Hope for today and tomorrow: identity construction power, and persistence of community college women who are first in their families to attend college

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HOPE FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION, POWER, AND PERSISTENCE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE WOMEN WHO ARE FIRST IN THEIR FAMILIES TO ATTEND COLLEGE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

In

The Department of Educational Theory, Policy and Practice

by

Crystal Deer Lee
B.A., Louisiana State University, 1994
M.L.I.S., Louisiana State University, 1998
May 2007
I dedicate this dissertation to the four women who participated in this study
and to others who strive for understanding and a better tomorrow.
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The people in my life who love me, teach me, guide me, encourage me, and inspire me are the reason I have completed this dissertation work. Thank you.

Dissertation Committee

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation was a case study of four community college women who were first in their families to attend college. Through the case study, I discussed and analyzed the higher education and political construct “first-generation.” In the research process, the limits of “first-generation” were presented and discussed in relation to how the category is problematic through social discourse. Only one of the students found considerable importance or personal meaning in her “first-generation” status. The other three participants did not find personal meaning in this status prior to the study. This research confirms London’s (1996) finding that students themselves do not necessarily find anything unique about their situations or anything in common with other students simply based on their being the first in their families to attend college. This suggests that the “first-generation” construct may be viewed primarily as a higher education versus an individual construct.

This study further explored the ways in which the participants constructed and explained their own identities and challenges in regard to participation and persistence in higher education. A significant finding was participants’ distinctions of their career and academic identities. Three of the students developed a career identity in the sense that they were pursuing degrees that related to a specific profession or career. Yet, within these three participants, one did not develop an academic identity as it related to attending college for the desire of learning for learning’s sake. She had developed a strong career identity, but not a strong academic identity. The fourth participant, even after her fourth semester of college, had not developed a career identity, yet she had
developed a strong academic identity in that she voiced a strong desire and thirst for knowledge and learning.

All four of the women voiced personal control over their finances and life choices in general. All four of the students held positive outlooks for their futures regarding gaining more independence, achieving their personal or professional goals, and becoming “smarter.” None of the four students viewed themselves as powerless or at risk. Through this research and analysis, I found a contraposition with the term “at-risk” as it relates to first-generation students. If the students do not view themselves at risk, then it must be the institutions of higher education that are “at-risk” of losing the students.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

First-generation students. An ineloquent, formulated phrase that captures little a
euphemism for a great surge of human striving by people of many different races,
backgrounds, and ages. It is yet another label, one whose currency is owed to the
needs of researchers and bureaucracies to classify and categorize large numbers of people
who are the first in the histories of their families to attend college.

(London, 1996, p. 9)

Deconstructing the First-Generation Label

Do I cash in on the currency, which would perhaps be an easier road? Why not just use
the established category and do my study, not caring about the value and meaning in a
potentially pejorative label that groups together diverse individuals under a single common
category which labels them at-risk? Or do I step back and critically consider my use of
language, research, and position? What are my needs? Completing a work called a dissertation
to demonstrate my abilities as a researcher capable of making a unique contribution to higher
education discourses, finishing a degree for personal development, including mobility benefits
that may follow; showing myself and those who know me that I can rise to meet this intellectual
challenge; and, finally, choosing a topic and “subjects”- participants with whom I can learn from
as well as learn about. This study seeks to understand more about community college women
who are first in their families to attend college: their involvement, persistence, and who they are
beyond a “first-generation” label.

This chapter will provide a critique of the label “first-generation,” explain the need to
study persistence of women holistically, and present some relevant characteristics of two-year
institutions and community college students. It will also outline the research questions for the study and address the need for research on persistence of community college women who are first in their families to attend college, especially within their first-semester.

In selecting a topic for inquiry, I began with wanting to study the persistence of “first-generation” females; however, informed and challenged by both poststructural feminist literature and current literature on first-generation students, I began to question the nature of the “subjects” of my inquiry. What are the needs both of the women who are first in their families to attend college and of other non-first generation first-semester women? Do these groups of women perceive a need to grow personally, to feel a part of a new community (the college), to improve their view of themselves or others’ views of them, to improve their financial situations, to strengthen their personal agency?

The label or phrase “first-generation” is relatively new. Research on this socially constructed category of students has been useful in many respects in adding to the bodies of knowledge concerning the fact that many minority students, low-income students, females, and older students face challenges to persistence in higher education (Terenzini, Springer, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Ishitani, 2003; Lee, Sax, Kim, Hagedorn, 2004; and Ting, 1998). The classification has provided a funding category for public higher education programs such as the TRIO Student Support Services program which focuses on skills development and personal growth for this large group of students who are first in their families to attend college (Forest & Kinser, 2002). Yet, while I am still very interested in the strivings and success of “first-generation” and women, particularly in the vulnerability of their first-semester, it is important to consider the uses of the category and assumptions carried with such a label because the grouping places concerns of gender, race, class, age and socioeconomic status as a secondary issues.
The category is also exclusionary in that other non-first-generation students from low-income backgrounds and racial or ethnic minorities meet similar types of gender, race, and/or class struggles as do these students. The categorical label also masks pressing issues of gender, race, and class by grouping diverse students together under one classification that may address some concerns related to their being the first in their families to attend college but that still fails to seek a holistic view of their needs which include challenges beyond the “first-generation” characteristic. At face value putting all of these diverse students under one category seems non-discriminatory or race and gender neutral and may address some concerns of inter-generational poverty. However, taking another approach, for instance, gender, as a starting point may be exclusionary in some ways as well; for instance, studying just females. Even so, women as a group have some particular historical, political, and educational concerns that can only be effectively explored through centering gender. Additionally, because the majority of “first-generation” students are females, it seems important to deconstruct and decentralize the category “first-generation” in educational research, looking instead at gender as a starting point for inquiries concerning persistence of women. Further, there are some socio-political issues for women which merit their attention as a group. One very obvious issue is poverty, inasmuch as poverty has been and continues to be feminized in that the majority of Americans faced with poverty are women (Pearce, 1991; Tiamiyu & Mitchell, 2001). Moreover, for many women, college may provide more than an opportunity for intellectual development; it may provide a path out of poverty and a path to improved personal agency.

Who Are They? Let Them Say

It makes more sense to me to approach first-semester women, who are likewise the first in their families to attend college, as complex, capable women rather than as “at-risk” because of
this or that category of their identity. This approach provides more freedom for participants to share their experiences and challenges to persistence as they perceive them. Just knowing that students have characteristics that may be associated with attrition is not enough. Educators need to ask and seek to understand what it is about higher education environments as well as students’ gender, racial, class, cultural identities and experiences that pose threats to their persistence. Further, we need to know how to remove barriers, obstacles, prejudices, and unnecessary challenges to persistence. It is more than academic ability or isolated characteristics that present challenges to persistence for women. Through this study, I am interested in using a holistic approach to explore the ways in which women negotiate their first-semester college experience. I am also interested in better understanding how the students themselves define and construct their identities and how this self-understanding relates to college involvement and persistence.

Retention issues focused on the first-year experience, improving college preparatory education, and first-generation students are receiving significant attention in educational research; yet, marginal conversation exists about how gender, race, and class issues relate to the success of first-semester community college women. Further, over three decades of research has focused on how college impacts student development (eg. Astin, 1977, 1993; Chickering & Reisser, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzinni, 1991). However, there is a gap in educational research concerning how student identity construction upon college entry impacts participation and persistence. Therefore, this study will focus on participants’ identity constructions as formed in relation to academic and social facets of their college experiences.

As a low-income female student coming from a sparsely populated rural part of north Louisiana, I faced the “typical” four-year university first-year transition of being several hours away from my family, but, I also had to face an adjustment to a mostly middle-upper class
student body that was different from me with a different standard of living, a different way of talking and thinking – most not driving “hoopies” like mine that broke down every other week, many wearing name brand clothes, and most talking without a “hick” twang. In many ways, these experiences shaped my own sense of identity and position within the university setting as well as within society. In my rural hometown where I was reared, there were few college educated women and as I left home to attend Louisiana State University in south Louisiana, I began to think about the examples and lack of examples I had in regard to what women could accomplish. In conducting the literature review for this dissertation, I found several examples of researchers who explain learning and ways of knowing as gendered experiences (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). I know in my own undergraduate experience I had to adjust to new ways of approaching knowledge and understanding as strong women role models were few and far between.

Constructing Categories - At Risk - Who Gets to Say?

Higher education environments have been and continue to be difficult to navigate for women and minority students (Astin, Astin, Bayer, & Bisconti, 1997; Bowen & Bok, 1998; Chapman, 1989; Martinez, 2003; Solomon, 1985). By de-centering or destabilizing “first-generation” as a construct and instead centering gender as a starting point for inquiry, I specifically look at the ways in which participants either recognize or fail to recognize “first-generation” as part of their personal identities. Also, by recognizing the complexity and diversity within the group I am studying, I seek to provide each participant an opportunity to share her perspectives about her identities, experiences, and perceived obstacles to persistence. This provides a starting point for exploration that moves beyond a label, category, or at-risk classification. Through my study, I am interested in adding to the educational discourses that
encourage women to find strength in their ways of learning, knowing, understanding, and questioning. I am interested in educational avenues that promote in women of all colors, classes, cultural backgrounds, and sexual orientations a strong sense of self-worth and value in their abilities in all educational disciplines and professional careers.

Educational researchers began studying “first-generation” students in considerable numbers following a 1992 longitudinal study conducted in 1992 by the National Center for Educational Statistics, which indicated approximately 41 percent of high school graduates’ parents had attended college but did not complete a bachelor’s degree. By a stricter definition, 26.5 percent of high school graduates were coming from families where neither parent had any college education (Forest & Kinser, 2002). Special attention is given to these “first-generation” college students in America since higher education is linked to economic stability and because there is such a large percentage of the population affected (Torres, 2002). From this starting point of knowing very little about students who are the first in their families to attend college, we now have moved to knowing a considerable amount. Terenzini, Springer, Yager, Pascarella, and Nora (1996) conducted a large scale study of 2,685 students at 23 diverse institutions. Of these, 825 were the first in their families to attend college, and 1,860 were non-first students. Their research found that “first-generation” students tend to come from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds and are more likely to be women, members of a racial minority, parents of dependent children, and older. Further, “first-generation” students have been categorized as a group at risk of academic failure and of dropping out (Terenzini, Springer, et al, 1996, Ishitani, 2003; Lee, Sax, Kim, Hagedorn, 2004; Ting, 1998). The categorizing of “at-risk” concerns me; what makes students “at-risk,”—their race, their gender, their socioeconomic status, their first-generation characteristic, or perhaps a combination of these? In fact, the phrase “at-risk” could
be detrimental to the self-value of students and could cause educators to take an unfounded negative “objective” view of students.

Categories and subcategories can be used in every approach. For instance, within gender there can be masculine and feminine characteristics as well as characteristics associated with race and class (Harding, 1987). However, feminist theory offers a useful approach to understanding plurality, the value and meaning of lived experiences, and the purposes and usefulness of research (Harding, 1987). By using feminist theory, my study approaches “the subjects,” the women participants in my study, not as divided and categorized, but as complex human actors socially, historically, and politically located in their environments.

Although still centering upon “first-generation,” London’s (1996) study provides an example of a more holistic kind of approach to understanding persistence. London conducted hundreds of interviews with undergraduates from two-year and four-year institutions across America and found that while “first-generation” students did find the transition to college life difficult academically and personally, socially, they rarely identified themselves as “first generation” (p. 11). They did not view their first-generation characteristic as a difference from or a commonality with other students, so this is an imposed identity of sorts. Additionally, London found that students coming to college became “increasingly aware of the constellations of social, family, historical, economic, and philosophical processes that contribute to who they are, their own identity, the workings of social institutions, and fate itself” (p. 11). Essentially, these students come to understand more about power relations within society and they recognize some of their own agency in directing their futures. So, the students themselves provide the most accurate account of their identities and what challenges or risks may threaten their persistence and personal success.
Feminist Poststructural Perspectives and Identity

Identity, power-relations, language, and discourse are central tenets to poststructuralism, a theory that has aroused much debate, consternation, and even concern by some about the stability of higher education research and practice (Constas, 1998; Pillow, 2000; St. Pierre, 2000). Yet, feminist poststructuralism provides an intelligible framework for striving to understand the unique lived experiences of my participants and for making informed connections between their experiences amidst power-relations and discourses, both locally and more broadly in the higher education and social arenas. Inasmuch as my thinking has been stirred by feminist poststructuralist thought, my study will focus on first-semester community college women’s persistence. In a holistic spirit, I will view my participants’ experiences individually and as a group, leaving wide-open for exploration the background histories, race, class, gender issues, and “first-generation” characteristics for consideration as they relate to the phenomenon of persistence. Through an analysis of their individual stories I will strive to bring together links or common threads within their experiences to inform theory and practice.

Community Colleges and Community College Students

According to the United States National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), there are 1,844 two-year colleges in the United States; these two-year colleges accounted for nearly half of the 4,168 (NCES, 2003a) public and private higher education institutions in 2001/2002 and 39% of the total 15,927,987 higher education enrollment in the fall of 2001 (NCES, 2003b). Community and technical colleges provide a critical service in American democracy by providing open admission for the pursuit of an associate’s degree, transferable junior college course credits toward a baccalaureate, and practical trade skills for the world of work. Although two-year colleges are often the first choice for many students, there are many students for whom
two-year colleges provide an alternative route to a bachelor’s degree when they are denied access to a four-year institution of choice. In this regard, community colleges are diverse in their function and in their student population.

Two-year colleges differ from universities in regard to mission, purpose, faculty roles, and student bodies. Universities tend to emphasize research as primary in their missions, placing teaching and community service in secondary and tertiary order of importance; two-year colleges regard teaching as the highest priority. The purpose of two-year colleges also differs from universities in that universities serve to provide bachelors level degrees and above while two-year colleges serve to provide associates degrees, transferable junior college level credits, and workforce training, including technical programs. Research fills a large portion of the time of university faculty, whereas two-year college faculty members spend the majority of their time on teaching and learning. Faculty teaching junior college credits at two-year colleges must have a master’s degree in the subject they teach, but a Ph.D. is the credential required at most universities. Two-year and four-year institutions are similar in providing post-secondary courses and in serving the communities in which they are situated.

Two-year college student bodies have diverse backgrounds and needs. There are adult learners and younger learners, full-time and part-time. Most are commuters, most work several hours per week and care for either young children or aged parents, many are academically under-prepared, and many rely on financial aid or their own income to pay for college expenses. Whether they are young adults entering immediately from high school or older students coming to college after a delay due to caring for family or time in the work force, college is a transition for first-year students. Many low-income students, in particular, face a transition in learning to manage work, school, and often-times family responsibilities in addition to understanding the...
college’s expectations related to quality of work, attendance, participation, and behavior. Also, many community college first-year students come unprepared for college level reading, writing, and mathematics and must take one or several preparatory courses before beginning courses for credit. Each of these differing characteristics impacts student experience and learning outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993).

The first-year experience is the most important in terms of students’ decisions concerning whether to continue in or to leave college (Barefoot, 2000; Tinto, 1993). The transition and challenges many students face often lead them to alternatives other than higher education. Some may be forced to leave due to poor academic performance, while others may voluntarily leave to direct energies elsewhere, for instance to work or family responsibilities. Both types of departure are a concern, as many first-year students would likely stay to complete their specific goals if only colleges helped them overcome challenges.

The concern for persistence is across the board in higher education; however, it is perhaps more critical in community colleges. According to the American College Testing, Inc. (ACT), the national persistence rate from first to second year for Ph.D. granting public universities was 82.9% but was only 51.3% for two-year public colleges (ACT, 2004). Additionally, because women comprise a large percentage of higher education enrollments (NCES, 2003c), it is imperative that educational researchers take notice of first-year women and, within this population, the gender, race, and class challenges they have in order to promote their persistence.

According to 2003 NCES statistics, females comprised 56% of the total fall enrollment and 56% of the total undergraduate enrollment in degree granting institutions in 2001 (NCES, 2003c). Females also earned 57%, 58.7%, and 46.3% of the bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral
degrees, respectively, in 2001-02 (NCES, 2002). At first glance, women tend to be faring quite well in regard to equity as it relates to achievement because they have been coming to higher education and earning degrees in larger percentages (undergraduate and masters levels) than men. However, women are not proportionally earning undergraduate degrees in business, engineering, and the social sciences (NCES, 2005) and are not represented proportionally at professional and Ph.D. levels (NCES, 2003b). Additionally, very little is known about the persistence and departure of women in higher education. Tinto (1993) states, “even with the recent surge of interest in persistence we still know relatively little about the specific attributes of attrition among females” (p. 76). Many females are leaving higher education for reasons very different from males (Tinto, 1993, p. 77). Males typically leave for academic reasons whereas, females tend to leave “voluntarily” due to forces related to continued social expectations regarding the role of females as related to family (Tinto, 1993, p. 77). Tinto’s view of women’s departure as being “voluntary” is a matter for consideration. Their leaving may be “voluntary” from the institution’s perspective, but from their own perspective may be that they do not have a choice because the sacrifices they would have to make to stay in college would be too great. A recent report by NCES (2005) further confirms that students experience some gendered obstacles to persistence:

Men were more likely than women to cite academic problems (6 vs. 2 percent) or the need to work (28 vs. 18 percent) as reasons for their departure, while women were more likely to cite a change in family status (12 vs. 4 percent) or conflicts at home or personal problems (14 vs. 6 percent) (p. 34).

Research exploring the experiences of first-semester women is necessary to determine how gendered and other obstacles may be impeding their success. If more were known about the
experiences of women in college and the threats to their persistence, then higher education institutions could do more to facilitate success.

Statement of the Problem

Student retention is a major issue for higher education. It is imperative to consider the role that gender, class, and ethnicity have in persistence. Additionally, several studies have confirmed involvement or engagement is linked to persistence, finding students’ level of involvement in the academic and social aspects of college is positively linked to student development, knowledge acquisition, and likelihood to complete educational goals (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). What are some of the ways first-semester women are involved, engaged, and integrated with peers and faculty? Are they engaged with the mainstream culture and sub-cultures? Do they feel connected to “the college” at all? If they perceive themselves as uninvolved, what are some of the reasons for that disengagement? Alternatively, if they are not engaged with college peers and faculty, with whom and in what are they engaged? What are the gendered, raced, and classed obstacles to college engagement and how do first-semester women navigate their first-semester experiences?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this dissertation was to gain a better understanding of the persistence among community college women who are the first in their families to attend college. This was accomplished through exploring participants’ identity construction, personal goals, experiences, and perceptions as they engaged in their first semester of college. The following research questions guided the study:

**Research Question 1:** How do women who are first in their families to attend college describe their identities and personal agency in relation to the college experience?
**Research Question 2:** How do women who are first in their families to attend college describe their multiple identities, and how does their understanding of social discourses affect their involvement and persistence in higher education?

**Research Question 3:** What do community college women who are first in the families to attend college perceive that college attendance will mean for their futures?

For purposes of this study, identity construction is defined as the way in which individuals describe the characteristics, roles, personality traits, etc. that comprise how they view themselves and how they are viewed by others. Power and personal agency are used interchangeably in this study as these relate to an individual’s personal ability to shape one’s actions and future. At the start of this study, the term persistence was used in the sense of progress toward completing an associate or bachelor’s degree. However, at the end of the study, I began to think about the term persistence in a different way, one which is thought about more from a student’s perspective in relation to her individual goals and progress toward achieving those goals, whether or not these deal directly degree attainment.

**Significance of the Study**

This dissertation investigated the experiences of first-semester community college women who are first in their families to attend college. The study was conducted at a rural community college in Louisiana by exploring the phenomenon of persistence, which is a critical issue both for the State and the nation. If students obtain their educational goals, then higher education institutions are considered effective, and American society benefits from a more educated citizenry. The study is significant because there is a gap in existing literature on the persistence of first-semester community college women. If researchers in higher education want to know more about the retention of female students, they should ask the women who know best
about the nature of their own persistence. Additionally, it is important to produce studies not just about but also for women in order to continue to advance equality and social justice in American higher education.

The findings of this research inform theories on higher education involvement and social integration. This study also informs practice because it provides academic advisors, instructors, and administrators a better understanding of community college women, so services, instruction, and academic advising may be made more effective in relation to serving them.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter one provides a critique of the “first-generation” label. The chapter also explains the need for holistic studies concerning persistence of “first-generation” community college women during their first-semester. Chapter two provides an in-depth literature review of involvement and integration theories as well as the problem of persistence particularly during the first year of college. Chapter two also explains feminist poststructuralism and its usefulness in exploring student engagement, involvement, and persistence in this study. Chapter three provides information concerning researcher positioning and explains the methodology used in this study. Chapters four through seven include the case study chapters for each of the women participating in this study. Chapter eight provides the analysis of the research questions, and chapter nine includes implications and closing discussion.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

“We allow our ignorance to prevail upon us and make us think we can survive alone, alone in patches, alone in groups, alone in races, even alone in genders.”

(Maya Angelou, 1990)

Why students come to college and why they stay or leave are complex questions not easily answered by statistical data sets; however, by studying lived experiences, researchers may come to a clearer understanding of the answers to these questions. The majority of college students come to higher education in order to complete a degree, so what changes or happens to students to make them change their minds? Tinto (1993) states:

The paths to degree completion are many and often long-drawn-out. Individuals are more tenacious in their pursuit of college degrees and more varied in their patterns of departure than previously pictured. More importantly, their leaving appears to be more situational in character than patterned by broad attributes of either individuals or institutions (p.33).

As such, this dissertation explored the experiences of community college women who are first in their families to attend college. Through exploring their involvement in the academic and social realms of college, I sought to gain better insight as to participants’ individual educational goals and persistence. This literature review explains Tinto’s and Astin’s theories as they relate to persistence, provides a brief discussion on the role of community colleges in America and in Louisiana, gives a rationale for studying women as a group in regard to furthering knowledge about persistence, discusses feminist poststructuralist theory, presents some first-year student challenges, and discusses developmental theory with implications for this study.
Alexander Astin’s *theory of involvement* and Vincent Tinto’s *theory of student integration and departure* are two widely accepted theories about student persistence in higher education. Only recently have some begun to question these theories for positional bias. For example, Tierney (1992) critiques social integrationist theory, pointing out it is important to critically question existing educational theories and practices in relation to the standpoint of the administration, students, and person conducting research or developing theories. For example, both Astin and Tinto’s theories reflect behaviors of the middle class, white male norm and do not focus specifically or investigate in-depth conditions affecting persistence of women and minorities. These theories make several assumptions about “normal” student behavior and do not consider experiences of women and minorities in any depth. There is no single condition for all women or all minorities, so it is imperative to ask questions about how persistence differs in experiences of individuals and how identity -- including race, class, and/or gender -- may impact student participation and retention.

During the last 30 years, researchers in higher education have given much attention to the phenomenon of student retention, development, and departure (Astin, 1977; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Noel, Levitz, Saluri, & Associates, 1985). More recently, researchers have begun to study college learning and social environments as well as students’ experiences in regard to how these interplay in relation to student outcomes, satisfaction, and persistence (Astin, 1993; Astin, 1999a; Astin, 1999b; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzenni, 1991; Tinto, 1993; Upcraft, Gardner, & Associates, 1989). However, these theories have not addressed how a student’s identity upon college entry impacts participation and persistence in higher education. Here, I will discuss Astin’s and Tinto’s theories separately, then explain how they relate to my study of persistence.
Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement

Astin’s theory of student involvement is defined and explained in an article originally published in 1984, “Student Involvement: a developmental theory for higher education,” and further expounded upon and supported in What Matters in College, a study of over 20,000 students, 25,000 faculty members, and 200 institutions (Astin, 1993; Astin, 1999b). Astin (1999b) explains concisely, “student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (518). Further, Astin explains that motivation, as defined and studied by Robert Pace, certainly is part of involvement, but motivation is more concerned with how an individual feels or thinks, whereas involvement is concerned with the behavioral aspects of what a student does (Astin, 1999b, p. 519).

According to Astin (1999b), this theory of student involvement has five basic postulates:

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects. The objects may be highly generalized (the student experience) or highly specific (preparing for a chemistry examination).

2. Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum; that is, different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student manifests different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times.

3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. The extent of a student’s involvement in academic work, for instance, can be measured quantitatively (how many hours the student spends studying) and qualitatively (whether the student reviews and comprehends reading assignments or simply stares at the textbook and daydreams).
4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.

5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement. (p. 519)

Astin explains the last two propositions are not truly postulates “because they are subject to empirical proof;” yet, they have the greatest potential for developing effective student educational programs (p. 519). Further, Astin (1999b) explains the concept of involvement in a way easy to understand by saying, “if we conceive of involvement as occurring along a continuum, the act of dropping out can be viewed as the ultimate form of noninvolvement, and dropping out anchors the involvement continuum at the lowest end” (p. 524).

In *What Matters in College* (1993) Astin describes two distinct forms of student involvement. The first form of involvement relates to students’ experiences upon initial college entry, including such actions as choosing a residence, seeking financial aid, and investigating a college major. Astin explains, “the second, and much more extensive, class of involvement measures includes the so-called intermediate outcomes that can only be known after the student has been in college for some period of time” (p. 365). These measures are placed into five broad categories, including: “academic involvement, involvement with faculty, involvement with student peers, involvement in work, and other forms of involvement” (Astin, p. 365). These two conceptual forms of involvement -- involvement upon entry to college and the many and varied forms of involvement students may participate in while in college -- help make sense of an otherwise obtuse term. Astin’s “theory of involvement” provided a conceptual framework for crafting questions to better understand involvement in this study. I constructed several interview
protocol questions that directly related to students’ initial experiences and decisions to come to college; to their involvement and interactions with faculty, staff, and peers; and to their schedules and energy investments in regard to the time they spent on academic efforts, jobs, and their personal lives and relationships.

Astin (1993) explains the effects of both of these two conceptual types, first explaining the three forms of involvement upon initial entry. On-campus residence, Astin states, has three direct positive effects, including the “attainment of the bachelor’s degree, satisfaction with faculty, and willingness to re-enroll in the same college” (p. 367). Astin also explains that the results of this study confirm the results of findings in *Four Critical Years* (1977), that residence on campus has positive and direct effects on retention (1993, p. 367). Additionally, financial aid in the form of institutional support is “the only form of financial aid that seems to have measurable direct effects on student development” (Astin, 1993, p. 368). Astin explains the reasoning appears to be students’ “knowledge” that they are receiving merit based institutional support serves as a “motivating force for higher academic achievement” (Astin, 1993, p. 368). Lastly, Astin explains that fourteen categories of freshmen choice of major field were examined, and of these, biological science, business, education, engineering, health professions, humanities, fine arts, physical science, psychology, social science, and other technical majors had direct effects on student development outcomes; however, agriculture, mathematics, and statistics produced none. Effects of student outcomes varied based on degree choice, but some of the examples of outcomes included completion of a bachelors degree, graduating with honors, GRE and LSAT scores, and self-reported growth in analytical and problem solving skills (Astin, 1993).
Astin (1993) also explains the effects of each of the five broad categories of the second form of involvement – academic involvement, involvement with faculty, involvement with student peers, involvement in work, and other forms of involvement -- which happens over a period of time while a student attends college. Astin’s conceptual framework aided in defining involvement for this dissertation and assisted in developing qualitative questions for use in gaining an understanding of participants’ involvement in the various aspects of their first semester of college.

First, academic involvement is divided into three categories, including “time allocation, courses taken, and specific learning experiences” (Astin, 1993, p. 375). Astin refers to time allocation such as how many hours students spend during the week and over previous years studying, attending class, doing homework, or using a computer (p. 375). Not surprisingly, Astin finds and reports, “basically, hours spent studying is positively related to nearly all academic outcomes: retention, graduating with honors, enrollment in graduate school, all three scores on the NTE, and all self-reported increases in cognitive and affective skills” (p. 376). Astin explains that the results of this 1993 study support the theory of involvement and that “the most basic form of academic involvement – studying and doing homework – has stronger and more widespread positive effects than almost any other involvement measure or environmental measure” (p. 376). In regard to courses taken, specific student outcomes increased with the number of courses taken in specific subject matter. For example, verbal skills, writing skills, critical thinking skills, and general knowledge increased with the number of English courses taken, and analytical and problem solving skills increased with the number of mathematics courses taken (pp. 377-379). Likewise, specific learning experiences in programs such as ethnic or women’s studies, study abroad, and internships all had positive effects on student outcomes.
such as attitudes regarding diversity, liberalism, and cultural awareness (pp. 377-379).

Involvement with faculty is defined by Astin (1993) as student-faculty interaction in or outside of the classroom. Astin explains that, after controlling for other variables, the strongest positive correlations between student-faculty interaction and student outcomes includes perception of student-oriented faculty and satisfaction with faculty; other substantial positive correlations include satisfaction with quality of instruction, student support services, and the overall college experience (p. 383). Astin essentially says that student-faculty interaction is positively correlated with several outcomes such as achieving a higher college GPA, completing a degree, graduating with honors, and enrolling in post-graduate or professional programs (p. 383).

Involvement with peers or student-student interaction has many positive correlations with student outcomes; in fact, “the peer-group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (Astin, 1993, pp. 398). Astin explains that student-student interaction includes any of the following: talking about classes, doing group projects, playing intramural sports, joining a fraternity or sorority, discussing issues of diversity, socializing with a member outside one’s racial or ethnic background, engaging in campus protest, holding a student office, and the number of hours a week students spend engaging in student clubs or student organizations (p. 385). Astin reports that peer contact has the strongest positive correlations with the following: general knowledge, leadership personality measure, self-reported growth in leadership, public speaking, and interpersonal skills as well as overall academic development, knowledge of a particular field, problem-solving and analytical skills, critical thinking, cultural awareness, and preparation for graduate or professional school (p. 385).

Involvement in work is explained by Astin (1993) as any part-time, full-time, on-campus,
or off-campus employment. Astin explains that full-time employment is associated with a “uniformly negative” pattern of student outcomes (p. 378). Essentially, Astin reports full-time employment is negatively associated with the following academic outcomes: “GPA, graduating with honors, enrollment in graduate or professional school, and self-reported growth in Cultural Awareness, interpersonal skills, knowledge of a field or discipline, and preparation for graduate school” (p. 388). Astin also explains full-time work has uniformly negative effects basically on all areas of student satisfaction (p. 388). The only type of work positively associated with student outcomes is part-time “on-campus” work, which is “positively associated with attainment of a bachelor’s degree and with virtually all areas of self-reported cognitive and affective growth” (p. 388). Off-campus part-time employment, however, had the opposite pattern of effects. Astin explains part-time on-campus student employees spend a considerable amount of time on campus talking with other students and perhaps faculty, which provides on-campus students a “greater degree of immersion in the collegiate environment,” ultimately making up for the time they may otherwise be involved with other positive forms of involvement, including studying, spending time with peers, or interaction with faculty; students working part-time off-campus do not have this kind of opportunity or “trade-off” (Astin, pp. 388-389).

Finally, Astin (1993) addresses seven other forms of involvement, including time students spend watching television, commuting, attending religious services, doing volunteer work, getting married, receiving personal or vocational counseling, and using alcohol (p. 389). First, television is negatively associated with almost all academic outcomes, and Astin explains this is because it is an isolated and passive activity that does not require student involvement (p. 391). Second, commuting also produces a pattern of negative effects, which Astin says is similar to working off campus and working full-time. Astin explains the more commuting a student
does, the less satisfied the student is with all areas of the college environment, excluding facilities (p. 390). Astin further states commuting is “negatively related to attainment of the bachelor’s degree, enrollment in graduate or professional school, and self-reported growth in leadership ability and in interpersonal skills” and has negative effects on “self-rating of emotional health and positive effects on feeling depressed and feeling overwhelmed” (p. 390-391). This dissertation focuses exclusively on commuter students; as such, the negative effects associated with commuting are particularly important to explore through qualitative methods in this dissertation.

Third, attending religious services has a pattern of affective and cognitive outcomes; the negative effects are on hedonism, liberal versus conservative views, alcohol consumption, and Libertarianism; the positive effects are on feminism, getting married, tutoring other students, voting, and being elected to a student office (Astin, 1993, p. 391). Attending religious services has some other negative effects on smoking cigarettes, feeling overwhelmed, and MCAT scores; other positive effects are on self-ratings of emotional health, social activism, and willingness to re-enroll in the same college (Astin, p. 391). Fourth, doing volunteer work is strongly associated with a pattern of positive correlations, including social activism, leadership, participation in demonstrations, self-rated leadership skills, and tutoring other students (Astin, p. 392). Another positive correlation includes choosing a major in clinical psychology or medicine (Astin, p. 392). Some negative correlations associated with participating in volunteer work include the commitment to the goal of being very well off financially as well as the view that the primary purpose of college is to increase an individual’s personal wealth and that a single person has not much ability to change society (Astin, p. 392).

Fifth, marriage has its strongest positive effects associated with the goal of raising a
family and the strongest negative effects on alcohol consumption and hedonism with weak but significant negative effects on one’s self-reported growth in cultural awareness, interpersonal skills, and leadership abilities (Astin, p. 392). Sixth, Astin (1993) separates counseling into vocational and career counseling and personal or psychological counseling. The former has positive effects on “several personality measures – Leadership, Scholarship, Social Activism, Hedonism, Faculty, Diversity Orientation, Social Change Orientation, and Trust in Administration” (Astin, p. 393). It is also positively associated with several behavioral outcomes including tutoring other students, alcohol consumptions, being elected to a student office, voting, and attending recitals or concerts as well as choosing a major in the social sciences field (Astin, p. 393). The latter type of counseling, personal or psychological counseling is associated with no effect on self-reported growth, but has positive effects on feeling depressed, feeling overwhelmed, and on self-rated emotional health (Astin, p. 393).

The last of the seven other forms of involvement, alcohol consumption, although negatively associated with college GPA, has a positive association with retention and completion of the bachelor’s degree (Astin, 1993, p. 394). Alcohol consumption also has positive associations with “joining social fraternities or sororities, attending recitals or concerts, participating in campus demonstrations, and self-reported growth in interpersonal skills, leadership abilities, and Overall Academic Development. It has positive correlations also with Leadership” (Astin, p. 394). Some other positive correlations include Libertarianism, smoking cigarettes, feeling depressed, and the commitment to the goal of being well off financially (Astin, p. 394). The only negative correlations Astin found with alcohol consumption is feminism and getting married (p. 394). Astin explains alcohol consumption in past studies has been negatively associated with academic performance; however, in this 1993 study, he finds many positive
effects, including retention, to which he contributes the theory of involvement; by explaining students are spending time drinking with friends, and this time with peers actually promotes retention (p. 394).

Astin explains his conceptual guide for understanding college student development. The I-E-O (input-environment-outcome) model is as follows: inputs are the student characteristics at the time they enter college, environment includes those factors the student is exposed to such as “programs, policies, faculty, peers, and educational experiences,” and outcomes are the changes in student characteristics “after exposure to the environment” (Astin, 1993, p.7). Astin explains the difficulty lies in defining specifically which “outcomes, inputs, and environmental experiences” are relevant to measure (Astin, p.7).

Astin (1993) also notes a major limitation of the study is that “separate analyses have not been done by gender, race, ability, socioeconomic status, or other key student characteristics” (p.29). Since Astin’s work is a leading resource for higher education researchers and practitioners, it is important to note these individual groups have not been focused on separately. An additional limitation of the study is that it focuses only on the effects of four-year colleges, which may cause one to question how effects differ in two-year institutions. Additional research is needed on involvement, focusing on each of these characteristics, to have a more complete understanding of student involvement and student outcomes.

Tinto’s Theory of Student Integration and Departure

In Leaving College, Tinto (1993) presents a conceptual framework for understanding student integration and student departure in higher education. In this work, Tinto argues that institutions have a responsibility for the intellectual and social development of students and that fostering this development promotes retention. Tinto suggests that
retention should not be the ultimate goal of institutional action, though it may be a desirable outcome of institutional efforts. Instead, institutions and students would be better served if a concern for the education of students, their social and intellectual growth, were the guiding principle of institutional action (p. 4).

In other words, Tinto suggests if colleges act out of concern for the social and intellectual growth of students, retention will follow.

To understand retention and departure, it is first necessary for colleges to understand their mission and the goals or the purposes which cause students to be admitted and retained; only then may institutions “reasonably direct the actions they take with regard to student retention” (Tinto, 1993, p. 5). Tinto explains a “reciprocal obligation” exists between the student and an institution; the institution’s responsibility is to create an environment in which social and intellectual growth of students can occur and it is the individual’s responsibility to make an educational commitment to fulfill obligations associated with obtaining an education (p. 6).

Tinto (1993) draws upon the work of Emile Durkheim’s, Suicide, to understand the departure process of students. Tinto relies primarily on Durkheim’s last form of suicide, egotistical suicide, which Tinto explains as “the form which arises when individuals are unable to become integrated and establish membership within the communities of society” (p. 101). Tinto states:

Durkheim referred to two forms of integration – social and intellectual – through which membership may be brought about. The former refers to the form of integration which results from personal affiliations and from the day-to-day interactions among different members of society. The latter comes from the sharing of values which are held in common by other members of society. (p. 101)
Tinto (1993) explains Durkheim’s egotistical suicide provides an analogue for understanding institutional departure, stating that this form of suicide “highlights the ways in which the social and intellectual communities that make up a college come to influence the willingness of students to stay at that college” (p. 104). Tinto explains that Durkheim’s theory is concerned with “differences in aggregate rates of suicide, not its individual occurrence” (p. 104). Tinto strives to understand the individual occurrence of persistence and says, “to adapt Durkeim’s work to the question of individual departure from institutions of higher education we must move to a theory of individual behavior” (p. 104).

Tinto (1993) provides a significant amount of data on the fact that large percentages of entering students depart from an institution prior to the start of their second year, and many fail to persist to a four-year degree; however, he explains that the studies on departure do not provide a complete picture (pp. 13-33). Instead, he indicates past studies have focused primarily on institutional departure, not system departure, and often times, a student may leave one institution and transfer to complete a degree at another institution. Also, departure varies by sex, race, ability, and social class, and the patterns of student departure are not simple (Tinto, p. 33). There are differences in departure across groups of students (i.e. females, minorities, disadvantaged students, and adult learners) and differences in departure across attributes of institutions, including size, level, residential character, and two-year versus four-year (Tinto, p. 35). Some leaving is voluntary, and some is involuntary or forced due to failure to meet minimum academic requirements (Tinto, p. 35).

Tinto (1993) says the roots of individual departure from institutions of higher education are answered by trying to understand “how an institution comes to influence the leaving of its own students” (p. 34). Understanding the answer to this question helps institutions form practical
questions about necessary changes in activities and policies to increase retention (Tinto, p. 34). Tinto explains the process of withdrawal is longitudinal and colleges must explore students’ experiences within the institution and how their experiences over time lead to withdrawal of one form or another. He further states that through a theory of individual departure, institutions may understand “how and why it is that particular individual and institutional attributes come to be associated with student departure from institutions of higher education” (p. 34). Through this study, I explored the experiences of four women as they engaged in higher education. I sought to better understand their involvement and persistence in regard to their experiences with the institution, the similarities and differences in their experiences, and the ways in which they defined and constructed their identities beyond higher education’s identification of them as “first-generation” students.

Individual student departure, according to Tinto (1993), may occur at the individual level or the institutional level (p. 37). At the individual level, there are two attributes that are the primary roots of departure; these are “intention” and “commitment” (Tinto, 1993, p. 37). Tinto (1993) explains individual intention can be understood as educational or occupational goals; some students come for additional skills, to acquire special content knowledge, or to obtain additional courses necessary for a job; others come just for the experience of learning, and some come uncertain about their major or career goals (pp. 39-40). The problem of student departure occurs not because of initial uncertainty or changes in one’s goals, but rather due to continued uncertainty (Tinto, 1993, p. 41). Tinto (1993) explains,

when those careers and identities are crystallized, that is, when individuals are more certain as to their futures, they are more likely to finish college. When plans remain unformulated over extended periods of time, that is when uncertainty persists for several
years, students are more likely to depart without completing their degree programs (p. 41). In other words, identity formation and, in particular, career identity are important components of persistence and the lack thereof may lead to early departure.

Individual commitment is found in two major forms: goal commitment and institutional commitment (Tinto, 1993, p. 43). Individual commitment is often expressed through attitudinal attributes such as drive and motivation and through behavioral actions such as effort. Tinto explains these attributes play a central role in decisions to persist or depart from higher education (p. 41). He states:

It is obvious, research findings aside, that a person’s willingness to work toward the attainment of his/her goals is an important component of the process of persistence in higher education. Conversely, the lack of willingness or commitment proves to be a critical part of the departure process. The unavoidable fact is that college completion requires some effort. Even in nonselective colleges, it calls for a willingness to commit oneself to the investment of time, energy, and often scarce resources to meet the academic and social demands which institutions impose upon their students. (p. 41-42)

The key point Tinto (1993) makes in regard to individual commitment is that students’ commitments may change, and these commitments are often reflective of the experiences the individual has had while attending the institution (p. 45). Further, although a student’s attributes or dispositions prior to or upon entry can directly influence departure, the impact of these attributes often times is “contingent on the quality of individual interactions with other members of the institution and on the individual’s perception of the degree to which those experiences meet his/her needs and interests” (p. 45). Tinto notes that the experiences a student has after
entering college are much more important to the decision to persist or withdraw than attributes or experiences prior to entry (p. 45).

Departure at the institutional level takes shape in four forms of individual experience; these include “adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation” (Tinto, 1993, p. 45). First, students must experience adjustment in order to persist; many are making transitions from young adulthood to the responsibilities of adulthood; they are separating themselves from previous peer groups as well as understanding and striving to meet the new social and intellectual demands of college (Tinto, p. 45-46). Many students find the transitions too difficult and leave before they have enough time to adjust (Tinto, p. 46). Second, Tinto explains, difficulty is another root cause of departure in that some students are not able to meet minimum academic performance requirements (p. 48). Although many students leave for academic failure, the majority of leaving is in the form of what Tinto calls “voluntary departure;” “only 15 to 25 percent of all institutional departures arise because of academic failure” (Tinto, p. 49, 82).

The third form, incongruence, takes place when there is a “lack of institutional fit” or a “quantitative mismatch, if you will, between the skills, interests, and needs of the individual and those which are characterized by the demands of academic life. Such demands may be seen as either too hard or too easy” (Tinto, p. 51). In other words, with “incongruence,” an individual fails to connect with the institution as a result of the student’s perception that his or her social or intellectual wants or needs are not being met, and this may lead to departure (p. 51). According to Tinto, “decisions to withdraw are more a function of what occurs after entry than of what precedes it” (p. 5). The last form of institutional departure is isolation; this form of departure results “from the absence of sufficient contact between the individual and other members of the social and academic communities of the college” (Tinto, 1993, pp. 55-56). Tinto explains that
amount and quality of student-faculty interaction and peer interaction is the most important in the phenomenon of student persistence (p. 56).

Tinto’s (1993) “interactive model of student departure” is that “the individual integrative experiences in the formal and informal academic and social communities of the college and the interplay between them, as conditioned by external events, are central to the process of departure, especially that which takes place voluntarily” (pp. 112-137). This theory of student departure involves students’ intentions and commitment along with external forces in regard to their individual goals and their social and academic experiences, which serve or fail to integrate them into college life (p. 82). In other words, interaction occurs between the individual and the college environment, and the individual’s ability to become integrated will largely determine a student’s decision to remain in college or drop out; in short, the institution shapes student behavior (Tinto, p. 120). Tinto suggests a caveat in that full or total integration is not necessary. Students may be minimally academically integrated yet fully integrated socially, and, as long as they are meeting minimum academic standards, they may persist. Vice versa, one may be very well integrated academically yet not integrated socially and still persist (p. 120-121).

The two primary ways students become integrated into academic life are through interaction with faculty and peers (pp. 112-126). Tinto (1993) explains the process of integration into college life in this way:

- colleges are seen as being made up of a cluster of social and academic communities, comprised of students, faculty, and staff, each having distinct forms of association tying its members to one another. The process of persistence in college is, by extension, viewed as a process of social and intellectual integration leading to the establishment of competent membership in those communities.
Conversely, departure from college is taken to reflect the unwillingness and/or inability of the individual to become integrated. (p. 121)

Although students may find membership with peers within the various subcultures of an institution, and even though some institutions have established effective out-of-class learning experiences declares the classroom is the most important place in regard to student involvement Tinto (1993). He says this is particularly true for commuter students because of their limited time on campus (p. 119-132). Classrooms also serve as “smaller communities of learning” and as a “gateway for subsequent student involvement” (p. 133). Overall, Tinto’s model suggests that in order for students to persist, they must be minimally integrated; “some type of social and/or intellectual membership in at least one college community is a minimum condition for continued persistence” (p. 121). To sum up Tinto’s theory, the more a student is socially and intellectually integrated into an institution, the more likely the student is to persist.

How Astin and Tinto’s Theories Relate To Community College Students

Both Astin (1993) and Tinto’s (1993) theories focus on students’ behaviors and students’ interaction with their environments. Astin’s more broadly focuses on student developmental outcomes and Tinto’s specifically addresses persistence and departure decisions. Astin’s theory focuses on two primary types of involvement: (a) those activities that take place prior to entry including choosing residence, applying for financial aid, and considering a college major, and (b) those actions occurring after a student has been in college for awhile such as involvement with faculty, peers, work, and any other form of activity in which the student may become involved (p. 365). Tinto states that a student’s decision to withdraw is a process related to students’ individual experiences with faculty, staff, and peers. Further, he posits that the nature of
students’ experiences either provides or fails to provide the social and academic integration necessary for persistence (Tinto, 1993).

Both Astin’s (1993) and Tinto’s (1993) theories focus primarily on four year students; yet, there are some distinct differences worth considering in regard to the experiences of two-year students. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) in *How College Effects Students* conclude “living on or near campus (versus commuting to college) facilitates integration into the campus social network of peers, faculty, and extracurricular activities. This integration in turn has positive implications for persistence and degree completion” (p. 401). Pascarella and Terenzini’s (1991) findings poses concerns for persistence among commuter colleges, particularly since they comprise such a large percentage of higher education enrollment. Pascarella and Terenzini also state, “about 60 percent of all college students live at home or with parents and commute (41 percent at private four-year colleges, 68 percent at public universities, and 76 percent at public two-year colleges)” (p. 401). Additionally, although commuters’ on-campus time and out-of-class contact with peers, faculty and staff is limited, this type of contact is still important to persistence (Astin, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzeni, p. 640; Tinto, p. 78).

Tinto (1993) very briefly addresses the differences in characteristics of two-year versus four-year college students as well as the nature of the difference in the two environments. As he explains, participation of commuter students in the college social life is very limited because of the external forces of “family, community, and work,” which impact their time (p. 78). Tinto also explains community colleges typically do not have a wide array of student organizations (p. 78). Further, commuters typically work either part-time or full-time, so they attend class and leave to take care of external obligations, these obligations; do not leave much time for social interaction with peers, faculty, or other college staff (p. 78). Additionally, Tinto explains, two-
year college students differ for four-year students in the following ways: (1) they are “less likely to hold lofty educational goals,” (b) they are more likely to intentionally leave before completing a two-year degree with the goal of transferring to a four-year college, and (3) on average, they are “academically less able or well prepared to meet the academic demands of college work” (p. 80).

Astin’s (1993) and Tinto’s (1993) theories are interrelated in understanding persistence and departure. Astin (1993) explains how involvement with faculty, peers, work, and other forms of involvement impact students’ experiences (p. 365). Work, as Astin explains, can be on or off-campus, both having very different implications for student outcomes. Concerning other forms of involvement, these include basically everything else that occupy a student’s time such as commuting, spending time watching television, smoking, drinking, attending church etc. (Astin, 1993). Support, or lack of support, of family, friends, co-workers, or supervisors influences a student’s ability to be successful in college. For instance, a supervisor or co-workers may facilitate a work schedule conducive for a student to attend class, and families can be supportive in respecting and allowing for homework and study time. Further, a student’s own decisions concerning using limited discretionary time wisely can also contribute to success. However, commuter students may have extremely limited discretionary time due to the fact that many are raising small children and older adult students may be caring for aged parents.

Tinto’s (1993) model of student departure explains the importance of social and academic integration for student persistence in the process of integration. Since time on campus is very limited for commuter students, the experiences they have in class or associating with peers is important for engaging students with the curriculum, other students, and with the instructor. In considering students’ lives holistically, they may be balancing family, work,
school, commutes, and other personal or community activities. While the external may greatly dominate their daily lives (Tinto, 1993, p. 78), campus life impacts life outside of campus and vice versa. For instance, homework assignments and study time may influence the amount of time students are able to spend with family, and in turn, the amount of time students spend working or taking care of family may impact alertness, energy levels, and attention span while attending class. In addition, the stresses associated with school, work, and family are seldom left at the door when a student goes from home to class or from class to work, etc.

The First-Year Experience

The first-year experience, a phrase coined by John Gardner, emphasizes the importance of students’ first year in college. Since the majority of college withdrawal happens prior to matriculation to the second year, the first year is the most important (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, & Associates, 1985; Tinto, 1993; Upcraft, Gardner, & Associates, 1989). Levitz and Noel (1989) sum up the importance of the first year by saying, “it has been our experience that fostering student success in the freshman year is the most significant intervention an institution can make in the name of student persistence” (p. 65). Upcraft and Gardner (1989) explain that institutions dedicated to promoting student success and students’ intellectual and personal development will develop policies, programs, and environments that promote student success during the first year of college.

Upcraft and Gardner (1989) define student success by first year progress toward: “(1) developing academic and intellectual competence; (2) establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships; (3) developing an identity; (4) deciding on a career and life-style; (5) maintaining personal health and wellness; and (6) developing an integrated philosophy of life” (p. 2). In order to help students achieve these developmental goals, institutions must focus
attention on the first-year student by providing opportunities for learning and development in and outside of the classroom, encouraging interaction and involvement with peers as well as faculty and staff, promoting an appreciation of diversity, treating first year students with respect and dignity, developing a definition and goals for first year success, and orienting students effectively through a first-year seminar (Upgraft & Gardner, 1989, p. 4-6). Students will come to college from various backgrounds and levels of academic preparedness, but colleges should do what they can to help every student succeed. Community colleges must find ways to engage and develop students while they are on campus since opportunities for student involvement are very limited.

Community Colleges and Student Persistence

There are currently 1,844 two-year colleges in the United States accounting for approximately half of the 4,168 accredited higher education institutions and 39% of the total 15,927,987 higher education enrollment in the fall of 2001 (NCES, 2003a, 2003b). The purpose of community colleges has been the source of some educational debate, especially during the last twenty years (Pedersen, 1997). On one side of the debate there are those who view community colleges as champions of the democratic ideal with the purpose of equalizing social and economic differences. The critics, on the other hand, see them as perpetuating a social class system by diverting “socially and economically disadvantaged students away from the baccalaureate and into vocational programs, leading to careers of inferior status and limited opportunity” (Pedersen, 1997, p. 501).

Perhaps a more moderate view is that two-year colleges have developed over history, not through conspiracy or grand ideals, but rather through many and sometimes conflicted and confused roles (Pedersen, 1997). Pedersen explains that between 1900 and 1940, community
colleges rapidly grew “in response to specific social and economic conditions” (p. 501). The close association of the junior college with public high schools developed during this period out of economic necessity (Pedersen, p. 501). The community college’s association with the university grew out of the junior college function of two-year colleges and the external pressures that eventually came to bear on community colleges to conform to standards of accreditation (Pedersen, p. 501). Two-year colleges today serve several roles, including providing junior college credit toward the associate degree or transfer credits toward a baccalaureate; training for technical programs; providing educational courses and programs for business and industry; and providing continuing education for personal enrichment and development.

Astin (1999b) explains that involvement of faculty and students at community colleges typically is minimal given the nature of two-year colleges (p. 524). The majority of two year college students are “commuters, and a large proportion attend college on a part-time basis (thus, they presumably manifest less involvement simply because of their part-time status). Similarly, a large proportion of faculty members are employed on a part-time basis” (Astin, p. 524). Astin explains that different kinds of colleges produce different student outcomes; “the most consistent finding – reported in almost every longitudinal study of student development – is that the student’s chances of dropping out are substantially greater at a 2-year college than a 4-year college” (p. 524).

Other more recent studies also seek to understand factors influencing persistence at two-year colleges. Cofer and Somers (2001) examine two-year colleges and factors influencing student persistence, including background, achievement, college experience, price, and debt-accumulation. The study also looks to see if these factors have changed between 1993 and 1996. The researcher used National Postsecondary Student Aid Surveys (NPSAS) from 1993 and 1996.
to conduct this study, using only data for two-year colleges and students borrowing money. The sample size for NPSAS: 93 was 5,006 and 7,505 for NPSAS: 96. The study focuses on students who were retained from the first semester to the second semester. The variables for the study included: background achievement, college experiences, current year price, subsidies, and amount of debt. The results of that study indicated that financially dependent students with a lower GPA and working full-time are less likely to persist, and students with aspirations for a bachelor or other advanced degree are more likely to persist. Also, persistence is more likely at the sophomore level (Cofer and Somers, 2001). This finding is consistent with Tinto’s and Astin’s findings.

Wyman (1997) also studies predictors of student retention at two-year colleges, investigating the institutional factors that most strongly influence student retention, including policies, management, institutional performance, demographics or economic forces. Wyman’s sample includes 16 colleges from the South Carolina Technical System. First-year retention rate was used as the dependent variable. The researcher uses one cohort from 1990 and another from 1991, obtaining two retention rates for these two groups and two years for each of the 16 colleges. The researcher uses the first-year retention rate as the dependent variable because he explains that the largest attrition occurs during the first year. The purpose of the study, according to Wyman, is to find a predictive model of retention using 158 independent variables and using aggregated county data from the South Carolina Statistical Abstracts Series for each college constructing regional demographic and economic data. Wyman (1997) explains that retention rate prediction may be determined by “two independent variables: regional employment per capita at the time of cohort formation…and the ratio of institutional instruction and academic support spending per headcount student to regional income per job at the time of cohort
formation” (p. 6). He concludes that retention rates are directly tied to FTE expenditures and FTE enrollment and college students taking heavier course loads have higher retention levels. Wyman suggests additional studies are needed to distinguish between internal and external factors affecting retention in community colleges.

These recent findings support Astin’s (1993) research regarding the effect of institution size on student development outcomes, because FTE and budget are usually directly related. Astin (1993) explains that size has the strongest effects on the “affective-psychological realm of student development,” stating that student satisfaction with factors such as general education requirements, quality of instruction, student support services, and the overall college experience are strongly associated with the size of the institution (p.326). Astin (1993) further says that “a certain degree of dissatisfaction may be inevitable” for large institutions, but colleges may possibly increase student satisfaction through “effort to simulate smallness in some manner” (p.315). Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (1991) also refer to the “involving colleges” in their study as “human scale;” these colleges were identified as doing a good job of promoting student involvement and development (p. 257). Even though commuter students spend very little time on campus compared to university students, it is important for community colleges to maintain campuses and student spaces that promotes social interaction, study space for individual and group study, and a welcoming atmosphere that encourages students to stay on campus as long as possible. Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates explain that for involving colleges, the campus environment is cared for by being sure:

(1) the physical plant is well maintained and not overpowering; (2) the psychological size – the ‘feel’ of the place – is appropriate, comfortable, and manageable so that small colleges seem larger than they are and large universities seem smaller; (3) students are
not anonymous; (4) indoor and outdoor nooks and crannies encourage informal,
spontaneous interaction among all community members; (5) students can appropriate
personal space and be alone if desired; and (6) opportunities for meaningful involvement
are in ample supply, such as leadership positions and other roles of responsibility in
major-related and social clubs and organizations, recreation, campus jobs, and off-
campus work or internships. (p. 258)

Community colleges should strive to create environments that promote involvement even though
they are at a disadvantage when compared to residential colleges.

The first step to involving commuter students academically and socially is to understand
the obstacles students may have that prevent them from being highly involved. Tinto (1993)
states that “for commuting institutions generally and for commuting students in particular,
especially those who have numerous other obligations such as work and family,” the theory of
departure allows us to better understand the competing demands of academic, social, and work
life of students (p. 127). In other words, some external commitments may take time and energy
away from academic life and prevent meaningful membership within college academic or social
communities. Additionally, for community colleges, the classroom is the key location for
involvement. If students are to be involved and become integrated academically and/or socially,
the classroom is likely where the involvement will begin (Tinto, pp. 119-132).

Race, Class, Gender, and Age Differences in Persistence

Higher education institutions miss opportunities to better serve students, communities,
and society when they do not strive to understand diverse students’ challenges and ways the
institution may change to alleviate unnecessary barriers to success. Marginality, incongruence,
isolation, academic difficulty, and discrimination are terms Tinto (1993) uses to describe the
experiences of many Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans and low-income students in higher education (p. 73-76). He examines literature on minority persistence relative to white student persistence, explaining that formal types of institutional association may be more important for minorities than their white peers; also, minority students face several challenges, including finances, and poor academic preparation coupled with unwelcoming and unsupportive environments that present additional challenges to persistence (pp. 73-76). Tinto further explains that “national evaluations of Special Service Programs indicate that the success of a program and that of its students hinge upon the degree to which administrators and students alike perceive themselves as central to the daily life of the institution,” and that minority students are less likely to view “themselves as being integrated within the mainstream of life in largely white colleges” (p. 74-75). Concerns for diversity as well as differences in racial, cultural, and class backgrounds still tend not to be a central focus for many American higher education institutions, so it makes sense that students from minority backgrounds and lower socioeconomic statuses may feel outside of the mainstream of college life.

Likewise, women and older students face challenges to persistence that are different from their male younger student peers (Tinto, 1993, p. 76). Tinto (1993) explains that although there have been numerous studies on persistence in recent years, “we still know relatively little about the specific attributes of attrition among females and adults. Yet common experiences would tell us that the experience of older students and of females differ, at least in part, from that of the younger male college student” (p. 76). It is very important for higher education institutions to strive to understand the complexities of gender. Women and men are not monolithic groups; within a particular gender grouping there are a multitude of differences. For example, college women are from various socioeconomic backgrounds, are shaped by racial and cultural
differences, have various degree and career paths, and represent their sexuality in various ways. To take into account these various differences as well as to better understand participants’ experiences and persistence, I considered identity construction and interpersonal social relationships.

Tierney’s Critique of Social Integrationist Theory

William Tierney (1992) provides a critique of the social integrationist theory by suggesting that although Tinto’s widely accepted model of college participation as a “rite of passage” has been tested for validity, it must nevertheless be considered for “potentially harmful consequences for racial and ethnic minorities” (p. 603). I would add that this may be true for low-income students and for women as well. Tierney deconstructs Tinto’s model posing four conceptual problems. First, Tierney argues that Tinto borrows the “anthropological term – ritual – yet extracts the term from its cultural foundations” (p. 608). Tierney explains the dominant culture in America is white and most colleges and universities reflect this dominant culture since these institutions historically have served to educate white middle and upper class males (p. 608). Tierney suggests the problem with Tinto’s theory is that he has “developed an analytic tool that is dysfunctional: individuals from one culture, such as Apache, are to undergo a ritual in another culture, such as Anglo” (p. 608-609). The second conceptual problem Tierney suggests with using ritual to pertain to higher education is “the assumption of one’s leave-taking from such a ritual. In traditional cultures rites of passage do not have notions such as ‘departure,’ ‘failure,’ or ‘dropout.’ Choice does not exist about whether to undergo the ritual; one simply partakes of it” (p. 609). The third and fourth conceptual problem Tierney addresses with Tinto’s model is associated with the use of Durkheim’s theory as related to “individuals and integration” (p. 610). Tierney argues, “Tinto has conceptualized college-going at the individualist level rather than a
collective one. From a social integrationist perspective individuals attend college, become integrated or not, graduate or depart. Conformity is the norm and it is the responsibility of the individual” (p. 610). Tierney suggests the model of using ritual and integration in conjunction with individuation does not make sense because the use of the anthropological term suggests a shared communal process.

Tinto’s model is dysfunctional, Tierney (1992) asserts, in that, “Leaving College emphasizes the ‘roots of individual departure’ and a ‘theory of individual departure.’ From an anthropological standpoint to emphasize ‘individual’ at the expense of the ‘group’ or the ‘culture’ is backwards” (p. 610). Further, Tierney argues that it is “particularly odd” that Tinto utilizes anthropological terms relating to groups in an “individualist manner” (p. 610). Tierney also critically questions Tinto’s own position as a native member of the dominant culture. Tierney’s study analyzes the language of two college administrators in regard to American Indian college student persistence and demonstrates how the administrators view the Native American culture with the first administrator stating “‘they grow up without competition, and when they come here to a university whose ethic is achievement and competition, it’s tough’” (p. 613). The second administrator says, “‘The major problem is that they have a foot in each culture that draws them back to their roots’” (p. 613). Tierney explains these administrators’ comments demonstrate the firm grip the social integrationist theoretical argument has in higher education. Further, Tierney suggests if we use Tinto’s Durkheimian integration model, then members of non-white cultures must “undergo a cultural suicide of sorts to avoid an intellectual suicide” (p. 614).

Tierney (1992) argues that instead of viewing the integration difficulty of members of “other” cultures as the problem, perhaps the problem may be defined as “an institution’s inability
to operate in a multicultural world” or “the university’s ‘ethic of achievement and competition’
as opposed to an ethic of cooperation and willingness to work together” (p. 615). Ways of
thinking about persistence and retention in higher education should be questioned for their ability
to effectively encourage students’ success. Those of us working in higher education must realize
that language and discourse carry value-laden notions about the students we are serving and the
outcomes toward which we are striving (Tierney, 1992).

Tierney (1992) suggests that persistence, integration, departure, and other terms are social
constructs that should be critically considered in regard to their meaning and practice. Perhaps
higher education should view a student’s desire to remain connected to one’s own culture as
valued and that “ripping one away from his or her native culture is detrimental and harmful” (p. 615).
Further, the “solution” may not be found from the perspective of the privileged standpoint; instead, it may be found “in the hands of those who are most centrally involved in the issue” (p. 615).
Tierney adds, “rather than objectify Native Americans as the problem, one might point out
that institutional racism and the mindset of the powerful is the ‘real problem’” (p. 615). Tierney
is arguing for a

radical reorientation of how we conceptualize and, hence, act in the organizational worlds
of academe. The task of conceiving different theoretical horizons will enable us not only
to offer alternative strategies for developing multicultural environments, but such
horizons also will enable us to reconfigure the social conditions of power that give voice
to some and silence others. (p. 616)

By critically questioning the purposes, uses, and value of educational research, practices, and
policies and their direct impact on the lives of students, higher education can continue to change
in a way to be more concerned about student outcomes that promote equality, social justice, and
caring and less concerned about holding on to traditional practices that have discriminating effects.

Tierney’s (1992) article provided a conceptual framework for approaching the phenomenon of persistence in my study in directing my attention to the ways in which the gender, race, class, and age of students may be at odds or consistent with the dominant college culture. Additionally, it urged critical questioning of the types of discourses present within the culture that may come to bear on students’ perceptions of their positions within the campus environment and students’ views of themselves within the campus culture.

Feminist Poststructural Perspectives

Feminist poststructuralism is a term used to describe a perspective that has developed from the writings of various postmodern philosophers such as Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, and feminist adaptations of these as well as the work of Lacan reflected in the writings of Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva (Weedon, 1997, p. 12-13). Poststructuralism, a post-modern philosophy, critiques the structural linguistics of foundationalism and essentialism and challenges modernity and Enlightenment (Capper, 1998; Fraser & Nicholson, 1997; Pillow, 2000, St. Pierre, 2000; Weedon, 1987, 1997). Poststructuralism concerns itself with the ways in which language, writing, and discourses create, convey, direct, shape, reproduce, and change meaning and truth within individual and collective consciousness (Derrida, 1998, p. 50; Foucault, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2003d, 2003e, 2003f; Kristeva, 1997; Weedon, 1997, pp. 34-37). Additionally, poststructuralist theory is concerned with the understanding of self and “the subject” of inquiry and power relations (Foucault, 1978; Foucault, 2003d, Weedon, 1987, 1997). For instance, Foucault (2003d) explains in an interview in 1982 that the aim of his work over the last two decades “has not been to analyze the phenomena of power, nor to elaborate the foundations of
such an analysis;” however, such an exploration of power is needed for his objective of understanding what he refers to as “three modes of objectification that transform human beings into subjects” (p. 126).

These three modes Foucault (2003d) speaks of include: first, how modes of inquiry strive to give themselves the “status of sciences” as with economics, linguistics and philology; second, the “objectivizing of the subject” referred to by Foucault as “‘dividing practices’” through categorizing and classifying humans; third is the “the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject” (p. 126). An example that comes to mind concerning dividing practices and the “status of sciences” is studies of the welfare system, which tend to take one aspect of a person’s life, the fact that they are requiring federal or state assistance, and make generalizations about all people on welfare without considering, studying, and trying to understand holistically the various aspects of the person’s life. Foucault gives “sexuality” as an example concerning the ways in which human beings turn themselves into subjects and discusses how people come to “recognize themselves subjects of ‘sexuality’” (p. 126). Foucault states, “thus, it is not power, but the subject that is the general theme of my research” (p. 127). Poststructuralist theory questions traditional knowledge, theories, and Western practices through deconstructing language, discourses, power relations and social practices that perpetuate inequities, discrimination, and oppression.

Foucault (2003d) explains that human struggles have some common objectives; some of these include struggles to control one’s own body, struggles against “the government of individualization,” and struggles concerning “privileges of knowledge,” including “opposition against secrecy, deformation, and mystifying representations imposed on people” (p. 129-130). The question, Foucault explains, in regard to these struggles is “the way in which knowledge
circulates and functions, its relations to power” (p. 130). In regard to these human struggles, Foucault states that the objective is
to attack not so much such-or-such institution of power, or group, or elite, or class
but, rather, a technique, a form of power.

This form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life
categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches to him to
his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others
must recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects.

There are two meanings of the word “subject”: subject to someone else by control
and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge.
Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to.

Generally, it can be said that there are three types of struggles: against
forms of domination (ethnic, social, and religious); against forms of exploitation
that separates individuals from what they produce; or against that which ties the
individual to himself and submits him to others in this way (struggles against
subjection [assujettissement], against forms of subjectivity and submission)…. 

And nowadays, the struggle against the forms of subjections – against the
submission of subjectivity – is becoming more and more important, even though
the struggles against forms of domination and exploitation have not disappeared.

(p. 130)

In other words, the struggle against forms of subjections involves the resistance of imposed
identities and the resistance to individuation that separates individuals from others through their
subjectivities. Struggles against imposed identities may involve gender, race, or class. For
instance, requiring an individual to recognize her womanhood requires her to recognize a particular aspect of her identity, making her subject to gendered aspects of her identity or subjugating her through tying her to her own identity. A similar analogy would be the use of racial categories. Additionally, resistance to individuation involves a struggle against the “government of individuation,” which imposes upon individuals a submissiveness of subjectivities through forcing the individual to consider himself or herself as completely unique while discouraging community and connections with others who may face similar struggles (p. 129). As I understand Foucault’s argument, individual uniqueness should not prevent relating to and connecting with others to resist domination, exploitation, or subjugation.

The work of Foucault (2003f) focuses on power and power relations in order to explain how humans are historically, socially, and politically situated and the ways in which both knowledge and truth are constructed (p. 316). Foucault understands “truth” as constructed through an ordered system which produces, regulates, distributes, and circulates discourses, which through a circular type of process, are produced and sustained through power relations (p. 317). He refers to these systems as a “‘regime’ of truth,” whereby societies operate in a system -- for instance in socialism and capitalism -- through an acceptance of legitimized discourses (p. 317). Foucault encourages intellectuals who are interested in political change for social justice to consider the possibility of creating “new politics of truth” through framing new ideologies which recognize power relations through discourse in society (p. 317). Foucault explains this is not a matter of changing “people’s consciousness,” but instead of challenging the system of truth by “detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time” (p. 317-318).
Poststructuralism deconstructs, critiques, and calls into question notions of what constitutes knowledge and truth, recognizing that meaning is constituted in discourses and knowledge is legitimized and determined by the power relations within a given society. Poststructuralism also challenges traditional Western notions such as rationality, individualism, and progress which have their origin in the Enlightenment. It is important to note that poststructuralism has faced several criticisms, which Ropers-Huilman (1998) discusses pertaining to its nominalism; inability to address large-scale social problems; inaccessibility to marginalized groups for whom the perspective is intended; exposure of societal problems without offering solutions; obliteration of personal agency; and limited theoretical use in terms of making generalizations due to the perspective’s insistence on the locality, specificity, and context (p. 9-11). However, poststructuralism provides a critical approach to understanding knowledge, truth, and power relations in society. A form of feminist theory has, thus, aligned itself with poststructuralist theory with a focus on analyzing power relations, deconstructing truth and knowledge by exposing and challenging forms of oppression, discrimination, subjugation, misogyny, racism, and other forms of inequalities that continue in familial structures, institutions, and societies.

Feminist theories have changed through time; yet, they have in common the struggle against the forms of subjections (Foucault, 2003d, p. 130) both in the refusal of imposed identity to dictate the lives of women and other marginalized groups as well as the resistance of individuation, which serves to separate rather than connect groups in social and political struggles. Ropers-Huilman (1998) explains that feminist perspectives have held various meanings and continue to change, but their consistency is in their political change orientation and insistence on developing and recognizing personal agency for change. Ropers-Huilman
explains it is important to understand historical, social, and political change in regard to women’s contextual experiences, and defines a “working” definition of feminism in this way:

Feminist thinkers and actors believe in equality. They recognize that women and men in a wide variety of situations have not experienced equality in either public or personal relationships. More recently, feminists have also recognized that many other groups of individuals share a marginalized status, one that relegates them to positions "outside" the norm. As a result, feminism today is a philosophy that seeks equality for women as well as other oppressed persons. (p. 11)

Ropers-Huilman (1998) further suggests that “used as a tool to break down or deconstruct binary relationships, poststructural feminism illuminates, and allows for the analysis of, infinite points of intersection of our social structures” (p. 14).

A feminist poststructural perspective inextricably links knowledge, language, discourse, meaning, and power, thereby examining implications for gender, race, and class (Capper, 1998; Ropers-Huilman, 1998; Weedon, 1987, 1997). Women and other groups have been marginalized through theories and social practices and have been excluded from the discourses that create knowledge and theory; only recently are women and other marginalized persons being considered as valuable contributors to the production of knowledge (Capper, 1998, p. 370). Capper regrets, however, that some in privileged intellectual positions “suggest that theory and practice must move beyond the singular subject/individual and that conceptualization of the subject/individual must be a dispersed one” (p. 370). In other words, researchers holding to humanist viewpoints argue for a conceptualization of individuals as essentially the same, thus easily allowing for normalization and generalization. A feminist postructuralist theory suggests, however, that gender, race, and class should be considered in any inquiry involving the social,
educational, or political aspects of people’s lives since is no universal “human condition.” Further, research practices and forms of inquiry should have processes respecting a multiplicity of experiences, backgrounds, and peculiarities.

Identity and the understanding of “self” is a central focus of poststructuralism. Both feminism and poststructuralism recognize the social, historical, and political implications concerning the notions of “self.” Additionally, these perspectives recognize limitations on individuals in regard to personal agency. Weedon (1997) asserts

we are neither the authors of the ways in which we understand our lives, nor are we unified rational beings. For feminist poststructuralism, it is language in the form of conflicting discourses which constitutes us as conscious thinking subjects and enables us to give meaning to the world and to transform it (p. 31).

A feminist poststructuralist perspective rejects the notion of a unified rational being and views “the individual as constructed of multiple, shifting identities within the person” (Capper, 1998, p. 366). Likewise, Ropers-Huilman (1998) explains, “human actors both construct and are constructed by the discourses in which they are located” (p. 3). Feminists using a poststructuralist theory approach nearly every type of knowledge and inquiry with questions about power relations and the ways in which language, discourses, and knowledge perpetuate inequities as well as the ways in which people are historically, socially, politically, and locally situated within the contexts of our environments.

Feminist poststructural perspectives also view education as a system of power relations operating through discourses, which shape and are shaped by everyone participating (Capper, 1998, p. 371). Further, education creates and perpetuates social structures and norms, and educators within the system should be aware of social discourses for the ways in which they
shape truth and, in turn, create a critical awareness in students of the ways in which their own identities are shaped by and in discourses (Capper, 1998, p. 371). Finally, a feminist poststructuralist perspective seeks to understand differences and reconstitute knowledge in ways that promote social justice for women and marginalized groups that have -- and continue to experience -- oppression, discrimination, subjugation, and devaluation (Capper, 1998; Cixous, 1991; Hirschmann, 2004; Irigary, 1991a, 1991b; Ropers-Huilman, 1998; Scott, 1997; Weedon, 1987, 1997).

Identity, Language and Discourse: Implications for Higher Education and This Study

Identity, language, and discourse are relevant considerations in regard to students’ participation and persistence in higher education. Educational researchers have long focused specifically on the ways in which higher education influences student development (e.g. Astin, 1977, 1993; Chickering & Reisser, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Additionally, psychologists, linguists, sociologists, and education researchers are now critically questioning traditional developmental theories and educational practices for their lack of consideration of women, issues of sexual orientation, race and class differences (Banks & Banks, 2004; Bornstein & Bradley, 2003; Chodorow, 1991, 1997; D’Augelli & Patterson, 2001; Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan, Ward, Taylor, & Bardige, 1988; Greene, 2003; Josselson, 1987; Post & Rogin, 1998). Yet, scant research exists on the ways in which student identity construction relates to participation and persistence. This consideration is at the heart of my study.

Language and discourse are the primary means for communicating, interacting, and meaning-making. Gee (1999) provides a useful explanation of discourse. Gee uses “Discourse with a capital ‘D’” to refer to ideas expressed through a “social network,” explaining that within “any modern, technical, urban-based society,” the “Discourses” are varied and “innumerable” (p.
17). Gee states “Discourses” are present and ever changing through forms of communication on a large scale through media, politics, government, and other types of bodies such as health, medicine, education, etc. Gee further uses “discourse” with a little “d” to refer to “language-in-use” meaning the discourses present in “conversations or stories” (p. 17). These “discourses,” as Gee explains, are those that take place locally between individuals or small groups of people. Further, Gee suggests meaning is made and understood through these contextually and locally situated discourses or conversations. Gee clarifies,

It is sometimes helpful to think about social and political issues as if it is not just us humans who are talking and interacting with each other, but rather, the Discourses we represent and enact, and for which we are “carriers…” Discourses, through our words and deeds, carry on conversations with each other through history, and, in doing so, form human history (p. 18).

In this dissertation, I sought to use language and “D/discourse” to deconstruct the “first-generation” label through having the individuals in this study share their self-representation and construction of their identities. I accomplished this through dialoging with students about their individual backgrounds, experiences, and their reactions to broader American societal “Discourses” on gender, class, and race, as well as their locally situated perceptions and understanding of these “discourses” in relation to their college-going. Further, within a feminist poststructuralist framework, I used this understanding of educational “D/discourses” to better how involvement and integrationist theories were relevant to the participants’ stories and experiences.

Even though there are some practical uses for the “first-generation” classification, it is important to deconstruct the term and its uses because it makes some collective assumptions about the students without a holistic consideration of the students’ individual backgrounds,
personal goals, and challenges. While all of the students within the “first-generation” category share the common characteristic of being the first in their family to attend college, they may or may not personally recognize this condition as pertinent to their individual identities or personal success. Further, within the “first-generation” classification, there are race, culture, gender, class, and age specific challenges that are not effectively addressed through this grouping.

Language and discourse have a role in the construction of gender and have implications for the ways in which women and men of various cultures, races, and classes engage with each other and knowledge (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Bergvall, Bing, & Freed, 1996; Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003; Perry, Turner, & Sterk, 1992; Mills, 1995; & Tannen, 1993, 1994). Additionally, language and discourses have powerful implications for perpetuating and creating gender, racial, and class inequities (Babcock & Laschever, 2003; Lakoff, 2004; Richardson, Taylor, & Whittier, 2004). Discourses concerning gender, race, and class intersect in the daily lives of students; thus, it is important to be aware of language and discourses as well as what impact these may have in the lives of college students.

Discourses related to gender, race, class, and culture work on minds, identities, and actions. For example gender stereotyping is present in the English language in “grammatical and semantic structure” with the generic use of “man” to include women (Richardson, Taylor, & Whittier, 2004, p. 89). Richardson et al assert there is a loss of women’s identity upon marriage for those who follow the traditional pattern of taking the man’s name. Additionally, they suggest that pronoun usage perpetuates some gender stereotypes; for instance the use of “he” when referring to specific positions such as doctors and “she” for nurses, although this is now changing somewhat. They also explain the use of “girl” to refer to women presumes “incompetence and immaturity” (p. 89).
Further, women’s bodies are sexualized, politicized, and normalized to a Western ideal in discourses and socialization. After interviewing twenty females who had undergone some form of cosmetic surgery, Gimlin (2004) discusses the discourses and capitalization of beauty as well as the various ways in which women pay for beauty through cosmetic surgery, breast augmentation, and liposuction. She explains how women weigh the costs and benefits of cosmetic surgery and discusses how these women have made decisions to undergo cosmetic surgery in order to function in a “culture that they believe judges and rewards them for their looks” (p. 107). Gender discourses are so powerful that students, particularly women, feel compelled to strive for the “ideal,” sometimes at the expense of their physical well-being (Hensley, 2003). Hensley, a counseling educator, discusses the effect cultural messages and pressures to obtain an ideal body image have on the self-esteem and psychological health of college women. She explains the detrimental effects of diets and eating disorders as well as the complexities of gender differences concerning body image and identity development during college years (p. 56).

Banks (2004) and hooks (2004) further explain how the bodies of black women are further politicized and sexualized, often differently from the experiences of white women. Banks (2004) describes experiences that Venus Williams had with criticism concerning her hair and provides examples from other interviews, in Hair Still Matters, concerning various ways in which women’s hair has a relationship to sexuality and femininity. Banks specifically addresses how black hairstyles -- such as braided rows and beads -- are viewed with discomfort by mainstream American society. bell hooks (2004), in Selling Hot Pussy, retells an experience of racism where she and some colleagues enter a dessert café to overhear a group of white men saying that her colleagues “‘who are all white, must be liberals from the college, not regular
'townies,’ to be hanging out with a ‘nigger’” (p. 119). She says that the men “burst into laughter and point to a row of gigantic chocolate breasts complete with nipples – huge edible tits. They think this is a delicious idea – seeing no connection between this racialized image and the racism expressed in the entryway” (p. 119). hooks explains the ways American society depicts “black female sexuality” both in day-to-day interactions as well as in the media and strives to describe some of the complexities of the historical and social power relationships that impinge upon black female identities. In regard to black sexuality, hooks states, “we must make the oppositional space where our sexuality can be named and represented, where we are sexual subjects – no longer bound and trapped” (p. 127). Discourses, including those associated with women’s bodies, shape how students think about themselves and others. Educators interested in persistence need to consider larger social discourses alongside student identity construction when trying to understanding college students’ experiences as they engage in higher education.

I am interested in the various ways in which discourses related to gender, race, and social class impact students’ identity construction at the time of college entry during their first semester experience, particularly those students who are women and who are first in their families to attend college. Even though students may share the common characteristic of being the first in their families to attend college, “first generation” students are not a monolithic group with a common identity. Thus, it is important to explore what discourses are present in their lives and how identity construction impacts their involvement and persistence in higher education.

Chickering and Reisser (1998) argue that student development should be “the organizing purpose of higher education” (p. 268). They propose seven non-linear vectors of development, which include developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing
purpose, and developing integrity (pp. 38-39). Chickering and Reisser’s work is primarily interested in the ways in which colleges promote student learning and development. Their understanding of identity development is essentially a “positive” description, which involves:

1. comfort with body and appearance,
2. comfort with gender and sexual orientation,
3. sense of self in a social, historical, and cultural context,
4. clarification of self-concept through roles and life-style,
5. sense of self in response to feedback from valued others,
6. self-acceptance and self-esteem,
7. personal stability and integration.

A solid sense of self emerges, and it becomes more apparent that there is an I who coordinates the facets of personality, who ‘owns’ the house of self and is comfortable in all of its rooms. (p. 49)

Although Chickering and Reisser’s (1998) description of identity development presents aims for student development outcomes, they do not specifically address the ways in which student identity upon entry comes to bear on students’ involvement, engagement, and persistence. Additionally, feminist poststructuralism questions the notion of a stable self and questions the ability to ever have full-ownership of our identity. Historical, political, cultural, and social discourses influence self understanding, and this has implications for higher education in regard to promoting diversity and student development. Thus, it is critical for higher education researchers concerned with persistence to investigate the ways in which students’ perceptions of themselves and their environments work to shape their engagement with others and knowledge within and outside of college classrooms.

It is important to continue to study female development and consider potential implications for education. An example of recent discourses in the media as it relates to education and women and girls’ development is the discussion sparked by the comments of
President Lawrence H. Summers, president of Harvard, who spoke at a conference on Women and Science in January 2005. His commentary, which questioned the factors, including innate biological differences between men and women in terms of aptitude for the sciences, resulted in a letter with an apologetic tone explaining his views on women in the sciences and the need to “reduce barriers to the advancement of women in science” (Summers, 2005a). Summers addressed the faculty of Harvard following the controversial speech and explained the fact that universities were created by and for men “shapes everything from the way career paths in academic life are conceived, to assumptions about effectiveness in teaching and mentoring, to concepts of excellence” (Summers, 2005b). Thus, debates, discourses, and considerations about gender, race, and class in education are very relevant for research and practice and must be explored to further social justice in America.

Although still embarking on new frontiers of understanding gender, class, racial, differences, and shared struggles for equality, feminist development theorists are contributing to the elevation and value of care, relationships, connectedness, empathy, and community in educational research, practices, and educational outcomes from primary to post-graduate levels. In this particular study, I asked why the women in my study have come to college, inquired specifically about aspects of “identity” relevant to their decision to pursue higher education, and questioned how they viewed themselves in relation to being a student as well as how they perceived their identities for the future. I sought to find out if they were coming to college for themselves, for their families, or for a sense of control over their futures. I also learned more about their experiences throughout the course of their first and second semesters as they juggled various responsibilities and interacted with peers, staff, faculty, new knowledge, and new ways of thinking. Feminist theories and women-centered development theories have informed
researchers that women have, in the past, occupied a lesser place than men; additionally, race and class poses some further inequities for some women. Only by studying women’s experiences as central with the multiple and plural meanings of their lives in regard to race, class, and gender differences will researchers come to a better understanding about their persistence. As such, some considerations for this study involved the asking of the following: what were the discourses in the lives of these women as they entered college; what sense of control did they perceive in their personal situations, especially in regard to finances and education; how did they define themselves in regard to their identity; what are some of the power relations they experienced; and what did they perceive college will mean to their identities and their futures.
“There is no clear window into the inner life of an individual. Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity.”

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 19)

Thoughts on Researcher Position

Qualitative researchers believe “self” is and should be present in qualitative research practices, and feminist researchers posit that self-reflection in respect to the privileged position of power of researcher as “truth teller” is imperative (Blair, 1998; Creswell, 1998a; Creswell, 1998b; Denzin, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Foster, 1994; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Richardson, 2000). Further, critical race theory, postcolonial and queer theories have informed, challenged, and encouraged feminist theory to move beyond the theoretical stance, which maintains white European middle class heterosexuality, to a feminist solidarity centered in diversity (Asher, 2001, 2002; Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000; hooks, 1997; Ladson-Billing, 2000; Lorde, 2004; Mohanty, 2003). Developing a critical awareness, or what Asher (2002) refers to as a “hybrid consciousness,” challenges educators to recognize our own implications in continuing racism, classism, sexism/heterosexuality and urges researchers to examine our own geographic and historical positions, which privilege us within our particular nationality, race, culture, class, or gender/sexuality (p. 85-94).

In examining my own perspective as researcher, I positioned myself as a working class feminist of white color because my upbringing and experiences have shaped my perspectives on race, gender, and class as well as my views education, politics, and the economy. These perspectives also shape my interactions in the higher education environment both as a student at
Louisiana State University and as an administrator at a community college within the State. As I critically considered my “position,” the various, plural, and conflicted aspects of my own identity surfaced to conscious level as I worked to understand myself. I have known all through my higher education experiences that my socio-economic background influenced my perspectives, but until this dissertation, I had not spent a great deal of time thinking about how. In critically reflecting on my own socioeconomic upbringing in regard to higher education, I had to modify, shed, and hide some of my working class ways of thinking and expressing myself to “fit in” to the arena of higher education. I have discovered that I am not alone in my concerns about revealing my class identity in higher education (Adair & Dahlberg, 2003; Dews & Law, 1995). Sullivan (2003) discusses plainly how the stereotype of “white trash” is inscribed on the consciousness of people from poor and working class families and how she and others working in higher education who have moved from the “lower-class” to middle class have had to silence themselves and assume a “middle-class” appearance to be successful (p. 58). Dahlberg (2003) also explains when any research or consideration of “poverty-class identities” is explored the portrayals, function very much like the colonized racial ‘Other’, as poverty-class imagery is sexualized, fetishized, and appropriated by middle-class culture to proscribe more acceptable models of class Otherness. Further, these models pit working-class images of labor against poverty-class representations of economic failure to reinforce concepts of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor. The poverty class remains Other as a result and unacceptable in the cultural consciousness (p. 68).

Dahlberg (2003) further explains that research and education need to focus on the plural identities of people seeking to understand the complex and multiple aspects of lives, rather than
essentializing and objectifying subjects; otherwise, she says, “the transcending body is relegated to an imposter role, while the appropriated text of her upward mobility is used as an endorsement for middle-class norms” (p. 81). In a deliberate attempt to “reclaim” a hidden part of who I am, I positioned myself as “working class.” I considered myself indelibly working class in my research, work, and personal life; as such this work sought to dismantle stereotypes about “class” in regard to the assumptions present in the “first-generation” label by providing, in as much as possible, a holistic picture of the students who are categorized as “first-generation” by higher education. In this case study, by having the participants express how they constructed and expressed their own identities, I deconstructed the “first-generation label” that is used in higher education as a primary construct, or “identifier,” for students who are first in their families to attend college.

My “whiteness” is much more complex for me to understand. In my undergraduate education, I was not required to take any classes in diversity or multiculturalism for my political science major nor did I think about taking any. I was first exposed to a race and gender issues course through my Ph.D. program and only then began to critically engage with concepts of oppression and discrimination, to which I had not devoted much in-depth thought, undoubtedly because of my “whiteness.” While grappling with the meanings of my “whiteness” with historical, social, and economic implications in oppression, articles by Lee (2003), Lubienski (2003), and McIntosh (1990) have aided in my positioning myself as white working class. These articles have caused me to critically think about the complexities of socioeconomic class, race, and culture and how intersections of these influence engagement in education as individuals participate as students, teachers, or administrators. Lee (2003) explains that white middle-class privilege is embedded in educational practices, research, and social conscience. She explains the
use of the phrase “person of color” is telling of the “white” privilege and power relations, because whites have a color (white), but in our society, people who are non-white are forced to position themselves or are positioned by “whites” as “Others” (p. 3). Positions of race, gender, and economic status matter greatly in regard to education and financial status in American society. Thus, educators need to critically consider disparities and injustices, while avoiding stereotypes and monolithic conceptions of groups, in order to work toward social justice (Lee, 2003; Lubienski, 2003; & McIntosh, 1990). As such I chose to recognize my gender, color, and class with the various meanings and implications these have for this study.

Prior to attending college, my worldview was poignantly narrow because my rural public education, lack of cable television, and the earthy lifestyle of growing up in the woods of North Louisiana one generation removed from my “Mamaw and Papaw’s” farm provided little opportunity to learn about “the world.” I knew nothing of the United Nations or political philosophies, and the very little I had learned about discrimination and oppression was locally understood in terms of black-white relations in a rural parish of less than 10,000 people who comprised of seemingly homogenous polar groups.

Growing up in a working class home, the budget was always tight, but we always had running water, electricity, and air conditioning in the double-wide trailer. My father told my three older sisters and me stories of how he and his family did not have running water during his early childhood and how a well provided drinking and bath water. He would remind us it is a privilege to have running water and air conditioning. Even though my father had the desire to attend college, he was not able because of financial constraints and obligations to help support younger siblings. He dropped out of high school to help with family expenses, then returned a year later to finish. My father would tell us, “you are going to get a college education,” and
looking back, there was a sense of urgency in his message which implied we needed to have a college education so we would not be poor like he was. He even joked sometimes, saying, “I married up,” which meant that he, as a member of the “poor” class, married a woman from the “middle class.”

My mother grew up in Baton Rouge and graduated from Louisiana State University with a bachelor’s degree in music education. She started her career as a high school music teacher then later became a social worker and maintained side-line jobs as church choir director, and participated in parish-wide art and beautification projects. My parents scraped together money for us to have piano lessons, a couple of years of ballet and dance (until they could no longer afford it), and high school band and choir membership which required funds for more musical instruments and costumes for choir. They also managed to provide enough money to make 30 mile trips during the summer for us to take karate at the YMCA, to participate in the Monroe Youth Symphony Orchestra, and to have parts in the summer plays sponsored by Northeast Louisiana University (now the University of Louisiana at Monroe).

Through observing my mother’s experiences and through my own college experience, I understand the value of higher education in regard to a woman’s self-esteem, financial independence, and personal agency. Additionally, through engaging with feminist and critical theory literature in regard to the political, economic and educational intersections of race, culture, and class I understand the moral implications for fostering educational environments, outcomes, and experiences that promote care and concern for others. Additionally, I see the need for teaching students critical self reflection in regard to understanding discrimination, subjugation, and oppression.

In pursuing my undergraduate degree, I overcame many obstacles, including having to
work part-time to pay for food, books, and other necessities. Since many women are first in their families to attend college are also from working class and poor backgrounds, I empathize with some of the difficulties they face. I was able to attend college because of a Pell grant at a time when community colleges had not yet become a wide-spread option in the state and the nearest one was about three hours away, too far to commute. Although I performed well academically, I struggled in many other ways to get through college. I realize now I began my higher education journey at a privileged place in regard to unearned racial advantages and in knowing, at least in part because of my mother’s experience, the avenues to overcome “academic process” obstacles along the way, such as the importance of paying attention to university deadlines and following the college catalog as well as the importance of syllabi and establishing positive interaction with instructors. This study was an exploration of the educational experiences of four women participants and my own journey as I learned more about others and myself through this research.

As I began this study, I understood that my role as a college administrator may have some impact in regard to the students’ willingness to share personal information or negative perspectives about the college. I sought to minimize these affects through informing students about their confidentiality rights and voluntary participation in the study. Further, I shared information about myself and my personal background through informal conversations as well as through interviews, so the participants and I might feel more at ease about sharing personal backgrounds, experiences, and perceptions. Additionally, I sought to establish a mutually beneficial relationship, whereby the students would have a contact who could serve as an information source as a direct benefit to participating in the study. The students and I would often see each other on the courtyard or around campus over the course of the study and stop to
talk informally mutually asking about how things were going. Although initially my position of
authority may have caused some limitations in students responses, I feel the participants and I
soon forgot about the student-administrator relationship and began communicating as friends.
McKensie expressed this is one of her interviews when said she felt we were friends and that she
could talk with me about what was going on in her life.

In the remainder of this chapter, I present some assumptions of qualitative research and
discuss feminist poststructuralist perspectives and implications for the study. Additionally, I
discuss my case study design and narrative presentation of the study results.

Assumptions of Qualitative Research

In establishing a philosophical and theoretical framework for my research problem, I
considered ontological, epistemological, axiological, rhetorical, and methodological questions in
relation to my inquiry about the experiences of community college women. I considered
implications each of these questions had for my research (Creswell, 1998b; Denzin & Lincoln,
2000; Patton, 2002). The following section explains how I understood each of these questions as
they pertain to this study.

Ontological questions, such as “what is the nature of reality?” were important to consider
in conducting and interpreting research (Creswell, 1998b). Although I, as researcher, interpreted
the meanings of the case study, I wanted the participants’ stories and views to be shared.
However, this involved a realization that research and “reality” is subjective (Creswell, 1998b;
Denzin, 2000, p. 898). The students’ individual backgrounds, identities, and experiences were
all unique, yet, some “common” themes concerning their experiences arose through studying and
comparing their experiences. The case study report used many “quotes and themes in words of
participants” to bring forward their experiences (Creswell, 1998b).
Epistemological questions, such as “what is the relationship between the researcher and that being researched?” were also important to consider (Creswell, 1998b). The relationship I developed with the participants was not as a removed observer, because I have personal experiences that shape who I am in regard to this topic. Thus, I chose not to distance myself from the participants; rather, I spent time throughout the semester getting to know the participants through informal and formal meetings and observed some of their interactions with others (Creswell, 1998b). Feminist epistemology considers women’s experiences as valuable resources for research and new knowledge related to understanding women’s plural and diverse experiences (Harding, 1987, p. 7). Thus, a feminist epistemology which accepts women’s experiences, including my own, as conflicted and complex provided a framework for inquiry that allowed me to explore issues across class, culture, and subjectivities in order to better understand the diverse experiences of the women in this study.

Axiological assumptions deal with the role of values. Qualitative researchers consider the research process as a value-laden activity. This implies researchers should explicitly discuss their own “values that shape the narrative” as well as include reflexivity along with the stories of the participants (Creswell, 1998b). In striving to understand the phenomenon of persistence in the lives and experiences of the participants in my study, I recognized my collection, interpretation, and presentation of the data was shaped through the lense of my own experiences. Through my research process, I specifically worked to share participants’ experiences with as much authenticity as possible through providing a detailed story for each participant while I engaged in critical self-reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, pp. 180-185).

Rhetorical questions pertain to “the language of research” (Creswell, 1998b). I used first-person language in this qualitative study to interpret participants’ experiences through my voice.
in the narrative analysis for the case study report (Creswell, 1998b). Additionally, language, discourse, power relations, and knowledge have implications in this study, and these are discussed in the next section.

Finally, methodological considerations for this study led me to an emerging case study design that considered the context and time frame as well as the individual specificities and uniqueness of each person’s experience. Additionally, using narrative analysis and reflexivity, I analyzed the data through reflecting on the research questions while seeking to understand more about how involvement and integrationist theories applied in these case studies. This type of methodology allowed me to consider the particulars of each case and compare each participant’s experience when common themes emerged across the cases.

Feminist Poststructuralist Perspectives: Implications for This Study

I decided to use a feminist poststructuralist framework because of the importance these two frameworks place on language and relationships in meaning making (Capper, 1998; Ropers-Huilman, 1998; Weedon, 1987, 1997). Although there are tensions involved in joining these two epistemological frameworks, together they provide a conceptual approach for exploring the phenomenon of persistence through investigating power relations, knowledge and truth, and discourses encircling issues of gender, race, and class present in the experiences of the participants within this study.

A feminist poststructuralist perspective considers the ways discourses shape knowledge and understanding. Discourses concerning gender, race, and class intersect the daily lives of students. Family structures, educational practices, political rhetoric, media and entertainment, psychological theories as well as curriculum/studies of geography, culture, and history encircle and shape our understanding of ourselves, others, and the contextual, historical, social, and
political environments in which we live and act. As actors within our environments, we may choose to accept, accept in part, or reject discourses as presented to us. Also, through participating in public discourses, individuals may change and potentially create new discourses, which shape politics, education, and societal norms.

As such, this study concerned itself with questions about the students’ identity construction, background experiences, and reasons for coming to college. It sought to understand the various raced, gendered, and classed “scripts” or discourses operating in the lives of participants in my study and how participants positioned themselves within these discourses. Through this study, I further sought to understand participants’ involvement and engagement with those touching their lives during their first semester and first year of college and the meanings these relationships had for their college persistence.

For my study, feminist poststructuralism offered a framework to explore the experiences of the women in this study in the midst of their complexities and diversity. Further, this framework provided a means to explore how they expressed their personal identities, goals, perspectives, and relationships throughout their first semester and first-year experience. This framework provided a means for in-depth study of the phenomenon of the persistence among the four individuals in the study.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) offer a useful perspective, stating poststructural feminist theories “emphasize problems with the social text, its logic, and its inability ever to represent the world of lived experience fully” (p. 21). I do not want, nor do I think it is practical, to make grand generalizations on how “all” community college females who are first in their families to attend college persist or fail to persist toward degree completion. Instead, I chose to focus specifically on the participants in my study with their complex individual identities and
individual experiences. A feminist poststructuralism framework informed the types of questions I asked of participants, myself, and the literature. Additionally, given this framework’s view concerning the partial nature of knowledge, I focused on the particulars of each participant’s experience and presented each student’s story with as much detail as possible to convey the context of each participant’s first-semester experience and early college experiences. Following my presentation of the case studies, I offer cautious comparisons between cases.

Case Study Design

According to Creswell (1998b), five essential assumptions guide the design of good qualitative research; these include: “the multiple nature of reality, the close relationship of the researcher to that being researched, the value-laden aspect of inquiry, the personal approach to writing the narrative, and the emerging inductive methodology of the process of research” (p. 74). Through my data collection, analysis, and interpretation, I sought to reflect the experiences of the individuals as closely as possible to how they interpret “reality” in their own situations. I reflected on students’ experiences and my interpretations of their experiences by “spending extended time, on site, personally in contact with the activities and operations of the case, reflecting, revising meanings of what is going on” (Stake, 2000, p. 444).

Creswell (1998a) provides a definition for case studies writing: “whereas some consider ‘the case’ the object of study (Stake, 1995) and others consider it a methodology (e.g., Merriam, 1988), a case study is an exploration of a ‘bounded system’ or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (p. 61). This method of exploration was needed for an in-depth understanding of involvement and persistence among the women in this study who are first in their families to attend college.
Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) explain that case study research involves four characteristics: “(1) the study of phenomena by focusing on specific instances, that is, cases; (2) an in-depth study of each case; (3) the study of a phenomenon in its natural context; and (4) the study of the emic perspective of case study participants” (p. 545). They further define case study research as “the in-depth study of instances of a phenomenon in its natural context and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon” (p. 545). The phenomenon explored in my study was the persistence of four women who were first in the families to attend college. The cases for investigation were the individuals participating in the study. I devoted a substantial amount of time and energy to collecting information about each individual participant and her experiences throughout her first and second semesters of college. I worked to capture a picture of the context of participants’ environments through utilizing observations, interviews, and personal journaling as each participant engaged with peers, faculty, staff, and important others in their lives who have an impact on their college involvement and persistence.

Stake (2000) and Yin (1994) also offer useful, although different, approaches for case studies. My methodology relied on select aspects from each but relied more heavily on suggestions from Stake, who explained there are three types of case studies: intrinsic case study, instrumental case study and collective case study (p. 437). My study was an instrumental case study from Stake’s perspective because particular cases or individual participants’ experiences were “examined mainly to provide insight into an issue” (Stake, 2000, p. 437). Stake also explains that with instrumental case studies, the individual cases, although studied in-depth, serve as a means for understanding a problem or question: “the case still is looked at in depth, its contexts scrutinized, its ordinary activities detailed, but all because this helps the researcher to pursue the external interest. The case may be seen as typical of other cases or not” (p. 437).
depth investigation of the four particular cases provided further understanding of the phenomenon of persistence of women during their first semester of college and helped to further understanding about the usefulness of involvement and integrationist theories.

Louisiana Community and Technical College System

Southtown Community College is the pseudonym chosen for the college in this study. In order for readers to better understand the context of the case studies presented in the next chapters, I present here some background information about the Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS) and Southtown Community College, which is a member of the LCTCS. Louisiana has only recently begun developing a structured system of community and technical colleges within the state. In 1996, a single board was created to manage all two-year colleges in the state, and through the First Extraordinary Session of 1998, ACTS 151 and 170 were passed and approved by voters in the state (LCTCS, 2006). Prior to this legislation, 42 individual technical colleges, governed by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), and three community colleges existed – Delgado Community College, Bossier Parish Community College, and Nunez Community College. Following the creation of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS) board, four new community colleges were established; these include Baton Rouge Community College, South Louisiana Community College, River Parishes Community College, and Delta Community College respectively. Also, two technical colleges have begun the process of converting to comprehensive community colleges offering both technical and junior college programs; these are Sowella Technical and Community College and L.E. Fletcher Technical and Community College. Three other community colleges operate in Louisiana outside of the LCTCS system. These include
Louisiana State University at Alexandria, Louisiana State University at Eunice, and Southern University at Shreveport (LCTCS, 2006).

As part of a targeted effort to improve higher education in the state of Louisiana, the Board of Regents of the State of Louisiana along with the governor formulated, the *Master Plan for Public Postsecondary Education: 2001*. This document strives to provide clarity concerning the comprehensive statewide system of higher education by differentiating between the role, scope, and mission statements of the various public and private institutions. In addition, this document outlines seven mission elements of the comprehensive community and technical services provided by LCTCS: “1.) Economic Development 2.) Workforce Development 3.) Basic Skills and Literacy Development 4.) General Education Development 5.) Career Skills Development 6.) University-Level, Lower Division Educational Development 7.) Secondary School Vocational-Technical Education Development” (Louisiana Board of Regents, 2001, pp. 13-14).

The *Master Plan for Public Postsecondary Education: 2001* also establishes several objectives impacting two-year colleges. Some of these objectives involve improving first-time retention to second year and increasing the three-year graduation rate at community colleges (Louisiana Board of Regents, 2001, pp. 13-14). In addition, this plan for higher education involves raising admission criteria at four-year institutions, which is expected to have the effect of directing many more students to enter community colleges prior to attending a four-year institution (Louisiana Board of Regents, 2001, pp. 14-18).

Finally, the LCTCS is still a new developing system with an enormous amount of potential to improve the state of education in Louisiana. With the growth of community and technical colleges within the state, more students have affordable access to higher education
within their geographic location. Additionally, this new system has the opportunity to develop and create environments that promote student success. The site location for my study was a small community college within the LCTCS. Since the first and second semester of college was the timeframe for the study, I limited the study to a single-site in order to collect an in-depth series of interviews, observations, and field notes.

Site Location and College Demographics

The statistics for the college description were obtained from Southtown Community College’s Grants and Contracts Office. The college offered its first classes in fall of 1999, and since that time, the college has gained full membership in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges. In regard to student involvement or engagement, Southtown Community College faces challenges similar to those of many other commuter campuses. These include having low participation in campus activities and organizations, having a student population where the majority attends college on a part-time basis, and having a student population that is highly involved in external responsibilities related to work and family.

In 2003, Southtown Community College participated in the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), a national survey on student involvement in community colleges. The college has not participated again since that time, but plans to administer the survey again during the Spring 2007 semester. The results of the 2003 CCSSE survey reveal some of the college’s successes and challenges concerning student involvement in relation to their peers in the 2003 cohort. The 2003 CCSSE results compared Southtown Community College students’ responses with those at nationwide peer institutions that also participated as part of the 2003 cohort. On average, Southtown Community College students came to class more prepared in regard to having completed readings or assignments. Additionally, on average,
Southtown Community College students reported having had serious conversations with members of a race or ethnicity different from their own more so than did their peers at other community colleges participating in the study (University of Texas at Austin, CCSSE, 2003).

Some areas for improvement, according to the 2003 CCSSE survey, were that Southtown Community College students made fewer class presentations and wrote fewer reports or papers than their peers at other participating colleges. In regard to student involvement, as it relates to this study, the CCSSE 2003 survey results show Southtown Community College is doing well generally in regard to encouraging students to be academically involved through completing their required work for classes and in encouraging cross-cultural interaction among students. The college could, however, make some improvements in regard to academic expectations. (Items 1b, 1d, 1e, 1s, 3c used with permission from The Community College Student Report [2003], Community College Survey of Student Engagement, The University of Texas at Austin.)

Southtown Community College is located in an economically thriving parish, yet it is a quiet campus located alongside a bayou. The buildings are constructed in Acadian style architecture, and the campus is surrounded by wetlands. The campus buildings form a U-Shape around a grassy courtyard and on days when the weather is nice, students gather on the porches of the buildings. At the start of the 2006-2007 academic year, Southtown Community College had 1,130 students enrolled. The average age of Southtown Community College students is 24 and 637 students or 56% are within the ages of 16-21.

Gender and financial class statistics for Southtown Community College were collected, since these statistics were relevant in this study. During the fall 2006 semester, the college followed a national pattern of a larger percentage of women enrolled, with 67% of the student population being female. Additional statistics were gathered to understand the gender
enrollment pattern from the fall 2005 semester through the spring 2007 semester; the ratio was 64% female to 31.2% male across those semesters.

Southtown Community College serves several surrounding rural parishes and many of the students come from areas where 25% of the population is eligible for some form of federal assistance. Additionally, nearly 68% are also “first-generation” college students who are the first in their family to attend a college or university. Southtown Community College’s “first-generation” percentage across the semesters of this study, fall 2005 through spring 2007, was 65%. This is an important percentage to note, since more than half of the students are “first-generation;” this condition is the norm at Southtown Community College.

Many of Southtown Community College Students attend college on a part-time basis and come to the college with a need for some remediation. The majority of the students attend part-time with approximately 60% of the fall 2006 student population carrying fewer that 12 semester hours. Approximately 28% of the student body attends 6-11 hours, and nearly 32% carry course loads of fewer than 6 semester hours. Slightly more than half of the students at Southtown Community College are first-time full-time freshmen with an average score of 18 on the ACT. In the fall 2006 semester, a total of 388 students or 34% of its students were enrolled in developmental studies courses. Of those students, 82% had one developmental course, and 18% had at least two developmental courses.

Southtown Community College students are from diverse ethnic groups. In the fall 2006 semester, demographics were as follows: 63% White or Caucasian, 33% Black or African American, and the remaining 4% identified as Hispanic, Asian, Native American or ethnicity unknown. The faculty at Southtown Community College is evenly represented by gender at an even 50% ratio. The faculty body is also somewhat diverse with the following racial group
percentages: 5% Asian, 9% Hispanic, 18% Black, and 73% White. At the start of the 2006-2007 academic year, the college had 18 full-time and 25 part-time instructors.

**Sampling Procedure**

Random sampling is useful in qualitative research for credibility in the research process (Creswell, 1998a; Kemper, Stringfield, & Teddlie, 2003; Patton, 2002). Random sampling was used to identify first semester women who were classified by the college as “first-generation,” meaning neither parent had attended college. The random sample was selected through a college-provided list of students who matched these characteristics.

Patton provides the following advice in regard to sampling: “There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources” (p. 244). I began by interviewing six participants in a pilot interview process and then selected four participants to observe and follow throughout the study (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Patton, 2002). I narrowed the participants to four based on their interest and commitment to continuing in this dissertation research. As Patton (2002) explains, there are “trade-offs between breadth and depth. With the same fixed resources and limited time, a researcher could study a specific set of experiences for a larger number of people (seeking breadth) or a more open range of experiences for a smaller number of people (seeking depth)” (p. 244).

**Advance of Fieldwork**

Prior to beginning fieldwork, I made an initial inquiry to find out whether or not the community college does collect data on students who are the first in their families to attend college. The community college collected “first-generation” data in a reportable form through
the student application form and process. Additionally, I sought and obtained approval from the Director of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement to use information drawn from the CCSSE survey in my study (Appendix A). Prior to beginning field work, I also obtained IRB approval (Appendix B). Then, I sought and obtained appropriate campus approval from the Chancellor to negotiate access (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). I next collected a report of “first-generation” first-semester females from the college and selected participants as noted above.

Data Collection Procedures and Sources

Yin (1994) and Stake (2000) provide useful suggestions for data collection in case studies. I chose to use suggestions from each of these approaches, but again, I relied more on the interpretive process as defined by Stake. The case study, as described by Stake, is an “interpretive” process “seeking out emic meanings held by the people within the case” (p. 441). He describes case studies as “storytelling” and explains that “case content evolves even in the last phases of writing” (p. 441). Stake also acknowledges that “empathic and respectful” research will be cognizant of participants’ “realities” in collecting and analyzing the data, but in the end, the researcher must decide what information is included and excluded in the final report and “the researcher ultimately decides criteria of representation” (p. 441).

Yin suggests data collection in case studies should include the following six sources of information: “documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant-observation, and physical artifacts;” these together provide the necessary evidence for case studies (p. 78). One additional source of data I used was participant journaling, which is explained later in this chapter. Yin also provides a few guiding principles for the process of data collection:
These include the use of (a) multiple sources of evidence, that is, evidence from two or more sources, but converging on the same set of facts or findings; (b) a case study database, that is, a formal assembly of evidence distinct from the final case study report; and (c) a chain of evidence, that is explicit links between the questions asked, the data collected, and the conclusions drawn (p. 78).

This case study followed a chronological timeline for data collection and focused on the progression of students’ experiences at the outset of their first semester, in the midst of their first semester, and at the beginning of their second semester of college. At each of these points, I interviewed each participant. I was able to obtain a fourth interview with two of the participants in the fall of 2006 and informal follow-up information from the other two approximately one year from their college start date and initial participation in this study.

**Documents**

Yin (1994) explains that researchers can use documents as a data collection method to: verify spelling of names, titles, or organizations mentioned in interviews; find corroborating or contradictory information for further investigation; make inferences that can provide “clues” for further inquiry (p. 81). I read newspaper clippings about the college context to look for information relating to student involvement, financial aid, or any special programs for students. I also considered organizational and administrative documentation to understand more about academic and social integration as it pertains to involvement opportunities or services available to women who are first in their families to attend college. The formal opportunities for extracurricular involvement are few. Southtown Community College has a student government association, a Phi Theta Kappa Chapter, and a handful of other clubs. The financial aid
programs include federal grants, federal loans, and a deferred payment plan to assist students with the financial costs of college.

Archival Records

As suggested by Yin (1994) I sought archival records that were useful and relevant to my study. As a participant researcher in this study, I also had some insider knowledge about programs and services offered for these groups. Since 2000, the college has participated in TRIO Dissemination Partnership grants with two different four-year universities. Over the course of the year 2000 to the present, these two separate grants allowed the college to provide tutoring and to create a mentoring program for students who were considered “first-generation.” Other students could participate in these services, but the programs were created specifically to assist first-generation students. Also, the first-year Academic Seminar, one-credit hour, course is a half-semester long course that provides students an opportunity in their first semester of college to learn more about the college, expectations related to academic work, career exploration, and personal skills to encourage success (e.g. study skills, time management).

Interviews

I conducted several rounds of interviews, first at the beginning of the fall 2005 semester, then near the end of the fall 2005 semester, and then again at the beginning of the spring 2006 semester. An example of the first interview protocol is included (Appendix C). The purpose of collecting multiple interviews was to gather information about the students’ experiences and their reflections on their first-semester and first year of college. I established a researcher-participant relationship with the four participants throughout the first semester into the early part of their second semester; as mentioned earlier, and was able to continue interviewing two participants through the fall of 2006. I conducted the first round of interviews shortly after the
application, registration, and initial “entry” period. These interviews were “open-ended conversational interviews” (Patton, 2002, p. 342; Yin, 1994, p. 84). Yin explains that allowing the participant to provide insights without formal pre-structured questions allows the interviewee to be more of an “informant’ rather than a ‘respondent’” (p. 84). Patton suggests that even though the interviews are informal, “unstructured doesn’t mean that conversational interviews are unfocused. Sensitizing concepts and the overall purpose of the inquiry inform the interviewing. But within that overall guiding purpose, the interviewer is free to go where the data and respondents lead” (p. 342) This round of interviews focused on students’ identities, the process of “coming to college,” and their early semester experiences.

The second round of interviews took place near the end of the students’ first semester of college after they had ample time to interact with faculty, staff, and peers. These interviews occurred at a pivotal time for many first year students when they were experiencing a great deal of introspection and self-questioning about their reasons for attending college, choice of major, academic strengths and weaknesses, and support systems both within and outside of the college environment.

Patton (2002) discusses a “standardized open-ended interview” as especially effective “to be sure that each interviewee gets asked the same questions -the same stimuli- in the same way and the same order, including standard probes” (Patton, 2002, p. 344). The interview protocol focused specifically on student perceptions and experiences as they related to intentions and commitments, social and academic integration, ethnicity, race, gender, class, obstacles they faced to academic and/or social integration, and strategies they employed to overcome barriers.

The third round of interviews took place at the beginning of the spring 2006 semester. This set of interviews served to better explain how students had changed in their perspectives
over the course of their college experience. The last interview also allowed students to reflect on how they had changed personally in regard to their identities and in regard to their educational and career goals. The structure and focus were the same in the second and third round of interviews, except there was an added focus regarding “changes” the students experienced.

The fourth round of formal and informal interviews with the students took place during the fall of 2006. I was also able to arrange formal interviews with two of the students near the end of the semester. I was able to contact the one who had resigned from the college via e-mail to ask her some questions concerning her decision to withdraw. Additionally, I was able to talk informally with the last participant about her continued status as a student.

**Direct and Participant Observations**

I also used observations to see the students interacting in their classroom settings. The classroom observations gave me an opportunity to observe the students’ interaction with faculty and other students, which provided additional information to incorporate into my understanding of their responses and perceptions as expressed in the interviews. I conducted a total of four classroom observations, one with each participant during the spring 2006 semester. I talked with the students and faculty members ahead of time concerning access. I then visited the classes as a silent observer sitting at the back of the classroom in order to observe participants’ interactions with faculty and other peers. I wrote my observations through field notes and included relevant details from these in summary write-ups following the third round of interviews, which took place in the spring 2006 semester.

**Physical Artifacts**

Yin (1994) states, “a final source of evidence is a physical or cultural artifact—a technological devise, a tool or instrument, a work of art, or some other physical evidence. Such
artifacts may be collected or observed” in field work (p. 90). The Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS) administered the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) during the Spring 2003 semester. This survey is intended to provide an overview of student involvement on individual community college campuses. It indicates both academic and social types of student involvement. I used the CCSSE data to better understand the larger contextual picture of student engagement at the college in regard to student participation and involvement.

Participant Journaling

I asked the four participants if they would be interested in maintaining a personal journal of experiences and reflections about their first semester (Appendix D). The purpose of the personal journaling was to have students write about and reflect on their college experiences as they proceeded through their first semester of college. Two of the students participated in journaling. The journaling was useful in that it provided additional information and insight into the individual case studies. I also maintained field notes and reflections during the data collection process, which were useful in analyzing data throughout the entire process of analysis. I used the participant journal data collected along with post-interview reflection notes and observation notes to synthesize the data collected and make connections between what participants told me in interviews with what I observed or read in their personal journals.

Confidentiality

I maintained confidentiality of the participants through asking participants to choose pseudonyms and by following directions regarding student privacy as instructed by the college. Southtown Community College is the pseudonym I gave to the college for purposes of confidentiality. Further, I informed participants in writing of their confidentiality and rights
through the informed consent form prior to collecting any participant data (Appendix E). Additionally, all personal data collected through the demographic form remained confidential and any references to personal data were reported only in connection with participants’ pseudonyms (Appendix F).

Description of Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred as I collected, compiled, read, and re-read the data. I worked to understand how inter-subjectivity and the partial and situational nature of truth impacted the data and stories; I analyzed the data at every point of the research process through hearing, seeing, interpreting, and presenting the data (Crowther, 1999; Denzin, 1999; Olesen, 1998; Richardson, 2000; Ropers-Huilman, 1999a, 1999b). I used interpretational analysis to analyze the data.

Interpretational analysis, as described by Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) involves “examining case study data closely in order to find and construct, themes, and patterns that can be used to describe and explain the phenomenon” (p. 562). At each data collection point, I chronologically compiled and analyzed the data gathered from interviews, observations, and participant journals. I transcribed all interviews, typed my notes and reflections, and read through the transcriptions and notes in their entirety. Then, I summarized these through initial and continuing individual and group analysis (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996).

Credibility, Limitations and Strengths

Although investigator bias may be considered a limitation in regard to my research positioning, my position as researcher also strengthens credibility of this study in that I was able to share my experiences with participants, establish an open relationship for dialogue, and reflect on participants’ experiences while also reflecting back on my own. It is not possible to ever have a complete accounting of someone’s story (Foster, 1994), but my insider status as a woman and
someone with origins in the working class allowed students to be more at ease with me as “researcher,” so they were willing to share more about their experiences.

Several researchers have written about how one may be simultaneously an insider and outsider and how conflicts may arise in the research process that relate from that unique positioning (Alridge, 2003; Chaudhry, 1997; Narayan, 1993; Villenas, 1996). I experienced some of this tension in the study in observing how my position as an administrator at the college may have initially caused students not to feel open in their dialogue. Nevertheless, sharing my own experiences coming from a working class background and some experiences I had in common with participants seemed to break down some of the differences and provided a space for a researcher-participant relationship that encouraged free expression and less restrained dialogue.

Patton (2002) explains, “researchers should strive to neither overestimate nor underestimate their effects but to take seriously their responsibility to describe and study what those effects are” (p. 568). Throughout the interview and data collection process, the participants and I became more at ease with each other as we got to know each other better. Each of them provided reflections on their relationship with me as well as some of the effects of participating in this study. These are discussed in the case analysis.

Trustworthiness was increased by collecting data over the course of a year and through collecting information from a variety of methods. Using interviews, observations, participant journaling, and field notes increased the credibility of my findings by providing a variety of data for “cross-data consistency checks” (Patton, 2000, p. 556; Stake, 2000, p. 433).

Another limitation of this study was the sample size for drawing meaningful and useful comparisons across cases. As Patton (2002) explains, there is a trade off in qualitative research
regarding breadth and depth in that a smaller number of cases allows a more in-depth study of experiences, whereas a larger number provides more breadth for comparison (p. 244). A smaller number of cases provided a more in-depth analysis than a large number of cases, but this choice was intentional.

My intention in this study was to explore in-depth the ways in which the women in this study understand their “first-generation” status, how they describe their identities, and what relationship understanding of “self” has with involvement and persistence. Credibility of findings was strengthened through sampling procedures. Patton (2002) explains, “the purpose of a small random sample is credibility, not representativeness” (p. 241).

This study sought to understand “meaning of events in individuals’ lives” (Janesick, 2000, p. 394), in particular, the ways in which women who are first in their families to come to college and how they persist through their first semester. I chose to study the experiences of four students, employing thick description in uncovering the particular complexities of each participant’s experience and using “sufficient detail so that the reader can make good comparisons” (Stake, 2000, p. 444). Stake (2000) states, “readers examining instrumental case studies are shown how the phenomenon exists within particular cases” (p. 444). He further explains, “conclusions about differences between any two cases are less to be trusted than conclusions about one. Still, illustration as to how a phenomenon occurs in the circumstances of several exemplars can provide valuable and trustworthy knowledge” (p. 444).

Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) provide several points to consider in “interpretative validity” of case study findings that are applicable to my study (p. 571). The first is “usefulness;” since “objectivity cannot be a criterion for judging the validity of interpretive case study findings. In its place, one imposes the criterion of usefulness” (p. 572). My research findings are useful in
regard to furthering knowledge about persistence of women, particularly those who are first in their families to attend college. The case study findings are also useful in that this study adds to knowledge through explaining how involvement and integrationist theories are and are not applicable in the experiences of these four community college women who are first in their families to attend college. Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) also suggest results of a study may be useful if they liberate individuals. This study has had an impact in the lives of the participants in the study as illustrated in later chapters. The women in this study reflected on their personal identities and agency as well as the meanings of these for their higher education experience and their futures. One voiced that I was a positive role model for her; another voiced that because of the study, she was able to look back on her first semester experience in a more critical and intentional way. In this way, my study has been useful as well.

The second is “contextual completeness;” Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) explain for “phenomena to be properly understood, they need to be set within a context. The more comprehensive the researcher’s contextualization, the more credible are her interpretations of the phenomena” (p. 572-573). I provided detailed descriptions of the state and college context of this study. I also provided in-depth and relevant details to communicate to the reader the participants’ backgrounds, experiences, and perceptions.

The third is “researcher positioning” (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 573). I have discussed how my background and experience shapes my view of this research. Additionally, I related on a personal level with participants through identifying with them on gender and class matters. I dealt with researcher positioning throughout the study by allowing my reflections and perceptions to come forward in the interviews and through the narrative analysis.

A fourth issue of credibility is “reporting style,” and Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996, p. 574)
explain the goal is to achieve “verisimilitude” in order to reflect the participants’ experiences with as much authenticity as possible. I achieved verisimilitude through asking several questions in different ways for a more thorough understanding of students’ responses and perceptions. The data presentation or reporting style for this study is narrative analysis, which is discussed in detail in the next section.

A fifth, “triangulation,” was achieved through using multiple sources and theories in drawing conclusions in the study findings. I reflected on and analyzed the various data through continuously asking questions relevant to Astin and Tinto’s theories with Tierney’s critique of social integrationist theory (Gall, Borg, and Gall, 1996, p. 575). “Member checking” is a sixth suggestion Gall, Borg, and Gall provide regarding credibility in interpretational analysis (p. 575). I conducted member checks through asking all participants to read their corresponding sections of my report and to check my interpretations. Each participant read the summary analysis that I wrote after each interview and provided feedback. Doing member checks assisted in my interpretation of “individuals’ emic perspective” through their review of my summaries for “accuracy and completeness” (p. 575)

A seventh suggestion is maintaining a “chain of evidence” by using the following six forms of documentation in an “audit trail”:

1. source and method of recording raw data, (2) data reduction and analysis products, (3) data reconstruction and synthesis products, (4) process notes, (5) materials relating to intentions and dispositions, and (6) instrument development information” ((Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 576).

I maintained a case study record that includes all typed field notes, transcriptions, and reflective notes. I reduced and analyzed data through coding the data by reading and re-reading the
transcriptions. To reduce the data, I conducted interviews, transcribed the interviews, coded the interviews, read and re-read the interviews, typed a summary analysis for each interview, and shared the summary analysis with participants to incorporate feedback. After each round of interviews with the four participants, I analyzed the data through a cross-case reflection of the students’ responses to the interview questions as the responses related to the research questions and theoretical framework of the study. In this way my methodology provided a structure for making “clear, meaningful links between research questions, raw data, and findings” (Gall, Borg, and Gall, 1996, p. 576).

Data Presentation

I presented the case studies and analysis through feminist narratology using the work of Leslie Bloom (1998) as a model. Bloom (1998) considers both feminist methodology and narrative interpretation in *Under the sign of hope: feminist methodology and narrative interpretation*. Bloom understands the interview process “as central to research relationships in feminist methodology, particularly when the focus is on collecting personal narratives” (p. 16). Additionally, Bloom focuses on the “complexities” of power relations within the research relationship and how the nature of power is problematized in understanding the lives and experiences of participants (p. 16). In other words, exploring power relations within the lives of participants, both in terms of the researcher-participant relationship and power relations in the broader context of individuals’ lives and experiences, is a critical issue for investigation.

Feminist theory is concerned with understanding and breaking down oppression wherever it manifests itself. Bloom discusses the relationships between the researcher and participant, as well as an individual’s own “multiple subjectivities” explaining some implications for research, stating:
one of the central claims of feminist theory—that individual, multiple subject positions are central to human relationships and that these multiple subject positions take on different meanings and levels of importance depending on particular situations and interpersonal relations. In the research relationship, the way that power functions depends greatly on the interrelationship between the multiple subject positions of the people involved in the research and the different discourses about those subject positions. What is crucial to unravel is the ways that conflicting discourses about the role of power in research emerge in research relationship as a result of the hierarchical structuring of particular subject positions. (p. 34)

Because of their understanding of the complexity, plurality, and subjectivity of a human life, feminist researchers resist traditional research methods that rely on rationality, unification, and a bounded notion of an individual. Bloom explains feminist research in this way:

Feminist methodology resists normalization and attempts to falsely stabilize it; it is created through situated relationships and social contexts; it is internally conflicted as a sometimes conformist and sometimes subversive practice; it fragments with conflict; it is rife with shifting positions of power; it demands the freedom of mobility; and it is continually being constructed in language and discourse. Feminist methodology, like women's nonunitary subjectivity, is a means through which we may reinterpret the world, others, ourselves, and our lived experiences. As a nonunitary concept and practice, feminist methodology resists definition, since it must be understood as tentative, residing to a great extent in the idiosyncratic, subjective practices and beliefs of the person doing the research and interpretation. (p. 138)

Feminist methodology allows the researcher to deal with the complexities of lived experience,
which are not tidy, easily explained, stagnant, certain, or always resolved. Additionally, as Bloom explains, narratives offer a way of presenting data in a way that considers the social, historical, and local situatedness of women’s experiences along with the ways in which social construction of race, class, and gender permeate their experiences (p. 141).

Bloom (1998) recognizes the contradictions between poststructuralist and feminist theories. She deals with this tension by maneuvering back and forth between essentialism and constructionism. The work of maintaining this dual use of the analytic category of women is particularly critical to feminist empirical work, where the researcher is responsible to not only feminist politics as a part of a collective struggle, but also to the individual participants of the study, whose personal struggles must not be diminished or colonized by theory. (p. 143)

In utilizing feminist narratology, I devoted a chapter to the background and experiences of each participant. Next, I analyzed the data collected through narrative reflections of participants’ responses in relation to the research questions individually, then as a group. In my data presentation, I used this strategy in order to confront the larger “discourses” and struggles within society that are present in the lives of the participants and in my own life. At the same time, I worked to bring forward the unique personal stories and struggles within the lives of these women as they engage with higher education.

Feminist poststructural frameworks seek to explore the ways in which power relations and resistance operate. Domination, hegemony, subjugation, and oppression in regard to society and the impact of these power relations through discourses in daily lives are manifest through continued legitimization of knowledge and “truth” (Foucault, 1978, p. 94). Power relations operate within discourses in society to maintain positions of control, legitimacy, and domination.
Foucault explains, “there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives” (p. 95). Additionally, Foucault explains, “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always ‘inside’ power, there is no ‘escaping’ it” (p. 95). In other words, power relations are present within the lives of everyone, for good or bad. Further, Foucault suggests power relationships “depend on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support….points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network” (p. 95). Thus, through the data collection and analysis process, I chose to recognize the value-laden nature of research and of my role as researcher and deliberately joined feminist poststructural discourses in higher education.

Methodological Detail

This section details the process of data collection and analysis, should someone choose to replicate the methods used in this dissertation. After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) and faculty committee approval to conduct the study, I then obtained permission from the site’s Chancellor to conduct the research at Southtown Community College. I requested and obtained a list of all females who were beginning their first semester of college and who were considered by the college to be “first-generation,” meaning neither parent had completed a college education. Next, I took the college-provided list of 131 students who met the criteria for the study and used a random tables chart (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996) to narrow the pool of potential participants to 20 students. I called all 20 potential participants in order to locate 10 who were willing to participate in the study through the pilot interview process and/or the entire research process. I was not able to obtain 10 from the initial round of calling, so I pulled an additional random sample of 20 more potential participants. From this second random sample, I obtained 9...
students who were willing to meet me for an initial interview in order to participate in the pilot interview process and/or the entire study.

I provided each of the six participants the informed consent prior to beginning the pilot interviews, which were conducted to refine my first interview protocol. The pseudonyms for these students are: Abigail, Brandy, Casey, Darlene, Jennifer, and Melanie. I had to randomly pull twice from the college-provided list in order to obtain a sufficient pool for the study. Thus, I contacted a total of 40 students before having a sufficient pool to conduct the study.

After the pilot interviews were concluded, I began the first round of interviews in September of 2005. Jennifer, McKensie, Delane, and Madison were the four students who were in the study at the start of the semester. Jennifer dropped out of the study after the first round of interviews, and Casey agreed to replace her in the study. The first interviews were conducted at the early part of their first semester of college in the fall of 2005. I called each participant and asked her what time would be convenient to meet for approximately one hour for an initial interview. We scheduled a time and met, at which time I provided each participant the informed consent prior to beginning the interview process. After the first interview, I also had each participant complete the demographic form, which provided additional information about participants’ background experiences, relationships, goals, and personal commitment in regard to attending college, specifically Southtown Community College, and their level of commitment to participating in this study. This demographic form was also utilized in the pilot interviews to determine which students would be most interested and committed to continued participation in the study. This was the primary tool I used to narrow the pool of potential participants from nine to four after the random sampling process.

I conducted the second round of interviews in November of 2005 near the end of the
students’ first semester of college. After the second round of interviews, I asked each participant about her willingness to do participant journaling. Three of the four students agreed to participate in the journaling process. One was not interested but continued in the interview processes. The instructions for participant journaling were given to the three participants who used the journals to express any experiences, thoughts, feelings, interactions, or reflections they had concerning their college experience. I left the directions open and broad, striving to obtain as much information from their perspectives as possible through the journaling process.

I conducted the third round of interviews in February of 2006 near the beginning of the participants’ second semester of college, and I asked for a copy of the journal entries at this time. During these interviews, three of the four participants made comments about particular classes or instructors, so I sought additional information about these classes and student-instructor relationships through observing three classes. Shortly after the third round of interviews, I observed one class session of Casey’s developmental math class, Delane’s English class, and McKensie’s introduction to psychology class. I obtained permission from each instructor prior to attending the classes. I sat at the rear of the classroom and observed the teacher and student communications as well as took notes on participants’ engagement with the lesson, with other students, and the instructor where applicable. Along with my hand-written notes, I typed my reflections following the class observations in order to have a record to go back to when reflecting upon and analyzing the data.

The last round of interviews and communications took place in October and November of 2006, near the end of the participants’ third and/or fourth semester (including Summer 2006 for some). I conducted a final formal interview with Casey and McKensie. I also met informally with Delane and confirmed I could include information from the informal meeting. Lastly, I
contacted Madison by e-mail to inquire about her resignation from Southtown Community College.

For each round of interviewing, a total of four rounds of interviews, I taped and transcribed the interview meetings. Again, all four participants met me for three formal rounds of interviews at the beginning and end of the first semester of college in the fall of 2005 and the start of the second semester of Spring 2006. This was a total of 12 transcriptions. The additional interviews in the fall of 2006 were also transcribed, so the total number of transcriptions was 14. Also, after each interview, I typed my reflections of the interview, thoughts about the meeting itself, and thoughts about the actual interview in terms of other forms of expression that arose during the interview, such as body-language and silences that occurred that may have had additional meaning beyond the information that was shared through verbal responses.

After I completed each round of interviewing, I followed the same process for round 1, round 2, round 3, and round 4. For each participant and each interview (i.e. 14 transcripts), I analyzed the transcript, looking for themes. As I coded the data, I located themes that emerged from purposeful questioning. I also looked for themes that emerged out-side of the purposeful questions that were asked through the interview protocols. After I analyzed each interview transcript, I wrote a brief narrative analysis, approximately one to two pages, summarizing the interview and my reflections. I next took each analyzed transcript, narrative summary, field notes, and for interview rounds (1, 2, 3, and 4), journal entries, as well as observations and reflected on these to complete a narrative cross-case analysis summary for the group. In effect, for each round of interviewing, I conducted a narrative cross-case analysis of similarities and differences in the four participants’ cases. Finally, after analyzing the data at each point in the data collection process, I used the entire data collection record to write the narrative analysis.
Introducing Casey

Casey, now 20, was 18-years-old at the start of this study. She, because of a four year long-term relationship, moved to Louisiana from Mississippi to go to college. Upon getting to know Casey, it seemed she and I have several things in common. We both grew up in rather rural areas, both of our mothers’ families were in the furniture business, and both had relatively long-term relationships at the beginning of college. Sharing some similarities helped me relax a little about the research process and focus on building a relationship with Casey while also collecting data. Casey was in my pilot interview group in September 2005; then, I asked Casey to join the study after another student dropped out of the study.

My first impression of Casey when she came to my office for the first interview and knocked on the open door was of a confident young woman with a pearly white smile. Casey is slightly taller than average height with a petite frame and long straight brown hair. I am not sure why it is a tendency for me, or people in general, to notice “differences” from our own backgrounds or cultures, but I did observe some “differences” immediately in Casey’s physical features – dark skin and perhaps a bit of Asian within her facial features. She was wearing ruby red scrubs, and the bright clothes added a sense of warmth about her with her dark skin, long, dark brown hair, glowing smile, and big brown eyes. As she entered and sat with her back straight in the chair next to mine Casey also appeared poised and graceful, even though perhaps a little nervous during the first interview. I was a little nervous as well, since I was just beginning the data collection process, and I wanted the process to go smoothly. Even more importantly, I wanted to form a good relationship with the participants in my study.
During the first meeting, I asked participants to complete a demographic survey. One of the questions was “What is your ethnicity?” and this question prompted a question from Casey. She was unsure as to what to put and explained that her grandmother is Japanese. She was comfortable enough to voice her frustration with forms whereby she had to “label” herself. After considering what to put down, she told me since she is about ¼ Japanese, she put “Japanese/American.” I shared with Casey that I have some Cherokee Indian in my family; we talked more about how diverse American society is today, and we both agreed that forcing people to label themselves may do more harm than good. After completing the last interview, approximately one year later, we reflected back on the first interview and talked more about “labeling” and difference. We wondered out loud together about the purposes of various data and what purpose and intentions people had when they gathered the data. I told Casey I knew I wanted to know about “difference,” but I struggled with it especially with “why and if” it was acceptable to ask. As we talked we both agreed that asking about “difference” is fine if people know what the purpose is and how the data will be used; we then talked about this particular study and how one of its purposes was to get to know the students better. After that conversation, we both seemed even more at ease with each other and the “asking about difference.” I really liked being around Casey; she has a calm demeanor, is soft spoken, and seems to have a quiet confidence about her.

Sharing both my initial impressions of Casey, including her physical appearance, provides a brief narrative analysis of perception and “difference.” I puzzled and still wondered more about why I noticed right away the slight “difference” in Casey’s physical features from my own racial/cultural background. I also learned from Casey that she does not understand why people are required to “label” themselves. Further, it was incredible to me how much Casey and
I had in common in regard to some similar type of background and life experiences. While this case study chapter will not give an extensive background or detailed day-to-day account of Casey’s first semester experiences, it will provide an exploration of Casey’s identity construction in relation to gender, ethnicity, class, and “first-generation” status and how these impact her college participation and persistence. It also provides a projection of what Casey believes college will mean for her future.

Casey’s Identity Construction and Agency in Relation to College

As explained in an earlier chapter, identity development is considered one student development outcome of college (Astin, 1977, 1993; Chickering & Riser, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzinni, 1991). Yet, virtually no research exists about how student identity construction upon college entry impacts a student’s participation and persistence. For Casey, “who she is” and her self-construction had much to do with her choice of college. For example, she chose Southtown Community College because her boyfriend lives in this area, and she wanted to attend a school where she could also be with him. Identity is complex and not easily defined or understood. One way to try to better understand a woman’s identity construction is through asking her to describe herself to herself (Gilligan, 1982). During the first interview, I asked Casey the following:

Me: You can take a few moments to think about this question before you respond. How would you describe yourself to yourself?

Casey: That’s a tough question. I want to be successful and have a career. And, friendly, organized, I guess that’s it.

From Casey’s response, at first it seemed she had not given much thought to her identity and how she may describe herself. However, she did have some idea of how she views herself, responding that she is organized, friendly, and desires success. I also asked her what she would
consider to be one of her centralizing or primary characteristics. She asked me for an example, and I responded, “being a woman,” as that was the first thing that came to my mind and one I believe is central to my identity. Also, gender is in the front of my mind as I have been writing my dissertation, rearing a toddler, and working full-time. Casey responded similarly, indicating that being a woman was also a primary part of her identity. I asked her to elaborate; she responded in this way: “Because I feel a pride in being a woman. Because I’m 18, but I’m in the process of being a woman.”

After the first interview, I thought perhaps Casey just responded similarly, repeating my response because she did not know what response I wanted to hear. But, after other interviews, I learned a lot more about why she may also have responded as she did. Also, after further reflection, her response indicated that she had thought about her identity as changing as she indicates she is in the “process of being a woman.”

In the last interview at the start of Casey’s second semester, I posed the same question from the first interview, asking her again to describe herself to herself. She again noted some “change” in regard to her self description. She responded in this way:

Used to I would say [that I was certain about things] and I knew myself really well… I used to think I could control everything, but now [I realize things just happens on their own] and I have to accept it, in terms of life and school and everything.

Casey further related how she has changed since the beginning of her first semester, saying that she has become more independent and that she is more focused on her educational and professional goals. Casey explained in this way:

You don’t have people telling you like in high school what you have to do anymore. You know, you become more independent, so I guess it shows that, like, you
know – I want to be something and be successful in college and in life…I’ve had to become more independent than I was in high school. But, I’ve learned that it’s changed in a lot of ways. Like, I’m really, I don’t know, I’m really busy all the time (sigh). I don’t have time for a lot of things, you know. It’s made me more goal-oriented I guess. Casey also explained that she has to study a lot more than she did in high school.

I wanted to know more about Casey’s perspective concerning her personal agency. Specifically, I intended to learn more about how much control Casey feels she has about her finances and life choices. During the last interview, Casey told me:

I feel like I have a lot of say, I guess, and control over my financial state, I guess, because I work and have my own checking account. But, pretty much I’ve always, my Mom has always let me become independent, I guess, and learn that and do everything on my own. And, how to do balance everything with money and all, and wants and needs – I feel like I have a lot of control in general, too.

Although Casey did relate her parents help pay for her college expenses and she occasionally has some concerns about that, she expressed because she works and independently takes care of most of her wants and needs, she feels a considerable amount of control over her finances and choices in general. In addition she says, moving away from family has caused her to be more responsible and self-reliant. Her reflection on how she has changed since the beginning of college indicates some internal change in her locus of control as she used to believe she could “control everything” but now sees that she cannot. At the same time in the third interview, she responded to the question about how much control, she feels over life choices and finances with a response of having “a lot” of control.
Identity is constantly in flux or “changing” when viewed through a feminist poststructuralist framework. Additionally, this framework also questions the ability to ever have full-ownership of our identity and the ability to achieve a solid or stable self. This is a quite different perspective than that of Chickering and Reisser (1998) who propose in *Education and Identity* that one central purpose of higher education is a student outcome whereby “a solid sense of self emerges...who ‘owns’ the house of self” (p. 49). This contradiction presents a question for those concerned with student development in higher education. Rather than encouraging students to strive to achieve a solid sense of self, should the focus perhaps instead be on encouraging students to continually explore and question themselves, others, and the world around them?

“First-Generation” Status and Persistence

In the course of the second interview, I asked Casey what stood out or stayed with her after our initial meeting, and she said the question about her parents and being a “first-generation” college student. She explained, “you know, that stood out in my mind because I really am starting a new thing, I guess, for my family.” Casey further explained that she had never thought about being a “first-generation” college student before the first interview. It is important to note that higher education uses this label as a primary organizing construct, when those in the situation do not necessarily define their primary identity around this construct. Casey also talked a little about the lack of familiarity her mother has with college requirements and that she explained some of these requirements to her mother since these were new to her. Casey was also glad to rejoin the study, and she reflected on this as well as on being “first-generation” in a journal entry on November 16, 2005. Casey wrote:
I am very excited to be chosen to do this for Mrs. Lee. I have never been asked to do something like this. I never thought that being the first generation to go to college in my family would make me stand out in some way. In fact, I never thought of it at all this way. Mrs. Lee has made me realize another factor of the importance of my college experiences and my education.

In regard to Casey’s being the first in her family to attend college, at the start of the semester, I did not find initially this was something that was incorporated into her personal identity. However, since the interviews, I have found that Casey has given much more thought to the significance of being the first in her family to attend college and what meaning that holds for her and her family. Casey was not aware of a “difference” in regard to her “first-generation” status; this was pointed out to her as a result of her participation in this study, yet, Casey viewed her “being first” as a positive condition and did not see it as negative in any way. She explained:

Before, I had not ever thought about being the first in my family to go to college. I knew that my Mom and Dad hadn’t, but I never even thought about that I was the first to go. But, it means a lot to me because of my parents, I guess. And, in some ways for my brother to look up to, as in, you know, “if she can do it, then I can.” Because he’s really competitive, I guess, so. He’s a lot different than I am. But I think that it would be – with me going to college -- may help him think that he can. He wants his certain – he’s only nine but he wants his certain goals in life. You know, at least he thinks he does (laugh). So, I try to talk to him about school. And, it’s hard, but you have to do it, and you can get through it if you try hard enough. So, I try to talk to him about things like that.
Although Casey had not thought about being a “first generation” student prior to these interviews, by the end of the study she had since incorporated some meaning of this “social construction” into her self-understanding” and she began to view this “status” as something that adds importance to her education in regard to completing college for herself and for her family. 

Gender, Race, and Class: Casey’s Response to Social Discourse

During the course of the time I spent with Casey, I asked her perspectives on gender, race, and class both at Southtown Community College and more broadly in terms of her thoughts on what “society” has to say about these. In regard to gender and society, Casey indicated that women had been on the “outside,” but “they [women] can do everything men do.” In addition, she mentioned she notices “a lot more women than men here [at the College].”

In regard to Casey’s thoughts on race and ethnicity in American society, she said, “You know that it’s not right to discriminate...[People] shouldn’t be looked at differently; they should just be looked at the same...I think that everybody should be treated the same.” As Casey responded, I felt badly for noticing the “difference” in her physical appearance, but it was not intentional. After thinking about Casey’s response and my own reflection of the first meeting for several months, I wondered about noticing “difference.” In some ways, noticing difference may be useful if it helps to break down barriers, prevents maltreatment or injustice, or assists those who have been wrongfully mistreated or discriminated against based on some form of “difference” outside the majority “norm.” Casey shared a reflection about her high school experience, stating: “a lot of people look at African Americans differently,” but at this College, “everybody talks to everybody and that’s the way it should be. And, that’s what I see here.”
Although Casey’s responses about social class were brief, she had apparently given some thought to social class in general and had noticed socioeconomic or class differences growing up attending high school. The questions and Casey’s responses were as follows:

Me: Do you ever think about – have you ever thought about class – financial status in America – is that something that you’ve thought about?

Casey: I think there will always be a gap, you know, social class.

Me: What about on this campus as far as social class at this college?

Casey: I really don’t see – everybody seems to be in a similar class.

I followed up with Casey in the last interview, and she explained that in high school, there were groups of students who associated based on financial or social class; Casey felt those in the upper class looked down on those who were not as wealthy. As early as the first interview of the semester, Casey had come to college with some well-formed ideas about social justice and equity, even though these are not the terms she used. She expressed these ideas in phrases like, “everyone should be treated equally,” “it isn’t right to discriminate,” and “women can do everything men do.”

Academic and Social Involvement and the College Environment

Casey explained that she has had positive experiences with other college students, faculty, and staff. She related that she is comfortable with the college environment and the support she receives. Coming from another state, Casey said she is not going to school with any of her high school peers, but the students here are “friendly.” She told me, “I’ve made new friends and just everybody’s welcoming and helpful with everything.” She explained there are no particular peers who stand out in her mind because she has different people in every class, yet,
the relationships she has with peers are positive. Casey further expressed these thoughts in a journal entry on November 22, 2005, as she further reflected on some of her first semester experiences, thoughts, and feelings:

I was so nervous at the beginning. Although I’m not fully confident, it has become easier for me. Since I attended a small Catholic school, I was so used to only my friends at school and people that I had got to know. I wasn’t like other people in my class; I didn’t go to college with my friends or with anyone that I was familiar with. I started fresh, not knowing anyone. I thought that it would be a lot harder than it has been. I mean, becoming friends with new people, I sort of felt that no one else could be my friends except the friends that I graduated with, but was I wrong. Everyone has been so sweet and just friendly. 😊 (Ending the entry with a happy face.)

Casey said the faculty members are also supportive. Casey explained, “they’ve been helpful, pretty much the same [as students] – friendly and down to earth. The faculty doesn’t make you feel like, you know, they’re superior. I guess, they make you feel like equal.” Here, Casey was referring to power differentials that occur in teacher-student relations in the classroom, and as she expressed, she perceived the faculty here make here feel “equal.”

I asked if any relationships with faculty or staff members stood out, and she said the one with me. I asked if she could tell me a little about why the relationship with me was particularly meaningful. Casey explained that because her mother did not go to college, having several women examples has helped her to consider what she can accomplish. She expressed that several women, including me, have served as role models of what is possible. Casey related, “A lot of ladies here, you know, you and [others], have shown me that women can go as far as - you know, anybody. I told Casey that statement meant a lot to me. I had not thought that others
may be looking at me as a model of what can be accomplished. I shared with Casey some of my own experiences and the fact that my Mom was a role model for me. I also shared with Casey some of the struggles I faced in achieving my personal educational goals. Her response made me think back to the first interview and her response of being a woman as central to her identity. I already understood the importance of my own mother’s influence in my higher education pursuits, and Casey’s reflection helped me to better understand the importance of women role models for women attending college. For Casey, women role models are particularly important for her given her mother did not attend college. After this interview, I understood more about why Casey responded as she did in the first interview in regard to indicating that being a woman was central to her identity as she was in the process of “being a woman.”

I asked Casey who she relies on for encouragement and support. She explained that her parents are very supportive, and they help pay for her college. However, Casey said that is a bit of a concern because she thinks about her dependence on their financial support. Casey explained that in addition to her Mom and Dad, she relied on her boyfriend and his family. She said:

During the week, I go to school and work and it’s stressful, but they encourage me, too... My Mom can do it over the phone, but they’re here physically…They encourage me, [and tell me], you know, it’s going to be all good in the long run and just keep on doing it. Don’t give up. So, I rely on them for my encouragement.

Casey maintained a tough schedule during her first couple of semesters of college, working approximately 25 hours a week and going to school full-time. Casey explained that she goes to school in the mornings until noon and then commutes about one hour to work. She does not arrive home from work until close to 6:00pm and then does as much school work as possible
along with trying to get enough sleep. In addition to her busy schedule, Casey says there is always housework, but since her boyfriend does most of that; she really does not see any particular challenges or concerns related to home of family. Casey explained that because she works, she does not have any extracurricular involvement in college. She explained this has always been the case; even when she was little, she used to help her Mom with the furniture store.

Since the first interview, Casey had made progress toward developing her educational goals and had increased her commitment to the College in regard to knowing she wants to stay at the College longer and complete an associate’s degree. She knew at the beginning of the semester that she wanted to pursue a job in the medical field related to ultrasound or gynecology. However, over the course of the first semester, she further refined her path toward her educational goals. Casey said:

I’m going into ultrasound at [a nearby college]. And, the requirements are to have a two year allied health degree or have 60 credit hours. And, last Friday, I had like an educational nervous breakdown because I didn’t know what I wanted to do, because I didn’t know if I wanted to do the program somewhere else, the allied health program, or the general science degree here, or the General Studies degree here. So, [an advisor] helped me figure that out. And, I’m going to do the General Studies…and I want to graduate from here, you know, with an Associate. So, that’s what I decided to do. And, then I’ll plan to go to [a nearby college] when I finish that. So, I’m pretty tied to here, I guess.

She explained that she had done a considerable amount of reflecting on her goals through the semester and said that she wants the associate degree because the ultrasound program is a
certificate program and having a degree will be beneficial in the event that she would decide to further her education or change jobs after working as an ultrasound tech. In this response, Casey is constructing her career identity and academic identity through investigating her career path as well as what academic degree may be useful for her future. There is an active construction happening here as she is internally constructing and externally expressing her dynamic identity.

Casey explained that she feels very connected to the College and feels a “strong connection to the school,” because she is now familiar with it, and it is where she goes every day. Casey said that at first, she was “really scared” of moving here without knowing anybody at the school. She explained that the friends she has made “have made me feel even more comfortable with the school and the faculty. And, like the front desk…She’s really sweet and really helpful. And really everybody helped me figure out what I want to do and how I need to do it.” Casey’s comments are indicative of the importance of a supportive environment in regard to her personal success.

In regard to Casey’s academic involvement, she related that her challenge is finding enough time to do the homework and studying that she needs to do along with her work schedule. She explained that she spends at least one hour every day on each class. Casey said, “I try to find as much time to do what I need to do. But, also, I know I need to do stuff to prepare me for other tests that are coming up. So, I try to find enough time to give. So, I spend at least an hour, every day that I’m in class and on-campus.” During her first year of college, Casey worked about 25 hours per week. Casey explained she balances her multiple responsibilities as best as she can.

In relation to social life on campus and interacting with peers, Casey explained she just does not have time. She said, “Well, with the combination of school and work, I don’t have time
for, you know, stuff on campus or participating in campus activities or anything.” Casey further explained that she was not involved in activities or organizations in high school either. However, she related that she does wish that she was more involved. In her words, “I just think that if I had more time for it, I’d be more interested in it. But, I guess I’m just really concentrating hard on my studies, my academic studies.” Casey described, however, one important interaction she had with a peer on campus, which actually resulted in her decision to remain in a class during the spring 2006 semester. Casey talked about this particular peer relationship in this way:

Actually, I’m taking a college algebra class right now, so I was really scared at first about the class, because I’ve heard other people talk about how hard it was and how difficult it was. But, a girl in my class, actually – I was planning on dropping that class, but I don’t want to drop any of my classes, because it would put me down to nine hours. So, I talked to her about it, because she had that class before, and she dropped it. And, she said that she wished that she wouldn’t have… Now, she realizes that she should have stayed in it. And, she encouraged me to stay in it and talked me into it really. So, I did, and she really helped me a lot.”

This is one example of Casey’s peer relationships; even if it were not much more than just an acquaintance, this peer relationship was important in Casey’s persistence in the algebra class.

Coming to College and What College Will Mean for the Future

Casey explained that her cousins and others in her family were an influence in her decision to go to college because she had observed some of them going on to college and entering professions such as nursing and physical therapy. These other family members,
although not immediate family, helped influence her decision to go to college and have possibly helped her to consider opportunities within the field of ultrasound and gynecology.

I asked Casey to talk a little bit about her parents in relation to higher education; she shared that her mother’s family owned a furniture store and that her mother was reared around the business before deciding she wanted to continue it when she was older. Casey explained that her mother could have gone to college and decided not to go. Instead, she helped her parents with the store. Casey indicated that her father went straight to work from high school. Casey further said, “I guess in some ways they want me to go to college, just wanting me to do what they didn’t do, in going to college to better myself and all of that. I think all parents want their kids to do well.”

Casey said she needs a college education in order to go into the profession she has chosen. She also said,

It means a lot to me in that my entire family, my Mom and Dad, never went. It’s something that I knew I would do. And, I feel that it would mean a lot to me later on also. I’ll be glad that I did the hard work and everything that I had to [do to] become what I would be.

Here, Casey expressed that she feels a sense of pride in going to college. She related that going to college means a lot to her parents and to her brother in terms of her serving as a role model for him. Although Casey does not know exactly what college will mean for her future, she does relate an understanding that it will change her identity, as she has expressed, in terms of who she will “become.”
Introducing McKensie

McKensie is a 20-year-old young woman who moved to Louisiana from Washington State to attend Southtown Community College. During the first interview at the start of the fall 2005 semester, McKensie, then 18, indicated she came to college through a “last minute” decision. During the last year or so in high school, she had considered going into the Navy or Air Force immediately upon graduation from high school, and she had planned to go to college later. She explained that just two or three months prior to graduation, she decided not to go into the service and to instead go on to college.

When I first met McKensie, I found her to be a cheerful person; and, I was at ease talking with her because of her frankness. During the first interview, I learned that McKensie is employed at a local restaurant where she works as a waitress 25 hours a week or more. McKensie related how she believed that she has so many career choices and is trying to narrow down her focus, but she is fairly certain she would like to major in mass communication. Both in the interview and in the demographic form, she indicated that she has a strong commitment to completing her goals.

Also during the first interview, McKensie’s completed demographic form indicated she chose to come to Southtown Community College because it is close to her aunt’s house and the tuition is affordable. She did not share much more in the first interview about her reasons for coming to Louisiana, and I was very curious as to why she chose this state and this particular community college. As we had additional meetings, I learned more about what shaped
McKensie’s decisions, about her reasons for coming to college, and about how she interacted with her environments on and off-campus.

McKensie’s Identity Construction and Agency in Relation to College

At the start of McKensie’s first year in college, she described herself as “outgoing” and “adventurous.” She explained she is “always looking for new experiences.” My thoughts were she must be somewhat adventurous to make such a big change in relation to leaving her northern home state to move to one of the southern-most states in the nation. I wanted to know why McKensie chose to come to Louisiana from Washington State.

I asked McKensie how being adventurous and wanting to experience new things relates to her college experience. She responded, “I think that’s just who I am as a person; that’s who I like be. I like to be adventurous and to go out and see new things and meet new people. And this was one of my first opportunities to step out and do college in a different state.” I still wondered, “Why Louisiana and why Southtown Community College?”

As we got to know each other better through the interviews, McKensie shared some of her personal family history, which has influenced her identity and served as a source of inner strength as well as a motivator for pursuing a college education. McKensie explained that she never got to know her birth mother because her mother left before McKensie was old enough to really remember. McKensie said that her father was the most important person in her formative years and that later, her step-mother became like a mother to her.

McKensie also explained that her Aunt Kelly, who lives in Louisiana, came to visit her family in Washington State a few times as she was growing up and would say how much McKensie, both looked and acted like McKensie’s mother when she was young and healthy. McKensie shared how she felt a strong connection with her Aunt Kelly even though they did not
see each other often. McKensie also said that her Aunt Kelly would share stories about
McKensie’s birth mother, Aunt Kelly’s sister, telling McKensie of how very loving, caring, and
affectionate she was.

McKensie, not having really known her birth mother, has had only stories whereby to
relate. Through those stories, McKensie considers herself to be like her mother in relation to
being affectionate and caring but also unlike her birth mother in other ways, particularly as it
relates to allowing herself to become addicted to and damaged by drugs. McKensie also
explained that by going to college, she is proving to her family that she will be successful and
will not allow drugs or alcohol to control her life. She said:

I’m glad that I was able to show everybody, because, I honestly think my family is kind
of scared – not scared, but it is in my genetics; what she did is in my blood and I could
have gone down the wrong path…so, I think that to show that I am going to college and
that I am bettering myself. It is because of my environment, because of the way my Dad
raised me.

McKensie explained that she wanted to “get away” and go to college; she knew she could move
away on her own but was not sure that she could be successful in college. She says, “All the
stuff [referring to her experiences related to her birth mother and formative years] that happened
in my past, it makes me stronger and it makes me want to do it – kind of show everybody.” In
making this statement, she is indicating that part of her identity was shaped by those experiences
related to the situation with her birth mother as well as the tentativeness she has sensed from her
family in regard to wondering if she would also make some bad decisions about drugs.

McKensie’s move to Louisiana to live with her Aunt Kelly while she attends college as
well as her decision to come to Souhtown Community College were both a result of her identity
construction in regard to her family situation. This is exemplified in her adventurousness in moving away from Washington to “get away,” in finding an affordable higher education option, and in locating a school nearby to where she could live with her Aunt Kelly. McKensie said that her Aunt Kelly is like a mother to her and that she is her number one supporter because she gives her the encouragement she needs on a daily basis. McKensie said, “My Aunt who I’m living with – we’re very close. And, she’s the one who says ‘get up’ in the morning….She’s just always there for me, and she can tell when I’m stressed out or maybe when I have too much on my plate…So, she’s definitely my number one encourager.” The relationship McKensie has with her aunt is a very important one in regard to answering questions McKensie has about her birth mother and in having an encourager to push her forward toward completing her educational goals.

During the last interview, I asked McKensie her definition or understanding of the term “identity.” She responded, “identity is something I believe you make of yourself.” She further explained that it is also your presentation of yourself to other people. McKensie suggests “everybody has their own identity. And, its not the way you look, but I think more the way they present themselves toward other people.” In relation to her own identity McKensie explains, “I want to be true to myself and true to other people. I don’t want to be one person towards other people and then inside I’m really not that way. I guess you could say a fake person.” McKensie further explains that she believes college has changed her identity as she has come to realize that what she is doing now with her college education relates to her future. She said,

College has definitely changed my identity. And, I guess within the last couple of months, because it was like college is important to me and it’s part of who I am and what I want to do for the future. Yeah, college has definitely changed my identity. And, I’ve
definitely changed during the last semester. Even just this semester, it was like – this is my future, and this is what I want to worry about. And, I stopped drinking and going out and stopped smoking and just got really serious with it. And, I’m just really proud of myself for that. And, it’s hard to when your other friends are doing that and they’re not in college and you’re trying to fit in…My identity now is – I want to be a good person and I want to do good in college and I want to have a good future.

From the first interview meeting, McKensie indicated she was very committed to achieving her educational goals. McKensie came to college with a fairly well-developed ability for self-reflection, as she shared with me her background, perceptions of herself, and the broader contexts in which she lives. During the last interview, McKensie indicated that she believes an individual has the power to influence the outcome of her own educational pursuits, and, my observation is that McKensie has the required determination to complete her educational goals. Through her past personal experiences, she arrived at college with a personal identity, which encompassed exploration and adventurousness, care and belief in the equality of others, a desire to prove to herself and her family that she could achieve her goals, and a perception of herself as a strong individual. I believe this personal identity, which McKensie has already developed prior to coming to college, places her in control of her college success and her future.

“First-Generation” Status and Persistence

During the first interview, McKensie related that being the first in her family to attend college is important to her. She said, “I need to do this for me and for my family. I’m the oldest of all the grandchildren in the family. So, it was like I had to go out there and do this for family.” As the oldest of the grandchildren, McKensie wants to obtain her college degree as a role model for family members and to make her family proud that she has accomplished her
goals. McKensie described her working class background in this way: “My Daddy, like his grandparents, we’ve always been kind of a working family…we live in the same town, kind of pass down the generations and just did the farm work; nobody has gone off to college.” McKensie also related there is some pressure, some fear, as well as a sense of pride in being the first in her family to attend college.

Additionally, McKensie shared a little about her perceptions of college from when she as a child as they compare with her thoughts now. She said:

It [being first] almost adds a little bit of pressure, but not really because its more of making my family proud of me and making me proud to do the college thing, the degree thing. And, I remember looking back when I was a little kid and being like, “Oh, man, I can’t believe it, it’ll be so weird when I’m in college.” And, I always thought of college kids as, you know, I looked up to them…and I’m in college; I’m doing that now. It’s a great feeling to realize that I’m bettering myself for my future.

McKensie indicated that she has very strong support from her family, emotionally and financially, in regard to college, and as for being “first-generation,” McKensie said, “I know it makes my Dad proud and my step-mom proud.” McKensie added, she wished her real mother could see what she is doing to better herself through education. After a pause in her response, McKensie continued to explain that her decision to come to college was because of her environment and how she was reared by her father who encouraged her to pursue a college degree.

During the final interview, McKensie reflected again on being the first in her family to pursue a college education; she explained that it’s “a big deal” and an “honor” that gives her an “extra push” so that when she is tempted to miss a class or not work as hard, she remembers that
she has this added thing for which to strive. McKensie said, “It definitely has put a standard on me. I can’t fail. I have to do this. And, it pushes me. They’re counting on me.”

Gender, Race, and Class: McKensie’s Response to Social Discourse

McKensie has come to college already with some solid views on equality. In regard to gender, McKensie has previously formed notions about gender equity in American society. Prior to coming to college, McKensie’s background and family experiences, in part, shaped how she understands and enacts her identity as well as her perceptions about gender equality. During the first interview, I asked McKensie if she noticed any gender issues at Southtown Community College. She responded that she has not noticed any gender issues other than she has perceived students are treated equally in regard to gender and she has noticed there is a mix of men and women teaching the classes. When asked about her thoughts on gender in American society, she explained in this way:

Gender, for me that’s a really big thing…I was raised by my Dad, and I noticed I was kind of tougher than – I just kind of grew up to be tougher than the average girl, I guess you could say. I was just kind of a tomboy. And, I just noticed that women are always kind of depicted as littler.

In this statement, McKensie voiced how she perceived American society presents an image of women as being “littler,” or lesser in the sense of being weaker and not expected to achieve as much as men. McKensie further explained that she has noticed some gender inequities in society: “men and women definitely should be equal in jobs and money-wise.” McKensie’s statement here indicates that she perceives American society still considers or portrays men and women as unequal, despite the progress women have made educationally, economically, and politically.
McKensie shared some additional thoughts on gender in American society as it relates to entertainment and politics. She related that in her view, Hollywood puts forth an image of how women should look, and she thinks it is wrong. McKensie explained that it is “disgusting” how Hollywood and the media pushes the thin ideal, and she said “every day ‘we’ [referring to American women] see it with celebrities.” She also explained that she believes women are not treated equitably in the political arena indicating women are not regarded as political leaders. McKensie said, “If it ever came up that a woman would have to run something, it’s kind of like – ‘she can’t do it, she’s not capable.’” She articulated further, that if a female political leader makes a mistake her gender becomes an issue and she is called a “stupid woman” and is portrayed as being incapable because she is a woman. McKensie said she believes women are held to a higher standard than men in society, meaning women must perform better in politics and in general to overcome gender stereotypes.

During the last interview, McKensie shared more thoughts concerning gender and stereotypes. She explained how she has noticed that in general, American society holds a stereotype that “girls are not good at math and science.” She explained something that she had noticed is that there are several women at Southtown Community College teaching math and science classes, and, she related that having these women role models is important for her learning experience. She explained that it helps her because she sees these women instructors are intelligent in their fields, and it encourages her that she, too, can learn the material in her math and science classes.

McKensie reported on the demographic form that she is Caucasian. During the interviews
she talked about her experiences with people of ethnicities different from her own and shared some of her perceptions about the culture at Southtown Community College and the broader American society. In regard to race in American society, McKensie indicated that she perceives American society is still divided in regard to race. McKensie also indicated she has noticed there are differences in regard to race between her home in Washington State and Louisiana. She said, “I do think there is a difference and I can see it. I’ve noticed it in just living down here for only four or five months.” I asked what, in particular, she has noticed; she responded, “Nothing in particular. I don’t know if I’ve noticed a lot of intermingling of races. I just have to think everybody kind of has their cliques. But, so far, I haven’t noticed, like, a definite separation.” McKensie further said she believes the college is doing well in regard to race and admissions, saying, “I haven’t noticed an obvious – all of one color, or one race…so, I think it’s fairly a well mixed in the school.” McKensie also explained that she grew up in an area where there were few blacks and the racial mix was predominately white with some hispanic populations. She said she did not have much interaction at all with black people where she grew up and went to school.

McKensie’s perspective is unique in this study in that she has an outsider status from which to observe racial and cultural differences between her home area of Washington State and that of Southtown Community College and the surrounding area. McKensie noticed some racial tensions between blacks and whites here in Louisiana but could not really understand or articulate the nature of those tensions. We also talked about the hurricanes, particularly Katrina, as well as race relations and perceptions after the hurricanes. McKensie related, “everybody’s throwing their opinions out and it’s hard because nobody has the right answer. Nobody knows really what’s going on.” As an insider having lived in this state all my life, I shared with McKensie that I noticed an increase in racial tensions after the hurricanes. I shared that I
perceived these heightened racial tensions both in the media and in conversations among my personal circles in regard to events surrounding the devastation and displacement of people from New Orleans and surrounding areas. Although McKensie said she sees some differences between her home town in Washington State and South Louisiana, she did not articulate specific issues.

In regard to social class, McKensie explained that in American society, she sees “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.” She related that big businesses have taken more than their share and put the smaller local stores out of business. McKensie said there is a tendency in this society for businesses to be greedy and just want more money. McKensie also perceived that Americans, in general, tend to strive for a certain financial status through wanting expensive vehicles; she explained this through communicating the statement, “you’re rich, you want the status, you want the money, you want the power.” In addition, she indicated she does not know why that is other than perhaps people want to “feel like stars” or “celebrities” and that if people have certain possessions, they feel “rich and pretty.” McKensie said, “I don’t know why people feel like they have to have those possessions to feel wealthy when they’re not; they’re kind of, I don’t know hypocritical… You know what I mean; they’re showing something that they’re not.” McKensie further said she has not taken any classes that relate to the economy and the psychological and political issues related to wealth, but she hoped to learn more about these while in college. As my meetings with McKensie continued, she began to see her college going as important to her personally, not just to achieve a stable financial status, but to learn and grow as a person. McKensie communicated in the last interviews that her family had initially encouraged her to get a college education to make more money, but by the last interview, a year after she began college McKensie began to understand her college-going to be more directly related to her own self-construction and how she views herself rather than what her family’s
intentions are in relation to her obtaining a college degree. This was particularly true in relation to how McKensie expressed her sense of becoming a college-educated person through desiring to learn, through developing a desire to become smarter, and through wanting a future profession that allowed her to incorporate her personal strengths, talents, and things she enjoys.

Academic and Social Involvement and the College Environment

One of the biggest adjustments for McKensie during her first year of college has been balancing academics with work and a social life. As McKensie has moved through the first few semesters, she has redefined some of her identities and become more serious about educational and career goals. McKensie explained some of her decisions and how she had changed over the course of the several semesters in regard to her academic and social involvement. She described her experiences along the way as she has become more focused on her academics and in setting her priorities to place her education first.

For instance, during the first interview in the fall of 2005, McKensie indicated that she was working 35 hours a week at a local restaurant. She began the first semester with 16 credit hours, eventually dropping the introductory college algebra class toward the middle of the semester. During the second interview, she explained that she dropped college math and her reasons:

I can’t take the time right now…I thought I could handle it, but I can’t with all that’s going on in my other classes and stuff like that. I wouldn’t have the appropriate time to study for it and stuff. And, I just wasn’t getting it from day one. So, that’s why I dropped that. But I’m going to do it; it’s part of my degree. I just feel I need to be more ready. And, that’s what I, like, next semester, I did [registered for] only Monday, Wednesday, and Friday classes, so, that every day I could have my study days.
In this particular instance, McKensie failed to become integrated into the college math class because of lack of time to commit to the class. After the last interview, McKensie also explained that she also had difficulty with the math instructor’s teaching style in that she felt the instructor did not encourage questions and she felt intimidated in the class. During her third semester, McKensie enrolled in a college preparatory math in order to better prepare herself to take college algebra.

During the second interview, at the end of her first semester in the fall of 2005, McKensie assessed her own commitment to college, which demonstrates change in progress. She explained in this way: “I’ve changed in a sense that… I had to grow up fast and I had to take responsibility for my actions. If I missed class and did poor on a test or something, that’s my fault.” McKensie further said she has come to realize that “this [college] is serious” and that she has to “buckle down” and be more committed to her educational goals. She also reflected on what she is learning rather than just on making passing grades, saying, “I think in the beginning it was just like ‘I’m just going, get it done, and be done with it.’ But, really, I need to learn. I need to take it all in… I’ve just become more serious with it.” Additionally, after the first two semesters, McKensie decided to reduce her work hours from 35 to closer to 20 hours a week to give her the time she needs to complete assignments and study for exams. At our final interview, McKensie voiced that she had changed her major from Mass Communication to Teacher Education. McKensie explained this change in major was related to exploring further career options along with the things she likes to do.

In regard to McKensie’s social involvement, she explained that she is not very integrated into social life on-campus. Rather, her friends and social involvement has largely been with friends from the restaurant where she works. She also shared some about the difficulties of
trying to “fit in” with friends from the restaurant where she works because they are not in college. During the final interview, she explained that she has learned to say “no” to certain social activities when she needs to commit time to her school work.

McKensie explained how she has changed in regard to her social identity versus her academic identity. McKensie indicated that she intentionally isolates herself somewhat from the social life of the college campus. She explained that before coming to college, she was a “social butterfly.” McKensie said she now tries to be serious and tries to avoid becoming “too social.” She elaborates in this way: “I haven’t been as social as I thought I would be moving down here. And, that’s not a problem with me…in high school and before college I was so social, and so now, it’s just kind of time for me to focus on my education.” McKensie also explained that she has met several people in her classes and feels comfortable with faculty and other students in regard to talking with faculty and asking peers for missed information. She described her connection with faculty in this way:

So far, I like everybody, they all seem to know what they’re talking about and know what they’re doing and seem well-educated. And, they care. They care a lot more than I thought they would. So, that’s good…that’s important to me, teachers caring. Not just, I don’t care if you miss it or not.

Although she does not consider herself very socially involved on campus, she indicated she has positive relationships with other students, faculty, and staff. McKensie also indicated she felt connected to the college and that everyone was very supportive. McKensie also described her relationship with one faculty member, in particular, as being very positive in regard to the developmental English instructor encouraging her and “pushing” her to meet the writing expectations.
At the start of McKensie’s second semester, she reflected back on her first semester and jokingly referred to it her “experimental semester.” She indicated that she knows she could have performed better academically during her first semester if she had been more serious and had devoted more time to her college work. She also explained that now she is putting forth more effort, avoiding procrastination, and getting serious about studying. After more reflection at the final interview, McKensie described more about how she has changed, much of which has to do with her identity, educational goals, and personal priorities. She said:

When I first started [college], it was everything piled on my plate…work, school, this and that, and hang out with everybody, and go to all of these functions, and socialize all on the same day. And, just pile it on…Now, my priorities are school is first and work can come second, because right now I have an advantage because I don’t need to work right now as a college student. For me, I have really good support from my family and my aunt who lives down here. And, she sees that I’m trying very hard. And, she sees that I do work when I can; I just work weekends, but I don’t need to work excessively because of that support. You know, they help me out. And, I still get my bills paid, but college is definitely the first for me. In the beginning, it was just like, I’ll make time for it when I get all my other stuff done. I’ll try to fit it into my socializing schedule. And, now it’s definitely a top priority for me.

During the last interview, McKensie shared a little more about how she has changed in regard to her identity, her view of herself, in relation to her academics. McKensie shared a story about having prepared for class and an example of knowing an answer when no one else in the class seemed to know the answer. She said,

I tell everybody, I became a nerd this semester, and, it’s ok. It’s ok with me that ‘no, I
can’t do that [socialize] because I have to study…. I am a smart person. I’ve always been the dingy one or the funny one in high school and just kind of cared more about what I’m wearing Friday than the test Friday. So, just for me being able to forget that and, you know, this is my education. This is my future.

McKensie also said she has finally come to understand “studying equals good grades (laugh). It’s like I’m finally getting it.” So, through the experiences of not doing particularly well her first semester, she has learned what she needs to do in order to be successful, not only to earn the grades she would like to have but also to learn and become more knowledgeable in general. In this way, she has reshaped her academic identity and how she views herself as a college student.

Coming to College and What College Will Mean for the Future

During the first interview, McKensie indicated, “[College] It’ll help me find out who I really am and what I want in life…It’ll definitely shape me for the future.” McKensie indicated during the first interview that she planed to major in mass communications and that she is committed to that goal. She further related that college was important to her in relation to receiving the credential or “piece of paper” that she needs in order to be hired once she graduates. McKensie also explained working and going to school was stressful. She said, “I do get burned out some days.” However, she explained she has her priorities in order: “school is number one and work is second right now in my life, because I need the school to you know get the higher paying job, and I can’t be a waitress my whole life.”

By the time of the second interview near the end of her first semester, McKensie reported she has begun to refine her educational goals through the first-year Academic Seminar, a required one-credit hour class that encourages students to explore career options through investigating what is involved with the careers, including expected earnings, degree
requirements, responsibilities, and a typical work day. Further, the Academic Seminar class also helps students to be self-reflective learners through focusing on tips for improving skills such as reading, studying, testing, and time management. McKensie further indicated some of the ways she has changed. McKensie explained that she was taking college more seriously and learning not to procrastinate. She also said that college is basically what she expected, but that she “could have still put forth more effort.” By the end of her first semester, McKensie had experienced some change in regard to becoming more responsible in relation to her commitment to the effort she gave to her college work.

By the time of the third interview, at the start of McKensie’s second semester, she indicated that she had thought about changing her degree. She said, “I’ve always liked sports and dancing, and I was thinking about a way to kind of bring that back into my life. And, if I could teach, I could also do something that I like with a different major.” McKensie explained that she was required during the first year seminar class to explore careers and degree majors, and at the final interview, she had made a definite change in her degree and career path indicating she planned to become a teacher. She joined the College’s new Future Teacher’s organization and is strongly committed to the change of degree and career.

McKensie is very excited about her new “career identity” and her future. She explained becoming a teacher will allow her to do something she enjoys as well as provide her a stable income. At first when she entered college, she seemed to echo her family’s view of higher education in regard to going to college only to earn more money. However, she explained that now, she perceives college as not only provides her with credentials needed to earn a stable income, but that college also provides her a path for a profession in which she can do something she will enjoy doing the rest of her life.
CHAPTER 6
DELANE’S CHAPTER

Introducing Delane

Delane, 42 years old during the fall 2005 semester, came to Southtown Community College after hearing about the College through word-of-mouth. She indicated she came to Southtown Community College because it is close to home, the tuition is affordable, and the school is small with a relaxed atmosphere whereby she could receive individualized instruction. Delane works part-time as a substitute high school teacher. She and her husband have four children from elementary to high school age.

Lavender and sequins were among my first impressions of Delane. Just before the first interview, I called Delane to confirm our meeting. She said she would still be able to meet and that she was currently on the porch outside of the College library. I walked outside to greet a slim dark haired older student with a broad smile and bright eyes; I guessed her to be in her late 30’s or early 40’s. What I noticed just after that was her lavender sequin purse with matching shirt and sequined shoes. We talked a little informally about her matching accessories and our backgrounds before the interview.

After completing the first interview, lavender and sequins seemed to be good descriptors for Delane and her identity. As she described it, she has a softer or lavender side and is “sensitive, very compassionate, and religious,” but, she also has a sequin-like aspect to her personality which she describes as the humorous or “lighter side” of who she is. When asked specifically about the most important aspect of her identity, she explained it is her “humor” and how she views life. Delane said,
The kids [referring to her husband’s and her own: ages 8, 9, 10, and 17 they think I’m crazy, and they enjoy me because I’m a lighter person. I forgot to tell you that; that’s the most important thing. I’m not a serious-minded person at all. I have a big kid in me.

Delane also described herself as a complex person who is fascinated by people and who likes debate.

Delane had chosen radiologic technology as a degree major, and although she indicated on the demographic form that she is strongly committed to her educational and occupational goals, she also explained that she was not completely convinced that this would be her major. Over the course of the interviews, Delane shared more about her personal and educational goals as well what she expected to gain from her college experiences.

Delane’s Identity Construction and Agency in Relation to College

Delane has some personal reasons for coming to college, which relate to her identity. Additionally, some of her life roles relate to her choices and college success. Delane indicated one reason she has come to college was to fulfill one aspect of her identity, which she said she was not able to do immediately after high school. Another included proving to herself that she can succeed in math. During the second interview, Delane provided a “sweatpants” analogy of what college means for her:

By not going to college, by not trying to better myself or going into something that would better me, I feel like I was ripped off. So, not that that is who I am, but it complements who I am and I want the complement. That’s like going outside and just throwing on sweats. I’m going to have to always get a job in sweats. And, I don’t want to do that. I want to get dressed up sometimes. Granted, I can sweat it out…I can
do sweats anytime. But, I’d like to have and I’ve always wanted to do something that I enjoy that complements my personality and make money doing it.

Delane additionally explains that she failed math in high school and that now she has the chance to learn what she missed and to now go to college. She says, going to college “completes her,” and it allows her to achieve something she missed.

During the interviews, Delane also shared some of her life roles and described herself, her identities, as a “Mom, a wife, a friend.” These multiple life roles or identities impact upon her college-going, course load, and progress. Along with these, she also talked about her role as a substitute teacher for a local high school and her role as a college student. These multiple identities had an impact on how many courses she took as well as her progress and success. She explained that one of her challenges is her own attitude in having a very high standard for herself in trying to earn a 4.0 and gain a very solid foundation in math and English related to really learning the material. Several entries in her journal relate to some of the stress Delane feels about earning good grades. She also talked about her familial roles and the fatigue she feels as a wife and mother along with her role as a college student. Delane explained that she often feels a lot of stress related to her college work, particularly in regard to her math class. Delane said one of the ways she relieves some of this stress is by playing computer games, chatting online, or going shopping. Delane viewed these activities as a waste of time, but she indicated it relieves some stress. She explained in this way:

I like to get on the computer and go play a game or I’ll go wash my clothes, but I’m still kind of aggravated…If I do other things it takes my mind off the math and then I can turn around in about an hour or two and go back and figure this out on my own…And, then of course, everybody in my family has needs that they need from me.
So, I have to balance that, too. And, so I get fatigued from that, because I really want to do my homework, and I’ve got to do theirs with them or listen to my husband rant and rave about what so and so hasn’t done around the house. You know, so, I’ll get on my computer or I’ll go shopping or go release.

Delane talked about finding balance between her various responsibilities at home, work, and school. She indicated that she is only taking a couple of classes a semester in order to have the time to focus on her developmental courses and get a solid foundation in what she previously missed. Delane explained that completing college is a high priority for her, but her family comes first. There is tension and conflict present with all of Delane’s responsibilities in caring for her family, working, and going to college. When I asked what circumstances or challenges Delane is faced with, she explained how her multiple life roles or identities create a challenge to her success:

Just time, my own attitude, my children not doing what they’re supposed to when I delegate responsibilities and they don’t do it. And, it just really irritates me. I’m getting stressed out with them, stressed with myself because I get stressed with them. I guess that would be my family holding me down to a point…And, me trying to get on with that [her situation] and not let that get to me. And, my sleep, being stressed out and being able to sleep, relax, and find some pleasure in going to sleep.

Delane further explained the stress of all of her life roles and wanting to make good grades is an obstacle to her success and being able to enjoy college.

At the early part of her first semester, Delane indicated that she planned to major in radiologic technology or something in the field of science. She indicated that she really would
be interested in studying astronomy or archaeology. However, she explained she is limited in her choices and the number of classes she can take a semester because of family responsibilities. As she said, “the only thing holding me back from those two things are my kids right now and my husband.” Family responsibilities were a major consideration related to her course load, choice of major, and career path. Delane also talked about limitations related to caring for her children and that she does not always have the necessary time she would like to do her schoolwork. She said this can cause her considerable stress.

From my perspective, agency has as much to do with one’s perceived power to act as it does with actual power or means to act. In fact, sometimes these may be the same. Also, people in our lives have an enormous impact in ways we may or may not always be aware. In this next quote, Delane described what and who influenced her in her decision to come to college. The statement tells of some of Delane’s initial lack of agency related to attending college, the influence of another person on her decision, and a change in personal agency related to achieving her higher education goals. Delane explained in this way:

I’ve been wanting to go back to school. I never really felt fully personally complete when I flunked one of my major subjects in high school....I do not like the fact that I flunked algebra in high school. And, I was a quitter back then, just because of my insecurities of everything going on [referring to her parent’s divorce]. As I was getting older, there was one woman in particular; she was an older woman; she was my daughter’s second grade teacher. She wasn’t the best teacher, but one thing she told me I’ll never forget and that is “you can do it” if you want to go back. I did, I was 42 years old, and I went back to school, and I was 30 back then. And, I was like, “I really should complete myself, complete my knowledge, so I feel better about me.” I’m not dumb, I
can really apply myself if I just have a good foundation, which I really did not get in my high school for whatever reason…I could pass the blame, but I’m not; I just say, “I can do it now.”

Delane also explained that her parents were divorced around the time she graduated from high school and because of this her family lacked the financial resources necessary to support her college attendance. Delane further explains because her parents did not attend college, she was not aware of any other financial support such as loans, federal financial assistance, or the possibility of working and attending college on a part-time basis. After many years of wanting a college education, Delane is finally working toward her goal. I asked Delane if she could foresee a situation in which she would decide to leave college, she said:

Lack of motivation, lack of wanting, maybe just quitting and giving up…Maybe a child getting really ill would definitely take me out, or me, or my mother maybe; an immediate family member being ill would probably be the biggest then.

Again, family is a major consideration in Delane’s academic decisions and persistence. She voiced that along with having the necessary finances and motivation to finish, concern for the well-being of family is the other primary consideration in her success.

In regard to personal agency, Delane indicated that she feels she has control over her life and her choices. Also, in regard to obtaining her college education, she places the needs of her family first. Delane related that she evaluates her ability to attend college in regard to finances and family obligations. She said, “I have control over every choice I make. It just depends on the circumstances as to what choice I make.” Delane further explained if her family came under some financial strain, she would make a decision to leave college and then return later if the financial situation was bad enough to require that. She said that the decision may not be what
she wants, but if she made a choice to drop out she would return later.

“First-Generation” Status and Persistence

While being the first in her family to attend college seemed to be an obstacle to Delane’s college attendance immediately following high school, this “first-generation” status appears to have little relevance to her now. She is older and does not rely on parents for financial support. Also, she considered her “first-generation status” briefly upon entering college, but this was not something to which she gave much thought. The one area where being “first-generation” has some relevance is in Delane’s identity in regard to being a role model for her children in stressing the importance of continuing their education. She explained in this way:

Actually, I did think about it for a little bit. I thought that I was going to be the first one to do this….I’m hoping since I’ve raised the standard on myself that the kids will go with me. Just because it just wasn’t ever a priority in any of our families [referring to her spouse’s and her own], you know to go to college. While Delane had thought about her “first-generation” status for just a few moments at the time she registered for the first semester, she indicated she had not thought about it since. She said, “It was just a 30 minute deal of oh, wow, ok.”

After attending during the fall 2005 and spring 2006 semesters, Delane took the summer semester off from school. Delane returned during fall 2006 to take one math course. She indicated that her daughter is now taking classes at Southtown Community College. Delane said because of finances, she was only taking one class in order to let her daughter take the classes she needs to take. Delane said that since she is only taking Math, she feels she has the time needed to devote to doing well.
Gender, Race, and Class: Delane’s Response to Social Discourse

Delane had much to say in regard to gender in American society, some of which appeared to be self-conflicted. I asked Delane in the first interview what comes to mind when thinking about gender in American society. She responded in this way:

Today, I see women progressing in leadership. So, when I think of gender, I see women rising up more in a lot of areas. It’s broad, I mean, just the areas are broad. And, if you said “gender” to me, the first thing I think of is “man” – “men.” But then, its almost like I see a picture of women just coming up.

Delane shared her perception and response to social discourse in America regarding gender in that she viewed there is a lot of negativity both on the part of women and men; she said, “sometimes I think there is a power struggle.” Delane continued to explain that she does not believe women should be leaders and says, “I don’t think we [women] were built for that, emotionally, physically.” She continued to say she believes that women should be the teachers and nurturers. Delane further indicated she perceives there is a power struggle between women and men in American society because they get mixed up in an “ideal” of gender roles and do not pay attention to their strengths and weaknesses. I am not sure what “ideal” Delane had in mind, but so much has changed in American society in regard to women’s rights and gender equality just within the last couple of generations.

I found much conflict in Delane’s responses to the gender question. She talked about women being mistreated and abused and women struggling “to get out from underneath the oppression,” as well as the importance of women being financially independent and not “just relying on men’s pay checks.” She further explained that women are progressing; yet, she did
not believe women should be leaders, and she asserted that men should be the ones always making the final decisions.

In regard to her own college success, Delane talked about the need to take care of herself and for women, in general, to take care of themselves. Delane explained she usually puts her children first and whispered her judgment that doing so is “kind of bad.” She explained that she has come to realize that she has to take care of herself first in order to care for others. She said, “Everybody needs a balance, which means you do you first, because if you don’t have you, you don’t have nothing.” She indicated that many times she finds herself “lacking” when she continuously puts others’ needs before her own. Delane explained in this way:

It becomes a habit and then you get caught up and then they expect it. And you’re doing it; they expect it. And, so then, you become on this vicious cycle that you try to break out of, and you’re fatigued because you really don’t understand it. But, if you really look back, you can see, “I don’t have time for me. I’m not involved in something creative.” Then, of course, you’re upset, and then they’re upset because you’re upset and nobody knows why.

Delane also said she believes that “we’re [women] taught that if you say no, that you’re being selfish.” So, Delane explained there is pressure from society and from the media for women to be “SuperMom.” Delane continued:

We [women] feel that we – well, this is the way I feel… that if [women] don’t do everything for their children alone [without help]…that somehow they’re not the “SuperMom.” We [Americans] have a “SuperMom” mentality. And, why do I say that? Because, its everywhere. It’s all over the media; it’s all over schools; it’s everywhere you go, that everyone [women] should be the best, thinnest, prettiest, smartest, wisest,
best Mom, the best looking Mom…That’s where we pick it up and our parents picked it up; they gave it to us, we picked it up.

Delane continued to say that “we [women] are wrong” because “If we [women] weren’t [wrong in giving in to this pressure] I wouldn’t have so much fatigue about it.” Here, Delane indicated women should react against societal pressures to meet the “SuperMom” and “thin ideal.”

Even after the several interviews, I remain puzzled about Delane’s responses concerning gender and equality. Many of her responses seem to be conflicted: whereas on one hand she believes that women need to have independence and to take care of themselves, on the other hand, Delane believes men need to always be the leaders in the home and in society. Delane also stated she perceives that society is “trying to turn men into women and women into men.”

Through chance, I observed one of Delane’s classes where the class was analyzing some printed media and the messages advertisements present to readers. This provided an additional opportunity to explore Delane’s thoughts on gender.

In the class I observed, Delane’s English instructor showed the class magazine advertisements to students and asked them to analyze the images. One image was a picture of a woman in a business suit and heels, speeding through a grocery store while holding a bouquet of flowers and pushing a toddler in the basket along with the groceries. During the interview, Delane and I talked some about the image, and she wondered why women feel compelled and pressured to do everything when the responsibilities could be more evenly shared between men and women. Delane reflected on the image in this way:

I think sometimes the media actually thinks that is appealing. Personally, I don’t think so…You’re thinking to yourself that I can relate to that, but why, why?
Why are we [women] doing that to ourselves? You know, I don’t know why I’m doing this to myself (laugh). No, actually, when I think about a rushed woman these days and the power of that, I don’t really think that you should rush though raising a child. I’ve missed a lot by working and raising a kid, and I wish that I really wouldn’t have…We talked last time how men have their place and women have theirs, because they’re better at some things than the other. Sometimes there is one exception; out of ten women who make better leaders….I don’t know that we’re really born to take on all of that. It takes away from some things. I mean, if you’re a teacher at home, how can you be the other stuff? And, if you are everything, how stressful is it? Is something else hurting?...That lady in the picture was saying to me that is the women of today. And, you know, we’re killing ourselves…and men are just hanging out there and women are doing everything, letting [men] do nothing. You know, like I said before in that first interview, one day, we will all have our balance. I’m searching for that balance.

In regard to being successful in her school work, she said she is still learning to say no and trying to find a balance. This quote helps explain some of Delane’s perception of gender and gender roles in American society as well as some of the personal pressures she feels in finding balance within herself in regard to her multiple identities and life roles. It also explains some of the ways she views what she regarded as tension between women and men in today’s society as expressed in her statement that she perceives some “power struggles” among women and men in regard to gender roles and gender equity.

In regard to race in American society, Delane primary reflected on the tensions of blacks and whites. She talked generally about “difference” and explained that “anytime something is
different, we react; it’s a change, and change brings about fear, and we [people in general] tend to build barriers, and that’s what causes racism.” Delane further said she believes that it is “human nature” and a tendency with any race to notice differences and to feel some sense of hesitancy when there is a difference. She explained that she thinks when there are differences, people may be scared, and instead of being open to change, difference, and compromise, there is a “power struggle” rather than a viewing of situations in a positive framework. As far as race or ethnicity at Southtown Community College, Delane said she did not notice much diversity in regard to the instructors teaching at the college but that she sees a “good mixture” in regard to the student population.

Delane further explained that she believes individuals have the ability to change things for the better. She gave an example within her own family and said that she is able to make a change by not listening to her parents talk negatively about Blacks. Within her own family, she sets an example for her children. Delane also said she still perceives there is much “bitterness” between the Black and White people in American society and that change for the better only happens when people let go of the bitterness and look forward to living and working together for a better future. One of my thoughts during Delane’s comments related to the differences between the oppressor and oppressed. It may not be quite as simple as Delane has made it sound for people with particular histories to simply forget what has happened in the past.

Delane did not have much to say about socioeconomic class. She did not seem to relate to the term in the first interview. I asked the question in several different ways, and there was still not much a reaction to the term. During the second interview, Delane indicated that she perceived herself to be from a lower-income family and she used the term “lower middle-class” to refer to her own background situation. She shared how she wanted to attend college but that
she was unable because of financial resources. Delane also indicated she believed Southtown Community College is conveniently located, particularly for families who need financial assistance in order to obtain a higher education. Delane shared her thoughts about how college may help people move out of poverty. She explained in this way:

[Southtown Community College] is conveniently located smack in the middle of middle or lower income families that need that assistance. And, the reason they’re lower income is because they’ve never had the opportunity to get to college. That’s one of my primary reasons why I never got to go.

Delane related because she was from a lower income family that went through a divorce, she did not get to go to college. She further said that colleges can and should help lower income families obtain a higher education.

In regard to persistence, Delane’s perspectives on gender and financial status have a considerable impact on her college involvement and persistence. Delane struggles with balancing her desire to obtain a higher education with the desire to care for her family. From everything I obtained from her interview comments, Delane believes she bears the largest responsibility for caring for the needs of her family, and these obligations take considerable time which competes with time and energy to devote to academics. Also, financial wherewithal was an obstacle for Delane to attend college at an earlier age, and she still perceives that financial status or financial obstacles could be a threat to her persistence.

Academic and Social Involvement and the College Environment

Delane is a part-time student by circumstance and choice due to her life roles as a mother, wife, and part-time employment as a substitute teacher. She began her first semester with three classes, seven credit hours, taking developmental math (3 credits), developmental English (3
credits), and the first-year Academic Seminar course (1 credit). Delane indicated that in high school she hated math and hated writing. She said now her goal is to enjoy math, and enjoy English, and really challenge herself to learn. During the first semester, Delane said she thought about dropping math because she was struggling with taking three classes. She indicated, “If I didn’t have the family things to divide my attention, then I would not have had a problem with that. And, as a matter of fact, I probably could have taken more, but, since I have all these things I have to balance, I only took on three.”

During the second semester, Delane decided to only take two classes because she was working some additional hours at her job as a substitute teacher. Even though Delane was only taking classes part-time, she indicated she felt connected to the college because the faculty and staff provide students with information to ensure they have everything needed for registering and scheduling classes.

Because of family responsibilities, Delane indicated that she is not as involved in extracurricular or social activities as she might like to be. However, she reports having positive relationships with faculty and other students. Delane shared her thoughts about relationships with faculty in her prerequisite classes. She reported having a great relationship with her instructors and said,

I love every one of them. They are so helpful for me. They know I’m trying hard. They know why I’m here, that I’m taking it [college] probably more serious than the normal student coming out of high school. They’re very helpful, and, they know how much I need that because I’ve been out [of school] so long.

When I asked Delane who she relied on for the encouragement and the support she needed to be successful in college, she said, “not really anyone; I have to be honest, no one is really my
support right now.” She did, however, talk specifically about one math instructor who is particularly helpful in spending time outside of class providing tutoring. She also related that people who have gone to college and are now professionals are an inspiration to her.

Her relationship with some of the other students is somewhat unique in that because she is a substitute teacher in the parish, Delane knows many of the students from her role as a substitute teacher. Delane explained that her relationship with other students is good but that it causes her to be a bit self-conscious and insecure at times because they expect her to know all of the answers. As she said, “sometimes they know more, and we [older students] can learn from them.” Delane also related that she had become familiar with other students in her classes and was comfortable calling them or talking to them about class or homework when something was unclear.

Coming to College and What College Will Mean for the Future

Over the course of the interviews, Delane shared quite a bit about her reasons for coming to college in regard to completing something she was not able to complete earlier in life. During the first interview, along with being sensitive, compassionate, competitive, complex, and humorous, Delane also said she is a “pretty content person.” Delane seemed to be content with her life in regard to her family, financial situation, etc.; however, she indicated she felt she was missing something by not having gone to college. During the first interview, I asked Delane what she thinks college will mean for her future. Delane responded,

Everything for me right now, just because it’s part of who I want to be…What I’m saying is right now I feel incomplete, and I want to feel I’m going somewhere, and education is the first step for that. It builds security. And, I don’t care what anybody says; it really does. Knowing things means you can talk to anyone about
anything…the more knowledge you have, the more power you have. And, knowledge is power.

In this response, Delane indicated that college builds security, opportunities, confidence, and provides more power or control over self.

In the second interview near the end of the first semester, Delane shared how the role of a college student shaped how she views her own identity and some of the changes she had experienced over the course of the first semester of college. In regard to Delane’s identity as a college student, she explained that college adds to who she is as a person and college will make her a better person, in several ways. She said:

The role of a student would make me a little more confident in what I know and how to present myself. You know, my future, not only my future jobs, but just relationships even. …[College will] make me a better communicator, a better, knowledgeable person all around.

Delane also explained what she learned from her first semester experiences. She said:

The first semester is learning about what you can handle, learning about you…It’s your foundation of what you’re going to expect throughout the whole thing. It’s learning about the college itself. It’s learning about you personally; it’s learning about the people around you, the environment…To me, the added things were knowing what I could handle, knowing what I couldn’t handle, learning about my mistakes and how to deal with that.

In the final interview, Delane further explained the importance of college to her identity. She explained she does not need college to get a job, but she wants to have a profession and career doing something she would enjoy and that would continue to expand her knowledge. She also
said coming back to college was important to her identity in how she views herself. She said:

I really wanted to come back and get what I missed in English. I wanted to get
what I missed in Math, where I flunked it in high school. It was a personal thing
for me to be able to say, “yeah, I flunked in high school, but I passed in college.”

That’s a big deal for me. That’s a big deal for my self-esteem.

Delane continued to say she is getting smarter every day. She said, “I’m smarter than I was
yesterday…every day I’ve come here, I’m learning more than I did yesterday, so that’s all that
matters.” From every interview, I gleaned that Delane perceived college offers her a better
present and future-self.
Introducing Madison

My first impression of Madison, a 26 year old at the start of the fall 2005, semester was of an unassuming individual. She is an average height young woman with a larger than average frame. To the first interview, she wore no make-up, and her freckles colored her round face. Her clothes were plain blue jeans and a solid color shirt; her shoulder-length blonde hair was down and had what looked like a slight natural wave.

Madison began the semester and this research study with a strong commitment to her educational goal to have a career in the medical field. She indicated in the first interview that she originally had planned to attend another community college, but she did not feel comfortable there and did not like the way she was treated during the registration process. She said she was “treated as someone that didn’t know anything.” Madison said she received “friendly service and help” from Southtown Community College. She further said that she was treated with respect and that is the reason she chose this particular college.

Madison has never been married and has a daughter who was two-and-a-half in the fall of 2005. Madison worked part time, 12-15 hours per week, at a local fast food restaurant and scheduled five classes, 13 credit hours, during the fall 2005 semester. Madison explained that initially, she did not want to work while going to college in order to focus on her education, but she did not have that freedom of choice due to circumstance. She explained that she needed care assistance for her daughter, and in order to receive assistance, she must have a total of 25 hours a week of training, work, or education. So, as a result, she said she has to balance her responsibilities as a mother while she works and goes to school. During the interviews, Madison
shared how important her daughter is to her in regard to the decisions she makes. Also, in the interviews and her journal, Madison shared some of the difficulties she faces in regard to being a single mother pursuing a higher education.

Madison’s Identity Construction and Agency in Relation to College

During the first interview, I asked Madison to describe herself and share with me her understanding of her own identity. Madison said she is “a hard working person” who tries to complete what she begins, although she said she does not always succeed. Madison also said she tries to be “truthful and honest.” I asked for one centralizing aspect of her identity, and Madison indicated that would be “independence.” Madison explained that she has always tried to be an independent person as well as a person who thinks for herself and who takes care of herself.

When I asked what influenced her independence, Madison said she was not sure what causes her to strive for independence. Madison did not know if it was the way she was reared or relationships she had in the past. As she wondered out loud about her desire for independence and that primary aspect of her identity, she included one of her life roles as a mother in her reflection. She said:

I’m not sure what might have influenced it [her independence], but I’ve dated guys in the past that try to help you out and you live together. So, you both have equal responsibility. And, I’ve always done wrong in that department. I had a little girl in 2003, and I’m a single Mom. And, the father chose not to be in the picture. So, I’d have to say that I’ve learned a lot from her [referring to daughter], just trying to be independent for her [starting to cry].

Madison related that she desires financial independence in regard to being able to provide for her own and her daughter’s needs. In fact, she equates a continued education with financial stability.
Madison further indicated that her daughter is the reason why she came to college. She explained through tears, “she’s my inspiration, what I look forward to everyday. She’s what I work for and go to school for.” Madison also said in regard to her situation, “I don’t want to have to rely on a man, since I can’t rely on one now.” Madison and her daughter currently live with Madison’s parents. However, Madison has a strong desire to be able to take care of herself and her daughter without having to rely on others.

I asked Madison what or who influenced her decision to come to college, and her response was two-fold. A personal friend who is already attending a different college encouraged her to register and helped her through questions about financial aid. The other part of the decision again, related to her life-role or identity, as a mother. Madison’s response was this:

I had a friend that brought me here and helped me get the financial aid. She was going to make sure that I went to school. So, I really appreciate her for that. But, it would have to be my little girl [starting to cry]. Everything I do is for her. And, like I said, I want to be able to be on my feet.

Madison further explained that she is going to college to improve her financial situation so when her daughter begins school, she will be able to provide for her daughter’s additional needs related to schooling.

During every interview, the themes of financial independence, concern for her daughter, and a commitment to completing her goal of obtaining a job in the medical field were present. On the demographic form Madison completed during the first interview meeting, she indicated that she wanted to pursue a career in the medical field. Madison thought she might like to earn a degree in radiology. Although she was not completely certain what degree she would choose,
Madison indicated that she is strongly committed to her goal to get a job in the medical field. In regard to personal agency as it relates to Madison’s higher education experience, Madison again referred to financial stability. Madison explained she wants more freedom of choice in regard to a career. I asked Madison how much control she feels in regard to her financial situation and her life choices in general. She responded:

    Well, right now I would say, I have control of it [her life and financial situation] in a sense. But, of course, I’m not working full time, so I’m not making the money that I could be making. But, then again, with me going to school, hopefully the outcome…[will be] making twice as much.

Madison related that she wants to have a job making more than minimum wage and does not want to have to work at a fast food restaurant for the rest of her life. Also, in regard to life choices in general, Madison said she had “pretty good control of it,” and she explained that now after her second semester of college, she had more clarity or a clearer outlook about what she wants out of life. Madison further continued to say that she felt control over her life choices and finances in the past, but she said her current situation was not where she wanted to be.

“First-Generation” Status and Persistence

    While Madison does have several of the characteristics of a “first-generation” student, in regard to having to take developmental courses and struggling financially, being “first-generation” has little relevance to her personally in regard to her own identity and persistence. Madison does not view her experience of being the first in her family to attend college as being a motivating source or as something that makes her experience particularly unique. I asked Madison about her parents in relation to higher education, and she responded in this way:

    Well, neither one of them ever went to college. I’m the only one out of the family
that’s really entered college. They found out they were pregnant with me when they were still in high school. They did not finish high school, and they got married and just lived their life…So, they didn’t influence me at all. But, they didn’t say it was a bad thing that I was going. So, they didn’t influence me, but they thought it was a good idea.

Madison viewed her situation as her own, distinct from her parents, and referred to her circumstance of being a single mother desiring financial independence. She did not view her “first-generation” status or personal success as having much to do with her parents. Madison further explained she “really didn’t give it [first-generation status] any thought.” I asked Madison who she relied on for encouragement and support in regard to her success in college and she said,

I haven’t actually relied on anybody. My parents are all for me going to college they support me, but we don’t really talk about it a whole lot. I mean they know I go Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. And, they ask me, “Have you got your homework done?” kind of like I’m still in high school. I guess that’s just the way it is. That’s just the way parents are. They, of course, wanted to know how my grades are, what I’m doing. But, as far as graduating and getting a degree in anything, we hadn’t really discussed it too much.

In every interview, Madison voiced that she is committed to her goal of obtaining a career in the medical field, and even though she has several challenges and demands on her time and energy, she remained committed to her goal throughout the course of this dissertation research.

Gender, Race, and Class: Madison’s Response to Social Discourse

Madison did not have much to say about gender in society in regard to her response to social discourses and gender. She had only a couple of brief observations and opinions.
Madison said when thinking about gender in American society, her first thought relates to marriage. Madison said that she believes that marriage should be between a husband and wife, but also spoke about tolerance for others. She said: “We have gays and lesbians trying to marry, and I don’t believe in that, but, if that’s what a person wants to do, then who are we to stand in their way? That’s really the only thing that comes to mind, when you say gender.” After an additional question related to gender as it relates to the media, politics, education, etc.; Madison also added: “As far as society goes, they [social discourses present in American society] think we should be slender I guess…instead of looking at us for who we are.” Madison’s responses related to gender equality in regard to marriage and some of the social pressures in regard to what could be considered America’s thin ideal. I asked Madison what, if anything, came to mind in regard to gender at Southtown Community College, and she had nothing to add. She said, “nothing comes to mind about gender at school.”

Madison had a few brief comments about race in American society. I asked her what comes to mind when she thinks about race or ethnicity in American society. Madison responded she perceives society is different than it was a few decades ago and said she believes they will continue to be a lot different. Madison further said she thinks things are getting worse; she explained in this way: “I think things are different now from what they used to be, and I think they are going to continue to be a lot different than 30 to 40 years ago, mostly towards the bad because we have a lot of robberies, killings, things for the worse.” I wondered what this has to do with race and Madison’s perceptions concerning race. In retrospect, it would have been useful to ask her specifically about her response. Madison continued to say that she perceived race relations had gotten worse also due to the hurricanes. Additionally, I asked Madison if she had any experiences as a member of her racial group or as a woman that have caused her to think
about race or gender issues. She responded, “I guess just like...crime, there’s so much crime. Like I was talking about before, just being a woman, doing all you can to protect yourself anywhere you go, whether it be the grocery store, school, or anywhere, just being out in the public.” I could not determine from Madison’s quotes, but there seemed to be some association of race and crime in her responses. At the same time, Madison talked about racial equality, indicating she believes everyone is equal and that she does not perceive any differences because of race.

I also asked Madison about her thoughts on race or ethnicity at Southtown Community College. Madison responded, “nothing” but then added that she has one black friend whom she talked with quite a bit. Madison explained she feels they have a lot in common because of their age and starting college at an older age than some students. Madison added that she has not had any problems relating to anyone from other races. She said, “I had no problems getting along with White people, Black people, Chinese people, or Asian people. I don’t have a problem with that.”

In regard to social class, Madison had an emotional response. I asked Madison what comes to mind when she thinks about socioeconomic status in American society. She responded, “for me that’s been a hard one. You know, financially, being a single parent, that’s why I decided to go to school.” Madison continued to share through tears about wanting to better her financial situation to be able to provide for her daughter’s needs. In regard to Southtown Community College, Madison said she did not know other students’ financial status, so she said she would not know how to comment.

For Madison, much of her college experience revolves around her financial status. Madison made the decision to come to college to improve her financial situation and to be able
to provide for her daughter. Madison also reported that she sought financial aid and child care assistance. Further, the outcome of college, for Madison, what she hopes to gain, is financial stability for herself and her daughter.

So, for Madison, socioeconomic class is something she is aware of and the realities of social class impact her ability to take care of herself and her daughter. Madison’s daily life provides reminders of financial class. She holds a minimum wage job and is faced with being the primary provider for her daughter’s needs due to an absent father. Madison spoke in her journal about some of the daily financial challenges she faces, including notes about the struggle to obtain child care assistance. She wrote on November 20, 2005,

I’m still having trouble trying to get child care assistance. I gave them all the information they need, but they are beating around the bush. I really need their help right now because I really don’t have enough money for childcare, much less money for Christmas. I don’t care what anyone says, but the state or the government is not for the women. I’m a single Mom working and a full-time student and I really can’t get help or assistance with anything. By the time child care assistance is willing to help this semester will be over. The only thing I can do is laugh. There isn’t much more I can do, but PRAY!

For Madison, gender issues and social class issues are relevant to her success in college. Being a woman, she is left bearing the brunt of the financial burden in caring for her daughter, which means providing for her daughter’s daily needs and thinking about her long-term financial needs. Further, in order for Madison to better her financial situation, she must have childcare assistance for her daughter while she works and attends classes. That process has been quite difficult.

Academic and Social Involvement and the College Environment
Madison had many demands on her time and energy as they related to her academic involvement in college. She had a tough schedule her first semester. Again, in order to receive child care assistance, she was required to have 25 hours of work, school, or training. During her first semester, she took 13 credit hours and worked approximately 15 hours per week along with rearing her two year old daughter. I asked her thoughts on how she managed work and school; she responded:

I go to school Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. I try to do my homework for Mondays…on Tuesday, because I’m off Tuesdays from work. I go to work Monday night. So, I’m off Tuesdays, and I try to do my studies and homework then. I go to school Wednesday, and I try to do my homework either Wednesday night or early Thursday morning before I go to work. I work all day Thursday, and, then Friday, I come to school, and then I go to work in the evening. And, I try to do my homework when my daughter is sleeping. She [referring to her daughter] usually goes to bed at 8:00pm or 8:30pm, so I try to get in my homework time like 8:30pm-10:00pm.

Madison’s second semester was just as demanding with about the same number of work and course hours. She explained her typical week, and again, it was similar to the first semester in regard to the demands on her related to the physical time she spent either at school or work. Madison explained she spent about five hours a week outside of class time on her school work and said, “I don’t think it’s enough. I mean you know, I feel that I could do more but, of course, with school work and [my daughter], it’s hard.” Madison also shared in her journal some of her struggles with math and with having to write two book reports for physical science, a subject for which she said, “I’m not really interested.” This particular entry related the stress Madison felt
about her academic work and the lack of interest or engagement she felt in regard to completing work in a subject that she did not like.

During the interviews, Madison talked about some of the joys and challenges related to having a toddler present while she is trying to further her education. Madison explained that she does not work on the weekends and she tries to spend some of her weekend with her daughter. She explained, “time is so valuable with them.” She further said, “I just try to spend as much time as possible with my little girl with her being two.” I responded with my own experiences and related that I saw how quickly my own child was growing and how difficult it is to give up time with him in order to do school work. Madison also said, “it’s hard to do work when I have her at home.” She further explained at the start of her second semester that her daughter stayed at day care a little longer so she had a few hours to do her homework while she had some time alone.

I asked Madison about her social involvement and about what, if any, extracurricular or outside-of-class activities in which she may be involved. Madison explained the only involvement or activity she had outside of class was coming to meet with me. I had thought that I might be a connection for some of the participants in the study, but I felt an added sense of responsibility to help Madison when hearing that I was one of her only connections to the college. Madison explained that she had a few classmates whom she spent some time socializing with on campus her first semester, but had not been socializing much during the second semester. Madison voiced, “I would say I’m pretty isolated, I guess, I mean, I participate, you know, when I’m in class… But, as far as things outside of class I don’t really participate in anything.” Madison further explained that she does not view spending time with peers as a necessity, but she did say that if she had time, it would perhaps “make things a little bit easier.”
Madison reported having a good relationship with faculty, and she explained she feels comfortable asking questions.

After hearing Madison talk about her work, school, and home schedule, I could tell how much stress she faced in regard to the amount of energy that was required for all of these. Also, even though I have a strong support system with my spouse and his mother in regard to helping with my own children, I could definitely relate to the stress of child rearing, working, and going to school.

Coming to College and What College Will Mean for the Future

Again, Madison equated a continued education with financial stability. She had a sense of urgency about bettering her financial status in regard to being able to support her daughter financially. Madison explained she is going to college in order to give her daughter a stable life “whenever she [her daughter] starts school” and so she can provide the things her daughter “wants and the things she needs.” At the completion of the first semester of college, Madison had not developed a desire, necessarily, for a broader or general education. Again, her financial situation or status was foremost in her mind in regard to day-to-day existence and provision for her daughter. I asked Madison if she would say she needs a college education and what she perceives college may mean for her future. She responded:

I would say, yes, that I need a college education, because I dropped out of high school and eventually went and got my GED and wasn’t really smart as far as that. I didn’t really know too much. Common sense, I was ok, but as far as book smart goes, I wasn’t.

I asked Madison during the last interview, how she would describe herself to herself. She replied:
I think that’s funny; I don’t really like to describe myself. Well, right now I would say I’m pretty clear headed, level-headed. I try to keep my responsibilities and my priorities in line, just try to stay focused on things that need to be focused on -- family, friends, and you know work and school, and, try to keep it all together.

After completing two semesters at Southtown Community College, Madison decided to visit a business college in the area. After visiting the business college, she decided to obtain training in medical and insurance coding. The program was rather short and allowed her to complete her training and internship within a period of about six months. So, during the fall of 2006, Madison completed her training and began her internship in December in order to complete the program in January of 2007. Through e-mail in December 2006, I asked Madison about her decision -- what prompted it and her thoughts about herself and her identity in regard to the change. I also asked Madison if she thought she may return to college one day. She wrote,

> It wasn’t that I had planned on leaving Southtown Community College. I just didn’t know where I was going with my schooling, I went into it blind. When I went to [FastTrak Business School] I really was just going there asking questions. Before I knew it I was to start the following Monday. But now, being in the Medical Insurance program, I find that I like it and would really like to work in the hospitals. And, honestly I don’t know if I will return to school after I am finished with this program, if I do it will probably be for physical therapy or radiology.

When I went into Southtown Community College I was unsure of what I wanted to do with my life and in a sense I feel that I can see some light at the end of the tunnel. After I finish this Medical Insurance program, I plan to get certified. I think that I will have some
completion in my life after doing this…Only one way to go and that’s forward.

After reading Madison’s e-mail response, I realized she is achieving her goals or will at least, in part, achieve her goals in January when she locates a job in the medical field of medical coding. She will likely have a better financial situation when she locates a new higher paying job with her recent training and will be able to move from a minimum wage job to a skilled-labor position. She indicated that later she may return to college, but she is just not sure at this time. And for Madison, right now, that is enough as she continues to move forward.

In regard to her experience at Southtown Community College, she voiced through the interviews that the first year Academic Seminar course helped her explore career choices and goals. Also, Madison said that she feels smarter having attended college, even for a short time. If Madison wants to return to further her education and her career opportunities in the future, Southtown Community College will be there for her. For the meantime, if Southtown Community College helped Madison to refine her goals and gave her some additional confidence to achieve her goals, maybe that is enough.

Still, I cannot help but wonder if Madison will earn enough in a new job as a medical encoder to be financially independent. Will she earn enough to pay for child care without having to rely on the state or a government that she perceives as uncaring in regard to her life and struggles? Will Madison find the personal fulfillment she is seeking? I don’t have the answers to those questions.
CHAPTER 8

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Researcher Positioning and Chapter Description

Am I one, or two, or three?
Mother, student, academic dean
Oh, yes, and wife that makes me four,
No, much more, I am one with many doors,
One with the others, the women, these four
In this journey, called life, called learning,
and like they, I want more.

A better future, a better world
for my children, my family, my birth sisters, us four,
I cannot capture the ebb and flow
of what life’s questions leave me not to know
But I go on asking, striving, hating, loving,
and wondering about mine-our tomorrow, today.

The previous case study chapters provided a glimpse into the lives of the four women in this study who were first in their families to attend college. Through those chapters, I pulled together pieces of personal backgrounds, current life situations, experiences, and perceptions as these four women proceeded through their first semesters of college. They reflected along with me on the questions I posed about their/our experiences.

In this chapter, I address each research question through an individual case analysis and cross-case analysis, presenting results and discussion as these relate to my theoretical framework and research questions. The analysis and discussion will further examine the four participants' stories through interpreting meanings as these relate to involvement and social integrationist theories.

Additionally, through a poststructural feminist perspective, I examine the individual and collective backgrounds, experiences, challenges, and struggles of the women in this study, striving to better understand what meaning “identity” and “self” have for college involvement,
persistence, and our futures. In using a poststructural feminist perspective, I urge readers to recognize that the information and stories participants have shared with me are partial, unfinished, and filtered through both the participants’ and my own lenses, experiences, interpretations and subjectivities.

Through narrative interpretation, my voice and thoughts are privileged as researcher and author. Through this dissertation, I deconstruct the label “first-generation” and reconstruct meanings related to the lived experiences of these four women as they have journeyed through their first semesters of college and as they continue their educational and life journeys. At the same time, I will share some of my own learning experiences as I journey through this dissertation process.

As I prepared to write this analysis and the conclusions chapter, Bloom (1998) helped me to remember that, unlike characters in literary fiction who are well-defined and whose stories have a tidy conclusion, narrative interpretation analyzes lived experiences of individuals who are subjective and conflicted and whose stories have not ended (p. 94-95). So, I explore these cases for meaning and understanding, rather than for conclusions, in regard to the four women’s involvement and persistence in higher education.

Since little is known specifically about the persistence of women, this dissertation provided an excellent opportunity for me to explore the ways in which each of the women in this study describe their various “multiple shifting identities” (Capper, 1998, p.366) and how they viewed their personal agency both prior to coming to college and through their involvement in pursuing a higher education. Conducting several interviews with the participants over the course of the first, second, and, for some, third and fourth semesters of college allowed many opportunities to explore their own as well as my interpretations of the students’ identity.
construction, representation and some of the challenges and changes the students experienced.

At the start of the data collection process, I came face-to-face with some personal challenges, including fear of the unknown and acts of God that related to my dissertation and persistence. Although I had some experience in collecting and analyzing data through my course work, I still had hesitancies in regard to not knowing exactly how the data gathering, collecting, and analyzing would unfold. Also, Hurricane Katrina and Rita hit at the start of the fall 2005 semester, just as I was to begin my field work. I already had met with the community college that was my first site preference and had a meeting with the Chancellor as well as a couple of deans and had gained approval and access to conduct my study there. Then, the hurricanes hit. Colleges in Louisiana opened for the fall 2005 semester, then, many closed due to Hurricane Katrina, then reopened only to close again due to Hurricane Rita. After the hurricanes, most colleges, if not all, experienced some changes related to the abrupt population shift in regard to helping students continue their education for the fall 2005, despite the natural disasters that had occurred.

The community college where I had originally gained approval and access to conduct my study was then unable to provide me assistance related to giving me a student data pool from which to draw a sample for my study. So, I chose another community college and gained approval and access. This caused a delay in my intended start time and a slow response in being able to make contact with my students. This was only one of the times throughout the Ph.D. and dissertation process that I thought about walking away from it all.

When I finally did start meeting with the women in my study, I quickly got very excited again about my research and my own educational goals. They inspired me through hearing them talk about their own educational goals and challenges. Many of the questions I asked them, I
also asked myself, for instance: What is my identity? What are some of the challenges I face in my educational pursuits? Who do I rely on for encouragement or support? How do social discourses and my multiple shifting identities impact my educational pursuits? I pondered all of these through the interviews as I related to the women in my study. Sometimes, their responses resonated with me, and other times their responses challenged my thinking and made me grapple with my own perspectives. Some examples are included throughout this analysis chapter.

Analysis of Research Questions

This section addresses each of the research questions through a case by case analysis. Each research question is presented. Then using data pulled from interviews, observations, and personal journaling, I provide my analysis, personal reflections, observations, and results concerning each individual case and provide a cross-case analysis with discussion about the group. As suggested by Stake (2000), I examined each individual case and made cautious conclusions concerning similarities between cases (p. 444).

Research Question 1: How do women who are first in their families to attend college describe their identities and personal agency in relation to the college experience?

This section analyzes each participant’s responses to interview questions either directly or indirectly about identity and personal agency in regard to their college experiences. This analysis also includes some of my own responses, thoughts, and reflections about my own identity and personal agency as I simultaneously questioned the students and myself. In this section, I analyze ways in which identity and personal agency relate to the students’ college experiences as present in participants’ responses, in interviews, or in journal entries, individually and as a group.
Casey in Response: I asked Casey, 18 years old at the start of her first semester of college, what was one primary or centralizing aspect of her identity; she said “being a woman.” During the first interview, Casey appeared to be following me significantly in answering the questions either as I did or as what seemed to be how she thought she should answer them. I asked her again why she chose “being a woman,” and she said, “because I feel a pride in being a woman …because I’m 18, but I’m in the process of being a woman.” I was able to interview Casey again in her fourth semester of college in November of 2006. She had just turned 20, and I asked her again about her previous response inquiring why “being a woman” was central to her identity. This is how Casey responded:

I just turned 20. The older that I get, I learn more; I just accept things more, much better than I did when I was 18; I just thought that I knew exactly what was going to happen in life and how things would go…I’ve learned that things happen when they’re supposed to happen. Things go the way they’re supposed to go… that I can’t have control over everything that’s going to happen. That’s one thing that has changed as a woman, just getting older; I kind of am becoming a woman.

I responded to Casey and asked her, “Do you think you have become a woman?” She said, “no” and laughed. I laughed, too, because it seemed a silly question when I heard myself asking it. Casey said, “No, just getting older, I guess (laugh). I don’t really know, from a girl to a woman, I guess. I don’t know.” I wondered out loud along with Casey, “What do you think that means?” Casey replied, “I don’t know,” but, I pushed for more thoughts from Casey, asking her, “what do you think that means to you, in terms of achieving becoming a woman? What do you think that means?” Casey replied, “more experiences and learning more about life.” I shared with Casey that I, at 33 years old, still really don’t know exactly what being or becoming a woman means.
either. She further said, “What I’m realizing is that there’s never going to be an answer to everything.” Casey’s response resonated with me, and for just a moment, we shared what I felt was a common place in time, discovering, perhaps in part, what it means to be a “woman” if there is such a thing as “womanhood” in an essentialist type of context. I responded aloud with my personal affirmation of Casey’s interpretation, saying that, I too, have learned and am still learning that I’m not going to have the answers to everything and have accepted that there will be no point in my life when I’ve just “figured out” life.

Casey shared some other thoughts directly and indirectly on her identity and personal agency throughout the interviews, some of which will be addressed through the analysis of the other research questions. Specifically, however, in regard to her college experience, Casey said she has learned through her first couple of semesters of college that she is becoming more independent. She indicated in the first interview she felt considerable control over her personal finances because her mother had encouraged her to have her own checking account in order to manage her own money. Casey also indicated she felt she control over her life choices in general.

Experiences through her first semesters of college have had a part in further solidifying Casey’s identity as a woman. Some of these experiences relate to daily challenges of learning to balance work and school. For example, Casey explained,

I’ve had to become more independent than I was before. I thought that I was in high school, but, I’ve learned that it’s changed in a lot of ways. Like, I’m really, I don’t know, I’m really busy all the time (sigh), I don’t have time for a lot of things. You know, it’s made me more goal-oriented.

Casey gave no specific defining moments for the changes she experienced in relation to
solidifying her identity as a woman, although through her responses, she shared some about people who served to support and encourage her in achieving her goals, and her responses seem to indicate Casey is experiencing a gradual and continual unfolding of self-understanding and self-awareness. Some experiences she shared relate to her relationship with her family and boyfriend, to her college experiences in class and with other students, to learning to balance school and work, and, as Casey said, just in general “more experiences and learning more about life.”

McKensie in Response: McKensie, 18 at the start of this study, came to college aware of herself and aspects of her identity. She described herself at the start of her first semester in fall 2005, then again in fall 2006 after completing several semesters. At the beginning of her first semester, McKensie described herself this way:

I would describe myself as, the first thing that comes to my mind is a very outgoing individual. I’m always looking for adventures, and, I’m always looking for new experiences. I always like the bigger, brighter things in life, and like I just after to see what life has to offer.

McKensie further explained,

It’s just one of those things; you just kind of can’t hold back and just have to kind of like come out, you know, just kind of go with my gut feeling; just go with it…I’m always up for something new, like I said, and I’ve always just wanted to look out in life and, like, you know what I mean? Like, I’ve just heard some of the older people say, “Oh, I regret this, or I wish I would have done that.” And, you know, now’s my time that I can. …do what I want and nobody has to tell me. You know, it’s good to have guidance along the way, but now it’s my time to really see what I want and who I can be.
McKensie considers the outgoing, adventurous part of her identity the centralizing or most important to who she is a person. In analyzing and responding to the second research question, McKensie’s outgoing adventurousness identity, as she self-describes and constructs, is also important to her choice of college and how she interacts in her social and academic relationships. In addition, McKensie’s identity has been relevant in how she has gone about choosing a career and degree program. She began college with an open mind about career possibilities and was not completely sure of what she wanted to do. When I first asked about her educational and career goals, McKensie said, “I definitely can say that I’m so, like, spontaneous, there’s like a million things that I want to do (laugh), like honestly; I’m trying to, like, focus it down.” After taking the first semester Academic Seminar course, McKensie reported during the third and final interviews that she had changed and committed to an educational and career goal.

I also wanted to understand more about how McKensie perceives her personal agency in regard to personal finances and decision-making in general. McKensie related that she feels a substantial amount of personal agency in her life, but also explained how she receives support from her father and aunt in regard to her college pursuits. The questions and responses went this way:

Me: How much control do you feel you have in regard to your financial situation and about life choices in general?

McKensie: I am very much in control of my life situations right now. I pay for everything, but my college is pretty much, my father pays for, which that was in the deal. He’s willing to support me, and I do understand too, that if I have pay for my college then I will. And, financially though, I’m pretty stable; I have a good support system with my father. I haven’t had to ask him for money, yet. So (laugh). My Aunt, she’s also, very,
very lucky to have her, because she supports me, and there are times where I say, “Hey, can I borrow that $10 bucks?” and she’s willing to do that for me. And, she’s also willing to watch my money and stuff, because I tend to be bad with money. But, it’s not like I just spend it on clothes, and shoes, and stuff like that. I get what I need to get paid, like my phone bill, and my car insurance, and stuff like that. But, I’m very fortunate in that sense, because I have my car paid off, and I don’t have to pay for rent right now. So, I’m very fortunate in that sense, so. But, I’m really doing good; I’m good.

Me: And, just life choices in general?

McKensie: That is one where it just, like, it hits you, like you are on your own now. And, if you want to go out and party out all night, you can. But, there’s consequences with that, and there’s life choices that you don’t have to work, but you’re not going to have any money. So, I think my life choices have been good so far. I’ve had the motivation to have a job and keep a job and to know when to go out and have fun and know when to study. My life choices, though, they have got me, you know, kind of in a rut. I’ll admit, like I made bad choices where I should have studied, especially like especially last semester. You know, I studied, and then I’d go out. And, you know, what I mean, and it was just part of the new experience in being here, and it’s different, and you can go out, and you can do this and that. But, I believe that my choices differed definitely the first semester.

McKensie vocalized a strong sense of personal agency in having the power to control her finances and life choices in general; at the same time, she relied on important others in her life to help her achieve her academic goals.

McKensie began college with an understanding of “self.” As she continued through
college, McKensie continued to reflect on her identity and personal agency as it related to choices, decisions, and outcomes for her future. As the next interview excerpt shows, McKensie understood identity in terms of who she believes herself to be in present and dynamic future sense and how she relates to others. Further, she tied identity to action in regard to what she does and will do. The following is from the last interview I had with McKensie, in the fall of 2006, one year after the first interview:

Me: Could you share with me your definition or understanding of the term “identity”?  
McKensie: Identity. Identity is something I believe you make of yourself. You know, its what you want to present yourself towards other people. And I think everybody has their own identity. And its not like the way they look, but I think more the way they present themselves toward other people.  
Me: OK. And, what if any, kind of other things maybe go into identity, when you think about the term identity?  
McKensie: I guess the way people act toward other people and the way they act toward themselves or maybe their morals, beliefs, um, things like that, I think, would make up identity.  
Me: OK. Do you ever think about who you are as a person and who you want to be? And, how does college going or your other choices relate to that?  
McKensie: I definitely think of my identity, and it’s also important to me because I want to be true to myself and true to other people. I don’t want to be one person towards other people and then inside I’m like, “oh, I’m really not that way.” You know, I guess you could say a fake person. I think college, for me, has definitely changed my identity. I guess within the last couple of months, because it was, like, college is important to me
and its part of who I am and what I want to do for the future. Yeah, college has definitely changed my identity. And, I’ve definitely changed during the last semester. Even just this semester especially, it was like, this is my future and this is what I want to worry about. And, you know, I just totally just, I stopped just drinking and going out and just stopped smoking and just got really serious with it. And, I’m just kind of really proud of myself for that. And, it’s hard, too, when your other friends are doing that, and they’re not in college, and you’re trying to fit in with friends. So, I think that I definitely, my identity now is: I want to be a good person, and I want to do good in college, and I want to have a good future. So, I think that’s how my identity has become.

McKensie explained how college has changed her identity, because she has begun to consider more seriously her future; in doing so, McKensie has begun to tie or construct her identity in a way that is solidifying her career and academic identity.

**Delane in Response:** Delane is the oldest of the four students in this study and perhaps the most complex in regard to her description of her identity and personal agency. During the first interview in the fall of 2005, I asked Delane to describe herself in order to get a better idea of how she constructs her identity. Through direct and indirect questions related to identity, I began to have a better idea of how she describes herself and personal agency in relation to her college going. Delane described herself as complex and conflicted, and this internal conflict is clear in some of the responses she gave throughout the interview process.

In our first meeting, Delane described herself as sensitive, very compassionate, and competitive. Delane also said she is spiritual and complex at time. She further explained that she is fairly confident with who she is and with what she wants to do with her life. Delane also related that she loves people, that she is fascinated by people, and described herself as a “Mom, a
wife, and a friend.” After completing her description, she added that she is humorous and not serious minded. Delane said that being humorous is the most important aspect of who she is; she said “I have a big kid in me.” Delane explained that she likes to liven people up and teach them not to be so serious.

During the second interview, I asked each participant to answer a question directly related to her identity in regard to being a college student. I wanted to find out through this question how students perceive their college going in regard to how they understand themselves, who they are, and who they want to be as it relates to higher education. Delane’s response to the question was complex. Through this interview as well as others, Delane related her past experience of not having done well in high school math to her present experiences and identity now. Delane, in this response, explained she is trying to construct her identity through confidence in what she is learning, rather than on past mistakes. This interview excerpt is from near the end of Delane’s first semester of college in fall of 2005:

Me: In thinking about your role as a college student, how does this role as a college student shape how you think about your identity and who you are as a person?

Delane: It’s not really who I am; it’s what I want to do with who I am, you know, so I’d say that it adds to it. It would complement it. I wouldn’t, I’m trying not to, as a matter of fact, base myself on my, say like, success of my tests. It’s not about really making mistakes, it’s about learning… So, it would probably add to [identity] and make me a little more confident. So, the role of the student probably would make me a little more confident in what I know and how to present myself, you know, my future, not only my future jobs but just relationships even. You know, relationships in my job make me a better communicator, a better, knowledgeable person, you know, all around.
In this response, Delane explained that being a college student and what she is learning in college make her feel “more confident” both in her knowledge and in her self-presentation. She views her role as a student as a “complement” or addition to who she is and her identity in regard to making her a “better, knowledgeable person, all around.” In this statement, I see Delane had connected herself to college in a sense of forming an academic identity. Delane has begun to perceive herself, in part, as a “college educated person;” during this first semester of college, she had started to change how she perceives herself and her success as well as her self-construction in relation to learning, adding to her knowledge, and becoming a better person. Even at the last interview, Delane was not completely sure as to her career identity but was committed to completing her college education and obtaining a degree related to some area of science.

This next interview segment further demonstrates how Delane constructs her identity in regard to her college experiences through a dynamic reflection of her past and present. Delane, in this particular response, reflected on various aspects of her identity construction, which she tied to her motivation as well as to her own learning experiences. This part of the interview went as follows:

Me: What challenges or concerns, if any, do you have related to your success in college?
Delane: Those little things like I said, the not having a balance. To getting side-tracked, to getting distracted; that ADHD stuff that I think all of us battle to a point. Getting the past out of the way, just those personal struggles, you know, that the way you look at yourself, the way you have looked at yourself. They may stop me, but like I said, I’m trying to challenge those as well.

Here, Delane reflected on an internal conflict and struggle related to her self-construction and identity in terms of how she came to college -- viewing herself and her abilities in regard to past
experiences -- and the way she is challenging herself to construct her self-perception and identity in a more positive manner. The following is a continuation of this interview excerpt from the end of Delane’s first semester:

Me: Is there anything else, in general, you’d like to share about your experiences or perceptions about your semester, before the last question?

Delane: My biggest experiences that I’ve learned from and that have helped me with what I just said is making mistakes, to learn not to beat myself up. That first semester is not as important. It is important learning-wise. But, I think your first semester is more learning about what you can handle, learning about you, not so much learning about the subjects, even though they are very important…It’s your first foundation of what you’re going to expect throughout the whole thing. It’s learning about the college itself. It’s learning about you personally; it’s learning about the people around you, the environment. So, it’s not so much about the subjects really. It’s really more…the added things were: knowing what I could handle, knowing what I couldn’t handle, learning about my mistakes and how to deal with that, and not kick myself too hard or not hard enough, that type of play.

Delane further related through this response that during this first semester, she had experienced some changes in regard to learning more about herself, the college, and others. Through this response, she articulated the transition that she had made during her first semester of college; as an adult student, she experienced some changes regarding personal acclimation both related to her self-expectations and as well as to the College’s academic expectations. Also, through indicating that she had learned what to expect through the college experience and through recognizing some of her personal challenges in terms of her self-perception, Delane was
beginning to understand her negotiation of the academic environment and when she was pushing herself too hard or not hard enough.

Throughout the interview process, I also sought to understand each participant’s view of power in relation to their success in college. I wanted to better understand how they viewed their own personal agency and how this relates to their college attendance and success. In my own experience, I was determined to complete college even though there were some things I did not have a lot of power over at the time, such as finances and being dependent upon federal aid as well as having to work part time to cover needs not provided for through Pell assistance. I asked Delane about her personal agency at the start of her second semester of college in February of 2006:

Me: How much control do you feel you have in regard to your financial situation and your choices about life in general?

Delane: I taught myself about finances and about investing and saving… So, we have that; we have a decent savings, a decent retirement… With four kids it’s tough, I mean it’s really tough having four kids. You know one is graduating, and, of course, we support the other kids in school. We have to support me in school. Plus, when Katrina came and we got to get a new roof…and you know just a few things like that… But, overall, we had a savings; we still have a savings, and we try to balance out. If it ever came a time, where I had to, you know, shove back my school because we got in a financial [situation], I’d just cut a class and try to work around that, for now, until I get into the bigger stuff where they expect you to be there, when I go to the Lady of the Lake. But, for now, if we got into a financial bind, I would just back off and make sure I had money for those…three years so I could finish. And, we do have that worked out to borrow against my husband’s
retirement plan, which is what we were thinking about doing for our kids. So, we try to throw everything into a savings to where we’ll always have something to fall back on.

Me: Just life choices in general, how much control do you think you have?

Delane: My choices, I have control over every choice I make; it just depends on the circumstances as to what choice I make over what circumstance, you know. So, I feel like sometimes you have control over every choice you make. It may not be the choices you might want to make because of the circumstances that come up. You know, just like if we came under a financial whatever this year for whatever reason, my choice would be to back out of school until I could get back in. Unfortunately, it just depends on how bad that situation was. Is it more important than school, less important than school? And, that would be, I would base my choice on that.

In this section of the interview, Delane, reflected on her personal agency. She addressed my question of both personal finances and power over her life choices in general. In regard to finances, there were some financial considerations that related directly to her college attendance and participation. For instance, Delane related that depending upon her financial circumstances, she would leave college for a while if she had to in regard to her family situation.

Madison in Response: Madison is the only one of the four women who did not continue at Southtown Community College. After her second semester at the College, she decided to go to a nearby business school to obtain training and a certificate in medical and insurance coding. While Madison came to college with an idea about her identity, it appears she did not incorporate or form an academic identity. During the first interview, I asked Madison about her identity. She responded,

I guess, in so many words, I would say that I’m a hard working person. I try to follow
things through, even though sometimes I don’t succeed. But, I try to follow things through. I always try to be truthful and honest. And, of course, everyone has their down falls as well, but um, I guess that’s how I would describe me: hard-working, truthful, honest, always try to do good instead of bad, even though people make wrong decisions and learn from them.

In this self-description or self-construction of her identity, Madison presented herself as an honest hard-working person. She also explained that she tries to follow through, but she is not always successful. I asked Madison, if she were to share with me one central or primary aspect of her identity, what would that be, and she said, “independence.” I wanted to know why she chose that particular aspect of who she is, and Madison explained in this way:

Madison: I don’t know if it was the way I was brought up, but I’ve always tried to be an independent person. I’ve always tried to think for myself, do for myself. And, I’ve never really wanted anyone’s help. Even though it wasn’t like charity or they felt sorry for me, or whatever. But, I’ve always tried to do for myself.

Me: Could you share a little bit about what might have influenced your independence?

Madison: Well, I’m not sure what might have influenced it [my independence] but, you know, I’ve dated guys in the past that try to help you out and you live together. So, you know, you both have equal responsibility. And, I’ve always done wrong in that department. I had a little girl in 2003, and I’m a single Mom. And, the father, you know, chose not to be in the picture. So, I’d have to say that I’ve learned a lot from her, just trying to be independent for her.

In Madison’s response, she shared how she grew up seeking to be independent. While Madison indicated she is not exactly sure what influenced her independence as a child, she did share some
of her adult experiences with relationships and becoming a single parent. Madison explained she had a child in 2003 and the father of their child chose not to be present after the birth of the child, so she is now a single parent rearing their daughter. Madison explained that her desire for independence was also related to caring for her daughter and being able to provide for her.

At the start of Madison’s second semester of college, I asked her about her personal agency or control over her personal finances and life choices in general. In Madison’s response, she indicated she feels she has control “in a sense;” there were some qualifiers in her response as she reflected on her current financial and life situation alongside of what she would want for her future. The following is an excerpt from the third interview with Madison:

Me: And, how much control do you feel you have in regard to your financial situation and choices about your life in general?

Madison: Well, right now I would say, I mean, I have control of it in a sense. But, of course, I’m not working full time, so I’m not making the money that I could be making. But, then again with me going to school, you know, hopefully the outcome of this, I’ll be making twice as much at least than I would be doing, you know, on a normal regular basis without school.

Me: And, life choices in general?

Madison: Life choices as far as career wise?

Me: Yeah, how much control do you have in regard to your choices about life in general?

Madison: Well, I think now I have, you know, pretty good control of it, a clear outlook now, whereas, before working Monday through Friday, 9am to 5pm or whatever just making $8-$9 an hour, you know, I really didn’t know what I wanted out of life. And with starting school, and, you know, I have a better outlook on it.
Me: So, you feel you have more control?

Madison: Yeah. Well, I felt that I had control, but it’s not really, I guess, where I wanted to be, a career that I really wanted to work at, and that’s what I’m trying to get at now is working my goals up to be at that, you know, that position.

Madison explained in her response that she had “pretty good control” over her life choices in general, but related that she was attending college to obtain a better job and better salary.

Madison equated higher education to a better job and salary and that was the primary reason she began attending Southtown Community College. I asked Madison at the last interview at the beginning of her second semester to describe herself again. Madison said, “now I would say I’m pretty clear headed, level-headed. Um, I try to keep my responsibilities and my priorities in line, just try to stay focused on things that you know need to be focused on family, friends, and you know work and school.” Along with the description, Madison added that she is just trying to “keep it all together.”

Research Question 2: How do women who are first in their families to attend college describe their multiple identities and how does their understanding of social discourses affect their involvement and persistence in higher education?

This section analyzes each participant’s responses to interview questions either directly or indirectly related to “personal, biographical, and popular culture discourses” (Clark/Keefe, 2006, p. 2). This section also provides an analysis of each participant’s discussion of her own “nonunitary subjectivity” and plurality in regard to identity. Bloom (1998). Further, this analysis section explores some of the ways in which student identity construction relates to involvement and persistence.
As Tierney (1992) suggests, the social constructs used in higher education carry meanings and implications for theory and practice. Along with the dysfunctional problems Tierney (1992) gives in regard to Tinto’s (1993) social integrationist theory, an additional problem is in its application to two-year commuter colleges. Tinto (1993) explains that there are significant differences among variables relating to gender, social class, race, and age in regard to persistence and departure and that higher education research is still very limited concerning these differences as well as differences among community colleges versus residential institutions (p. 83). Each of these areas needs to be further explored. In regard to two-year commuter colleges, Tinto explains that most commuter students attend college part time and do not spend a large amount of time on campus:

It is not surprising, therefore, that social congruency and social isolation appear not to be as important to the question of persistence and departure as they might be among residential institutions, and that prior intentions, commitments, academic performance, and external forces appear to be relatively more determinate of individual decisions to withdraw (p. 83).

Further, Tinto poses an area for further research related to “individual personality” and the possibility of constructs that would explain a “personality of departure” (83). Tinto states,

There is much that still remains unclear. The question of the role of personality is still unresolved. Though it is obvious that individual personality must affect individual departure, we have yet to discern anything resembling a “personality of departure.” To date, our constructs of personality have yet to capture in a reliable fashion specific attributes which underlie individual responses to experiences within different institutions of higher education (p. 83).
Perhaps personality may be an area for further exploration, but the results of this study suggest a useful construct may be based on identity, particularly for women, in regard to exploring some of the reasons why women enter college, how they interact socially and academically, and whether they persist to college degree completion or choose other life paths.

As I continued my data collection and analysis, I wondered what had made three of the four women in my study continue to pursue a college degree and why one chose to leave the community college and go to a business school for a certificate, instead. There apparently are several factors for further quantitative and qualitative studies; however, two areas that seemed clear from this study were that the women’s personal family situations are very important in regard to their decisions. Also important was the development of an “academic identity” early on in the first or second semester (Clark/Keefe, 2006). Identity, as used in this study, encompasses each student’s understanding of herself in regard to the multiple life roles and descriptions she has for herself but also entails an “academic identity” (Clark/Keefe, 2006). Academic identity refers to each student’s construction of not only a “career identity” as Tinto (1993) suggests, but also an internal change related to forming a concept of self which includes viewing oneself in the present and future sense as a college student, a degreed professional, or in absence of a clear career or degree goal, just a college-educated person.

Tinto (1993) reflects on the connections between persistence, intention, and commitment as these relate to “career and identity formation” (pp. 41), suggesting,

When those careers and identities are crystallized, that is, when individuals are more certain as to their futures, they are more likely to finish college. When plans remain unformulated over extended periods of time, that is, when uncertainty persists for several years, students are more likely to depart without completing their degree programs (p. 41).
Yet, students come to college with some understanding of themselves, their identity, and the world in which they live and function. Their active identity construction impacts how they approach college and their subsequent experiences as they engage in their higher education pursuits. This next section provides an analysis of the students’ responses concerning their plural identities as they enter and begin college as well as some of their responses to personal and social discourses as these relate to their college experiences and how these impact their involvement and persistence.

Casey in Response: Through the interviews, I was able to explore the ways in which Casey explains her plural identities in regard to her personal life and educational pursuits as well as some of her responses to social and personal discourses and ways in which gender, class, race, and being a “first-generation” female relate to her college involvement and persistence. Casey is a daughter, sister, fiancé, soon-to-be daughter-in-law, student, and eventually, upon achieving the goal, an ultrasound technician; this plural list may grow longer or change in some ways as her educational and life-journey continues.

To begin, Casey chose Southtown Community College because her boyfriend, now fiancé, lived in this area. Casey said she moved here from Mississippi to be with him. Casey talked about her relationship a few times over the several interviews; she explained how they met and that he does most of the house chores, which gives her time to work on her school work. During the first two interviews, I posed questions to Casey about her perspectives on gender in American society and at Southtown Community College. She responded in regard to social or “popular” discourses in this way: “The entertainment media show what women should look like, such as celebrities and stuff like that, but I think that’s wrong….you should just be who you are.” Casey did not have a lot to say in response to “popular” discourses, but gender, class, race, and
being first in her family to attend college were important in her case. Casey explained,

As a young lady, I guess, my Mom didn’t go to college and a lot of ladies here, you and
other people, have shown me that women can go as far as, you know anybody [to earn a]
Ph.D. or anything [along with] balancing family, work, school and education.

Casey’s response put me in an uncomfortable place, at first, I did not expect to have such an
impact. I was not directly aware that I, along with some of the other “professional women” at
this college, serve as a model for gender achievement, but, there it was in audible voice as she
said it, I transcribed it, and have been processing it and analyzing it. More than the implications
for policy and practice on mentorship for college women, Casey’s response moved me as a
woman and professional to introspection and cautious action in considering how what I do in my
day-to-day professional life touches the lives of others.

During the last interview, I asked Casey specifically about any experiences she has had
that may be gender related:

Me: Ok, and as a young woman, what experiences have you had that you would say are
maybe gender related in relation to going to college?

Casey: I find there are a lot more girls here, a lot more women here. Another experience,
um, I find that there is a bond between the girls in the math class, I guess, with helping
each other. I think that girls can reach out more. I relate more to the girls in the class,
maybe.

Me: Could you tell me a little bit more about that, what you said, that you thought maybe
girls in the math class, and in general, reach out a little bit more; could you elaborate a
little more on that?
Casey: I feel that I can talk to a girl better than I can a guy, sometimes. I guess they can just understand each other a little more.

Me: In your experience, just in terms of your experience, like you said, maybe a bond there because of the gender, they are females?

Casey: Right.

Me: They [women] are more open?

Casey: Yeah, I think more open to help. I don’t know, I just feel like, I can go up to a girl more than I can a guy with a question in class or whatever. I don’t know, it might be weird (laugh); I don’t know. I just feel like I can do that, but, that’s not saying a guy couldn’t help me or whatever. I just feel more of a connection with other women to be able to talk to them about things.

I learned through this particular interview session that for Casey her interactions related to questioning and learning college material – and in this specific instance, math -- are gendered experiences.

Upon coming to college, Casey had not thought about being the first in her family to attend college, but after joining this dissertation study, she explained she began to think more about being first and what meaning that has for her. Casey said, “because I’m a first-generation college student, you know, that stood out in my mind because I really am starting a new thing, I guess, for my family.” Casey further explained,

Before, I had not ever thought about being the first in my family to go to college. I knew that my Mom and Dad hadn’t, but I never even thought about that I was the first to go. But, it means a lot to me because of my parents, I guess. And, in some ways, for my
brother to look up to, as in, you know, “if she can do it, then I can,” … so, I try to talk to
him about things like that.

Casey further related that her mother did not know about any the requirements of college, but
Casey said she is explaining those things so her mother can relate to her experiences. Casey also
views herself as a role model for her younger brother in regard to being a college-educated
person.

Casey explained some of her thoughts about race and her views on equality. Casey also
indicated that because of her race she believes she is looked at differently. Casey struggled with
how to explain how she feels about race, and after the last interview in particular, I grappled with
my researcher positioning, particularly in regard to race. Casey mentioned that she believes that
the environment at Southtown Community College is respectful of difference in regard to race;
yet, she provided only an example including African Americans:

I don’t feel like people are treated different, you know. In high school, I feel like a lot of
people look at African Americans differently. But, here it seems like everybody talks to
everybody, and that’s the way it should be. And, that’s what I see here [at Southtown
Community College].

In looking back over the interviews I reflected on how my own color and culture directed some
of the questions I had asked. I allowed myself to be uncomfortable while I considered how color
was clearly present in the research process with Casey, and how my positioning and some
unscripted questions in the last interview unintentionally may have forced Casey in a role as
“non-white other,” even though my intentions were to strive for a race-neutral relationship
between us.
Casey had a good deal to say about economic class. In the first interview, she indicated that she went to a private high school where she noticed the financial class differences among students in the high school. However, Casey explained that she sees more of a similarity in financial class at Southtown Community College. She said, “I went to a private school in high school, and you could tell everybody was in, you know, upper class or whatever. But you don’t see that [at this college].” In the fourth interview with Casey, I asked her a little more about financial class and the differences she perceived between high school and Southtown Community College. The conversation went like this,

Casey: In high school it was a private school, so it was mostly people who could afford to go to that school. Most people that were there were high class, you know, whatever the word is to use, but I’m from the middle class. But, I find here [at Southtown Community College], most everyone is from the middle class; there’s not a division between middle class or high class. You can’t tell from one person to the other.

Casey’s response illustrates the realities of class in regard to self-construction, perceptions of others, and positioning of self within society as well as the ways in which social class may be perceived within a college setting.

Casey has little or no extra-curricular involvement at the college; she explained that because of work she does not have extra time to get involved in any out-of-class activities. In fact, Casey said she struggled with just balancing her work and school responsibilities. The extent of her involvement stems from the connections she had within the classroom, either through interaction with faculty or other students, homework or study. Yet, Casey felt connected and committed to the college. I asked Casey specifically about her commitment to Southtown Community College and how connected she feels to the college. She explained,
I’m going into ultrasound at [another Louisiana community college]. And, the
requirements are to have a two-year allied health degree or have 60 credit hours. And,
last Friday, I had like an educational nervous breakdown because I didn’t know what I
wanted to do, because I didn’t know if I wanted to do the program somewhere else, the
allied health program, or the general science degree here, or the General Studies degree
here. So, [Mrs. Tanner] helped me figure that out. And, I’m going to do the General
Studies, and I told her that I didn’t want to go anywhere else, because, I mean, I like it
here, and it’s something that I want to do and I want to graduate from here, you know,
with an Associate. So, that’s what I decided to do. And, then I’ll plan to go to [the other
school] when I finish that. So, I’m pretty tied to here.

Again, Casey started at the College, not for any particular reason for which the College
could boast. Casey has become comfortable with the College environment, and has begun
exploring her degree program choices and transfer issues. Casey is developing an “academic
identity” beyond just doing what it takes to become an ultrasound tech. Casey voiced that she
wants to “graduate;” yet, it is not a necessity for her career goal. She could just transfer to the
occupational program and complete her career goals, but Casey said she wants to be able to earn
an associate’s degree that is transferable in the event that she wants to continue her education
later in life.

McKensie in Response: Throughout the year, I was able to get to know McKensie I
began understanding more about how she perceives and enacts her shifting identity and how this
relates to her involvement and persistence in higher education. I also asked her to respond to
social discourses, and through the interview process, I learned more about the ways in which
gender, class, and being a “first-generation” female, in particular, impacted her participation and persistence in college.

Identity played an important role in McKensie’s choice of college, how she interacts with the social and academic aspects of college, and her persistence. McKensie came to Southtown Community College because of her adventurousness and to be with her aunt who is like a mother to her. As explained in the case study chapter, McKensie went through several family adjustments as a child in losing her mother, gaining a step-mother, and becoming close to her aunt who lives near Southtown Community College. McKensie voiced wanting to get away from her home town and go to college and prove to herself and her family that she could succeed. McKensie’s choice of college, the decision to come to Southtown Community College had very little to do with the college itself, besides its location near McKensie’s aunt and its low-tuition, which McKensie voiced was relevant.

Identity construction was important in McKensie’s social and academic involvement in college. McKensie explained early in the interview process that in high school, she was very social in regard to participating in extracurricular activities, and being popular was important to her. McKensie works part-time at a local restaurant and has made several friends there who are not college graduates and who are not attending college. McKensie explained through the interviews that she started out her first semester spending a lot of social time with her work friends. She further explained that she did not want to socialize at school, because she feared she would lose focus on her academics if she became highly involved socially on campus. Early on during her first semester, McKensie tried to maintain a social life with her non-college going work friends and later, over the course of a few semesters, determined that it was difficult. McKensie shared with me some information about her academic and social life and how
connected she feels to the college. McKensie explained during the second interview in this way:

I’d say I feel somewhat connected. I don’t believe that it is the key thing in college, for me anyway. Of course, it’s good to have friends; it’s good to have somebody to ask, “Hey what were the notes, or can I call you if I have a question on this?” You know, that’s good, but, I feel that outside of that, honestly, for me personally, it distracts me. And, I kind of do isolate myself for that reason, because I do get distracted like that. I know myself way to well, and I know that I will get distracted, like, everybody is friendly and everybody is willing to talk with me and stuff like that. It’s just a matter of, like, if you can handle it… I can’t personally be a social butterfly in class and be able to focus. It’s either one or the other. That’s why I have my work friends, because I can, like socialize with them at work and do my job and go out and have fun with them, but at school it’s just me and my academics.

As exemplified here, at least in McKensie’s case, Tinto’s (1993) social integrationist theory is not particularly relevant. As Tinto (1993), suggests, since this theory is not especially applicable in non-residential colleges, then one must look at “prior intentions, commitments, academic performance, and external forces” (p. 83).

In McKensie’s situation, she wanted to leave her home town and get away, but she was not sure she could, in her words, “do college.” Also, she had some idea about what she wanted to do in regard to a career, but this changed over the course of a couple semesters. McKensie has focused on her academic performance, and from all that I can gather, has made a commitment to perform well academically. The next interview excerpt explains some of this. Additionally, without any knowledge of Astin’s theory of involvement, McKensie echoed one of the basic concepts of this theory, particularly in regard to her involvement in her academics and her
personal discovery that the more time and energy she devotes to her school work the more success she experiences. McKensie explained some of what she perceives as her good and bad college experiences as follows:

Bad, I guess I would say, kind of my first and second semester, just how I acted and how I felt. It was just, I wasn’t, I thought I was serious, and I thought I cared, but I really wasn’t. I think that was a bad experience. I think a bad experience also was just drinking or going out. It was just, I mean, sure it’s fun to do, but it was just, like… it wasn’t for me. And, I was trying to do everything -- the college thing and the socializing, the going- out thing. That was a bad experience for me: getting bad grades, just not studying, just kind of briefing. This semester, even my Aunt has noticed that I’m really trying, and I’ve really changed. You know, she’s always seeing me study or doing this or that, and, also my grades have shown it too. So, that’s a good experience. Studying equals good grades (laugh). It’s like I’m finally getting it. It’s like I tell everybody, I became a nerd this semester. And, its ok. Its ok with me that “no, I can’t do that; I have to study.” So, I think those are the good experiences, like, good grades for me; its like I am a smart person. You know, I’ve kind of always been, like, the dingy one or the funny one kind of in high school and just kind of cared more about what I’m wearing Friday than the test Friday. So, just for me being able to just forget that, and, you know, this is my education. This is my future. It’s what I make it, so that has definitely been the good experience.

The bad experience would be the not caring.

McKensie initially perceived that she could separate her socializing and academics on campus and still socialize with her work friends, thus balancing and distinguishing school, work, and socializing, but, through her own self-reflection and experiences, McKensie found that she
needed to devote more time and energy to studying. After devoting more time to homework and study, she found she was making better grades. Additionally, I noticed through her statement, she noted a change in her self-construction, her identity, in becoming a “nerd,” a term which she used positively to indicate that she perceives a change in her identity as it relates to caring less about popularity and socializing and caring more about her education, what she is learning, and her future success. She still related that she does not socialize much with others on campus, but she is much more involved academically.

In regard to social discourses, McKensie had some strong reactions to gender and class issues and had thought quite a lot about her being the first in her family to attend college. During the first interview in fall of 2005, I asked McKensie, “when you think about gender in American society, what comes to your mind?;” that part of the interview was as follows:

McKensie: Gender. For me that’s a really big thing… I was raised by my Dad, and, so, I noticed I was kind of tougher than…the average girl, I guess you could say. I was just kind of a tomboy, and I just noticed that women are always kind of depicted as littler, or like, when you’re going to lift something and like, “Oh, let me get that for you; you can’t lift that” or, you know what I mean. It just, kind of, it is different and I still see it as a gender issue, too…I’m very, like, that’s just one of those things that really that I’ve noticed very much. And, that men and women definitely should be equal. In jobs and you know, money-wise, and things like that, so.

Me: And you say your perception, that society kind of portrays women as being “littler,” can you think of a synonym for “littler?”

McKensie: More looked down upon, I guess you could say. They’re not expected to have, or do as much, when they really, I think they do a lot in society.
Me: Ok. And when you think about gender at this college, what, if anything, comes to mind?

McKensie: At this college, I haven’t noticed a gender issue. Again, I guess I haven’t really been aware of it, or had it brought to my attention. But, I think in classes and stuff, students are, I guess, treated equal, gender-wise. You know what I mean; the teachers seem to be different genders, different, you kind of see a little bit of everything. So, that’s good.

In McKensie’s response, she gave her reaction to discourses in American society that she perceives portray women as “littler” or “more looked down upon” and her perception that social discourses tell women that they are not expected to be equal to men in regard to salaries, careers, or physical strength. McKensie described herself growing up as “tougher than the average girl” and I related to that. McKensie also said, “men and women definitely should be equal,” which caused me to reflect on many discourses in society, including some of those in media, education, and politics. For example, with the recent shift of political power in Congress, Nancy Palosi became the first woman to become Speaker of the House. This event generated national and local discourses about gender, politics, and education in regard to what women can and are accomplishing. Discourses in American society are as diverse as the citizens, and the national and local conversations continue to shape individuals and education at all levels. In regard to McKensie’s perception of gender and Southtown Community College, McKensie believed that there was a good balance of gender in the faculty at the college, and she felt students were treated equally.

In the last interview in November 2006, one year after the response above, I asked McKensie again about any gender-related experiences that she may have had in relation to her
Me: Ok. As a young woman, what experience have you had that you would say maybe related to gender in relation to going to college? Have there been any gender-related experiences that stand out?

McKensie: I think a gender issue that I’ve noticed in college; maybe not college, but just a standard, that girls are not good at math and science. That’s kind of a, how do you say, oh, what’s the word? Not a standard, but just a…?

Me: Stereotype?

McKensie: That’s it. That’s it, a stereotype. You know, women aren’t good at this or that. And, I think it’s nice, too, when I see that we have girl teachers that are math. Like Ms. Matthews, she teaches math and she’s a girl. That makes me think that, you know, girls aren’t dumb at math, you know, girls can do math. So, I think, that, as a general rule is important to know your science and math and work hard at those, especially like Mrs. Razul, like she’s taught me to love biology. And, I’ve been doing really good in both those classes. You know, that helps because she’s very smart, and when I understand it and she helps me, it makes me feel smart about the subject, and it just gives you that, you know. Boy or girl, male or female can do this.

Me: If I’m hearing you right are you saying that female role models are important to you?

McKensie: Yeah.

Me: In terms of your learning experience?

McKensie: Definitely. It kind of shows that gender, or whatever the stereotype is, is not always right.

McKensie presented and responded to an American social discourse related to education and
gender that tells girls and women, “you are not good at math and science.” And, for McKensie

gender role models are important to her resistance to this gender stereotype. McKensie found

support in having these smart women as examples. I see McKensie’s example as a gendered

learning process and my perception is that boys and men do not grow up being told by “society”

that they are not good in math and science; so they do not have that barrier to break down before

learning, understanding, and a “feeling of being smart” starts. There are also, outside the scope

of this particular study, gender implications on how math and science are taught. This is just one

example of how students may respond to social discourses and how gender can affect

participation in higher education.

Social class and being the first in her family to attend college have meaning for

McKensie in relation to her involvement and persistence in higher education. I asked Mckensie
to give her perception of what American society has to say about social or financial class.

McKensie responded, “I’ve just noticed, like, in that in our society, between like – the rich get
richer and the poor get poorer (laugh), like, it really is sad.” She further said she is not sure why
the economy works that way but that she is interested in taking courses to find out more about
what motivates people to continually want more than they have.

McKensie also talked about how she grew up in regard to her work ethic; she constructs
her identity as being from and as being part of a “hard-working” family and connects this part of
who she is to her college attendance and persistence. During the first semester, McKensie had
this to say:

I’ve always done work and school even in high school, and I’ve always…that’s just how
my family is, that’s just how we were raised. I have another sister who is in college, and
she’s doing college full-time and working full-time. I think it’s just something our
parents have taught us, to work hard, and… if it’s something you want, then you’ll make time for it. It is stressful at times, but I like to work…I do get burnt out some days. But, I also have to know my priorities, that school is number one, and work is second right now in my life, because I need the school to, you know, get the higher paying job, and I can’t be a waitress my whole life. Right now, it seems good because I’m young, and I’m making money. But, like, I guess you got to get that priority… I did have a breakdown with that. But, now it’s getting better.

Initially, in the first couple of interviews, McKensie only related college to money in terms of obtaining a credential or degree to obtain the higher-paying jobs. As a younger child, McKensie explained that she actually had thought a lot about being the first in her family to attend college, and she shared some of what that means for her in terms of feeling a sense of pride and some added pressure. This is an excerpt from the third interview in February of 2006 at the start of McKensie’s second semester of college, as she talked about being the first in her family to attend college. She said,

It [being first] almost adds a little bit of pressure… but not really because it’s just more of making my family proud of me and making me proud to do the college thing, the degree thing. And, I remember looking back when I was a little kid and being like, “oh man, I can’t believe, it’ll be so weird when I’m in college.” And, I always thought of college kids as you know, I looked up to them and oh my gosh, you know, it’s so hard and now it’s like, “I’m in college, I’m doing that now.” It’s a great feeling to realize that I’m bettering myself for my future and I’m willing to do that. For being the first generation in my family, I know it makes my Dad proud and my step-mom proud. And, then…I
wish that like my real Mom could see that I’m doing it and bettering my education and stuff like that though.

Me: So, you had thought about it a little bit as you were younger?

McKensie: As I was younger, definitely; it was just, like, – a matter of getting there, and could I actually get there and go to college, and so. But, now it’s a good experience, and I’m glad I did it for my brother and stuff.

McKensie feels a sense of responsibility and pride in regard to making her family proud and in being an example for her younger brother. Additionally, as shown in this next quote, being “first-generation” also serves as a source of motivation for McKensie which relates to her persistence. I asked McKensie at our last interview meeting in the fall of 2006, after she had been in college a full-year, to reflect back on being the first in her family to attend college and share her thoughts now. She responded:

I definitely think it’s an honor, a big deal, you know, just because my family will always call and say, “How you doing in college?” or, you know. And, they all…it definitely has put a standard on me, you know, I can’t fail, and I have to do this. And, but it pushes me also…You know, they’re counting on me, and my Dad and Mom, my step-mom, have worked hard to put me through college. And, that’s another thing; they work so hard. And, they’re really the hardest working people I’ve ever seen. And, for them, it’s like.. I think, “oh, maybe I don’t want to go to this class”…But, it’s like they’re paying, they’re working hard so they can send me to better myself. So, it’s hard, and it gives me that extra push. Definitely being one of the first ones, it’s definitely an honor. And, it also sets me a standard, and it makes me strive.

So, for McKensie, gender and class, as well as being “first generation,” were and are important
in her identity construction in relation to her participation and persistence in higher education. McKensie includes a strong work ethic as part of who she is, but she has changed in the sense that she perceives herself as more academically able, especially in math and science, and she is motivated by the fact that she is the first in her family to attend college. Again, McKensie’s identity has been shaped by her past experiences and continues to be shaped as she proceeds through college. McKensie is aware of gender and class issues and some of the ways in which she participates and responds to these; and, McKensie is aware of her “first-generation” status, which, again, is a source of motivation for her.

Delane in Response: With each participant, I sought to find out about her initial involvement in higher education through exploring why she had chosen to pursue a higher education and what or who influenced their decision. As Astin (1999a, 1999b) explains, involvement happens in two forms entry experiences and those that occur after a student has begun taking classes. I wanted to explore as much as I could about both of these forms of involvement to better understand persistence.

In Delane’s case she articulated how she perceived herself, her identity, before coming to college. Throughout the interview process, I also learned more about how each student viewed American discourses on gender as well as her own understanding of her “first-generation” status. I wanted to know specifically, how these impacted Delane’s involvement and persistence.

With Delane, I found that her decision to come to college as an adult student had a lot to do with her self-perception and active self-construction. She explained in the first interview about her decision to come to college. The following is an interview excerpt from the beginning of Delane’s first semester in fall 2005:

Me: Why have you come to college and what or who influenced your decision?
Delane: Two things actually: I have been wanting to go back to school; I never really felt fully personally complete when I flunked one of my major subjects in high school. Also, I said two things; this is not going to be easy. My parents were going through a divorce, and they could not financially fund me through what I really should have done. So, that part of my life, I felt, like not going to prom. You feel like something is missing, that type of thing; that’s what I felt was missing. I do not like the fact that I flunked algebra in high school; and, I was a quitter back then, just because of my insecurities of everything going on. As I was getting older, there was one woman in particular; she was an older woman, she was my daughter’s second grade teacher. She wasn’t the best teacher, but one thing she told me I’ll never forget and that is, “you can do it.” … I was 42 years old and I went back to school, and I was 30 back then. And, I was like, I really should complete myself, complete my knowledge, so I feel better about me. I’m not dumb; I can really apply myself if I just have a good foundation, which I felt that I really did not get in my high school, for whatever reason.

In this response, Delane articulated her reason for coming to college, and it relates directly to her personal identity and self-construction. Delane explained how she viewed herself as a “quitter” earlier in life due to circumstances beyond her control and how she viewed herself as incomplete as a person and in her knowledge. Delane also articulated how through the encouragement of another woman, her daughter’s teacher, she has come to see herself differently in believing she is capable and “not dumb” and that through obtaining the knowledge that she missed before, she will be able to feel better about herself.

The theme of completing herself, her identity, was present throughout the interviews with Delane. In the second interview near the end of Delane’s first semester, she talked again about
her motivation, her self-perception, and identity in regard to pursuing a higher education. Delane explained one of her challenges was just her own self-perception or “image” that remained from a past failure in high school and from not being able to attend college as a young adult. Delane discussed how she was changing in her view of herself and how she was struggling with this change in her self-construction. Delane explained this personal challenge and identity struggle in this way:

Me: A challenge in terms of your being successful, you said, was being motivated; I think that was one of things you had said was being motivated; that was one of the things you had mentioned?

Delane: Just shrug off all the old stuff that I used to do in school, in high school. Get rid of that image. You know, what I was going through then, and what I was learning then, and how much I struggled then, and move on and say, “blow that all off, and start over new.” And, I’m tackling that, shrugging that off, and going with it…start over new, take what I have and run and just don’t focus on what I don’t have and didn’t get and try to get what I didn’t get… That’s what I’m doing. So, for me that’s it, just trying, and I’m getting better at, you know, at trying to push away the past and get on with the future and say, “ok, there’s a reason why I want to do this that can not be a waste of time, you know, and don’t waste this time.”

Me: What is that reason?

Delane: (Sigh) Because all my life I felt, in school and coming out of school, that I was not, I did not feel; I know this is going to sound contradictory to what the first question was, like it was a part of me, but, it completes me. It would, be like, a completion of something that I never finished… That, by not going to college, by not
trying to better myself or going into something that would better me, I feel like I was ripped off. So, not that that is who I am, but it compliments who I am and I want the compliment…and I’ve always wanted to do something that I enjoy that compliments what my personality is and make money to do it and enjoy that in life.

Delane’s motivation toward degree completion is tied to her identity construction as it relates to completing a part of her identity she feels was missing. Delane views her identity in a past, present, and future tense, and higher education is one aspect of this self-construction.

Gender issues and discourses were also relevant in Delane’s involvement in higher education, particularly in relation to her identity and life-roles as a mother and wife. We had several opportunities through the interviews to talk about what “American society” has to say about gender and Delane’s perception of some of those discourses. Delane’s understanding and personal responses to these discourses have some bearing on her involvement and persistence in higher education. Delane’s responses were complex and somewhat difficult to analyze because of the shifting expression of her perceptions.

Throughout the interview process, Delane communicated that she puts her family above her own wants and needs. By the end of the first semester, Delane began to question her actions in relation to meeting her own wants and needs. Delane started to perceive that she and other women are taught that if they do not always put others (i.e. children and spouse) first, then they are “selfish.” There is a conflict present in Delane’s responses about gender, and I was only able to begin exploring some of the ways her perceptions impact her involvement and persistence.

During the first interview at the early part of her first semester, Delane seemed to have an order of things that placed men above women and that “placed” women in a support role. The
following is an excerpt from the first meeting with Delane, as she reflected and responded to her understanding of social discourses on gender:

Me: When you think about gender in American society, what comes to your mind?

Delane: Interesting question (laugh). Today I see women progressing in leadership. So, when I think of gender, I see women rising up more in a lot of areas. It’s broad, I mean, just the areas are broad. And, if you said “gender” to me, the first thing I think of is “man,” “men.” But, then, it’s almost like I see a picture of women, just coming up.

Delane further related that she believed men should be the leaders in American society and in the family. Delane also perceived there to be negativity or a power struggle in American society in regard to gender. Delane explained more about her perception on gender roles, leadership, and the negativity she perceives in this way:

Delane: The negativity part, to me, would be, I don’t really think that women, in general, should be a leader in leading a family or a nation. Ok. I think that…it becomes a breakdown. I don’t think we were built for that emotionally, physically, but I do think we were built more like Congress. You know, that we teach, that we should be the teachers. We are teachers…we’re excellent teachers, that we’re leaders in that aspect… The breakdown in America right now between women and men are that they don’t realize what they’re good at…Sometimes I think there’s a power struggle.

Delane further reflected on her perceptions of gender and said she struggles with understanding gender roles. She explained that she perceives women are still not treated with the same respect as men. Delane then gave some examples of authorities and gender treatment and related that there is an underlying gender bias. Delane said that on the surface, there is gender equality, but “that’s surface, because they want to stay politically correct. But underneath when they go
home, they’re just like everyone else and they still see woman as lower because of the pay… so it’s an obvious gender-related thing, a superior gender-related thing.” Delane further reflected that she perceived television and Hollywood portray women as equal but that she believes women are “still not getting that respect that is shown on the media.”

Delane also talked about the need to find a balance as she further reflected on gender equality and social discourses in American society in the excerpt below. As the interview continued, Delane said she hoped to find a “medium ground.” Delane said,

There has to be balance. I don’t think we were made to be men, what society’s basically trying to do to us anyway; they’re trying to turn men into women and women into men. If you want a generalization overall, if I step back, men have beaten the women and took over and were not doing it right; the women come up, and they’re not doing it right now. And, we need to find that medium ground now. And, I think that eventually we may. I’m very hopeful and positive that we may, because we’ve fallen too many times. Men have fallen, they’ve seen their wrongs; women are starting to fall, and we’re starting to see, or hopefully starting to see, how we can come together.

My analysis of Delane’s initial interview responses was that she, at first, was responding to a “script” on gender roles in American society, one that still perceives or places women in a “lower” or “inferior” role to men. As the interviews progressed, I observed some changes in Delane’s perceptions on gender, at least in regard to her questioning of roles.

During the second interview, near the end of Delane’s first semester of college, I sought to find out more about her involvement. The question I asked drew a gendered response. The following is a brief excerpt from the second interview:
Me: What involvement, if any, do you have in out of class activities programs or organizations?

Delane: Outside of just working the substitute teacher thing, none. I’ve wanted some… Right now I can’t do any extra-curricular unless it’s involving my children. And, usually, I put them first, which is kind of bad (whispering)… I think that’s really a bad idea. So, I’m trying to, as you ask that, in my life right now, to put them a little on the backburner more than I did. I think a lot of women do that, though [put children and family first]. And, it’s a normal, natural thing. I don’t see anything wrong with it, in-so-far as, “oh, that’s bad, or that’s wrong.” I don’t think it’s -- I think it’s a natural thing.

Me: For a woman to put, to put

Delane: put their children,

Me: children

Delane: and even their husbands first… before them(selves). And, then the kids come before even the husband.

Me: Ah, huh.

Delane: So, I think that,

Me: So, you think a lot of women do that?

Delane: Oh, yeah, I do, I really do.

Me: Ah, huh.

Delane: I hear it all the time. I hear it all the time.

Me: Putting their kids and their husbands first?

Delane: I’m not saying I’m good at this; everybody needs a balance, which means you do
you first, because if you don’t have you, you don’t have nothing, then your husband, then the kids, then your friends. And, it should always be pieces of each, though, and specific times for each thing, you know, and none of them should go further than the other; you know, that order, then pieced out.

Me: So, you’re saying that you feel like, in terms of your own experience, you’ve put your children first, and your husband first, and, a lot of time, and ignore your own?

Delane: And, I still do, and it becomes a habit. It becomes a habit, and then you get caught up, and then they expect it. And, you’re doing it; they expect it. And, so then, you become on this vicious cycle that you try to break out of, and you’re fatigued because you really don’t understand it. But, if you really take a look back, you can see, “I don’t have time for me. I’m not involved in something creative.” Then of course, you’re upset and then they’re upset because you’re upset and nobody knows why?”

Me: Maybe because other people…

Delane: You’re lacking.

Me: are asking these needs of you, needs of you, needs of you – your children, your husband, and you’re not

Delane: And, you don’t learn to say no.

Me: And, you’re not taking care of yourself in terms of your own needs. For instance, your own emotional needs, your own educational needs, your own…

Delane: And we’re taught that if you say no, that you’re being selfish.

I asked Delane to elaborate more, and she shared that she perceived our society has a “Super Mom” mentality.

As I listened to Delane respond, I felt my own internal struggles with trying to
excel as a professional career woman, mother, wife, etc.. As I continued to move forward with
data collection and analysis, Delane’s comments below stayed with me:

Delane: We [women] feel that we, well, this is the way I feel; I can’t say “we” because
not all women may feel this way. I’ve just noticed that I believe some do. They [women]
feel that if they don’t do everything for their children alone [without help], you know,
and it might just be me (laugh), that somehow they’re not the “Super Mom.” We have a
“Super Mom” mentality. And, why do I say that? Because, it’s everywhere; it’s all over
the media; it’s all over schools; it’s all everywhere you go, that everyone [women] should
be the best, the thinnest, the prettiest, the smartest, the wisest, the best Mom, the best
looking Mom… the pressure is always against society, to me. So, yeah, so that’s where
we pick it up; and our parents picked it up; they gave it to us; we pick it up.

Me: When in fact we might…

Delane: And it’s wrong.

Me: be able to refute it. We might be able to

Delane: Yeah, we’re wrong. Yeah, we [women] are.

Me: say that, there could be more shared?

Delane: You know why I feel we’re [women] wrong. If we weren’t, I would not have so
much fatigue about it. … So, if we could all fight for our right (emphasis – and fist down
on chair)...But, I think it starts in the home; start saying “no” to your children. “No,
Mommy and Daddy are going out to eat; you will eat sandwiches tonight.” You know, or
whatever, or “I’m not cooking tonight.” You know, “I am not cooking; y’all will eat tuna
fish, or salad, or whatever.” And, to sit back and to look at them, they’re not starving.
Me: Well, this kind of leads to the next question; what are some considerations at home or with family related to your success in school?

Delane: Saying no -- saying no to my own family. Not saying no to the balance…And, learning to draw the line with everything. Make it a balance and then drawing a line, which I’m very bad about, but at least I see my problem.

This particular interview response demonstrated some of the internal conflict and struggle Delane has regarding balancing her own needs with those of her children and family. Delane’s involvement and persistence in higher education is related to this challenge in that the demand on her time and energy to focus on learning is in competition with these other, what Tinto (1993) refers to, as “external forces” (p. 83).

Delane and I had an opportunity to reflect on a magazine image from one of Delane’s English classes I observed. The picture of was of a professionally-clad woman dashing through a grocery store with a child in the buggy and a bouquet of flowers in one hand. I asked Delane for her response to that image. She said,

That lady in that picture was saying to me that that is the woman of today. And, you know, and we’re just letting the men have it easy. We’re killing ourselves, and before, it was the other way around, men were killing themselves, but they were also getting wrapped up in stuff, because women were not taking, you know, a little bit more. Now, it’s reversed and men are just, like, hanging out there, and the women are taking, doing everything, letting them do nothing. You know, like I said before in that first interview, one day, we’ll all have our balance. I’m searching for that balance.

Like Delane, I, too, am searching for that balance in my life. I love being a Mom, but I also love my career and want to continue my education. Like Delane, I also perceive there is a power
struggle, and I do not have all of the answers in regard to fairness and balance concerning equality in child-rearing responsibilities.

In regard to involvement on campus, Delane related that tutoring is the only other form of involvement she has outside of class activities. Delane said she goes regularly to meet with her math instructor for help during their office hours. Delane also said that she would like to have more time to socialize with peers but that she just does not have the time for it.

Additionally, Delane is aware of her status as a “first-generation” student, but she does not perceive this has much meaning for her as she is now older and returning to college, except for, perhaps, being a role model for her own children. During the last interview with Delane at the start of her second semester, I asked her about being the first in her family to attend college and what meaning that held for her. The interview question and response went like this:

Me: Before this interview, had you given any thought at all to your being the first in your family to attend college and what meaning that holds for you?

Delane: Actually, I did think about it for a little bit. I thought that I was going to be the first one to do this… and my kids hopefully will follow me and do that also. I’m hoping since I’ve raised the standard on myself that the kids will go with me, just because it just wasn’t ever a priority in any of our families, you know, to go to college.

I asked Delane if she had thought about being the first in her family to attend college before these interviews. Delane said she had thought about it just prior to registering for a period of about 30 minutes, and after that, she had not thought about it since. So, for Delane, being a “first-generation” student, the only meaning it holds for her presently is in raising an educational standard for herself and her children.
Madison in Response: Madison responded to social discourses as I asked her questions about gender, race, and social class in American society. The two areas that were most evident or applicable in Madison’s involvement and persistence were social class and gender. Some of Madison’s responses to direct and indirect questions concerning gender and class are analyzed in this section.

Throughout the interviews Madison talked about her experience as a single parent trying to improve her education and financial situation. As explained in the first interview, she was left as the sole provider for her daughter when the father chose not to be part of their lives. Being a single mother is a gender and class issue in regard to Madison’s college attendance. In my personal reflection on American society, understanding there are some exceptions, mothers are still expected to bear the larger responsibility for child rearing, and in Madison’s case, her role as a single parent has some clear connections to her involvement and persistence. Madison expressed this in the first interview as follows:

Me: And, when you think about socioeconomic status in American society, what comes to mind?

Madison: For me, that’s been a hard one. You know, financially, being a single parent, that’s why I decided to go to school. And, actually I had help with that. I thought about school once before, but I really had a friend, a girlfriend of mine, get me into school. To think more about it, my situation, I was staying home with my little girl for the past year, and, just thought that maybe, you know, it really was time for her to start day care, communicate with other kids, learn more things, be own her own in that situation. But, as for me, you know, go to school and try to better myself, so when she needs things for
school later on in life or wants to be a cheerleader, or ballerina, or whatever it is that she wants to do, you know, I’ll be financially able to supply her for the money, to do what she wants to do (starting to cry)…I know things are going to get harder; this is only my first semester. I can imagine things are going to get harder. I don’t know; I just think that I’ll do my best at whatever it is I’ve got to do and just take it one day at a time.

In this interview response, Madison communicated that she wanted to improve her financial situation in order to be able to provide for her daughter’s needs once she starts grade school. There is a sense of urgency in Madison’s situation in that she wants to improve her financial class status in order to, in her words, better herself and to provide for her daughter’s wants and needs. I shared with Madison a personal experience of mine as a young adult when I realized I did not want to have to rely on anyone else as a primary source for my financial or personal well-being. I told her that I wanted to be able take care of myself and children, should I have any, and she said, “that’s what I want.”

At the end of Madison’s first semester of college, she reiterated her desire to improve her education. Madison talked about having to choose her classes for her second semester of college and how that had prompted her to think more about her career goals. Madison still was not clear on exactly what she wanted to do but indicated she wanted to do something in the medical field. I asked her to reflect back on the first interview and share anything that stayed with her or stood out in her mind. Madison responded,

I do remember just talking about my little girl and her being my influence to go to school, and, I’ve really been thinking hard; I remember last time I told you that I wanted to you know graduate and do something in the medical field, and, with me picking my second semester classes, I feel really pressured to get more of an idea of what I want to do in the
medical field. So, I’ve been thinking a lot about, you know, what I actually want to do and to be.

Again, Madison emphasized that she is pursuing more education to become more independent in order to be able to support her daughter. Madison also related that being the primary care giver for her daughter draws time and energy away from her study and homework time. Madison explained that she initially wanted to be able to devote more time to school rather than work, but because she needed child care assistance to help with the cost of day care, she was not able to stop working while going to school. She explained as follows:

Well, in the beginning I really did not want to work while going to school. I wanted to mainly focus on school, so I’d know that my grades would be you know perfect, or good…. but, according to the child care assistance for my little girl, I have to get in 25 hours a week, whether it be you know training and work or education and work. Or, you know, it all has to meet 25 hours a week, and, of course, you can’t go to school 25 hours a week. So, I had to go to school and work. And, how I work around those schedules is:… I go to school Monday, Wednesday, and Friday… So, I’m off Tuesdays, and I try to do my studies and my homework then. I go to school Wednesday, and I try to do my homework either Wednesday night or early Thursday morning before I go to work. I work all day Thursday. And, then Friday, I come to school, and then I go to work in the evening. So, I try to do my homework on the weekend or on the Sunday. And, I try to do it when my daughter’s sleeping. You know, usually she goes to bed at 8pm or 8:30pm, so I try to get in homework time and stuff, you know, like 8:30-10:00pm or whatever.

Madison and I talked about the tough schedule she has, and we also talked about having toddlers.
Because our children were very close to the same age, we talked a little about the desire to spend as much time with them as we could as we watched them grow and learn. I also empathized with Madison in her conveyance of how difficult it is to do homework and study with small children underfoot. I empathized with Madison and wished I could offer assistance beyond a sympathetic ear. I wondered about ways colleges and universities could help more women like Madison who truly want to improve their situations.

Being the first in her family to attend college does not hold much meaning for Madison. Any meaning it holds for her personally in regard to her own identity, appears to be tied to her financial situation or financial class. In her response to the question related to her “first-generation” status, she again tied or connected college to a better financial situation. The following is an excerpt from the third interview at the beginning of Madison’s second semester of college:

Me: Before these interviews, had you given any thought at all to your being the first in your family to attend college and what meaning that holds for you?

Madison: No, I really didn’t give it any thought. It’s just something that I went and done. I mean, of course, my parents made it through their hard times, their life. So, that’ll just make it better for me and mine, better than before… So, I feel that I’m pretty lucky, and I’m glad that I had the chance to go to college.

Me: So, you really hadn’t thought about it until the interviews?

Madison: No. Not really.

Madison did not construct her identity around being “first-generation.” Madison does, however, understand the realities of a daily struggle of balancing financial demands, child rearing, and a pursuit of a better tomorrow. At the end of Madison’s second semester, she had
successfully completed two semesters of college with a 2.0 GPA while working and caring for her two-year-old. After the first semester, Madison decided to enter a local business school to complete training and certification in medical and insurance coding. Madison finished the program in the Spring of 2007 and had several job offers. I asked Madison if she planned to return one day for a college degree, and she said she is not sure.

**Research Question 3: What do community college women who are first in the families to attend college perceive that college attendance will mean for their futures?**

This section provides an analysis of the four students’ interview responses and perceptions of what college will mean for their futures. I wanted to know how the women in this study view themselves, their identity, in regard to being a college student. I wanted to know if they believe they need college and, if so, why? I wanted to know how they have changed since the beginning of college and how their futures will be different having gone to college. No one, of course can predict the future, but the women in this study share a hope for a better life and better future.

**Casey in Response:** I asked Casey several questions throughout the interviews concerning how college shapes her identity, if she thought she needs a college education, and what college means for her personally in regard to the future. In response to college shaping her identity, she said,

I have goals in mind. And, you have to be, I guess, straightforward to reach those goals. And,… you don’t have people telling you, like in high school, what you have to do anymore. You know, you become more independent, so, I guess
it shows that, like, you know, I want to be something and be successful in
college and in life.

I asked Casey what being successful means to her, and she responded, “My success, just being,
accomplishing my career, accomplishing my – becoming an ultrasound tech and have that
experience.”

Casey also felt she needed college; she said,

I feel like I do need a college education, mainly for my profession that I’m going into but
also because it means a lot to me in that my entire family; my Mom and Dad never
went…It was just something that I knew I would do. And, later on, I feel that it would
mean a lot to me later on also, I’ll be glad that I did the hard work and everything that I
had to do become what I would be.

Casey believes she needs a college degree not just to become an ultrasound technician but for the
experience itself. This is where I see Casey has developed an “academic identity;” she sees
additional intrinsic values in obtaining a college education. As Casey said, she sees intrinsic
value as related to gaining additional personal independence, generating a sense of pride in
regard to being the first in her family to attend and complete college, and realizing that it will
hold additional meaning for the future, even without knowing exactly what that will mean.

Casey explained further in other interviews how she has become more independent and
self-reliant since entering college. She further explained that when she completes the degree at
Southtown Community College, she will transfer and complete the ultrasound program and then
may later return to college for an additional degree. Casey does not know exactly what the future
will hold, but she is hopeful. After getting to know Casey, I do not have any doubts that she has
everything she needs to achieve her goals.
McKensie in Response: McKensie’s perceptions about college and her future changed some during the course of her first year of college; she also experienced some changes in regard to her own identity construction and self-perception. McKensie voiced she has become more responsible and has had to “grow-up fast” in being away from her family and in learning she has to take responsibility for her actions in order to be successful in college and in life.

Initially, McKensie believed she needed college for a single reason and that was to obtain a credential or degree in regard to getting a higher paid job. During the first interview in fall 2005, I asked McKensie, “why do you feel it’s important for you to finish college?” She said, “in this day and age, that’s what you need to get your foot in the door. And, it’s just like you can work, work, work hard all you want, but it sometimes, it just takes that piece of paper.” By the start of her second year of college, she voiced that college is more than just getting a degree and a better salary; McKensie, began talking about college in relation to “opportunity” and being able to do the something you love.

In McKensie’s case, I perceive a distinction between “career identity” and “academic identity;” the former deals primarily with solidifying professional and financial goals; the latter involves construction of self in a way that carries a liberal education and desire for learning beyond graduation. At the last interview, in November of 2006, McKensie had this to say:

Me: Could you talk with me a little more about your personal and professional goals and how these may have changed since you have started college and kind of where you are now?

McKensie: They’ve definitely changed (laugh) since I talked with you about that… I want to be a teacher. And, I think it was always kind of in the back of my head, but it was always, like, well, it doesn’t really make a lot of money. And,
it kind of seems like the focus in society, and especially even for my family is, go to college so you can make money. And, it’s not about that; going to college is getting that higher education for yourself and doing what you want to do. And, it gives you the opportunity. And, so, like, for teaching, you have to go to college to become a teacher, not because you have to go to college to make the money. You know, so, I think in my heart of heart’s, that’s what I would love to do.

McKensie further related,

Yeah, to me it’s [college]…is more like what you want to make yourself happy. And, I think, you know, I can have a decent amount of money…to be stable, then I think that’s enough for me. Because, I think in this society, it’s just, like, who can make the most money, money, money. And, for me, it’s like, do what you want to do for yourself but still also be stable and be stable to have money, I guess, do things that you want. But, I don’t think it’s [money] is number one on my list.

These reflections demonstrate how McKensie has changed in her identity construction as it relates to attending and completing college. McKensie changed her degree and career goals, but more relevant, I think she experienced some other changes that will have a lasting impact on her life, including her perception of herself as smart and having the capacity to “do college” in terms of learning and succeeding.

**Delane in Response:** Delane, more than any of the other three students in the study; had learning for the sake of learning as her highest priority in regard to her college attendance. During the first interview, I asked Delane about what college will mean for her future. She responded,

Everything for me right now, just because it’s part of who I want to be. I don’t want to
say that too broad. What I’m saying is right now I feel incomplete, and I want to feel like
I’m going somewhere, and education is the first step for that. It builds security. And, I
don’t care what anybody says, it really does; knowing things means that you can talk to
anyone about anything -- any gender, any race -- the more knowledge you have, the more
power you have, and knowledge is power.

Delane wants to obtain a college education, not just for more financial stability or security but to
add a college education to who she is as a person. In the second interview, Delane further shared
her desire to learn. In her responses, she has formed an academic identity in the sense that she
has connected herself, an aspect of her identity, to college and higher education as it relates to
becoming a college-educated individual.

I asked every participant in the study if she believes she needs a college education and
what college may mean for her future. Delane’s response further explained her identity
construction as this relates to forming an academic identity:

Me: Do you feel you need a college education, and what do you think college will mean
for your future?

Delane: I really don’t think that I need a college education in so far as personally to get a
job… But, that’s not saying I’d like it… So, I felt school is going to do things for me,
give me something that I might enjoy, and not only that, but expand my knowledge,
which was the biggest thing for me… I know I could go to another college
[business/technical college] and I could get into a field and go into college and just get
right into that field and spend $7,200 and get right into, a field I wanted to go into but
that isn’t guaranteeing that I would like, it and it’s not – It really wasn’t going to teach
me a general learning experience, you know, in a general fashion. I really wanted to
come back and get what I missed in English. I wanted to get what I missed in Math, where I flunked it in high school. It is a personal thing for me to be able to say, “yeah, I flunked in high school, but I passed in college.” That’s a big deal for me. That’s a big deal for my self-esteem, you know, to be able to say, “Hah, I did it”…It’s just more of a personal thing for me to go to …And, then, maybe I’ll figure out what I might like and get into something that I might like … But at least for me, I know I’m getting smarter, smarter than I was yesterday, learned more today than I did yesterday. Every day I’ve come here, I’m learning more than I did yesterday, so that’s all that matters.

Delane further expressed that she is still determined to complete her college education, but she is still deciding on what degree she wants. Right now, Delane is just concentrating on getting a solid foundation in her general education. Delane’s pursuit of a higher education has much to do with self-fulfillment. As she articulated in the last interview, obtaining a degree is not about getting a particular salary or job; it has more to do with obtaining a higher education to learn more about the things she enjoys and being able to make money doing what she enjoys.

**Madison in Response:** Madison left Southtown Community College and obtained a business training certificate in medical and insurance coding in the spring of 2007. She is not certain she will return to obtain a college degree. Through the interview responses during Madison’s first and second semester of college, I did learn more about how she viewed her college attendance and some of the impact it has had for her personally in regard to her identity construction and possibly her future.

I asked Madison, over the course of the interviews, if she felt she needed a college education and what she perceived college attendance would mean for her future. Madison responded as follows:
I would say, yes, that I need a college education. Because I dropped out of high school and eventually went and got my GED and wasn’t really smart as far as that. I didn’t really know too much. Common sense, you know, I was ok, but as far as book smart goes, I wasn’t. But, this would definitely be better, because I hope to, you know, pursue my career in medical, not quite sure yet, but, of course, I need the college education to do that.

Madison related in this statement a little about how she perceived herself in a past-tense. She viewed herself as having common sense but not being particularly “book smart” in an academic sense. After her first semester, Madison began to modify her identity and self-construction to see herself as “smarter.” Madison perceived her college-going as a means to improve her financial situation. I do not perceive that Madison got to a point where she developed an academic identity in the sense that she desired a college education to become a “college educated person,” but she was not at a place, given her financial situation and circumstances, where she could afford to seek learning for the sake of learning.

During the second interview, I asked Madison how being a college student shapes her identity, who she is as a person. She responded,

Well, I’ve always been an independent person, and I think that going to school made me more independent… I’ve been out of high school for so long, like 10 years; it’s all about learning again. And, it’s made me smarter, I feel smarter; when I talk to people now (laugh).

Here, Madison reflected on her first semester of college. Just having attended college one semester, she had changed somewhat in her self-construction in perceiving herself as “smarter.” Madison struggled with her grades during the first semester, but she was successful overall. I
also asked Madison, in this second interview, how she has changed during her first semester of college. Madison responded that she believes she has become more independent than she was before starting college and related that the change has been good:

Well, I said, you know, I’ve always been an independent person, and I think this makes me a little bit more independent. You know, I feel that I think more for myself now than I guess I did before, and I cram a lot in my brain in one day. But, um, it’s definitely been a challenge, a good challenge.

In Madison’s case, the one year of college helped her learn more about herself and that she can “succeed.” Even though Madison decided to leave Southtown Community College and obtain another credential, she has moved closer to her goal of improving her financial situation and, at the same time become “a little bit more independent.”

Group Cross-Case Analysis and Discussion

This section provides a cross-case analysis of some similarities and differences between the cases. Due to some overlapping of the research questions, particularly in regard to identity, this cross-case analysis will simultaneously address the research questions as these relate to similarities and differences in the cases. The group demographics provide specifics concerning age, Grade Point Average (GPA), and course loads (Appendix G). This section also provides some themes that were found through the case-study analysis.

Active Identity Construction

Through the interviews with the participants in this study, I observed that they had some understanding of “self” at the start of their first semester of college, but they, as well as I, had and have a dynamic, fluid, and plural understanding of their identities rather than a “solid sense of self” (Chickering and Reisser, 1998, pp. 38-49). Further, one of Chickering and Reisser’s
seven non-linear vectors of student development is “establishing identity” (pp. 38-39); yet, the women in this study came to college with some understanding of who they are through their life experiences and relationships. Further, their construction of their identities continued changing throughout the first semester and first year of college, not simply due to participation in higher education alone, but alongside the other relationships and experiences they were having while attending college.

Rather than seeking to “establish identity” in the sense of striving to complete one’s identity in a “solid” or finished sense, an outcome of higher education should be assisting students to continuously construct identities in ways that critically explore how they change through engagement with others in the environments in which they live and work. In this way, higher education would promote an outcome of active and dynamic identity construction that would be less culturally specific through an open engagement with diversity and with plural ways of thinking and understanding. Thereby, the traditional Western notion of individualism and self-actualization, which is a more static and limited understanding of self-construction, would be replaced with a construct that views “self” as constantly changing in action with and in response to students’ relationships and experiences throughout their lives.

In regard to identity construction and personal agency, each of the four participants started college with some understanding of “self” and some control over her finances and life choices. In other words, all of them were able to articulate in some way how they described themselves or their identity, and each of them related that she believes she has at least some control over her life and choices even if circumstances do not always permit her to choose different paths. They had a framework of expressing who they are, even though their self-descriptions were dynamic and plural. The participants described their identities through
characteristics, values, roles, or through what they have learned or are learning. The oldest student, Delane, had the most complex self-construction at the start of her first semester, and she had developed this understanding and sense of self prior to starting college through her life experiences. Over the course of the three or four interviews, each of the participants reflected on her experiences and how she had changed through her first semester of college. None of them provided what I would call “single defining moments” that specifically caused the changes that they experienced, but all of them indicated that they had experienced some changes.

**Self-construction and College Participation**

In regard to involvement and persistence in college, each of the four women in the study engaged differently with her higher education experience, but, in every case, identity or self-construction was important. The students’ individual identities related to why they decided to pursue a college education as well as how they engaged in the academic and social aspects of college once the semester began.

Casey said she came to college to pursue her goal of becoming an ultrasound technician, but she also chose Southtown, in particular, because she is in a long-term relationship, and she wanted to attend college where her fiancé is living. Casey also related that she does not have much time to socialize on campus or to be involved in any outside-of-class organizations, but she did indicate she feels more comfortable talking with and communicating with the other “girls” in her classes.

McKensie came to Southtown Community College from her northern home state to live with her aunt, to get out on her own, and to both get away from and learn more about some of her family’s past, particularly as it relates to learning more about her birth mother. McKensie changed her degree major a couple of times over the course of the study and still maintains her
adventurousness in regard to her decisions about transferring to complete her four-year degree and the rest of her life, but she did indicate that she has become more grown-up and more serious over the first couple of semesters. McKensie clearly made a distinction between her academic and social life but experienced some changes in regard to her socialization patterns and self-construction over the first year of college as she constructed an identity that moved from being a self-proclaimed “social-butterfly” to “academic nerd.” Additionally, McKensie expressed being proud of these personal changes.

Delane expressed she came to college to fulfill an aspect of her identity that she was missing by not having attended at an earlier age. Delane also related that having children and a family limited the number of classes she could take and the amount of time she spends concentrating on her academic work. In addition, Delane expressed that she has come to college to improve her knowledge, in general; she has an idea about her degree major and career goals as she would like to eventually have a career in the field of science. Delane indicated that, presently, she is just concentrating on getting through her developmental classes and learning what she needs to know in order to have a solid foundation as it relates to general education.

Madison came to Southtown Community College after having a bad registration experience with another community college. She was not sure as to what degree she would like to pursue. Madison indicated that being a mother and sole provider for her daughter is the primary reason she decided to return to school to further her education and, thus, to better her financial situation. Madison related she did not have any additional time to devote to social activities or organizations on campus. Additionally, because of her life roles, she was very limited in the amount of time she could devote to studying and doing homework. Also, because of the immediacy of her need to better her financial situation, Madison made a choice to leave
Southtown Community College and obtain a certificate in medial and insurance coding.

**Impact of Social Discourses**

Each participant responded to questions and social discourses about race, class, and gender. Every participant had some reflections about these social discourses and their perceptions of how gender, race, and class issues relate -- or did not seem relate -- to their experiences at the Southtown Community College campus. The two issues that were most evident in this study were gender and class, and this, I perceive, is due to the demographics of the random sample. Casey was the one student who considered herself Japanese-American and non-white. Casey talked some about race and how people perceive “differences;” however, gender and class were the more prevalent issues through the interviews with Casey as well. For all four women in the study, gender issues and class were relevant to their college involvement and persistence.

Three of the students -- Casey, McKensie, and Delane -- all talked about women on the faculty or staff who served as role models or who helped them through their first semester(s) of college. For example, Casey related that the other professional women on staff, as well as I, served as examples of what women can do in regard to balancing their education, professions, and family lives. McKensie talked about women who taught in traditionally male fields and how these women helped her to unravel stereotypes that she perceived in American social discourse. Additionally, Delane reflected on the help she received from a female developmental math instructor and related that she would not have been able to be successful had it not been for the tutorial assistance she provided.

Also, all of the four women in the study expressed their college experience was in some way either encouraged or supported by another woman or women, not necessarily at the college.
For example, Casey’s expression of the importance of the women role models on the college faculty and staff served to encourage her through providing an example of achievement. Also, Casey related how important her mother’s support and encouragement is to her even though her mother did not attend college and Casey has to explain much of her college experience to her mother. McKensie related that her aunt is her “number one” encourager; likewise, she related the importance of female faculty as role models as she progresses through college. In addition to discussing the impact of one of her female math teachers, Delane discussed the encouragement she received from one of her daughter’s teachers several years ago that played a part in her decision to start college. Lastly, while Madison did not continue after her second semester of college she said that I was the one person and one connection she felt she had to the college outside of her classes.

A Better “Self” a Better Tomorrow

Each of the four participants expressed personal changes such as becoming more independent, more serious or focused, or smarter. These are very real changes in the students’ identity construction and self-perception that occurred over the course of their first semester and year of college. In regard to perceptions the students held about what college attendance may mean for their “future self,” the students varied in their responses. The youngest of the four participants, Casey and McKensie, both 18 at the start of their first semester of college and the start of this study, related that college will provide them what they need in regard to achieving their career goals. Additionally, both Casey and McKensie also expressed they are learning more, generally, about life, others, and themselves, which is an added, if not central, goal of higher education. Delane, the oldest of the group, was not as concerned with immediately determining career goals; she was more concerned about becoming more knowledgeable in
regard to her general education. Madison equated higher education with a more stable life, a
better job, and a way to become a better provider for her daughter. Even though many questions
remain unanswered, each of the women in this study believed what she was learning was causing
her to be smarter and that through pursuing more education, she would have more opportunities
for a better “self” and better tomorrow.
CHAPTER 9
IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter discusses the findings and implications of this study for theory, research and practice. It also provides some discussion of additional findings in the study regarding what I expected and did not expect to find through the qualitative case study analysis. Finally, I conclude the dissertation with some closing remarks about some of the things I have learned from the women in this study and some of the things I have learned during my own educational and life journey as I continued through the dissertation process.

A feminist poststructuralist framework guided this study through exploring some of the limits and assumptions associated with the “first-generation” construct. A feminist poststructuralist perspective also provided a framework for critical analysis of involvement and integrationist theories as these pertained to the students in this study. Further, through a feminist poststructuralist perspective I sought to better understand how the four women in this study understood and described their own identities and “selves” along with discourses that impact their daily lives particularly as these related to their college involvement and persistence.

I used a feminist postructuralist perspective in designing the qualitative case studies to explore and analyze students’ understanding of themselves within various contexts in relation to family relationships, college, and as a participant in the broader society. Using this perspective, I constructed the study design and analysis to specifically pose questions exploring gender, age, race and class in the lives of the “first-generation” women participating in this study. I shaped the data collection process to take place over a substantial amount of time and in such a way to encourage questions and dialogue about identity, discourses, participation and persistence in higher education.
Postructuralist perspectives are among the many discourses shaping higher education today. MacLure (2003) provides an overview of discourse within postructuralism and within educational and social research. MacLure provides what she calls “a crude and rather unruly summary list of propositions associated with postructural notions of discourse” as follows:

- “Realities” are discursive; that is, there is no direct access to reality “outside” discourse.
- Language is not “transparent”; that is, it is not a neutral medium or vehicle for providing access to the world, or to thought.
- People are “made subjects” through their involvement as speaking subjects within discourses.
- The self is therefore “decentered”: instead of the self-actualizing individual conceived of in humanist philosophies, selves are multiple, fragmented and “subjected” to the constraints of discourse.
- Power, knowledge, truth and subjectivity are interlinked and produced in/through discourse.
- Language is never innocent.
- Ambiguity, uncertainty, irrationality and indeterminacy lie “at the heart” of meaning, reason and truth. (p. 180-181)

In this study, I posed questions to participants to uncover what discourses were present in their lives and how the students reacted to these discourses, particularly as relevant to their college involvement and persistence. Finally, a feminist poststructuralist framework further shaped the relationship I sought to develop with students as well as the processes I used for data collection and analysis. This chapter summarizes the key findings and implications of the study.
Active Identity Construction

Feminists using a postructuralist framework are interested in how understanding of “self” is constructed through discourse. In this study, I found the students were able to express some understanding of “self” and their own identities. As I collected data through interviews and participant journaling over the course of the participants’ first few semesters of college, I found the women in the study voiced their “self-construction” in dynamic, fluid, and plural ways rather than through self-representations that were solid, unified, or completely rationale. All four of the participants in the study arrived at college with at least some understanding of “self.” Further, their “identities” had an impact on their choice of college and their level of involvement. This dissertation also presented some gendered questions concerning identity, participation, and persistence extending beyond the “first-generation” characteristic in suggesting perhaps women may be more willing to be influenced by familial or relational concerns in their lives in regard to their college attendance, course loads, or degree and career options. At the same time, in regard to the participants in this study, particularly those with children, many questions remain as to how much “choice” they had in perception or reality concerning constraints related to caring for children while simultaneously pursing more education. As presented in the narrative analysis, the women expressed their identities in various ways which included aspects of personality, character, likes and dislikes, as well as current and/or future life roles. The participants’ self-conceptions were active and changing and they expressed their “identities” in past, present, and future-tenses as they explained who they are and who they would like to be.

In finding that the students described and understand their identities in plural and dynamic ways, I suggest some implications this study may have for developmental theory in higher education. Chickering and Reisser (1998) relate one of the developmental outcomes of
college should be an emergence of “a solid sense of self…an I who coordinates the facets of personality, who ‘owns’ the house of self and is comfortable in all of its rooms” (p.49). From a feminist postructuralist perspective, such a state of being seems unattainable. Instead, perhaps higher education may focus on a development outcome that proposes a plural and shifting understanding of “self” situated contextually, historically, politically, and socially. The students in this study viewed their identities as dynamic, multi-faceted, fluid, and shifting; they recognized changes occurring within themselves and also realized at least partially the influences of larger societal discourses on their self-conceptualization and representation.

From this finding, I suggest further research on how understanding of “self” impacts involvement and persistence and how higher education may support students’ identities as shifting and changing. In this particular study, as exemplified in Delane’s case, her self-conception as she described being a “wife and mother” impacted her course load as well as the level of involvement in regard to time constraints she faced due to familial concerns. Higher education may support students’ identities as shifting and changing through several means. College and universities have begun investing more in students’ first-year experience through academic seminars, programs, and services to assist students in the transition period many students face in the first year of college. One thing colleges could do is to use a first-year seminar to urge students to think about their own identities and what challenges or potential obstacles may be relevant to their college attendance, participation, and completion. Further, this would be an opportunity for a college to make students aware of advising, mentoring, or other support services that may be available and relevant to their personal success. This would encourage students to conduct some self-assessment of their own identities, consider their own personal challenges, and determine what college provided or other external services or resources
may be useful for them. Additionally, many institutions offer an array of student organizations that may support students’ shifting and changing identities, some examples include those focused on ethnicity, gender, or sexual preference. These types of organizations help students to make connections with other students with whom they share some similarities in regard to identity construction and exploration. Further, other support services such as college health centers, day cares and other services to assist students manage gendered or familial concerns may help students manage various aspects of their identities, life roles, and responsibilities that have a connection to their persistence and success.

Colleges and universities may also shape curriculum and instruction in the classroom to challenge students to explore their own identities in relationship knowledge frameworks and “self” in relationship to broader social contexts. Baxter Magolda and King (2004) discuss the concept of “self-authorship” and its use as a theoretical and practical model for higher education. They provide several examples of how teaching and learning practices in higher education may be modified to help students engage critically with diverse knowledge frameworks and social contexts. This model also encourages both students and teachers to continuously critically construct their identities and their understanding of themselves and others. Baxter Magolda and King explain:

At the heart of the Learning Partnerships Model is the assumption that a major goal of learning is self-authorship. The language of “self-authorship” may be unfamiliar to many, but like other lofty developmental aims (e.g., self-actualization and promoting intentional learning), it has a useful place in a lexicon of educational goals (p. 303).

The Learning Partnerships Model is not a value-neutral model, rather it positions the teacher and
learning in a partnership that recognizes the socially constructed environments in which we live and participate. Baxter Magolda and King further relate

self-authorship is about developing multifaceted capacities that enable learners to engage constructively and effectively in a learning process and to make decisions and take actions that reflect these capacities. Such learning could focus on deepening one’s understanding of subject-matter content in college classrooms, finding a comfortable occupational niche in which to draw on one’s interests and apply what one understands and can do, being involved as a member of one’s community, or negotiating social relationships with peers and loved ones. It is a broad and ambitious educational goal – as demanding as the problems we as a nation face in the 21st century. If attaining this kind of internal foundation will help today’s graduates address these problems, then this will be well worth our energy and effort (p. 304).

Colleges and universities need to offer many venues and opportunities within and outside of class for students to explore their identities and to make connections to knowledge in broader social contexts as these are relevant in their lives. If higher education were to support students in developing a sense of self as shifting and changing, this may aid student persistence through providing multiple avenues for engagement. Higher education should support learners in providing opportunities for interaction with multiple and diverse knowledge frameworks, and through encouraging students to consider “self” as a participant in both the local and larger societies in which they live and act. As explained in the Learning Partnership Model, teachers and students in this context would both be engaged in a learning model which encourages both students and instructors toward self-awareness and change.
“First-Generation,” Identity, and Personal Agency

Another finding from this research is the lack of identification students have with the “first-generation” construct.” I found, as London (1996) did in his research, the “first-generation” identifier or construct may not have personal meaning or importance in the lives of students. The definition and understanding of “a first-generation student” exists within discourse and positioning. Prior to the study, two of the four students had not given any thought to this construct or definition and what possible relationship they had to the term, category, or “group.” Only one of the four had expressed finding personal meaning and importance in “being the first” prior to this study.

Further, as London (1996) found in his interviews with “first-generation” students, I also found the students did experience some transitions in their early semesters of college in regard to the amount of energy or time required to be successful in their classes as well as in some of their relationships with other members of their families. London (1996) found through his interviews that the students he interviewed began to feel some disconnects with their families and friends in regard to the differences of experiences in relation to the students’ college participation. I also found some of these complexities and transitions expressed by the participants in my study. For example, Casey voiced some challenges in explaining college requirements and expectations in conversations with her mother. McKensie talked about some of the complexities of class in terms of her family members’ view of the purposes of higher education and that of her own experience in regard to earning a college degree not only to be financially secure, but to simply be able to find a way of life in a career or profession through doing something she enjoy. Additionally, Delane talked about the difficulty she had talking with her mother about her college-going experiences, because there was no understanding or relating in regard to her
mother’s experience. Madison also talked about her college experiences in a way that she perceived were foreign to her family. Madison explained that because they did not go to college, they talked about her college going much as if she were still in high school. Each of the students expressed they were from middle to lower economic status backgrounds and through the interviews they talked about some of the challenges they faced in communicating and sharing their experiences with family members.

Researchers using a feminist poststructuralist framework are interested in understanding the ways in which personal agency and choices are perceived, limited, and enacted. I found the four women in my study expressed and recognized their own personal agency in directing their futures, even at the early stages of their college experience. All four of the participants voiced control over their personal finances and life choices in general. The students did not view themselves as powerless or “at-risk.” This has some practical implications in working with “first-generation” students in regard to how these students are portrayed in higher education literature and in day-to-day practices. If the students themselves do not view themselves “at risk” of failing or dropping out, perhaps higher education leaders might think of the institutions being “at-risk” of losing these students. All four of the students in this study viewed themselves in control of their own lives and futures, so it is important to consider discourses about “first-generation” students in regard to how they view their identities, situations, and success. This suggests that researchers studying and writing about “first-generation” students should be cautious in assuming and presenting an “at-risk” stereotype of these students, when in fact from their perspective they are empowered and have control of their own lives and futures.

This finding yields some implications for practice in terms of the understanding and uses of “first-generation” students. Like Southtown Community College, many higher education
institutions serve a large population of “first-generation” college students. Further, on a national level, this group is so large that peculiarities among the diverse students within the group become virtually impossible to describe because of the variety of students in this catch-all category. It is very important to understand, as London (1996) explains, that this is not a monolithic group. The students are varied in their backgrounds, age groups, cultures, and gender; additionally, for some being “first-generation” holds some special meaning and for others it does not. While the “first-generation” grouping may be a useful construct for channeling federal funding and services to a large group of individuals who may have some varied challenges relating to participation and persistence the classification in itself is not particularly useful in understanding the specificities of the different groups of students within the larger construct.

Identity through Discourse

Another important finding from this study was that all four students recognized at least in part the presence and influence of some social discourses in their lives. The students were able to respond to questions concerning their perceptions of what American society says about race, class, and gender. In the responses of all four women, gender seemed to be the most relevant in regard to the extent of the students’ personal experiences and their reflections on what “American society says.” Some of their gendered experiences and responses have connections to their participation and persistence in higher education. For example, three of the four participants expressed they perceived that American society continues to present a view of women as “lesser.” McKenie used the words, “littler” or “more looked down upon;” Casey said, “on the outside;” and Delane said “lower” or “inferior to men.” I was not surprised by their responses, but I was troubled by them. Another example was Delane’s perception of an American discourse relating to gender roles and stereotypes. Delane stated, “We [Americans]
have a ‘SuperMom’ mentality, it’s all over schools; it’s everywhere you go. [Women] should be the best, thinnest, smartest, wisest, best Mom, the best looking Mom.” Delane voiced several times in the various interviews some of the personal struggles she faced in balancing her college going with being a “good wife and good Mom.” Another example was McKensie’s response to a social discourse was evident when she related, “I’ve noticed a [stereotype] that girls are not good at math and science” and she explained that having gender role models was important to her in discovering that “it shows that the gender stereotype is not always right.” For the women in this study, there were gendered situations, experiences, and perceptions that impacted their participation and persistence. It is important to note, while very difficult to capture and explain, participants’ perceptions and responses to discourses and identity are relevant to how they engage in higher education.

Implications Related to Student Involvement and Integrationist Theories

Through this study, I found Astin’s theory on student involvement relevant to the students in the study, particularly as it related to the time invested in studying and doing homework (1999a, 1999b). Each of the four participants voiced that they felt they could be more successful if they were able to spend more time on their school work, even though they struggled with the demands on their time due to work or due to responsibilities with their other relationships outside of college. Astin’s theory is vividly expressed in McKensie’s reflection on her first year of college when she said, “studying equals good grades. It’s like I’m finally getting it.” The students in the study also made a connection between their successful performance and the time they were able to devote to their school work.

Tinto (1993) explained in *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* that he believed his theory of departure in relation to social integration may not be
particularly relevant to two-year commuter colleges. There were examples in the cases were I found this to be accurate. Each of the participants communicated that their primary connection to the college was the classroom and that they did not have much, if any, time to spend engaged in socializing or in social organizations on campus. While most of them voiced that they would not mind participating in out-of-class activities and the social life of campus, they all voiced they just did not have time for it and it just was not particularly important in their own success.

Tinto’s (1993) theory of departure in relation to academic integration, however, was relevant in this study and is necessary for any student in maintaining satisfactory academic progress. Tinto (1993) puzzled about the gender differences in persistence and attrition indicating that there are some variations in the causes, but educational research is still being conducted to understand these. Just as the NCES (2005) statistics indicate, there are gender differences in participation and completion in undergraduate education and women on average leave college more often for non-academic reasons than their male peers.

Academic Integration and Some Differences in Academic Identity and Career Identity

Educational researchers have begun to explore “academic identity” as it relates to students, including differences among cultures, nationalities, class, and genders (Chowaniec, 2005; Clark & Keefe, 2006; Harris, 2005; Toni & Oliver, 2004; Valimaa, 1998; Zirkel, 2002). This study provided an in-depth exploration of identity as it relates to higher education involvement and persistence of four women who are first in their families to attend college. Further research is needed on gender and identity construction among students to better understand the reasons they come to college, how they interact and engage with the college environment in and out of class, and what obstacles and challenges they face in relation to achieving personal success in their educational and professional lives.
The findings from the case studies indicate that all four women in the study had achieved at least a minimal level of academic integration in relation to achieving satisfactory academic progress. Three of the four students continued pursuing an undergraduate degree upon the completion of my data collection. One, Madison, chose not to pursue a bachelor’s degree and instead obtain an occupational certificate from a local business college. Through analyzing the data, I observed some differences between Madison and the other three students in the study that caused me to consider the reasons for this decision. I followed-up with Madison by e-mail after the last interview and asked her about her decision and she related that she saw the business certificate as a means to quickly achieve her goal of improving her financial status and bettering income. In Madison’s case, she did not get to a point in her conversations with me where she expressed a desire for continuous or life-long learning as it relates to academics or what she referred to as being “book smart.” My observations and analysis of Madison as well as the other three students in the study is that there is a difference between academic integration, career identity, and what I consider to be an academic identity.

I perceive a distinct difference between Tinto’s (1993) academic integration and academic identity. Tinto explained the differences between social and academic integration and posed his theory of departure related to successful integration in one or the other domains. Tinto stated:

Integration or membership in either system need not imply comparable integration in the other. A person can conceivably establish membership in the social system of the college, largely comprised of one’s peers, and still depart because of an inability to establish competent membership in the academic domain of the college (e.g., failure to maintain adequate grades). Conversely a person may perform more than adequately in
the academic domain of the college and still come to leave because of insufficient integration into its social life (p. 109)

Tinto addresses briefly the fact that external forces and choices may also be relevant in a student’s decision to persist or withdraw from college, and indicates this is especially the case at nonresidential colleges (p. 109). He further discussed the notion of “voluntary departure” stating that this model of departure must be able to discern when a voluntary departure… may in fact be involuntary in the sense that it arises as a result of external events which force or oblige the individual to withdraw, at least temporarily, despite the maintenance of adequate levels of academic performance (p. 109)

Tinto’s (1993) model just did not neatly apply to Madison’s particular case. Although Madison, like the other women, was not well integrated socially into the life of the college, she maintained satisfactory academic progress. Further, she related being comfortable with the college and the faculty and staff, yet she still left. Madison left Southtown Community College, which is primarily a junior college type of institution offering no occupational programs, to go to a business school with a higher tuition rate. Tinto’s model just did not apply neatly. Madison did develop and further refine a career identity while attending Southtown Community College in realizing she wanted to have a job or career working in the field of medicine, but she just was not sure exactly what she wanted to do. Madison related in an e-mail response after she left Southtown Community College that she just went into the business college one day to find out what programs to have and she came out from the visit enrolled to attend the following week. In analyzing her case along with the other three students in the study, I found she was the only one
of the four that did not develop or incorporate an academic identity in her self-construction. Her
career identity was foremost.

All four of the students viewed their identities in a “future” sense as they constructed a
“future self,” meaning they had at least some idea of how pursuing a college degree or further
education would shape them personally. Casey and Madison talked about their college
experiences as providing them more independence. McKensie and Delane related that a college
education would allow them do something they would enjoy and love doing. All four connected
their college experience to an eventual career or profession. Lastly, all four expressed that they
were “getting smarter.” Yet, there were some differences in how the four students viewed their
college going and learning. Three of the four students, Casey, McKensie, and Delane, were
developing and constructing academic identities.

Academic identity has some relationship to career identity, but academic identity, is also
distinct. For instance, Delane even at the conclusion of my data collection had not yet developed
a career identity beyond knowing she would like to have a profession in the field of science.
Yet, she had developed or constructed a strong academic identity in that she desired learning for
the sake of learning and was more interested in improving her general education that she was
deciding on a career path or a career identity. Madison, on the other hand, developed a career
identity and figured out a way to quickly achieve her short-term goal of getting a job in the
medical field; however, during the study she did not develop an academic identity as it related to
expressing or representing “self” as a “college-educated” person. In Delane’s case, she began to
think about her pursuit of higher education as taking care of herself. Delane spoke specifically
about some gendered obstacles she dealt with in balancing her life roles as a wife and mother and
some of the daily challenges these presented in finding time to commit to her school work as
well as time to take care of herself personally in the sense of her physical, emotional, and mental health. Delane also related that she felt women are taught that if they take care of themselves first above others that they are being selfish, when she perceived this is not necessarily something boys or men are taught. In Delane’s case she was in a financial situation where she could afford the luxury of learning for the sake of learning. Delane did not have an immediate need to obtain a job to make more money. Madison, as a single parent, felt compelled due to her financial situation in needing to care for her daughter to seek the quickest path to a credential to bring more stability to her life.

Taking care of one’s self is a matter of perspective, in regard to career identity or academic identity. For Madison, she was taking care of herself in regard to an immediate need to better her financial situation. Taking care of self, for Madison, also included taking care of a young child. Delane was also taking care of herself in regard to completing an aspect of herself that she felt was previously left unfulfilled through going to college and learning and succeeding in areas where she had not previously excelled. Madison was taking care of some of her basic needs through developing and achieving a career identity. Delane, because of a stable financial situation, was able to focus on taking care of her self in relationship to developing and achieving an academic identity through fulfilling her intellectual needs.

This case study expressed some of the various ways the students in this study defined and described themselves as they understand their dynamic and plural identities in relation to the broader contexts of their individual lives. Valimaa (1998) discusses how identity should be used to better understand culture in higher education research. Considerations of identity are also relevant for understanding gender and class differences among students. Valimaa’s explanation of the “dimensions of academic identity” provides a description of how individual identity
intersects across one’s engagement in disciplinary, professional, institutional, and national discourses and experiences (p. 132). I found through my research that the personal lives, roles, responsibilities a student has as well as how the individual defines herself and her identity were very relevant to the ways the student engaged and participated in higher education.

Higher education researchers and practitioners must be cautious in their use of labels and categories and in making assumptions about students, their backgrounds, challenges, and diverse peculiarities. Also, as a primary construct or category, “first-generation” may or may not be something with which students personally identify. More research is needed to further understand how students approach higher education in terms of their personal goals and self construction. Further more research is needed in order to develop developmental theory and persistence models that take into account the dynamic and fluid nature of identity construction and the ways in which identity impacts student involvement and participation. Additionally, academic identity may be one additional construct to better understand student persistence. This dissertation also demonstrates the need for practical frameworks that encourage educational learning environments that recognize and encourage students to strive for better understanding of themselves and others as they actively engage in local and broader educational, social, and political contexts.

Concluding Discussion

Through this dissertation research, I had the opportunity not only to learn more about the ways in which four female “first-generation” students understand themselves and their persistence in higher education, but I also had the opportunity to get to know them personally and share conversations, stories, challenges, and encouragement as we all worked toward
fulfilling our educational goals. In this section, I share what I thought I might find prior to the study along side some of what I actually did find in this study.

Both my own professional experiences and my engagement with literature concerning “first-generation” students informed some assumptions I had in beginning the research process. I expected to find that the “first-generation” characteristic would not be a primary or centralizing self-identifier in participants’ self-description. Although I recognize from the literature that students who are first in their families to attend college do face some unique challenges related to being first, I expected the “first-generation” aspect of their identity was related to low-socioeconomic status and the need to improve their financial well-being. What I actually observed was that none of the participants constructed their identities with “first-generation” as a primary or centralizing aspect of their self-construction, even though higher education uses “first-generation” as an organizing construct for these students. Two of the students, Casey and Madison, had not thought about the fact that they were first generation until it was brought to their attention through this study. Afterwards, Casey seemed to find some personal meaning and importance in “being first.” For Delane, she said she had thought about “being first” just briefly during the registration process as she entered college, but that she did not think about it again; further she indicated it holds little meaning for her. McKensie was the one student who had thought about “being first” and who had given considerable thought to what meanings this holds for her. McKensie expressed through the interviews that as a child she had thought about “being first” and she talked about making her family proud and about being a role model for her family, since she is the oldest of the grandchildren to attend college.

Second, I expected to find that “class” status shapes the participants’ identity construction and that financial status would be a primary consideration for participants. In other words, I
expected that all or almost all of the participants would be seeking to improve their financial status. Further, this concern for financial improvement will likely be coupled with a desire for more control over their own lives and futures. What I found was that the participants had very complex ways of expressing “class” identity as well as complex ways of understanding and describing their own identities. Three of the students, Casey, McKensie, and Madison all talked about obtaining an education necessary to have a future stable financial situation, but there were other considerations as well. Financial status was very complex in Delane’s case, since she grew up in a working class or what she described as “lower middle class” background. Yet, her college going seems to not have a strong connection to “financial status” but rather to “self-fulfillment.”

Third, I expected that gender representation or construction would be a centralizing source of self identity or self-description. I anticipated that the women in my study would come to higher education with preconceived ideas about gender roles in society and that these “scripts” would impact the ways in which they engage in higher education. What I found was the students had a concept of “social discourses” in regard to what “American society says” about gender. They expressed and constructed their identities directly and indirectly around those gender discourses as they talked about their life roles as sister, mother, fiancé, etc. and as they shared some of their gendered experiences.

Fourth, I expected that race would be a primary source of identity construction for some, but not for others. For minorities, I expected race or culture will be a centralizing source of identity construction, since women of color deal with being outside of the white norm every day. I did not expect race to be a primary source of identity construction for most White women, because as a member of the majority they do not have to confront issues of race as “other” in
their daily lives. Additionally, I anticipated that race would impact the ways in which participants engage with peers, faculty, and staff in the higher education environment. I believe I did not have sufficient diversity in the pool of participants to sufficiently address this. One participant, Casey; however, classified herself as non-White, and culture or race was present in her self-construction and ways of expressing her identity. For the others, McKensie, Delane, and Madison, race was not a primary source of their identity construction as anticipated.

Fifth, I expected that relationships (i.e. spouse, children, significant other or partner) would be high priorities for the women in my study. Also, I expected that participants would consider the impact of their college attendance on these relationships and would be weighing choices concerning these relationships with concerns for their own involvement, persistence and success. I did find this to be the case for the older participants in the study, and personal relationships did have some meaning for participation for the younger two as well. Madison explicitly expressed the influences her daughter had on her college-going decision. Delane talked at length about balancing her role as a mother and wife and weighing some of her decisions about her course load and possibly withdrawing from school if she had to because of her children. Casey’s decision to come to Southtown Community College related directly to her relationship with her fiancé. And, for McKensie, near the end of her first year of college, she formed what she referred to as a steady relationship with another student and she explained some of the ways that related to her college involvement and study habits.

This study contributes to higher education literature by filling a gap in knowledge about the persistence of women in their first semesters of college through exploring intersections of gender, race, and class (Martinez, 2003, p. 186), through deconstructing the “first-generation” label. Because so little is known about the persistence of community college women who are
first in their families to attend college, this study informs higher education administration, particularly in the areas of student and academic services in regard to differences within the “first-generation” construct as these relate to female community college students. Further, the study provides faculty additional information for understanding student participation within and outside the classroom. Although the study’s findings are contextually bound, the methodology may be applied in other participation and persistence studies. Finally, this dissertation adds to educational discourses through pointing out some assumptions in higher education literature previously taken for granted with the construct of “first-generation” particularly in regard to students’ personal agency. In doing so, it provides a deeper understanding of how women who are first in their families to attend college construct their identities and negotiate their college experiences.
WORKS CITED


APPENDIX A

COMMUNITY COLLEGE SURVEY OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT (CCSSE) PERMISSION LETTER

November 30, 2004

Ms. Crystal Lee
PO Box 105
Raceland, LA 70394

Dear Ms. Lee:

Thank you for your interest in using the Community College Student Report and the CCSSE results from one of the participating CCSSE member colleges for your dissertation at the Louisiana State University. We have reviewed your request and approved the use of CCSSE data in your research with the following conditions:

1. A copy of the approval letter from the president of CCSSE member college whose data you use is provided to CCSSE. The results of survey data are owned by the community colleges. Therefore, you must get permission from the president of the community college to use its data if you are going to name the college in your research. CCSSE results are posted on our Web site, www.ccsse.org. You may be able to get the information you need from the Web site. Information available on the Web site may be used without permission as long as the community college name is not included. If you use results from the CCSSE Web site and plan to name the community college in your report, please get written permission from the president of that college and send a copy of the approval to CCSSE.

2. An electronic copy of data acquired, including frequency distribution and means on borrowed items; electronic and hard copies of the subject report or student, and the appropriate citation will be provided to CCSSE.

3. When data on CCSSE’s items are reported, you will include the following citation, “Items xx and xx used with permission from The Community College Student Report [date of survey version] – e.g., 2004]. Community College Survey of Student Engagement, The University of Texas at Austin.”

4. Permission is valid for one time use only, but may be renewed with written permission from CCSSE.

We wish you the best in your work toward your dissertation.

Sincerely,

Kay M. McClennen
Director

Supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Lumina Foundation for Education.
APPENDIX B

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
APPLICATION FOR EXEMPTION FROM INSTITUTIONAL OVERSIGHT

IRB Project Description

Qualitative Case Study Description

This research is a qualitative case study of the phenomenon of persistence of women who are the first in their families to attend college. The study will be conducted at an urban community college in Louisiana. Participants will be randomly selected with a random numbers table from a college provided list of all first semester first generation women. Forty students will be randomly selected as a possible pool for the study. I will contact each of the participants seeking volunteers for the study. I will provide each participant an informed consent form and will fully describe the study along with their right to voluntarily participate or refuse to participate without any negative consequence. The college and participants will have pseudonyms to protect confidentiality and participants will not be identifiable either directly or statistically as their identities will only be known to the researcher. Any data reported will be connected to a pseudonym to ensure participant confidentiality. Further I will provide each participant typed copies of interview and observation transcripts for participant comment, correction, or exclusion, should a participant decide she is not comfortable with particular data being reported.

I will conduct a pilot of the first interview protocol with five participants. After I make minor revisions to the first interview protocol I will then conduct interviews with twenty participants. Following the first interviews with the twenty participants, I will narrow the participant pool to four participants who are interested in participating in the study for the
remainder of the semester. The four volunteers will participate in two additional interviews at mid-semester and at the end of the semester. I will observe the four students’ interactions with their peers, faculty, and staff at the beginning, middle and end of the semester through shadowing them for several hours to a full-day while they interact with others on the college campus. I will ask participants to write journal entries related to their college involvement, interactions, and perceptions throughout the semester. I will collect and analyze journals along with other data including interviews, observations, and field notes.

Data Collection Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>June 2005</th>
<th>Obtain IRB approval</th>
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<tr>
<td>July 2005</td>
<td>Obtain site approval from community college Chancellor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug. 2005</td>
<td>Student interviews – conversational (beginning of semester)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Select four participants to follow throughout the semester</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Begin participant journaling</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Observations of campus and student spaces</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Review college documentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sept. 2005</td>
<td>[Option] Administrative, Staff, or Faculty interviews to follow-up on “good” or “bad” experiences to date</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Full-day shadow observations</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collect journals to date and continue participant journaling</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oct. 2005</td>
<td>Student interviews – structured open ended (mid-semester)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Full-day shadow observations</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Option] Administrative, Staff, or Faculty interviews to follow-up on “good” or “bad” experiences to date</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Collect journals to date and continue participant journaling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 2005</td>
<td>Student interviews – structured open ended (end-of-semester)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Collect journals</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Purpose and Length of the Study

The purpose of the study is to investigate the ways in which students’ identity construction, experiences, perceptions, and participation impact persistence during the first semester of college. The fall semester is the targeted time frame for data collection for investigation. A small sample of participants in this study is intended for in-depth holistic analysis of the phenomenon of college persistence in the lives of four individuals. The qualitative findings are not intended for generalization to larger populations. Rather, this study is intended to provide some insight into the complexities, diversity, and peculiarities of the phenomenon of college persistence within the lives of participants in this study. I perceive no risks to participants beyond those experienced in everyday life particularly with the use of measures to ensure confidentiality. Further, no medical information will be sought from a health care provider. The timeframe of the study will span one year with data collection beginning in the fall of 2005 and analysis completion by June 2006.
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

1st Interview Protocol
(Beginning of the Semester)

Opening Statement: The purpose of this research is to learn more about the success of community college women in their first semester, particularly those who are first in their families to attend college. This study will be done throughout the fall 2005 semester to gather information about the experiences of women from the beginning to end of the semester.

I’m seeking to learn more about your experiences, opinions, and concerns during the first semester. In exchange I am offering my assistance to you in regard to providing any information that I can that may help you be successful. I plan to use the information I collect to write my dissertation and possibly published papers or books. A pseudonym will be used to protect your confidentiality, as stated on the consent form. I would also like to provide you copies of what I write about your experiences for your review for accuracy, additional information, or concerns you may have. I am requesting to tape the interview and if you would like the tape recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview, please let me know. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Questions:

1. You can take a few minutes to think about the question before you respond. How would you describe yourself to yourself?

   (Probe: In other words, if you were to think to yourself “who am I?” then describe yourself, what would you say?)

2. If you had to choose one primary or centralizing characteristic concerning your identity, what would it be? Could you say a little more about why you chose this particular aspect of your identity?

3. This question relates to gender and society. What are your thoughts on what the media, politicians, educators or others say about what women should like, act like, or do?

4. When you think about race or ethnicity in American society, what comes to your mind?

5. When thinking about race or ethnicity at this college, what comes to your mind?
6. Could you share with me any experiences you’ve had either as a member of your racial group or as a woman that have caused you to think about race and gender issues?

7. Why have you come to college, in other words, what or who influenced your decision?

8. Why do feel it is important for you to attend college?

9. What would be the ideal situation that would ensure that you would stay in college?

10. Could you foresee a situation in which you would decide to leave college?

11. How did you go about deciding what classes to take this semester?

12. Thinking about your experiences with this college thus far, what encounters, relationships, or experiences have been positive, negative, or particularly memorable?

13. What do you think your college experience will mean for your future?
Second Interview Protocol
(End of first Semester)

**Opening Statement:** This is a follow-up interview related to your college experiences since the beginning of the semester. The pseudonym you chose will be used to protect your confidentiality, as stated on the consent form. I am requesting to tape the interview and if you would like the tape recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview, please let me know. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. In thinking back on the first interview, what ideas or thoughts stood out or stayed with you after the interview?

2. In thinking about your role as a college student, how does this role shape how you think about your identity, who you are as a person?

3. Could you tell me about some of your experiences thus far related with other college students?

4. Could you tell me about some of your experiences thus far with college faculty or staff?

5. Who do you rely on for the encouragement and support you need to be successful in college?

6. Have you dropped or thought about dropping any classes this semester, if so, why?

7. What are some things you do with any free-time you may have?

8. How do you manage work and school and what are some of the thoughts you have concerning going to school and working at the same time?

9. What involvement, if any, do you have in out-of-class activities, programs, or organizations? can you tell me a little bit about the experiences you’ve had in any of these?

10. What are some considerations at home or with family related to your success in school?

11. How tied or committed are you to attending this particular college versus another college? Could you say a little bit more about your response?

12. Could you tell me a little about where you stand with your educational goal planning? Have changed your goals or done any more investigation of your major or career path?

13. Could you tell me any other general thoughts you’ve had in the past or have had since the beginning of the semester concerning issues of race, gender, or economic class?

14. What are your plans for next semester? How many classes do you plan to take and will you be working and going to school?
15. In our first meeting we talked about race, gender, and financial status; what thoughts have come to mind since our last meeting?

16. How connected do you feel to the college? And, what and who makes you feel connected?

17. How do you think you’ve changed since the beginning of the semester?

18. What concerns, if any, do you have about your success in college?

19. Is there anything else, in general you’d like to share about your experiences or perceptions about your first-semester?

20. Specific question: unique to each participant from the first interview.
Third Interview Protocol  
(Beginning of the Second Semester)

1. Now that you’ve had time to reflect on your first semester, how would you summarize your college experience thus far and have you had any difficulties or challenging moments?

2. How involved are you in terms of academics related to time spent reading, studying, doing homework, etc.? (About how many hours would you say you spend on school work, outside of class time?)

3. How many hours are you working this semester? And, could you walk me through your “normal” or typical week?

4. Have you spent any time with peers working on group projects, talking about classes, discussing issues of diversity or other social matters, or socializing in general?

5. In previous interviews, we talked a little about social life on campus. In terms of your own participation in the social life on campus, do you feel very connected, somewhat connected, or isolated? And, could you share with me a little more about how important social life on campus is for you?

6. If you could change something about the College, the faculty/staff, or your experience in general, what would it be?

7. Could you briefly talk about your roles in life, for example daughter, sister, employee (mother) etc.? And, how do these roles relate to your college experience? (Have you had any conversations and discussions with others that have caused you to think about any of these life roles?)

8. How much control do you feel you have in regard to your financial situation and choices about your life in general?

9. Do you feel you need a college education and what do you foresee college will mean for your future?

10. Would you say you have very clear educational and occupational goals? And, how committed are you to these goals?
11. This is a repeat question from the first interview: How would you describe yourself to yourself?

12. Before these interviews, had you given any thought at all to your being the first in your family to attend college and what meaning that holds for you?

13. Is there anything in general you’d like to add?

14. Would you mind my following-up with you to share what I write or if I have additional questions?
Fourth Interview Protocol  
(Fall 2006)

1. Could you share with me your definition of identity?

2. Do you ever think about who you are as a person and who you want to be, how college  
And, how does college, your going to college relate to that pursuit?

3. Could you talk me a little bit more about your personal and professional goals and perhaps  
how these may have changed since you first started college and where you are now with those?

4. Have you seen any change in terms the way you were when you first started college in regard  
to your identity?

5. What are some of the struggles or challenges that you have faced either inside or outside of the  
classroom as it relates to your college going?

6. In regard to control over success in college, do you feel others as well as you have some  
power in determining your success?

7. Can you talk with me a little more about your connection with the community college as it  
relates to your classes, friends, faculty, etc.?

8. What good or bad experiences have you had in college that are memorable or that have shaped  
your experience?

9. In what ways has participating in this particular dissertation research maybe shaped your  
experience? You could talk about what other women you’ve come across as role models, or  
others who have influenced you for this particular research?
APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT JOURNALING INSTRUCTIONS

Participant Journaling

Instructions: The journal provided to you is a diary of sorts for you to write down any experiences and thoughts you have during your first semester of college related to your college attendance and success. Do not include any details about your experience that you would not want anyone else to read.

I am asking that you take a few minutes every day or every other day to write a few sentences or a few paragraphs about your feelings, opinions, and experiences concerning your college attendance. (At least three entries per week) Do not worry about grammar, sentence structure, etc. and you may write more than what is requested.

Include anything you want to share. For instance, any thoughts you have about your conversations, interactions, or experiences with coursework/classes, faculty, staff, or other students are relevant. Also, any experiences or conversations you have with family members or co-workers related to your school work or attendance are relevant. Additionally, you may include any emotions, attitudes or perceptions you have or you feel others have concerning your college attendance. You may include any experiences you have involving gender, race, or class as well as any other issues, challenges, or obstacles you face during the semester.

You may consider the journal a conversation with me and/or yourself as you write about your experiences. I will ask to borrow, read, and copy journal entries at mid-semester and will talk with you about some of your experiences and thoughts as you proceed through the semester. I will then return the journal for you to continue writing through the end of the semester.

I will again ask to borrow the journal at the end of the semester to read and copy entries. During the last interview and/or observation I will talk with you more about your ideas, thoughts, experiences, and progress at the end of the semester. I will return the journal for you to keep at the end of the semester.
APPENDIX E

INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: Hope for today and tomorrow: identity construction, power, and persistence of community college women who are first in their families to attend college

Performance Site: Baton Rouge Community College

Investigator: The investigator is available from 7:30am – 4:30pm (Mon.-Fri.) to answer questions about this study. Crystal Lee 225-675-0217 or clee@lsu.edu

Dissertation Faculty Chair: Becky Ropers-Huilman, Ph.D. 225-578-2892 or broper1@lsu.edu

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to investigate the phenomenon of persistence among community college women, who are first in their families to attend college through exploring their experiences throughout their first semester.

Number of Subjects: 20 community college women

Study Procedures: The data collection procedures will involve a random selection of 40 participants from a college provided list of first-semester women, who meet the college definition of first-generation. The case study procedures for this research include collection of institutional data, interviews, observations, and participant journaling.

20 participants will participate in interviews at the beginning of the semester lasting approximately one hour. From these 20 participants, I will select four participants who are interested in volunteering for further participation during the remainder of the semester. These four participants will participate in two day long observations at the middle and end of the semester. These four participants will also participate in personal journaling throughout the semester regarding their college. The interviews will be conducted using open-ended protocols. Interviews will be recorded and fully transcribed. Participants may request that the tape recorder be turned off at any time.

Potential Risks & Benefits: This study is designed to further knowledge about the persistence and success of community college women in relation to existing theories concerning college involvement, student integration, and gendered education. Pseudonyms will be used in reporting any and all data collected to protect your identity; therefore, no risks are perceived as a result of confidentiality procedures. Potential benefits include the researcher’s ability to serve as an information source to students concerning higher education services, programs, and resources available to aid in their success.

Right to Refuse: Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right not to participate. If you choose to participate, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence, penalty, or loss of any benefit.
Privacy: The results of this study may be presented or published, but no identifying information will be used. Participants will choose a pseudonym to replace their real names to ensure confidentiality and privacy of the individual. The participant’s identity will remain confidential to all except for the researcher. This study has been discussed with me and the researcher has provided answers to all of my questions. I may direct additional questions regarding the study to the investigator. If I have questions about participants’ rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Chairman, LSU Institutional Review Board (IRB), (225) 578-8692. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the researcher’s obligation to provide me with a copy of this consent form if signed by me.

_________________________________  _________________________    _______________
Participant’s Signature          Participant’s Name (Printed)    Date
APPENDIX F

DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

1.) What is your age? _______

2.) What is your ethnicity? ________________

3.) Do you have children (either your own or others for whom you provide care)?
   If yes, how many children? _____ Also, what are their ages? ________________
   If not, do you want any children in the future? (please circle) No or Yes
   Why or Why Not? ___________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________

4.) Are you currently married? (please circle) No or Yes
   Have you ever been divorced? (please circle) No or Yes
   If yes, how recently? __________
   If you have not been married, do you think you may want to marry in the future?
   (please circle) Yes No I don’t know

5.) Are you currently in a long-term relationship? (please circle) No or Yes
   If yes, approximately how long have you been in the relationship? __________

6.) Do your parents or parents-in-law (if living) require dependent care or assistance?
   (please circle) No or Yes
   If yes, what role if any do you have in providing for their care? ________________
   ___________________________________________________________________

7.) Are you currently employed? (Please circle) No or Yes
   If No, could you briefly state why you have either chosen not to work or why you
   are not currently employed?
   ___________________________________________________________________
If yes, where do you work and how many hours per week?

__________________________________________________________________

8.) How long is your commute?  
   In hours and/or minutes? ____________________
   In miles? ________________

9.) How many classes are you taking? _________  Number of credit hours? __________

10.) Do you have any set educational or occupational goals?  (Please circle)  No  or  Yes

   If yes, please state your educational or occupational goal(s)______________________

   Also, if yes, please indicate your level of commitment regarding your educational/
   occupational goals (Please circle)

   1  2  3  4
Not at all committed Somewhat committed Committed Strongly committed

If no, do you know some resources and services available to help you explore degree and career options?  (Please circle)  No  or  Yes

Also, if no, would like help locating information resources to explore degree and career options (Please circle)  No  or  Yes

11.) Why did you choose this particular college?_________________________________

   Please indicate the following scale from your level of commitment to attendance at this particular college versus attending another college

   1  2  3  4
Not at all committed Somewhat committed Committed Strongly committed

12.) How are you paying for college? _________________________________________

   _________________________________________

13.) On the following scale please indicate how much emotional support you feel you have from your parents concerning your college attendance

   1  2  3  4
Not at all supportive Somewhat supportive Supportive Very supportive
14.) If you are currently in a long term relationship, either dating or married, please answer this question, *if not, please skip the question.*

On the following scale please indicate how supportive you feel your partner is concerning your college attendance

1 2 3 4
Not at all supportive Somewhat supportive Supportive Very supportive

15.) In regard to participating in a research project throughout this semester, how committed might you be? (1 being *not at all committed* and 10 being *very committed*): #____

Please provide the following contact information, if I may contact you further in relation to this research:

Post Office Box (mailing address): __________________________________________

Phone Numbers:  __________________________________________

E-Mail Address:  __________________________________________
APPENDIX G
CASE STUDY GROUP CHARACTERISTICS

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<th>NAME</th>
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* Age at the beginning of the study, at the start of the fall 2005 semester
Crystal Deer Clark Lee is the youngest of the four daughters of Jessie Leo and Lois Blanche McGehee Clark. She began her life in rural Northeast Louisiana in Caldwell Parish. Crystal is proud of her humble upbringing. Growing up in a modest mobile home; sharing a room and bunk bed with her sisters; playing in the woods with her cousins; helping her parents with their family garden; and participating as a member of groups (choral, instrumental, ballet, marital arts, acting, and church) were just a few experiences that taught Crystal to appreciate the value of love, friendship, family, mother nature, and work. Crystal is proud of her various accomplishments and roles. The greatest, thus far, is being “Mom” to Ethan Michael and Jacob Christopher.

Some early-in-life leadership experiences that have been meaningful for Crystal include having been a drum major of the Caldwell Parish High School Band, a member of the LSU Tiger Marching Band, and a member of Leadership LSU (Class of 1994). After earning a Bachelor of Arts in political science (1994) and a Master of Library Science from LSU (1998), Crystal became one of the charter faculty members and founding Director of Library Services at River Parishes Community College (RPCC), where she now serves as Dean of Academic Studies. Recently, Crystal graduated from the Leadership Development Institute for the Louisiana Community and Technical College System and the Leadership Ascension program.

Upon earning a doctorate in educational leadership and research, Crystal plans to continue serving students through her membership and participation in the higher education community. Crystal has a deep passion for Louisiana, LSU, and RPCC, and is grateful to each for the opportunities they have granted her.