college functions.

He furthered shared what took place after their visit from Chicago:

My literature professor had us write two-page reaction paper about what we experienced. I look forward to doing the papers. I really enjoyed myself. Another thing, the trips did was changed my perspective on learning, different ways you can learn. You don't have to sit in the classroom with pencil and paper and listen to the teacher talk. You can get out in the community and still learn that way. I thought that was awesome. Growing up I was homebound so I thought it was nice to be away at college, on my own getting to see the things I haven't seen as a first-generation student- something to write home about.

Trailblazers learning community provided participants the space to learn and grow as diverse learners. By participating in fieldtrips, the participants gained new learning experiences that extended beyond the classroom. Consistent with the literature, learning communities incorporate

active and collaborative learning that are linked to positive behaviors as increased academic effort and outcomes such as promoting openness to diversity, social tolerance, and personal interpersonal development (Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Links FYE course included a civic engagement activity as a co-curricular experience either inside or outside the class involving cultural awareness. Participants shared that there were collaborative efforts among students in the learning community and a national organization to raise awareness about a specific cause such as homelessness, abuse, or health. Lynn shared that “there were papers and projects that involved community service which I found to be very uplifting and enlightening.” Michael shared that his class “got together to make baskets filled with toiletry supplies for people in need, this event was called Day of Caring.” Also, Paige discussed how her learning community participated in a Day of Caring with a national organization:

We partook in day of caring, we gave back to the community. It was for United Way so it was a class competition but it was more than a competition because you learn how to give back. A lot of college students forget that college is a state of giving back.

Alongside civic engagement or volunteer projects within the FYE course, a few learning community participants both from the Trailblazers and Links learning communities discussed the nature of diversity from their own student experience. Lemont implied within the learning community he had to understand other people differences:

I had to work with partners that totally had different views than me, like religion and morals. So when you have a goal that you need to get done and you are on a task that is important to your grade, you are going to figure out a way to collaborate with people and their different views. Sometimes you become friends; I mean, you find that their views are different from yours that doesn't make them a bad person. It just means your morals aren't the same and you respect to deal with each other on such bases.

Mary defined cultural awareness through her involvement at the school:

The athletic department requires every team to attend at least one diversity-related activity to help us socialize and broaden our diversity perspective on campus and in life. This allows us to see how cultures are different from our own and how to appreciate cultures all over the world.

Paige mentioned the different cultures in her FLC:

I felt like transitioning from high school was a big aspect of diversity. When you come on campus it is so many cultures. And even in the class we had a potluck so much food from other cultures. You are learning from that aspect too. You learn like the language, the ways in which students study in their own cultures.

Lenny discussed that the learning community was diverse:

It was interesting at a certain point because you want to hear from different kinds of people, like from different races and social classes, some cities and suburbs. We all got along. I went to high school that was predominately African American. Getting here being with all different kinds of people made me feel that it was ok. I think it was the main feeling getting, this was cool...diversity... it was totally fun that it was a place for me here. It goes back to the size of the group. In some classes professors don't reach out to students, and in the learning community these professors did. It was an intentional effort to get us started off on the right foot as a college student. We talked a lot about race and ethnicity. They taught us how to effectively discuss this stuff, not to be ignorant of certain things, how to interpret information and listen to others, give feedback, criticism. I felt it was a good diversity. We were able to talk about this stuff in a civilized way. We were comfortable because we had different perspectives in the learning community.

Participants shared that they learned about diversity within their learning community.

Participants felt these concerns with diversity were relevant to their participation. Congruent to Antonio et al. (2004), the researchers' findings were that diversity in college environments is a factor and linked to positive intellectual and social outcomes for college students.

Learning communities are purposely restructure the curriculum that links coursework for students to find greater coherence in what they are learning, and have increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Zhao and Kuh (2004) refer to FLCs as settings, which students are co-enrolled in two or more courses to ensure that students see one another frequently and spend a substantial amount of time engaged in common

intellectual activities. Participants shared they had a positive experience in their classes because of the structure of the FLC. Consistent with existing literature, participants benefited from the learning community structure because their viewpoints were valued, there were high levels of discussion among faculty and students, and there was a deeper appreciation for learning (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Kuh, 2008; Maher, 2005; Tinto, 1997). Mary indicated: “It laid the foundation for me and the rest of my college career. Some of the activities and assignments that we did include: writing a resume’, scheduling classes, and exploring different majors.” Taylor shared: “I realized quickly that the purpose of being there was to learn how to adjust to college life.” Paige implied: “When you think about the class all you think about is that it is an easy ‘A’ but actually it is more than that; from day one of integrated advising and now being in my major has been a real impact.” Jimmy described that he benefitted from the FYE course:

The benefit of the FYE course teaches: time-management, group participation, gives educational advice, and how to survive in college. The course teaches life skills while you make new friends as well. Including gaining communications skills from the group projects, learning how to work in a group in general, we were taught how to make a resume’, and talk to professional employers as well.

Jimmy acquired skills that could be applied to his academic and professional endeavors. Such skills were facilitated in the FYE course. Michel, too, shared that he developed skills he learned while working in groups and completing group projects within the FYE course:

The learning community has helped me developed professional skills that I will use in my future career as a teacher. Such skills were developed by giving me the opportunity to have hands on with the students. I learned how to create PowerPoint slides that contain useful information for students. I was provided guidance through the course on: how to budget, where to purchase textbooks, how to develop a relationship with their professors and advisors, how to look up classes and register on my own, etc.

Similar to Jimmy, Michael gained academic and professional skills that helped them obtain college level learning to succeed as first-year students.

Participants shared that they survived college and learned to navigate college by participating in the learning activities within the FLC. Terri expressed that participating in the FLC is learning how to survive college:

With the learning community, of course you basically learn how to survive in college. You learn where everything is, what the campus offers and how you can get help if you need it. Also, this class gives you a sense of community where you may meet new people and stay friends with for the rest of your college career.

Taylor shared that by participating in the learning community prepared him for college:

What I like best is that there's a push to get us out of the high school mentality. I think, for the most part, a lot of the stress (using the term loosely because college isn't that hard – it's just a matter of work ethics) comes from the inability to adapt or a process of adaption that is too slow.

Jane reflected on how the class helped her in college:

I knew the class was going help me navigate through the first year of college. This program helped me get started on my way to success, it has given me all of the necessary resources to better prepare for my college career and to move ahead into my career as a teacher.

Lenny explained the benefit of the learning community is having a guide into college:

As freshman it is a lot to take in, but lot of it is very helpful. The benefit is having the guide into college because you know students can start off wrong and don't come back; those was one of the main benefits of the program, is to get people in and stay to graduate. Another benefit is that I am still here. It has motivated me; although my parents didn't go to college it has the potential to change the culture of the family. It is an experience like this, an experience to where you had to apply or be rejected. For me to get the email saying we love to have you made me proud, made me think I am doing myself some justice and my family justice. It felt really good to be a part of a community like this. It still affects me until this day. I can say I done that. Also, it helped me in classes like Humanities and some type of global economic class. I am able to dissect information and write a paper.

Peter indicated that he didn't speak out because of his English, he felt overwhelmed but his success from the learning community got him excited about college:

I wasn't expecting to do that well because I never had taken any non-ESL courses. So, doing really well in the learning community got me excited about college. The teachers

pushed me harder. When I talked to the teachers they always say that I have something that many people in the class don't have because I work harder than everyone else. My parents are immigrants that played a big role; they did not know what it is like here so I had to figure out myself. Coming into this learning community helped me, showed me what's out there. My perception in college now is like I am use to it now. At first I didn't speak out. Now I speak out more with the people and in groups. I felt overwhelmed because of my English; it was kind of hard to speak with people and the professor.

Lemont expressed that participating in FLC allowed him to interact act with his peers:

As a freshman they saw a lot of spunk and charisma in me because I was so excited. Being introduced to a lot of people I had to learn personalities fast. I had to learn who I was and how I was going to deal with these personalities. So having to do that in an academic setting the classroom was a place to practice for me. It gave me the opportunity to: talk more, engage more, not be combative, and not wear my feelings on my sleeves. Seeing different views and take in many different scenarios at one time really makes you rational.

In Lemont's interview he shared that he gained knowledge by participating in classroom activities. However, collaborating with other cohort members allowed him to develop insight on how to participate in the learning process with other cohort members.

Two participants from the Trailblazers learning community expressed the structure of the learning community that incorporated fieldtrips were rewarding. Lenny felt more connected and involved because of the activities outside the classroom:

We do a lot of things what other freshman don't do; so, it is just to enhance the college experience. You get to see other cultures and ethnicities in how they interact within a community. The year that I did it, we did a lot of outward experiences. We got out of the classroom. We experienced different kinds of people and different parts of the city of Chicago.

Kevin shared that he benefited from participating in the field trips:

My experience in the learning community, first of all, was my first year in college. So, I mean I didn't even know what college was going to be like. The fact that I already knew that there was never going to be field trips when I came into college, but there were in the learning community. It was a great experience because we actually went to different places. And, when I was little I didn't care about field trips. They were fun but I never thought about them critically and why we had them. Going to college and having them was an amazing experience. The type of learning took place was having the first-hand



experience instead of research. For example, we went to Chinatown. Instead of having to do research, we would write papers about our opinions and experiences versus research.

Lenny and Kevin indicated they both benefitted from structure of the FLC activities, such as participating in the field trips, it taught them how to reflect critically about their college experiences.

Prior studies show that participating in a learning community because of its structure is beneficial because there is increased academic and social opportunities, greater involvement in learning, better faculty-student interaction, and higher levels of engagement and persistence (Astin, 1984, 1993; Kuh, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Goodsell, 1993). Lemont implied: “I can probably say that was one of the most interesting classes I had my freshman year. It wasn’t complicated, it wasn’t rigorous, it wasn’t very tiresome, and it was very fun.” Annabelle described her learning experiences in the learning community as “calm and adaptive:”

The learning community was very calm and adaptive. At the start of every class we talked about what were important, assignments we had, or things that we were struggling with in our course. It allowed us to gather support from our peers.  
Participants expressed the structure of the FLC was beneficial to their success.

The FLC was designed for incoming students to successfully matriculate into the college environment. Participants shared that their FYE and writing courses intentionally were designed to help them succeed by incorporating resources that engages them in the learning process. Other participants mentioned that the courses linked to the FLC were unlike traditional classes. Terri implied the FYE course was “laid-back” but serious:

It was almost laid-back but you still knew it was serious. It helped with future classes and resources needed to survive. We normally started with a general discussion of topic of the day then moved on to any of the homework we needed done.

Taylor referenced the FYE course was unlike traditional courses:

We operate on a different schedule and have a relative degree of autonomy. There usually was some sort of discussion about a topic, a related story from the instructor bringing it home, some input from the peer mentor, and then a brief in-class assignment where we'd break off into groups or less frequently do individual work.”

Peter stated that faculty would encourage FLC members to engage in campus activities:

They always wanted us to go to activities on campus. One of my teachers had a workshop so we would have to go to those things and listen to people talk. Sometimes they are boring and other times they were interesting. They would have us go off campus on field trips. If they are not on campus we could always go somewhere else like the museum or something. They would tell us to go to activities on campus to make us better rounded and to get to know more people.

According to Zhao and Kuh (2004), “learning communities incorporate active and collaborative learning activities and promote involvement through academic and social activities that extend beyond the classroom.” (p.116). Participants expressed their learning was gained from the collaborative approach and activities the FLC incorporated. The FYE course linked to the FLC helped participants develop skills they could use as college students. Jimmy discussed that his experiences were gained through class activities:

From being in the FYE course I learned more about myself, the major I was intending to do, and about college in general. Due to the advisory meetings we were required to do, I ended up changing my major because I felt like the major I was in wasn't for me. The course made me think about my major in a different way. I noticed I wanted to do it for the wrong reasons. It taught me to do research about specific majors and jobs I wanted to do. For example, when we were in class, she (the teacher) chose a random major and pull up a list of jobs that were within that major. She also reminded us that the major and job we picked had to reflect the life we wanted to live and work we wanted to do. Each day we would have group discussions about how our first semester was going so far and kept tabs on us. We offered advice to each other and our instructor would as well.

Marry described that the learning community was arranged for daily tasks:

The instructor asks: how we're doing, how all our other classes are going, and then we begin our lesson and material for the day. A lot of the material was from discussion and group work that allowed us to participate and get to know one another.

Lemont shared that he learned how to keep an academic journal:

The class taught me organizational skills my freshman year. I was an organized person. That class required us to keep a journal, write down assignment from every class and checked the journal daily. It was nothing they can do where they can check your journal but it was one of those integrity things. I checked it daily and my GPA was amazing. The moment I stopped journaling because I was no longer required too, I seen a difference in my GPA. So, I really had to get back on track, writing things down and keeping a journal so that way my academics will reflect my organization.

Jane shared that the course provided real-world experiences:

Every class was a new lesson on how to manage stress, testing, answering question, how to get help. We made a student action plan which was a whole semester plan that was due at the end of the semester. It made you think about each semester going forward: what's required, what you needed to do, what classes you need to take. I was going into education so with the many tests I had to take it made me think about the next level. We had a student plan to complete the 4 years or 5 years or however long it was going to take you. I learned how to write a resume', how to write a cover letter, and interview for a job. There were strategies to relieve stress. I mean it was just like one thing after another. When you put the things together it really made you understand how to deal with that first year. We had a couple of group assignments. One the thing throughout college you will learn how to work as a group. I mean in real life you are going to work as a team or in a group. One of the things we did was a real-world practice [sic] collaborative learning. You would have to figure out this project together. The professor gave you time to work on it inside the class. We worked on it through email and phone calls, and through the web to work on it as a group.

Michael implied that the class objectives were learning about being a college student:

We would pull out our textbook and learn about something we would do as a college students such as registering for classes, searching for scholarships, knowing how to budget your money, and knowing how to establish a relationship with professors and advisors.

Paige shared that the course helped her think at a "higher level" as a college student:

I was more engaged as a student, whereas I think on a higher level. When students come to college they are still on a surface level but my class and advisors made us think on a higher level. In college you can't be a surface level person, got to be better well-rounded so you can think on a higher level. If you are not thinking on a higher level then how are you going to make it out of college? Also, [sic] I am definitely a time-management person because of the class. We were given a planner at the new student orientation. I really did not use it the first week of school but when we start talking about time management, you should use the planner. They had the dates, drop dates...I didn't know it until I opened it up. And the planner was really good, I set times on how to go to work, times to do essays, everything, when you map it out it is so easy to check it off.

The learning activities within the FLC helped participants engage and develop effective learning habits. Cicerone (2005) suggested learning communities are to expose students to new teaching techniques and exploring connections between disciplines. Participants shared that the structure of the FLC helped them explore different ways of learning and participate educational activities that promoted success.

Participants from the learning community shared their learning experiences about the structure of the learning community. In participants' interviews, structure was referenced as class size, setting, or set-up. Jane indicated: "I believe the structure is essential, from beginning to end it is structured to help everyone succeed with their personal academic goals." Lemont shared that the structure of the learning community helped him as a college student:

I like the structure of the course; it is set up because it causes you to learn more about the campus. It required you to go to certain workshops like different majors. Somethings are very interesting. They make sure you get as much information as possible and that you make the best decision about your major to earn your degree. Sometimes people get here and don't know what they want to major in.

Peter indicated that the size of the FCL was important:

It was a small group and there was no pressure talking in class, you don't get intimidated by anybody when talking in class. Most of the classes were larger. I had two chemistry classes that had 113 students. It's really no time to talk with your teachers; you don't have a relationship with these teachers. In the learning community you can easily talk to the teachers. The teachers could always ask you questions if they don't think you are on task. So it was really nice to have small classes.

Kevin discussed how the learning community was small enough that he could be himself:

The class size was probably one of the biggest decisions they made, I think they did this on purpose. Having 10 people made everyone comfortable when asking questions. Even though you can get your question answered easily, people would get nervous sometimes. So when you are comfortable with small groups of people, then you can ask more questions and get more information out of the class. And we all knew each other, we were like really close. Everyone knew me as the goofball that's funny and fun. I felt really comfortable around them, so I would dance around them and all that stuff.

Lenny described his experiences being in a small group:

The most helpful thing was the class size. When you discuss important things in a small group you have a greater chance being understood and it helps you understand other people. That was one of the main things to get through to us that college is about effort and hard work. That is what I gain from it... I like that you got to speak out in a smaller group which gave me the confidence in academic areas and in other classes. That was a big thing about it I liked. You can discuss things, not a lot of people are talking at the same time and not being judge on what you say. That was a big thing being a freshman coming into college.

Lynn mentioned that the structure of the learning community allotted designated times for class discussions:

A typical class usually started out with a lecture of some sort from the instructor. Usually there was a video or slide show that was relevant to the material we were discussing that day and then often we would break up into group and work on an assignment that pertained to the day's lecture.

The academic experiences for students within FLCs is to “restructure the very classrooms in which students find themselves and alter the way students experience both the curriculum and learning within those classrooms” (Tinto, 2003, p. 1). Learning communities link two or more groups of students' classes during their first semester or year, emphasizing small class sizes, curricular cohesion, and collaborative teaching (Talbert & Boyles (2005). Consistent with the literature, participants expressed they were successful because the FYE course and writing courses was small enough to engage in learning activities. Unlike lecture halls, FLC members were able to participate in class discussions, collaborate with one another, and interact with faculty. Participants liked that they were able to engage in the learning process. They shared they respected each other's differences. And they were comfortable with group assignments and activities. Participants felt the learning community was intentionally set-up for their success.

#### Chapter Summary

Researchers found that learning communities is an effective means to connect the learner to the institution, classroom, and community (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Gabelnick et al.,; Harper, 2009; Kuh, 2008; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Talburt & Boyles, 2005; Tinto, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). This chapter discussed the experiences of 13 participants' from the Trailblazers and Links learning communities. My approach to themeing the data was generating theoretical constructs. The four themes as it relates to participants personal stories are: (a) Writing Intensively is Reflective and Impactful; (b) Academic Support is Beneficial, Utilizing Resources, and Engaging; (c) Making Connections is Relational and Transitioning; (d) Participating is Motivation, Awareness, and Structure.

Writing Intensively is reflective and impactful. It is going deeper into the work and, critically thinking, interpreting information, getting the best from the task, and gaining confidence to write college papers shared by the participants in this study. Academic Support is beneficial, utilizing resources, and engaging. It means having success, receiving help from tutoring, establishing a relationship with the academic advisor, interacting with faculty, and accessible to resources on campus that participants in this study utilized. Making Connections is relational and transitioning. It means sticking together, connecting and bonding with students, having a sense of community, adjusting to college, surviving college, and gaining new experiences when participating in a learning community. And, participating is motivation, awareness, and structure. It is investing in self, being involved on campus, encouraging others, being well-rounded, understanding diversity, volunteering, acquiring new skills, having small classes, and group participation through collaborative efforts that participants discussed.

The next chapter includes a discussion of the findings, research questions, limitations, implications of study, and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 6

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This chapter provides an overview of this study's research findings, questions, limitations, implications, and recommendations for future research. This study examined the experiences of first-generation students about how they perceive their FLC. Prior research suggests that first-year, first-generation students have significantly different academic, social, cultural, and psychological worlds than their non-first-generation peers (Beatty, Bottoms, & Gray 2011). And they are likely to leave college after their first year. To better understand the experiences of first-generation students, this study captured the participants' perceptions through personal stories about two FLCs.

Findings from this study revealed that students had an overall positive perception of their FLC. Participants shared that their first-year in college was successful because they had encountered new experiences and acquired academic skills gained from participating in a FLC. Both Trailblazers and Links participants mentioned their perception of the FLC was beneficial to their success in college. They discussed how their learning community created a sense of belonging to the campus with other students. Consistent with Strayhorn (2012), participants in this study felt the need to belong because belonging to the learning environment was related to their academic success and emotional well-being. They described that they evolved as a college student and developed confidence transitioning into college. They reflected on their experiences about adapting to college very quickly, such as being involved on campus and overcoming

challenges they may have experienced. A few participants stated they relied on other members of the learning community for information or helped solve problems they may have encountered. Participants from the learning community said that most of their work or involvement on campus developed when they learned the importance of being involved on campus encouraged by faculty, mentors, and advisors.

Additional results from this study show that participants from the Trailblazers learning community felt that their cluster courses, which were writing-intensive helped improved their writing and critical-thinking skills. Participants indicated they thought about the topics their professor introduced and began to dissect the information through a critical lens. Participants shared they gained confidence in writing. They felt confident about writing papers in other classes because of the skills they developed from the FLC. A challenge that each Trailblazers participant shared was not having the ability to write essays prior to college. By enrolling in the FLC, they developed college-level writing skills to become successful in college.

Participants from the Trailblazers FLC expressed that the learning community was intentionally structured or set-up for success. Congruent with Talburt and Boyles, (2005), the intent of learning communities link two or more groups of students' classes during their first semester or year, emphasizing small class sizes, curricular cohesion, and collaborative teaching. Participants felt comfortable with their class size and other cohort members. They expressed that the learning community gave them a sense of community. They connected with cohort members that had similar characteristics as a first-year, first-generation student. Additionally, participants from the Trailblazers learning community had the opportunity to take field trips to urban and diverse communities. Participants stated they learned a lot about cultural differences by traveling to various communities other than their own. Therefore, findings from this study revealed that



Trailblazers' participants were successful because the FLC provided the opportunity to create lasting relationships with faculty and students, and they engaged in deep approaches to learning encompassing integrated ideas and diverse perspectives within the learning community (Kuh, 2008).

Participants from the Links learning community felt their FYE course was fundamental to their college experience. They reflected on how diverse learning can be. Pascarella & Terenzini, (2005) suggested that FYE programs' primary goals are to increase student performance to integrate students into the university community both academically and socially. Participants felt the course helped them navigate college, utilize campus resources, and seek help from the academic community. The FLC provided them the tools to succeed and afforded them an opportunity to apply for a peer-mentor position as part of future FYE courses. Congruent to Crissman (2001) findings that students in a first-year seminar had positive reactions to their first-semester experience, they gained valuable academic skills that could be used in other courses, and they were more comfortable in approaching faculty members in and out of the classroom.

Additional findings from this study revealed that the Links learning community provided participants the necessary tools to succeed and persist in college, meaning to stay and progress to the next years of college. They felt faculty interaction and support was very valuable and that the professors were their biggest supporters. Participants indicated they were strongly encouraged to utilize campus resources, get involved on campus, get tutoring, and interact with faculty on an ongoing basis. Links learning community participants bonded with other cohort members. Participants expressed their experiences with other students were family-like. Barefoot (2000) found that first-year programs, including first-year seminars, learning communities, residence-life activities, community service, and service-learning opportunities, are intentionally designed

to provide students the interaction with peers necessary for group bonding and affiliation. Participants shared that the learning community provided space for connecting, open dialogue, and collaborative learning. They discussed wanting to register for classes together the following semester. They shared that they successfully transitioned into college because of the connection to the FLC.

Overall the results from this study show that students' perceptions and experiences of their learning community were positive. Being enrolled in a FLC gave them a sense of community. Faculty supported their transition into college, and the school provided them resources they needed to succeed. They made a connection with faculty, advisors, mentors, and students on campus.

Research Question #1: What Perceptions do First-Generation Students Have of Their Experiences in a FLC?

Findings from this study show that first-generation students' perceptions of their experiences were positive and successful while enrolled in a FLC. In agreement with Brownell and Swaner (2009), for participants in this study, participating in a learning community eases first-generation students' transitions into college by helping them build their identities as college students and find their voices in the classroom. Participants from this study reflected on transitioning from high school into college and connecting with students who are just like them. They shared that they did not know what to expect in college and were nervous about attending college because they were the first in their family to attend. Participants from the Trailblazers learning community expressed that college was exciting and new; however, transitioning from high school into the college environment was different. One participant shared that "they do not coddle you in college," so he had to learn very quickly to adapt to the environment. Participants

discussed that the support of the learning community helped them figure out who they were and why they were there. They believed their cohort members were equally challenged because college was unfamiliar to them. Participants shared that they learned to rely on each other and figure it out together. With the support of the learning community, participants expressed how they came into their own. They said the learning community made it easier for them to be successful college students.

In comparison, Links participants also felt that their learning community supported them in the transition into college because they had several classes together. A few participants stated college is not like high school, and they had to figure it out together as a group. They shared that they had no one to tell them about the expectations surrounding college, how difficult or easy it would be. They talked about not having a “pre-conversation” about college and navigating college on their own. Participants felt the FYE course was the reason for their success in college. They shared that the FYE course supported them in transitioning into college and building their own identities. They mentioned that faculty created activities that would help them transition into college successfully. Activities participants spoke about were having good time management skills, identifying learning styles and personality traits, and team-building projects. Participants felt these activities contributed to their growth. Like Trailblazers participants, they thought their experiences in the FLC were the reason they were successful their first year in college because of the support they received from other members and faculty within the learning community. A few of the participants felt that the faculty brought a different dynamic to the FYE course by sharing personal stories and creating a safe environment in which they could. They discussed how comfortable it was to learn new things because other learning community members were

learning too. They felt the learning community benefitted them as they developed as a college student.

Johnson et al. (2007) found that student perceptions of the transition into college, both academically and socially, could influence a smooth social transition into college which predicts a sense of belonging. Results from this study show that both Trailblazers and Links learning communities were safe places to be. Participants mentioned that they learned from one another. They described that their experiences of connecting with one another were like a family. They expressed that they shared similar experiences such as being the first to go to college, diverse backgrounds, and not being from the college's location. They felt they were able to express themselves without insulting anyone. They felt secure and confident to be in that space with the other learning community members. For example, Trailblazers participants discussed how supportive their cohort members and faculty were by helping them overcome challenges such as writing at the college level. They shared that writing and thinking critically about topics were challenging because it was the first time they had to take a deeper approach to completing an assignment. They mentioned that the instructors intentionally built assignments and presentations that required a lot of group participation. The participants expressed that these types of assignments led to the times they felt the most comfortable. Findings illustrate that Trailblazers developed a sense of belonging in the learning community because of the learning community members and support of faculty. Cohort members and faculty within the FLC cared for them and their progress, and support of faculty helped build their confidence to succeed in other courses.

Similar to findings from Jehangir's (2009) study, perceptions and experiences within a learning community were described by participants in this study as family-like, and some students reported they felt at least some responsibility to care for and emotionally support other

cohort members. Results show that Links participants experienced a strong sense of belonging to their FLC. First, the FLC was based on a cluster of two or three classes that students attended together. Participants had the opportunity to develop relationships with students who were a part of these clusters of classes. Second, Links participants felt they mattered. They felt they belonged in college. Because it was their first time in a college environment, they did not know what college was like. They knew the FYE course was designed to integrate them into the college environment successfully. Lastly, participants were included in class discussions, they learned together, and overcame challenges together. The FLC taught them to form study groups and work collaboratively. Not only have they established friendships among each other, but a sense of community was created with members believe they belonged within the learning community.

Additional findings show that Links participants felt the FYE instructor and peer mentor contributed to their positive experience within the FLC. They shared that everyone was family. One student stated, “What happens in the course stays in the course.” Participants shared that they could talk to the instructor and peer mentor about anything. Participants said they could even discuss personal problems that affected their transition. They reflected on the peer mentor’s responsibility in the FLC which was to assist students, faculty, and advisors with learning activities. Participants connected to the peer mentor easily because he or she was just like them. They shared that the peer mentor would tell them what to do or not to do as freshmen. It was the peer mentor’s advice that made them feel more relaxed and comfortable within the FLC. On the other hand, it was faculty who made sure the students and peer mentor connected to the course material. They shared that the classroom was a welcoming learning environment. It was the environment that fostered students’ learning and growth among the participants. Reflecting on

the intent of the FYE course, Links participants' perceptions of their experiences were positive, and they gained the confidence to learn in any environment.

Research Question #2: According to Participants, How has Participating in a FLC Led to Their Success?

Findings are that Trailblazers and Links participants' perceptions of their FLC were positive, and their transition into college was successful. Additionally, this study reveals that participants were successful in completing their first year in college and progressed to the second year at least partly because of their participation in the FLC. Prior research suggests that students, when participating in high-impact practices, are more likely to persist and have high GPAs, and greater gains in academic performance (Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Kuh, 2008). Participants shared that the FLC incorporated support systems such as faculty interaction, peer mentoring, tutoring, advising, and campus resources that helped them be successful in college. Faculty support was very instrumental to the learning community participants. Participants sensed that faculty instructions, concerns, and assistance helped them to adapt quickly and comfortably to the learning environment. They expressed that professors were always willing to help and meet with students, offering supportive advice. The FLC faculty was encouraging and connected them to campus resources they did not know existed. They shared that it was a great experience to have faculty willing to help and to have a meaningful experience the first time in college.

Results from Trailblazers participants are that they were successful because the professors helped them to develop college-level writing and critical thinking skills. They shared that the professors would edit their papers and highlight mistakes to improve their writing. They discussed mandatory meetings with a writing tutor and instructors to ensure they were meeting

the goals of the course. Similar to the Trailblazers, Links participants expressed that they felt successful because of what they learned from their FYE instructor. It was the instructor who provided them the tools to succeed. There was an open-door policy between the faculty and students. The faculty wanted them to think on a higher level than they did in high school. Many of the participants talked about how they had to get out of the mindset of high school to begin thinking like a college student. The results reveal that it was the faculty efforts that encouraged this growth to happen and mold participants into successful college students. For example, class activities, discussions, and projects all led them to become independent thinkers. Both of the FLCs' participants agreed it was the FLC faculty who aided them in the learning process. To that end, faculty interaction and class interaction created a positive learning environment in which FLC participants could succeed.

Findings show that tutoring and advising were equally supportive of participants' success in college. Participants shared that the college encouraged students to use the free resources offered on campus. Both of the learning communities participants were required to meet with a tutor, and/or attend supplemental instruction, and meet with their academic advisor throughout the semester. Trailblazers and Links participants discussed the importance of utilizing tutoring services because tutoring leads to student success in college. Participants reflected on how FLC faculty and peer mentors encouraged the students to incorporate tutoring or supplemental instruction into their schedules in order to become successful and overcome scholastic obstacles they faced in the classroom. Trailblazers' participants were required to allocate in time to meet with writing tutors. They shared that mandatory tutoring helped a great deal in developing writing skills. They stated this was a benefit of the learning community which made them successful in college. In comparison, Links participants were strongly encouraged to attend

tutoring and/or supplemental instruction. A few participants shared that they did not appreciate the use of tutoring until later in the semester. They knew tutoring services existed, but they did not know how beneficial tutoring could be to them and their success in college.

Consistent with Kuh's (2017) research, academic advisors played an integral role in fostering students success by engaging participants in the right kinds of activities inside and outside the classroom. Results are that academic advising was an essential component for Links FLC members. Unlike the Trailblazers, Link participants only saw their academic advisor to plan classes for the next semester, while Trailblazers found their advisors helpful with meeting other needs by discussing class options and providing recommendations to become successful in particular courses. However, Links participants' advisors played an instrumental part in their success. Many participants expressed how they enjoyed their visits with their advisors. Advisors would visit the FYE course several times throughout the semester to help participants stay abreast of university policies, promote campus activities, plan and prepare for courses, and discuss program options that were beneficial to participants' learning and transitioning processes. An advisor is one of the first people a student gets to know in college. Participants agreed that they were at ease with their advisor because advisors motivated them to stay on track and graduate. Also, they expounded on how the advisors would contact them to ensure they were getting what they needed as a new student and to inform them of the resources they might need to help feel connected to the campus. They shared that the advisors built rapport with the FLC students. The advisors would interact with them regularly to help identify or rectify issues. Participants expressed that not only did they benefit from the help they received from their advisor, but they succeeded because their advisor was available for them. Therefore, tutoring and



academic advising were primarily considered as campus resources that were beneficial to their success as college students.

Another contribution to student success was the structure of the FLC. Congruent with Tinto's (2003) research, FLCs were designed to "restructure the very classrooms in which students find themselves and alter the way students experience both the curriculum and learning within those classrooms" (p. 1), and this affected student academic experiences. Findings from this study are that participants felt connected to the courses linked to the learning community; they were more engaged, and because of the FLC's structure, it was easy to communicate with other members and faculty involved in the learning community. Participants expressed that they enjoyed the structure of the program because it was small enough to learn and participate. They found the structure was beneficial for everyone's to success because it was a collaborative effort. A few participants shared, "you were not pressured or intimidated by others" because students in the FLC had similar experiences. The environment was comfortable enough to easily ask questions, share and discuss topics that allowed immediate feedback from students and faculty. Therefore, the FLC structure created a sense of belonging because it was small enough to connect, collaborate together, and be a safe place to exchange dialogue.

Research Question #3: According to Participants, What Aspect of the FLC has Helped Them Become Integrated Into the College Environment?

Results from this study show that engagement and involvement, both inside and outside the classroom, were important to participants' matriculation. Consistent with the literature, participating in a FLC is significantly and positively related to student engagement, and student engagement is, in turn, strongly related to educational gains (Engstrom &Tinto, 2008; Kuh,

2008; Rocconi, 2010). Trailblazers and Links participants mentioned their FLC encouraged them to get involved on campus. Participants, who joined student organizations, including athletics, expressed that the FLC informed them that they would have a stronger sense of connection on campus and be more likely to succeed. Participants learned how to network with other students, felt accountable, discovered new opportunities, and felt the college cared about them.

Participants stated the advisor of their student organization was a faculty member who invested in them and their goals.

The Trailblazers FLC intentionally engaged students, as part of its learning environment, by incorporating field trips to communities outside the college. Findings reveal that participants not only had the opportunity to learn about cultures other than their own but to purposely be engaged to participate in meaningful learning activities. Participants discussed that they had to critically reflect on what occurred during a field trip, the intent of the trip, and why the trip was relevant to their learning experiences. This study shows that Trailblazers participants had positive learning experiences by networking with people from diverse backgrounds. Participants gained networking experiences that they could grasp as future professionals. They were introduced to different cultures to celebrate diversity within these communities.

Like the Trailblazers, Links participants were strongly encouraged to get involved on campus. The FYE course introduced participants to student organizations and student events that were offered on campus. Participants mentioned they had to attend a co-curricular activity on campus to meet the course objectives; however, committing to an organization was voluntarily. The FYE course incorporated a civic engagement activity that promoted awareness on campus. Participants stated it was a rewarding experience because they had the chance to “give back” and make a change or difference in the community. An additional way that Links participants

integrated into the college environment was to become a peer mentor for a future FYE course. Because Links participants had a positive experience with their peer-mentor and the FYE course, they often applied to the peer mentor program. This type of involvement led to greater knowledge of their campus, new friendships with students, and supported incoming freshmen.

Overall, results from this study illustrate that FLC participants were successful by getting involved on campus and integrating their experiences into the learning environment. This study shows that participating in a FLC has positive outcomes towards students' attitudes and feelings about their college experience. Students had the chance to visit communities outside the classroom, get involved on campus, and become peer mentors. Participants felt it was important to be engaged in the learning environment because they wanted to be connected to the campus. The results reveal that they have adapted to college and have become successful students due at least partly to the activities and co-curriculum experiences offered through a FLC.

#### Limitations

As with any type of research there are limitations to this study. Participants self-selected into this study. Participants in this study may have had different experiences than those who did not participate in this study. Pike (2000) suggested that students in different learning environments have different learning experiences. And, each learning community has its own particular practices that do not speak to all themed learning communities. I realize that not all themed FLCs are represented in this study.

#### Implications of the Study

This study has a several implications for higher education professionals who seek to support first-generation students who are entering college for the first time. Context for this study is the discouraging facts about the transitioning stage of first-year, first-generation

students. Data show that 25% of first-year, first-generation students do not persist to their second year of college (Education Advisor Board, 2016). Students who are entering college for the first time do not have the opportunity to have precollege conversations at home about college expectations and transitioning into college. Padgett, Johnson, Pascarella (2012) suggested that the influence of parents' interpersonal relationships with their children reinforces the values, norms, and expectations about the collegiate experience that non first-generation students use to navigate through their first year of college. The first implication is that the experiences of first-year, first-generation students in this study are shown through participants' stories about feeling lost and not knowing how to navigate college or lacking the understanding that college is not like high school. Participants implied they had to stop thinking like a high school student in order to succeed. A conversation is needed for higher education professionals learn about first-generation students' experiences when they arrive at a campus for the first time; perhaps it should occur during new student orientation. Those professionals should recognize that participants felt the FYE course and belonging to a learning community provided guidance and relief to help them collectively understand the transition into college. If first-generation students do not enroll in a FYE course or learning community, college professionals will need to figure out what resources to make available to first-generation students that will lead student success. This is the first implication of this study.

The second implication is that higher education professionals must be knowledgeable about the needs of first-year, first-generation students. Often faculty and staff do not know a student they teach or work with is first generation until it is revealed by the student. It is important for colleges to do a better job educating their faculty and staff about first-time, first-generation students, who they are, what matters to them, and what they need. Most faculty and

staff do not know that first-generation students come into the learning environment with different experiences than those who are non-first-generation. First-year, first-generation students attend college to further their educational goals with the intent to excel just as their non-first-generation peers do. However, there is something that hinders their success in college. So, what is needed are professionals who understand what matters to these students; professionals who care enough to learn about them and who want to help them succeed.

An ancient proverb says, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” The third implication is for higher education professionals to teach first-year, first-generation students how to fish for information at the college level. Transitioning from high school into college is difficult and overwhelming. However, first-year, first-generation students must learn the college language and logistics in order to survive the following years in college. First-year, first-generation students often come into the environment unsure about the expectations of college and how to survive staying in college. Higher education professionals assume that students already know; they believe someone has given students a survival guide to college. FYE programs have sought to accomplish this goal by providing incoming freshmen resources and tools to successfully make it through their first year. The problem is that FYE programs do not exist at all colleges and universities. Teaching students this very basic concept to “go fish” is imperative to their growth as successful college students. In order for first-year, first-generation students to succeed in college, professionals must find a way to teach students about the basic survival tools for college. The goal is to teach them survival skills early enough in their college career so that they are on track for degree completion. You want them to get the best out of college and maintain the same success in their professional lives.

Therefore, teaching students valuable skills for college survival and lifetime of skills for success should start early and often by college personnel.

The fourth implication is to implement FLCs as first-year programs. Many colleges and universities are implementing first-year programs to revise retention rates, as well as to address challenges first-year students experience when matriculating to college. FLCs are known to be rewarding and create positive outcomes for first-year students. Not all schools have invested in first-year programs or high-impact practices. However, schools that have created FLCs understand that participating in a FLC leads to positive academic transitioning and positive student experiences (Kuh, 2008). Intentional efforts by leaders of the schools should be designed increase learning, engagement, and success for their first-year students. The efforts of higher education leaders can address institutional challenges that affect students. First, creating FLCs can increase retention rates. Students stay in college when they know they belong and become connected to the school. Second, FLCs foster academic and social integration. FLCs incorporate student involvement to engage students through activities and events on campus while academic initiatives support students' growth and success in the classroom. Third, FLCs encourage students to persist. A learning community program for 1 year or 2 semesters increases the chance of academic support and academic stability for students. Colleges and university can do a better job of understanding the goals and outcomes of FLCs and incorporate more of them into first-year programs.

The final implication is to extend the duration of learning communities. FLCs sound like they are yearlong, when in fact they are often for 1 semester. FLCs should extend to a student's second semester, provided it is within the student's freshman year. Findings from this study indicate that first-year, first-generation students perceive their FLC as rewarding, supportive, and

family-like. Having a yearlong learning community allows students to persist to their second semester with relative ease and success. Participants mentioned that their FLC gave them a sense of belonging at the university. Strayhorn (2012) suggested that belonging with peers, in the classroom, or on campus is a crucial part of the college experience; it can affect a student's level of academic achievement or whether he or she stays in school. If learning communities provide the foundation of belonging, then what sense of community does a freshman have if the learning community is no longer available to him or her at the end of one semester? Participants revealed after their FLC semester ended that they scrambled to take classes with each other because they were comfortable and familiar with one another. A yearlong learning community would give students who are thinking about leaving college after their first year, a stronger first-year experience that might influence their interest in staying in college.

#### Recommendations for Future Research

The findings from this study show that students perceive their FLC as a positive experience. FLCs provided supportive faculty, access to campus resources, help navigating college, and a sense of belonging to the academic community. The first recommendation for future research is to investigate how students who have been part of a FLC perceive their second semester of college. Incoming freshmen retain a lot of information and interact with many people during their first semester. Students remember what is important for them to move forward but often miss the key pieces to surviving college. The outcome of this study is that first-year, first-generation students in a learning community do, in fact, persist while surviving their first semester in college with the support of a learning community. However, the literature lacks information about how first-year, first-generation students perceive their second semester in

college after being enrolled in a FLC. Researchers should also track first-year students as they persist in college and pursue long-term educational goals.

Second, additional research is needed on how adult learners, or nontraditional learners, perceive a FLC compared to traditional-aged learners. In this study two participants were nontraditional learners enrolled in a FLC, so the majority of students were traditional-age. One of the nontraditional learners felt her life experiences had superseded what was taught in the FYE course, although, she saw an advantage of attending the FYE course was to offer help to other students. Prior research suggests that adult learners come into the learning environment with lots of experiences and prior learning. Mezirow (1991) suggested that these students want to make meaning of these prior experiences. To fully understand how to engage adult learners in a traditional-age learning environment, then additional research is needed to identify the resources and activities that would support them.

This study highlights the perceptions of first-year, first-generation students in a FLC. It was important to conduct this study to better understand the experiences of first-generation students that participated in a FLC. Various higher education institutions rather private or public, 2 year or 4 year colleges have implemented high-impact practices to support the success and transitioning for first-year students. US Department of Education (2013) reported that colleges and universities like Drake University, Elgin Community College, University of South Florida, and Wheelock College have proven that an increase in fall-to-fall retention rates among first-year students is a result of their participation in high-impact practices. Thus, additional research to understand the direct and indirect outcomes of learning communities may be relevant to institutions that want to increase retention and graduation rates among first-year, first-generation students.



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APPENDIX A

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

Participant Name/Code: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Title of Study: *The experiences of first-generation students in a freshman learning community.*

Researcher:

Charnell Gilbert-Thomas

Graduate Student

Department of Counseling, Adult and Higher Education at  
Northern Illinois University

I agree to participate in the research study titled *The Experiences of First-Generation Students in a Freshman Learning Community* being conducted by Charnell Gilbert-Thomas, a graduate student at Northern Illinois University. I have been informed that the purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions of first-generation regarding their experiences in a freshman learning community (FLC).

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to do the following: complete an individual interview approximately 90 minutes in length. I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice, and that if I have any additional questions concerning this study, I may contact Charnell Gilbert-Thomas, (773) 213-7707, [charnell.thomas@gmail.com](mailto:charnell.thomas@gmail.com). I understand that if I wish further information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at (815) 753-8588.

I understand that the intended benefits of this study include generating outcomes on the perceptions of first-generation students, regarding their experiences in a FLC. Benefits of this study may alter current practices of student and academic affairs when servicing incoming freshman that are first-generation students. Such benefits are creating effective policies, incorporating safe and diverse learning environments, and obtain educational resources for the learning environment.

The researcher anticipates minimal risk to individuals choosing to participate in this study, which would not be beyond what they would expect to encounter in everyday life. Another potential risk and/or discomfort I could experience during this study may include being asked questions I find to be of a sensitive nature. I understand that I may decline to answer any questions I choose and that I may end my participation in this study at any time.

Finally, I understand that all information gathered during this experiment will be kept confidential and any reporting of data will be done in aggregate so that the individual identities of study participants are protected. The audio-recorded interviews will be destroyed after they are transcribed following the conclusion of data collection efforts. Research records, including interview transcripts and demographic information on participants, will be kept in a locked file; only the researcher will have access to the records. These records will be kept for a period of up to 3 years before they are destroyed.

I realize that Northern Illinois University policy does not provide for compensation for, nor does the University carry insurance to cover injury or illness incurred as a result of participation in University sponsored research projects. I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form and I am at least 18 years of age.

---

 Signature of Participant

Date

---

 Signature of Researcher

Date

### CONSENT TO AUDIO-RECORDING AND TRANSCRIPTION

This study involves the audio of your interviews with the researcher. Neither your name nor any other identifying information will be associated with the audio or audio recordings or the transcript. Only the researcher will be able to listen to the recordings.

The audio recordings will be transcribed by the researcher and erased within 3 years after data collection procedures end. Transcripts of your interview may be reproduced in whole or in part for use in presentations or written products that result from this study. Neither your name nor any other identifying information (such as your voice) will be used in presentation or in written products resulting from the study.

By signing this consent statement, I am allowing the researcher to audio tape me as part of this research. I also understand that this consent for recording is effective until the following date: 8/30/2018. On or before that date, the tapes will be destroyed.

---

 Signature of Participant

Date

---

 Signature of Researcher

Date

APPENDIX B

LETTER TO DIRECTOR

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I, Charnell Gilbert-Thomas, have received approval from your school's IRB office to invite students to participate in a research study I am conducting through individual interviews. You may have received an e-mail from that department advising you of this approval.

The purpose of the study is to understand the perceptions of first-generation students regarding their experiences in a freshman learning community.

This research has been reviewed and approved by Northern Illinois University's Research Compliance Division of Research and Graduate Studies (see included IRB approval documentation). If you have any comments or concerns resulting from students' participation in this study, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance, Division of Research and Graduate Studies, Northern Illinois University DeKalb, IL 60115, (815) 753-8588 or email: [researchcompliance@niu.edu](mailto:researchcompliance@niu.edu).

I understand that school administrators and staff are busy; however, I hope you will consider my request to conduct research within your program. I am requesting that you contact and follow-up with the students via email that had been enrolled in the learning community asking if they would volunteer to participate in the researcher's study. I will call you within the next two weeks to provide you with more information about the study and to discuss potential students' participation. I look forward collaborating with you on this exciting research study.

Sincerely,

Charnell Gilbert-Thomas (Researcher)

APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT FLYER

Dear Student,

I am writing you to let you know about a research study that you have the option to take part in. I am contacting you because you were enrolled in a freshman learning community (FLC) from Fall 2012 or beyond at the university.

The purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions of first-generation students regarding their experiences in a FLC. FLCs are designed to improve students' ability to learn and to create a safe place to learn within the classroom. Participating in FLCs ease first-generation students' transitions to college by helping them build their identities as college students and find their voices in the learning environment. I wish to investigate further how do first-generation students describe their experiences when participating in a FLC.

Your participation in the research is voluntary. I am looking for participants who agree to take part in the study and who are:

- A first-generation undergraduate student
- Second-year student at the institution and beyond
- Over 18 years old
- Enrolled in a FLC in Fall 2012 or beyond

If you choose to take part in the study, I will review all study details with you at a time that is mutually convenient for both of us. Participation in the study will require a 90 minutes individual interview.

There is no cost to participate in the study.

Please let me know if you are interested by contacting me at [charnell.thomas@gmail.com](mailto:charnell.thomas@gmail.com). I am happy to review any study details with you and answer any questions you may have.

Taking part in this research is voluntary. You may choose not to take part. If you decide not to take part in this study, your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the university.

Sincerely,

Researcher



## APPENDIX D

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Name (this name should not be your real name):
2. What is your demographic and educational background:
  - a. Ethnicity
  - b. Age
  - c. Identity, male or female
  - d. First-Generation, parents do not have a college degree
  - e. Grade classification
  - f. Intended major
3. What attracted you to the institution?
4. How did you learn about the learning community program?
5. What were some of the long-term goals that you got out of the learning community?
  - a. Experiences
  - b. Expectations
  - c. Outcomes
6. What type of learning activities took place in the program, both inside/outside the classroom
7. What are some of the benefits of the learning community?
8. How did you feel about your college transition? And, as a first-generation student?
9. What was a typical class in the learning community?
10. To what extent did your learning community influence your approach to learning?
11. Tell me about college life? Where you involved?
12. What campus resources were available to you?
13. How did the learning community help with academic support?
14. How did your learning community connect you to faculty inside and outside the classroom?

15. How did the learning community connect you to others inside outside of classes?
16. What additional opportunities have you had as a result of your participation in the learning community or at the university?
17. Where there any challenges? If so, what were the outcomes?
18. What other campus services or departments helped you succeed on campus?

## APPENDIX E

### PARTICIPANTS DEMOGRAPHIC CHARTS

## PARTICIPANTS BY ETHNICITY

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5   
*African American*

3   
*Hispanic*

4   
*White*

1   
*African*

## PARTICIPANTS BY GENDER

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7   
*Male*

6   
*Female*

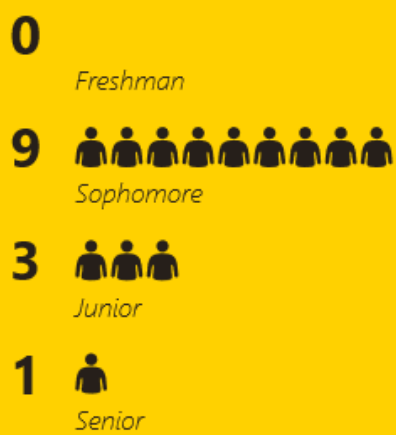
## PARTICIPANTS BY AGE

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## PARTICIPANTS BY GRADE CLASSIFICATION

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## PARTICIPANTS BY COLLEGE MAJOR

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