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## **A Qualitative Study Exploring the Lived Experiences of At-risk College Students Who Become Honors Students**

Billie June Bailey

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**A Qualitative Study Exploring the Lived Experiences of At-risk College Students Who  
Become Honors Students**

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of  
Montclair State University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

Billie June Bailey

Montclair State University

Upper Montclair, NJ

August 2023

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Leslie Kooyman

**AT-RISK STUDENTS WHO BECOME HONORS STUDENTS**

**MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY  
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
DISSERTATION APPROVAL**

We hereby approve the Dissertation

**A Qualitative Study Exploring the Lived Experiences of  
At-Risk College Students Who Become Honors Students**

Of

**Billie J. Bailey**

Candidate for the Degree:

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program:

Counselor Education



Dr. Laura Valente  
Assistant Dean for Graduate Student Affairs

Dissertation Committee:



Dr. Leslie Kooyman  
Dissertation Chair



Dr. Vanessa Alleyne



Dr. Kathryn Herr



Dr. Dana Heller Levitt

9/7/23

Date:

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**Abstract**A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AT-RISK  
COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO BECOME HONORS STUDENTS

By: Billie June Bailey

This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of at-risk college students who become honors students. There is much quantitative research on the factors that influence or predict the path of at-risk students becoming honors students. What is less well established in literature is what personal transformation occurs in the lives of students placed at-risk who go on to become honors students. While many pre-freshman programs have the strategies to provide individual opportunity and increase economic prosperity by producing college graduates, it is less obvious what individual students do in their journey moving from underprepared to becoming an honors student. In my study, I will be looking at honors students and listening to hear about their own personal journeys. With a theoretical framework utilizing two theories, Social Integration and Self-Efficacy, the research question being addressed in the study is: How do college students, initially considered at-risk of not succeeding, who are now honors students, describe their educational and personal journeys at the university? The data collected from one-on-one interviews and follow-up interviews of participants in the Opportunity program will be analyzed not only to understand the potential value of Opportunity programs but to understand the meaning and context of the lived experience for each at-risk student who transforms into an honors student.

*Keywords:* first-generation, low-income, academically underprepared, honors programs, qualitative, students placed at-risk

### **Dedication**

First and foremost, I give thanks to God Almighty for sustaining me all these years. For lifting me up during my darkest hours. For providing the Angel of Mercy when everything around me was falling. For being my burden barrier when I thought I couldn't make it anymore. For sustaining my marriage when so many who took this journey don't make it through and divorce is on the horizon. Thank you, God, I would have not completed this journey without you!

I dedicate this dissertation to my late mother, Louise Evans and my late father, William Evans, Sr. My parents demonstrated strength in everything they did in life. They were so strong and endured so much to take care of their children. They made sacrifices that my sister and I didn't know about until we became adults and parents ourselves. My mother attended my graduation ceremonies and made sure she sat in the front row when she could. I know when I walk across the stage, she will be right there on the front row smiling so proud at me pointing and telling all our loved ones "That's June right there". I also dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Darrel J. McLaurin. He spent so many lonely years without his beloved wife. He financially supported my academic journey for many years. He worked long hours and used his overtime funds to make sure my tuition was paid. I love you honey, and words alone will never be enough to show you my gratitude and respect.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction and Overview

Despite the long-term benefits of college attendance and graduation, many first-generation, low-income, and underprepared students who participate in a pre-freshman program may never achieve their educational aspirations (Mead, 2018). To address some of the challenging needs (family, personal, and academics) that students often face in a college setting, pre-freshman programs were designed to address such issues during the summer before the student officially enters college. Many of them drop out because of various challenges such as loss of financial aid, the need for employment (to fill the void of parental financial support), personal problems from home (family issues), school (academics), and making poor decisions that may lead to misconduct (Barbera et al., 2017; Stewart et al., 2015; Tinto, 2004, 2007). Results of several quantitative research studies (Barbera et al., 2017; Gutzwiler, 2020; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Tomasko et al. 2016; Turner, 2020) indicate that students who attend pre-freshman summer programs (also known as Bridge programs) do better academically and socially than students who do not participate in a pre-freshman program.

There is little known about the lived experiences of low-income, underprepared first-generation students participating in a pre-freshman summer program who then go on to be honors students. What is less obvious in the literature is the personal meaning and impact on the lives of student participants who are changed as a result of enduring the rigors of higher education, rigors encountered by way of pre-freshman programs that help students achieve honor student status (Cesar, 2021; Honetschlager, 2020). The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of university students who were part of a summer pre-freshman program for students considered at-risk of not succeeding who now are honors students. Herein lies a gap in the

literature and in the understanding of what occurs in the lives of students placed at-risk who go on to become honors students.

In general, a pre-freshman program allows pre-freshman students to take developmental courses during the summer, to prepare them for the college experience, and to give them the chance to earn a college degree. More specifically, pre-freshman programs provide academically and economically disadvantaged students with the tools needed to build confidence in themselves and their ability to be successful personally and professionally (Cancado et al., 2018). One of the primary ways in which students build confidence is by creating a sense of community among fellow students (McPherson, 2015). For instance, at most four-year colleges and universities, students are required to live in the dormitories during the pre-freshman summer program (Collins, 2020). Residing in the dormitories offers an opportunity for students to create another living space with a learning community of support (McPherson, 2015).

Well established researchers such as Colton (2000), D'Amico (2004), Stewart (2006), Vinson (2008), and Mulvey (2009), as well as newly published scholars Nemelka et al. (2017), Grace-Odeleye and Santiago (2019), and Howard and Sharpe (2019), have studied reasons why students who attend summer pre-freshman programs (also known as Bridge programs) do better than those students who do not attend them: (1) students are involved in the university or college campus activities, (2) students attend accelerated college coursework, (3) students are exposed to the college or university resources, (4) the opportunity for students to form meaningful social connections with each other, and (5) students showed a great commitment to remain at their particular institution. Yet, while there is a significant body of research that reflects the needs of the at-risk student and the interventions taken in higher education, there appears to be limited research on the lived experiences of the students who benefit from such programmatic

interventions. It may benefit those working in higher education to learn more about this population and their journey to becoming academically successful beyond the research on pre-freshman programs. This study attempts to add to the literature in a more meaningful way and shed light on the journey from being academically underprepared high school students to successful college students who become honors students. The remainder of this chapter will provide a background of the study, the statement of the problem, the justification of the proposed research, the significance of the study, the research question, and the definition of terms guiding the study.

### **Background of Study**

The tragedy of college dropouts is a longstanding and continuing problem in U.S. colleges (Bozick, 2007; Lancaster, 2014). Higher education has long represented the surest route to the middle class, but the middle class is increasingly being priced out of college (Obama, 2014). Nearly half of students who begin college in this country never finish and, for low-income students, their chance of graduating from college is less than one in ten (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). America once ranked first in the college completion rate of its young people; it now ranks twelfth (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Reclaiming the top spot in college completion is essential for maximizing both individual opportunity and revitalizing the country's economic prosperity. However, the reclamation of the individual opportunity and national prosperity must work in tandem with increased college affordability and improving college completion (Obama 2014).

Part of reclaiming the power of individual opportunity is understanding how the interaction between environmental context and identity development can influence students'

contribution toward their progress and goal achievement (Lancaster, 2014). Unfortunately, at-risk and economically disadvantaged students often have limited individual opportunities after high school such as employment and college (Balzora, 2015; Lancaster, 2014). These limitations are due to factors such as academic shortcomings, financial constraints, or family obligations. Traditionally, the principal mission of pre-freshmen summer programs has focused on providing access to higher education. Yet, understanding how students transform from being at-risk in high school to becoming honors in college is essential, beyond understanding the potential value of pre-freshman programs but to understand the meaning and context of the lived experience for each student who makes such a transformation. What influences their academic success? The gap in our understanding is that while many pre-freshman programs have the strategies needed to produce college graduates (Turner, 2020), it is less obvious what experiences individual students engage in from their perspective to produce academic excellence that propels them to honors status.

### ***First-Generation College Students Placed At-Risk***

For this study, "at-risk" is defined as students from diverse backgrounds who graduated from high school but did not acquire the necessary academic skills to be successful at the college or university level (Suzuki et al., 2012). "At-risk" students tend to be low-income and academically underprepared in at least one of the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics (Hall, 2016). Many of these students, but not all, are first-generation students as well. Although first-generation college students are part of a growing group of students in higher education, representing 24% of the undergraduate population, patterns of access to higher education are stratified for this group (Engle & Tinto, 2008). It appears that access has decreased over time for first-generation college students. Astin and Oseguera (2004) pointed out that in

1971, the number of first-generation students entering college was nearly equal to the number of students whose parents both went to college. Yet, from 1971 to 2007, the proportion of first-generation college students in the overall population of first-time, full-time students entering four-year institutions progressively declined (Adsitt, 2017). Nevertheless, literature written about first-generation at-risk college students has grown over the past decade and falls into three main categories: pre-college characteristics (including the process of choosing a college); the transition to college; and the impact of college experiences on persistence, attainment, and engagement (Barbera et al., 2017; Giffen et al., 2014; Harackiewicz et al., 2014; Jamelske, 2009). As of academic year 2015-16, 56% of undergraduates nationally were first-generation college students (neither parent had a bachelor's degree), and 59% of these students were also the first sibling in their family to go to college (Center for First Generation Success, 2020). Six years after first entering postsecondary education, 56% of first-generation college students and 40% of continuing-generation students had not earned any postsecondary credential (Center for First Generation Success, 2020).

Much of the existing quantitative research using large datasets frames first-generation college students as a group at-risk for educational failure and in need of remediation (Swecker et al., 2013). Most of these studies rely on aggregate data that show correlations between first-generation college students and enrollment patterns, persistence, and attainment information (Pitre & Pitre, 2009; Schriener et al., 2011). Many studies do not look at how ethnically diverse first-generation college students fare on these measures of academic success (Augustine, 2010; Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012; Johnson, 2017; Sandoval-Lucero, 2012). Many of the studies cite small numbers of racial and ethnic diversity within samples as the reason for not performing these fine-grained analyses (Choy, 2001). There are now more efforts to follow the advice of Fassett and

Warren (2005), which is to start listening to the students to understand their needs and how they make meaning of their experiences instead of reducing participants to static categories.

Among high school students from the 1992 graduating class, only 59% of first-generation students whose parents never attended college had enrolled in some form of postsecondary education by 1994, compared to 93% of those whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree (Tinto, 2004). Even after controlling for several factors, including educational expectations and academic preparation, first-generation students still face a disadvantage regarding enrollment in college (Choy, 2001). More recently, the Center for First-generation Student Success (2016) published an article which states among high school students from the 2016 graduating class, only 24% of first-generation students whose parents never attended college had enrolled in some form of postsecondary education by 2016. Fifty-six percent (56%) of those students' parents had no bachelor's degree (which means the parent had some college but did not graduate). Even after controlling several factors, including educational expectations and academic preparation, first-generation students still faced a disadvantage regarding enrollment in college.

While it is disconcerting that overall enrollment is lower for first-generation students, patterns of enrollment for this group are even more troubling. Many researchers argue that low socioeconomic status (SES) and first-generation status negatively impact the chances of enrollment in highly selective schools (An, 2013; Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Petty, 2014). Attendance at selective colleges can provide increased opportunities for graduates including careers in prestigious fields, higher earning potential, and enrollment in selective graduate programs (Quinn et al., 2019). Therefore, the representation of diverse groups of students in selective colleges, including first-generation and low-income students, is an issue of educational equity (Petty, 2014; Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2016).

Those who are the first in their family to go to college are often underrepresented in highly selective private schools, especially when compared to their peers from higher education. Austin and Oseguera (2004), Saenz et al. (2007), and Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) noted that despite recent policy and programmatic efforts to create greater access across socioeconomic lines, access is even more stratified now than in the prior three decades. Adsitt (2017) states “like Choy (2001), they found that students with highly educated parents have much better – as much as 500% better – chances of getting into a highly selective college or university than first-generation students” (p. 4). Those students who are first in their family to go to college often attend pre-freshman summer programs or Bridge Programs.

**Special Admissions Programs.** Colleges offer special admissions programs for students to gain entrance to a college and potentially earn a degree. Students who come from high schools that are poorly operating due to financial struggles often cannot give the best opportunities to their students, such as textbooks, learning opportunities, teachers, and staff. Although federal funding is available to operate these schools, there isn’t enough funding to support every aspect of a child’s education. As a result, the students may come into college underprepared from their high school experience. Many colleges offer a pre-freshman summer program aimed at bridging this educational gap.

**Pre-freshman Summer Programs.** Students placed at-risk benefit from participating in pre-freshman summer programs (Hughes, 2007). Pre-freshman summer programs have been noted for some time to be instrumental in acculturating and orienting students placed at-risk to increase success and retention in universities (Nadelson et al., 2013; Naughton, 2016). Typically, pre-freshman programs for students placed at-risk are held the summer between their senior year in high school and their freshman year in college. The programs typically include academic as



well as socialization skills necessary for success. Tinto's (1975) Social Integration Theory is most commonly cited as the theoretical basis for the development of at-risk students. In this model, positive experiences with the university and academic preparation before beginning the freshman year have positive influences on retention and attitudes for academic success (Bales, 2017; Moore, et al., 2007; Pan, 2010; Sidelinger et al., 2016).

Many colleges receive federal funding from the Department of Education TRIO Programs such as the Student Support Services Freshman Year Program. The TRIO Student Support Services Freshman Year Program is designed to serve students placed at-risk who possess one or more of the following characteristics: first-generation, educationally under-prepared, economically disadvantaged, or learning or physically disabled. Tinto (1975, 1993) notes that these students face a high risk for poor academic performance and some withdrawal from college. More attention to learning processes and contexts is essential with students placed at-risk in attempts to reverse long-standing patterns of school failure. The implementation of new freshman year programs throughout higher education is in direct response to a nationwide concern about decreasing rates of retention (McPherson, 2015). Students placed at-risk arrive at college underprepared, but with academic support such as tutoring, peer mentoring, and counseling they can achieve academic success in higher education and receive awards, accolades, and recognition for their accomplishments (Fike & Fike, 2008; Sidelinger et al., 2016).

Bridge programs are usually conducted for four to eight weeks during the summer months before the first semester of college. The student takes one to three remedial and basic skills courses during this pre-freshman program. Remedial courses are English, writing, math, and reading. Students take the basic orientation program and incorporate additional components

such as broad academic skill workshops including time management, organization, test-taking, financial management, goal setting, and decision-making. Students also receive intensive counseling/advising, tutoring, peer and professional mentoring, and assistance with the transitional part of the college which is associated with the adjustment to college life (Hughes, 2007; Moore et al., 2007; Robbins, 2010). Summer bridge programs report higher grades and retention rates for participants compared to students placed at-risk that do not participate in these programs (Guinn, 2006).

Opportunity programs offer college students special academic programs to assist academically underprepared students such as academic advisement, counseling, supplemental instruction, tutoring, peer mentoring, pre-freshmen summer program, and careers services. Throughout their tenure in college, at some point, they will utilize three or more of these services, if they plan to persist to graduation (McPherson, 2016). Honors programs use special academic programs as well to support honors students.

### ***From At-risk to Honors Students***

According to Huizinga (1955), a powerful sense of campus culture can be developed legitimately around competition and contests (sports, academics, etc.), coupled with honor, prestige, superiority, and an attractive campus. In an academic setting, institutions that have a reputation for being a winning college due to sports, some type of prestige, or a supportive campus environment can often recruit first generation, low-income, at-risk students. Although athletes have practices during the summer, coaches are aware of their participation in the summer academy, and they schedule practices around the academy. Most summer academies end around the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of August right when football games start. These students can become

honors students if they take advantage of the various support services provided (Augustine, 2010; Balzora, 2015; Cundall, 2013; Ellerton et al., 2016; Mead, 2018).

According to Mead (2018), approximately 24% of college students are both first-generation and low-income. In honors programs, first-generation college students make up 28.6% of Honors College and program enrollments (Mead, 2018). First-generation and low-income students may also include students with other types of diverse background experiences. Admitting these students may require additional effort on the college's part, but the social justice payoff is well worth the time, resources, and energy it takes to recruit and admit these students. Providing these students with the opportunity for an honors education allows them the chance to move into careers with higher salary expectations and greater social status (Lancaster, 2014; Mead, 2018, Robbins, 2010).

First-generation college students have made important steps in their families and can serve as mentors for siblings and future family members. The difference in earnings for low-income students can be immense over a lifetime. Education can be a lifeline to a new standard of living for students coming from a background of poverty (Cundall, 2013). Honors educators should not simply teach justice in the classroom but model it and lead the way in filling their classrooms with students from all backgrounds. Both in the classroom and outside it, honors teachers who teach in honors programs can change these students' lives and offer them insight and opportunities beyond anything they have imagined (Cundall, 2013).

As a whole, honors programs have established a uniform protocol of goals and objectives, which are to engender feelings of academic competence and empowerment in students (Stewart & Alrutz, 2014); assist in developing positive self-concepts in relationship to academic skills (Nichols et al., 2016); assist in meeting program retention and graduation goals

(Kampfe et al., 2016); highlight the success of students to the university community (McLaughlin, 2015); encourage students to reach their optimum academic performance each semester and thus, earn a minimum GPA of 3.2 to be eligible for various on-campus and off-campus academic achievement awards, scholarships, and honor societies (Buckner et al. 2016); and motivate students to continue to succeed academically (Vander Zee et al., 2016). As Tinto (2000, 2012) posits, achievement recognition is the responsibility of all staff members of the university. According to Lancaster (2014), providing students placed at-risk with services and early intervention before entering college can improve their understanding of honors programs. Summer Bridge Programs, also known as Pre-freshman Summer Programs, can provide services such as tutoring, supplemental instruction, peer mentoring, academic advising, and course structure which can enable at-risk students to excel into honors students. My study is to better understand the experiences of those students who are not regularly expected to be successful or excel in higher education, who participated in these support programs, and then went on to become honors students.

### **Honors Programs**

As a whole, honor programs have established a uniform protocol of goals, which are: (1) to engender feelings of academic competence and empowerment in students (Stewart & Alrutz, 2014); (2) to assist in developing positive self-concepts in relationship to academic skills (Nicholset al., 2016); (3) to assist in meeting Program retention and graduation goals (Kampfe et al., 2016); (4) to highlight the success of students to the university community (McLaughlin, 2015); (5) to encourage students to reach their optimum academic performance level of academic performance each semester and thus, earn a minimum GPA of 3.2 in order to be eligible for various on-campus and off-campus academic achievement awards, scholarships, and honor

societies (Buckner, Shores, Sloane, Dantzler, Shields, Shader, & Newcomer, 2016); and (6) to motivate students to continue to succeed academically (Vander Zee et al., 2016). As Tinto (2000, 2012) posits, achievement recognition is the responsibility of all staff members of the university. Thus, it is the aim of this researcher to further explore the experiences of those students who are not regularly expected to be successful or excel in higher education but went on to become honors students as a result of their participation in a pre-freshman summer program for at-risk students.

Certainly, the literature and data show that pre-freshman programs and honors programs such as those offered by colleges and universities can have a significant impact in the recruitment and retention efforts at institutions of higher education (Colton, 2000; D'Amico, 2004; Mulvey, 2009; Stewart, 2006; and Vinson, 2008). They also show the benefit of these programs on strengthening the middle class in American society. However, what is less obvious in the research is the personal meaning and impact on the lives of student participants who are changed as a result of enduring the rigors of higher education—rigors encountered by way of pre-freshman programs that help students achieve honor student status.

In this study an honors student is defined as someone who has earned 60 college credits and a cumulative grade point average of 3.0 or higher. A Dean's list student is defined as someone who has earned 12 college credits or more and a cumulative grade point average of 3.6 and a above.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem seems to be not fully understanding the transition a student experiences when they go from being at-risk to becoming an honor student. Another problem is while many Opportunity programs have the strategies needed to produce college graduates, it is less obvious

what individual students do from within themselves to produce academic excellence that propels them to honors status. A better understanding of the phenomena could result in more effective programming for these at-risk students and provide greater insight for counselors working with this population. Students placed at-risk face a plethora of issues resulting in academic under-preparedness, such as (a) remediation, (b) engaging and identifying with other students who do not look like them, (c) developing an adult identity, (d) deciding a major, (e) independent learning, (f) the stress of part-time or full-time employment, (g) on-going responsibility of supporting a family, (h) managing financial aid, (i) dormitory issues, (j) meals, (k) the adjustment of college life, (l) the uncertainty about the future, (m) the need for a support system, and (n) transportation to and from college (Augustine, 2010; Balzora, 2015; Mead, 2018; Pearson & Kohl, 2010). In addition, students placed at-risk can also be first-generation college students and come from low-income families (Mead, 2018). One of the problems is that most of the literature is focused on quantitative studies of students and may not capture the student's experience from being placed at-risk to becoming honors students. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of those students who are not regularly expected to be successful or excel in college. Another issue is not understanding their experiences that helped shape them to strive for honors status. From the existing literature, it is not as clear as to what personal experiences assist an at-risk student to shift into academic excellence in college. This study will answer questions that we do not know, and how knowing this information can benefit students and the counseling profession.

### **Significance of the Study**

Prior research indicates that most first-generation students who attend pre-freshman summer programs do better academically in their first year of college as compared to their

counterparts who do not attend pre-freshman programs (Hughes et al., 2012). This study may help program stakeholders to learn more about the experience of students who are successful in college and especially the ones who graduate with honors. This study is important in that it can help inform the higher education community, parents, school leaders, and politicians of the validity and continued support needed for academically underprepared students as these students can become honors students and be productive members in society (Watkins, 2018). In other words, this study is significant because it will contribute to the literature on the more personal journey and learnings of students who were placed at-risk and became honors students. This study addressed a gap in the research literature by focusing on a greater understanding of what the individual has experienced and has gained. This study will benefit counselors in higher education who work with Opportunity students. Counselors will learn what motivates at-risk students who become honors students. It may also shed light on what additional services can be added to their psychoeducational workshops that promote academic success.

### **Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to address the research question: How do college students, initially considered at-risk of not succeeding but who are now honors students, describe their educational journeys at the university? By understanding these students' experiences, they may assist key stakeholders in addressing at-risk, first-generation, and low-income student needs during their college student life who are engaging in the college community, e.g., athletics, drugs, residential life, classes, professors, mentoring, syllabi, clubs, etc. (Tinto, 2012). This study offers information for research, writing reports, and rich data for grant writing that support this population. It also may help in training mentors to serve as role models for other student participants during orientation or over the academic career of student successors.

## Research Design

I did a basic qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) using interviews to collect data. According to Merriam (2009), a basic qualitative research study derives philosophically from constructionism, phenomenology, and symbolic interaction and is utilized to understand "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose was to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (p. 23). This study examined the experiences of individuals with knowledge of the issues covered by the research topic. I sought out detailed answers to the research question, and data was collected using semi-structured interviews and the participants' desire to narrate the detailed experiences of their lives (Miller et al., 2018). I also used a reflective journal to document my thinking, analyses, and reflections.

After the interviews, I reviewed the tapes and transcriptions. While reviewing them, I coded the data by focusing on patterns and insights related to my purpose, research question, and guided by my theoretical frame. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) call this open coding (p. 208). Then I looked for recurring concepts, models, and themes. I did this by asking myself these questions: (1) What are the main themes that emerge when I think about the study? (2) What are the answers to my research question? I then took a second look at the themes, concepts, and models and developed some categories using the "constant comparative method" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The constant comparative method combines the codes from open coding into fewer, more comprehensive categories. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) call this axial coding (See Figure A). For organizational purposes, I used the Delve software to assist me with coding (LaiYee, 2021). LaiYee (2021) is the creator of Delve software. LaiYee (2021) describes it as a computer-



assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). Delve software helped me to organize and categorize; it did not analyze the data.

After I collected data and created codes, the Delve software saved time by automatically collating codes and keeping codes in a codebook stored in the software and in the cloud. After doing this for a while, I had lots of codes of data. After I input the code into the Delve software it compared snippets with snippets and created codes that connect (LaiYee, 2021). This is called open coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Next, Delve compared codes with codes and created categories (or axes) that connected them (LaiYee, 2021). This step was called axial coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). (See figure A) Lastly, Delve software compared categories with categories and created the core category that connected them (LaiYee, 2021).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study is grounded in two theoretical frameworks: Social Integration (Rose et al., 2014; Tinto, 1975) and Self-Efficacy (Seay, 2015; Watkins, 2018). As this study sought to acquire a more in-depth understanding of students' lived experiences when moving from the at-risk pre-freshman summer program into an honors program, these two theories guided my inquiry. Tinto's (1975) Social Integration Theory is most commonly cited as the theoretical basis for the development of at-risk programs. In this model, positive experiences with the university and academic preparation before beginning the freshman year have positive influences on retention and attitudes (Bales, 2017; Moore et al., 2007; Sidelinger et al., 2016). Self-Efficacy theory examines the interaction between environmental context and identity development (John, 2019; McGee & Stovall, 2015). Moreover, it:

asserts that the processing of phenomena and experiences not only influences how much one feels valued or valuable (e.g., self-esteem), but it also influences how

one gives meaning and significance to different aspects of oneself (e.g., ability, physical attributes, behaviors, and activities (Spencer, 1997, p. 817).

This study was guided by a theoretical framework in which the assumption is that academically and economically disadvantaged students can go from being underachievers to honors students when they are provided with the tools needed to build confidence in themselves and their ability to be successful personally and professionally.

### ***Social Integration Theory***

Social integration pertains to the extent of congruency between the student and the social system of a college or university. Tinto stated that “social integration occurs both at the level of the college or university and the level of a subculture of an institution” (Pan, 2010, p. 26). Tinto (1975, p. 110) postulated that academic and social integration influence a student's persistence to the institution and the goal of graduation. The greater the student's level of academic and social integration, the greater the level of subsequent commitment to the goal of college graduation.

The social system of a college or university includes academics (faculty), tutoring, clubs, Greek life, residential services, cafeterias and food courts, peers, sports, and any other face-to-face connections. During the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), colleges and universities used face-to-face platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, eLibrary, WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams, Webex Meet, and many more. I used social integration and self-efficacy theories to explore how these theories can be applied to students' success in an honors program. The reason for using social integration theory helped me to understand how students placed at-risk became honors students. It answered the questions: how, what, when, why, and who.

### *Self-Efficacy Theory*

Self-efficacy theory is relevant to this study as it suggests individuals hold beliefs about their ability to make things happen through their actions (Seay, 2015; Watkins, 2018). As a theory, self-efficacy refers to one's confidence in engaging in specific activities that contribute toward progress to one's goals (Erlach & Russ-Eft, 2011). For instance, students are typically taught the theory of self-efficacy during the pre-freshman summer program. Many students arrive with negative thoughts and limited opportunities from high school about their ability to succeed and their counselor needs to reach each student by helping them to find what motivates them to succeed. It is a monumental moment in their life when students achieve greater levels of self-efficacy. A greater degree of self-efficacy can contribute to the success of students placed at-risk moving into honors programs (Miller et al., 2018). Overall, theories of social integration and self-efficacy supported this study, as they helped to clarify and explicate student motivations that led to high achievement for students formerly placed at-risk.

### **Chapter Summary**

Consequently, this study sheds light on the lived experience of students who began as academically underprepared high school students and then emerged as successful college students who graduate with honors. Nearly half of students who begin college in this country never finish and, for low-income students, their chance of graduating from college is less than one in ten (Scheel et al., 2009). There is a significant body of research that reflects the needs of students placed at-risk and the interventions are taken in higher education. However, while many pre-freshman programs utilize strategies needed to provide individual opportunity and increase economic prosperity by producing college graduates, it is less obvious what happens to individual students internally to produce academic excellence that propels them to honors status.

The theories used to support this study were Social Integration (Bales, 2017) and Self-efficacy (Seay, 2015; Watkins, 2018). I chose these theories because there was a connection between them and the honors students' persistence to graduate with honors status. Blending these theories with academic success as motivation explained the possible connection from going at-risk to honors status. Therefore, this study attempted to shed light on the journey from being academically underprepared high school students to successful college students who graduate with honors.

In the next two chapters, I reviewed the related literature to this study's theoretical framework. I also provided a methodological design for the study that explored the experiences of those students who are not regularly expected to be successful or excel in higher education, but who went on to become honors students.

### **Definitions of Terms**

**Academic Integration** is the level to which a student believes he or she is meeting the explicit academic standards of the college or university as well as the individual's identification with the beliefs, values, and norms inherent in the academic system (Jones, 2010).

**Academically Disadvantaged** refers to students who have demonstrated (by attending class and struggles with the material) an inability to succeed academically without specific counseling and/or tutorial support. For this study, this refers to students who: (a) have a GPA below 2.0; (b) are in a state-approved developmental class (including English as a Second Language (ESL)); (c) low standardized test scores (e.g. Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or American College Testing (ACT)); (d) lack of high school diploma or General Education Development (GED); and (e) have a history of repeated withdrawal or incompletes (Miller, 2007).

**At-risk students** are students from diverse backgrounds who graduated from high school but did not acquire the necessary academic skills to be successful at the college or university level (Laskey, 2004). These students are academically underprepared in at least one of the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics (Hall, 2016). (Sometimes referred to as students placed at-risk).

**Economically Disadvantaged** refers to low-income students (State of New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (2014, March 11). Economically disadvantaged students are those who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch and Child Nutrition Program or other public assistance programs (Elias, 2018; Pitre, & Pitre, 2009).

**Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) Grant** is a New Jersey State grant that provides financial assistance and support services (e.g., counseling, tutoring, developmental course work) to students from educationally and economically disadvantaged backgrounds who attend institutions of higher education in the State of New Jersey (State of New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education, 2014).

**EOF Honors** refers to any EOF student who receives a 3.0-grade point average with a minimum of 12 college credits will be eligible for Honors List recognition. This includes freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors (Muindi, et al., 1979, Muindi, 2019).

**EOF Success** refers to an EOF student's definition of success: To graduate from college; not to be affiliated with gangs; not to be on academic probation; and to be able to balance family, employment, and academics simultaneously (Bailey, 2014).

**Inadequate Academic Preparation (Academically Underprepared)** is the quality of a student's academic preparation in high school that affects the student's performance in college (Olive, 2010).

**Individual risk factors** are situations or characteristics that are unique and inherent to the student and therefore cannot be controlled by parents, faculty, or staff (Olive, 2010).

**Low-income** refers to the Federal Pell Grants that are awarded based on the financial need of a student, which is a factor of the cost to attend an institution and the expected family contribution. If the student is receiving a Pell Grant, the student will be considered low-income for this study (Felder, 2017).

**Opportunity programs** refer to students who are placed at-risk but could succeed in college if they have the necessary tools for success. Tools such as tutoring, learning communities, faculty, and academic advisors (McPherson, 2015).

**Satisfactory Academic Progress** is a cumulative GPA of 2.0 and higher (State of New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education/EOF, 2000).

**Socioeconomic Status** refers to the combination of social and economic factors and the household income level of the student's family (Hughes, 2007).

**Social Integration Theory** pertains to the level of congruency between a student and the social system of a college or university (Jones, 2010).

**Student Success** is wanting to accomplish something in life (Olive, 2010). Student success is defined by workforce preparation, remediation, and transfer to graduate school and degree and certificate completion to help students achieve their educational goals (Topham, 2016).

**Underprepared Students** are mediocre educational performance (Miller, 2007). It also refers to students who are disproportionately unrepresented in higher education, which typically includes minorities, low-income students, and first-generation students (Felder, 2017).

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of Literature**

First-generation low-income college students placed at-risk academically are a growing demographic in higher education (Adsitt, 2017). Scholars are increasingly interested in the experiences of these “educational pioneers” (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Green, 2006). In this study, I was interested in how first-generation students placed at-risk become honor students and their journey of becoming an honors student within the higher education system. This chapter explored the literature as it relates to the development of higher education and how it has shaped the college student in America, how the first-generation students placed at-risk address their academic barriers, and how some within this population have used special college programs, such as learning communities and summer programs, to achieve honor student status (McPherson, 2015). This chapter presents the theoretical framework for this study which explored the role of self-efficacy and social integration with first-generation, low-income, and students placed at-risk who became honors students. Through this literature review, I will articulate how they achieve honors status and how that status is maintained through the student’s journey in higher education.

#### **The Shaping of the College Environment**

Harvard, the first college in the United States, was founded in 1636 and chartered in 1650. It was established chiefly because the first generation of New Englanders longed to advance learning and perpetuate it for posterity (Ford, 2017). From the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the primary function or purpose of a college education was civilizational (Ford, 2017). Other colleges founded in the colonial era were related to churches, and except for a few state universities, practically all the colleges founded between the Revolution and the Civil

War were organized, supported, and in most cases controlled by religious interests (Dorn, 2017). Furthermore, before the Civil War, public high school was still a rarity, and the academy's curriculum was controlled by its role as a preparatory school. To be admitted to the study of this curriculum, a student was expected to have considerable competence in Latin and Greek but nothing more, and these admission requirements did not materially change for a century (Malott, 2014). Thus, higher education was far more a luxury and much less a utility.

Later, with the Morrill Act of 1862, federal funding was distributed to every state government, and thereby helped to develop a whole new network of institutions with a popular and practical orientation, the land-grant colleges, which by 1955 would be enrolling more than 20% of all American college students (Ford, 2017). The country was expanding, and farming land became a way of life. This class of talented entrepreneurs in horticulture had made it clear that technical education would have its value for agriculture as well as industry (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Additionally, by the early nineteenth century, there was a multitude of small colleges designed especially for the lower middle classes. However, it was not necessary in the early nineteenth century to go to college to become a doctor, lawyer, or even a teacher, much less a successful politician or businessman (Dorn, 2017; Ford, 2017). Yet, the college was not to be an institution of narrow privileges. Society was beginning to require the use of all its best talents, and while it would, of course, always be easier for the rich rather than the poor to go to college, persistence and ambition and talent were not to be denied (Peralta et al., 2018).

By the twentieth century, higher education was greatly affected by the tremendous growth in enrollments (Mortenson, 2012). Both rich and poor students were now given a choice of courses under the elective system; the college curricula were made more flexible so that they admitted wide latitude to individual capacity and preference, and institutions with varying



programs and standards were established—all of which contributed to growth in college enrollments (Zhang, 2016). Other areas of change in the role of higher education opened doors for women. After World War II, America was comfortable asking citizens to shift their interests to meet national needs. During the war, women filled manufacturing, educational, clerical, and other roles left vacant by departing soldiers. Upon veterans' return, the country faced the absorption of millions of veterans without a clear understanding of how their needs would affect the job market. Consequently, with the war's end, many women left their positions, some by choice and others by coercion. Contrary to assumptions about a drop-in women's labor market participation after the war, adult women filled the workforce in increasing numbers with each decade. Many of these workers were older women no longer occupied with raising families. Some of these changes were compounded by economic need; poorer women without the luxury to choose between domestic and economic expectations continued to work out of necessity (Bell, 2013; Zhang, 2016).

From 1945 to 1970, the period which was to prove a time of extraordinarily rich opportunity began with the end of World War II (Malott, 2014). Militarily, politically, economically, technologically, and culturally, the United States was changing at a rapid pace. Scientific advances changed life at an exponential pace. This period ended in or about 1970 with the institutions of higher education facing a sharp decline in public favor, the prospect of decreased enrollments, an impending end to growth, intensified financial difficulties, the need for retrenchment, and increasing government regulations (Pasque & Nicholson, 2011). Americans relocated from farms to cities to suburbs, envisioning suburban security as a new ideal. Furthermore, both the civil rights movement and sensitivity to globalism built slow support as a means of redressing racial and economic inequities. Thus, the government faced the

challenge of providing educational opportunities for underrepresented demographic groups that were to become known as first-generation college students. It is important to know the history of higher education because it paints a vivid picture of how non-elite students gained access to college.

### **Development of Educational Opportunity Programs**

Educational Opportunity Programs (EOP) began in the late 1960s in response to economic and social barriers preventing minorities and underrepresented students from attaining a college degree (California State University EOP, 2021). The Civil Rights movement of the late 1960s called for access and equity to higher education (Office of the Secretary Higher Education EOF, 2020). Colleges and universities across the nation began developing Opportunity programs (Hamilton College EOP, 2021; Kean University EOF, 2021; Marquette University, 2021; SUNY EOP, 2021). Along with other states, New Jersey joined the movement and created the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program.

In 1967 Newark, New Jersey was amid many riots initiated by the Civil Rights movement. The previous summer's riots called for action in New Jersey. The newly appointed Chancellor of Higher Education, Ralph A. Dungan, wrote a memorandum to the presidents of all the state's institutions of higher education. In his memorandum, he outlined a proposed program of special assistance to high school graduates from economically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. The presidents' response was overwhelmingly favorable, and everyone was on board and ready to institute this new program. Institutions that were participating in the federally supported Upward Bound Program were the first to launch the EOF program. Upward Bound was created to assist high school students from disadvantaged backgrounds to prepare for entry into college. The following February, the Select Commission

on Civil Disorders (the Lilly Commission, established in response to the events in Newark) made its report to Governor Richard Hughes, who subsequently submitted his Moral Recommitment message to the New Jersey State Legislature. The message called for the establishment of a broad range of programs to address the basic conditions the Commission had cited as contributing to the summer's riots. Among those programs was EOF, established by legislation sponsored by then-freshman legislator Thomas Kean.

The New Jersey Educational Opportunity Fund grant was created by law in 1968 to ensure meaningful access to higher education for those who come from backgrounds of economic and educational disadvantage. The grant assists low-income New Jersey residents who are capable and motivated but lack adequate preparation for college study. The grant is distinctive in the comprehensiveness of its approach. To ensure the opportunity to attend college, the grant provides supplemental financial aid to help cover college costs (such as books, fees, room, and board) that are not covered by the state's Tuition Aid Grant Program. To ensure a viable opportunity to succeed and graduate, the grant supports a wide array of campus-based outreach and support services at 28 public and 13 independent institutions (Office of the Secretary in Higher Education: EOF, 2021).

The typical characteristics of an EOF student are first-generation, low-income, and academically underprepared. Students are identified by high school counselors and teachers. College counselors also recruit students by attending college fairs, workshops, and community fairs. The student attends a pre-freshman summer program geared towards preparing the student for the rigors of college. These summer programs can run from two to eight weeks depending on the college or university. The residential summer program offers developmental and college courses, tutoring, counseling, and financial aid assistance.

**First-generation and Low-income College Students**

First-generation students can also come from poverty (Hébert, 2018). Low-income students who have parents or guardians who did not obtain a postsecondary degree are defined as first-generation and low-income (Mead, 2018). Some researchers define this population as those in which either parents or guardians have a high school education or less and did not begin a postsecondary degree (Gorski, 2013; Mead, 2018). First-generation undergraduate students who are predominantly non-white and from low-income backgrounds face a myriad of financial, academic, and social barriers to entering and completing college as a result of being the first in their families to navigate college admissions, financial aid, and postsecondary coursework. Research has found significant differences in enrollment, degree attainment, and finances between students whose parents have a bachelor's degree or higher and students whose parents have little or no college experience (Blackwell & Pinder, 2013).

Data from the U. S. Department of Education in 2012 classified 25% of Caucasian and Asian-American students as first-generation students (Cataldi et al., 2018). In contrast, 41% of African American and 61% of Latino students belong to this demographic (Cataldi et al., 2018). Additionally, students from both first-generation and low-income student populations are also more likely to be older, female, have a disability, a minority ethnicity, non-native English speakers, and have dependent children (Contreras, 2011; Engle & Tinto, 2008). First-generation and low-income students may also include students with other types of diverse background experiences.

There is no singular definition of a low-income college student. The definition varies depending on the location and the institution. A student may be considered low-income if attending a private institution in a location with a high cost of living, but reasonably well-off at a

public institution in a low cost-of-living area. Most institutions use the Federal Pell Grant eligibility as a proxy for income levels, but this is an imperfect metric. Not all students file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) for a variety of reasons, such as having uncertain immigrant status or having a family member who is an undocumented immigrant. Other students are unable to file the FAFSA because their parents refuse to share financial or tax information with them out of embarrassment or fear of being audited (Patron, 2012). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) estimates that approximately 20% of students do not file their FAFSA, which makes it impossible to tell who may have qualified for a Pell Grant (NCES, 2017).

According to the NCES, 34% of undergraduates were the first in their families to go to college in the 2011-12 academic year. An additional 28% of undergraduates had parents with at least some college experience but not a bachelor's degree (NCES, 2012). First-generation college students whose parents do not have a baccalaureate degree make up 58% of college enrollments (Mead, 2018). Students with a Federal Pell Grant, which qualifies them as having a low-income background, comprise 33% of the American higher education population (Baum et al., 2016; Baum, 2015). Approximately 24% of college students are both first-generation and low-income (Mead, 2018).

There are limited qualitative research studies on this topic, but one study is important to cite as it relates to my study and sheds light on this population. This qualitative case study goal focused on a large phenomenon to gain a better understanding of how college access programs support first-generation, low-income, and first-year students. In addition, the study aimed to bridge the gap between the discoveries of successful students, their lived experiences, and how they piloted their first year of college. The three primary barriers identified were college

readiness (Swecker et al., 2013), financial issues (Goodwin et al., 2016), and academic and social integration (Williams, 2015; Windrow, 2017). There were three common themes presented in Williams's (2015) study, they were: College Preparedness, Social Networks, and Isolation. College Preparedness addressed academic and social experiences in college while in high school and feelings of under-preparedness. The results of the study were: College Preparedness (i.e., students were not adequately prepared for the rigors of college); Social Networks (i.e., they made positive connections with staff, faculty, peers, and family); and Isolation (i.e., they did not network outside of the Next Generation program; Williams, 2015). Williams' (2015) study is relevant to my study because it brought new information to literature and added knowledge about college access and retention programs by shedding new light on the importance of social integration and networks, as well as on strategies to overcome the psychological effects of being first-generation, low-income college students.

### **First-generation College Students Placed At-risk**

First-generation students have historically been defined in a variety of ways (Garriott & Nisle, 2018; Means & Pyne, 2017; Toutkoushian et al., 2018). In this study, I defined first-generation students as a college or university student from a family where no parent or guardian has earned a baccalaureate degree (Hébert, 2018; Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). Despite first-generation college students being part of a growing group of students in higher education, representing 25% of the undergraduate population, patterns of access to higher education are stratified for this group (Blackwell, 2014). It appears that access has decreased over time for first-generation college students. Astin and Oseguera (2004) pointed out that in 1971, the number of first-generation students entering college was nearly equal to the number of students whose parents both went to college. Yet, from 1971 to 2007, the proportion of first-generation college

students in the overall population of first-time, full-time students entering four-year institutions progressively declined (Adsitt, 2017). Nevertheless, literature written about first-generation at-risk college students has grown over the past decade and falls into three main categories: pre-college characteristics (including the process of choosing a college); transition to college in three stages; and the impact of college experiences on persistence, attainment, and engagement (Williams, 2015; Woosley & Miller, 2009).

Much of the existing quantitative research using large datasets frames first-generation college students as a group at-risk for educational failure and in need of remediation (Swecker et al., 2013). Most of these studies rely on aggregate data that show correlations between first-generation college students and enrollment patterns, persistence, and attainment information (Swecker et al., 2013; Wood, 2013). Many studies do not look at how first-generation college students of different racial and ethnic categories fare on these measures (Elias, 2018). Many of the studies cite small numbers of racial and ethnic diversity within samples as the reason for not performing these fine-grained analyses (United States Census Bureau, 2010, 2012; United States Department of Education, 2010; Wood, 2013). There are now more efforts to follow the advice of Kim and Nuñez (2013), which is to start listening to the students to understand their needs and how they make meaning of their experiences instead of reducing participants to static categories.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2013), data from 2010 indicates that among American adults over the age of 25, half of Asians and 3 in 10 Caucasians, compared with just 14% of Latinos and 1 in 5 (2%) African Americans were baccalaureates (Kim & Nuñez, 2013). Kim and Nuñez (2013) noted in their research the following:

The college enrollment rates of historically underrepresented students, including Latino and African American students, continue to trail behind those of their counterparts, and

these students are less likely than their Asian and Caucasian counterparts to begin their college educations in 4-year institutions. Among all college students in the 2007-2008 academic year, 55% and 52% of Caucasian and Asian undergraduate students, compared with 48% of African American and 47% of Latino students, were enrolled in 4-year institutions. (p. 85)

This statistical data rings true even today regarding the college enrollment of African American and Latino students. Among Latinos ages 25–29, only 15% have a bachelor’s degree or higher compared to 22% of African Americans, 41% of Whites, and 63% of Asians (Greenwood, et al., 2016). Low educational attainment often results in unemployment, low wages and earnings, and increased poverty rates, which can have an impact on the ability of Latinos to contribute to the economy and the global competitiveness of the United States (Vega, 2016). African Americans and Latinos also represent a significant proportion of the unskilled labor force and, accordingly, they are underrepresented in the highest paying careers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).

While it is disconcerting that overall enrollment is lower for first-generation students, patterns of enrollment for this group are even more troubling. Many researchers argue that low socioeconomic status (SES) and first-generation status negatively impact the chances of enrollment in highly selective schools (An, 2013; Manstead, 2018; Reynolds & Cruise, 2020; United States Department of Education, 2010; Yang, 2014). Attendance at selective colleges can provide increased opportunities for graduates including careers in prestigious fields, higher earning potential, and enrollment in selective graduate programs (Kim & Nuñez, 2013; Wood, 2013). Therefore, the representation of diverse groups of students in selective colleges, including first-generation and low-income students, is an issue of educational equity (Swecker et al., 2013).



Kim and Nuñez (2013) noted students who are the first in their families to go to college are often underrepresented in highly selective private schools (especially when compared to their peers from higher education. Kim and Nuñez (2013) and Wood (2013) noted that despite recent policy and programmatic efforts to create greater access across socioeconomic lines, access is even more stratified now than it has been in the prior three decades. They found that students with highly educated parents have much better chances of getting into a highly selective college or university than first-generation students. Williams (2015) noted that differences in parental education among low-income students do impact enrollment patterns.

Given these statistics, first-generation students constitute a large proportion of the student population at community colleges, and they reflect a distinct population within this educational context (Williams, 2015). They are less prepared for college at four-year institutions (Péruce et al., 2017). According to researchers Péruce et al. (2017), “more than 50% of first-generation students entering two-year college and nearly 20% of those entering four-year universities are placed in remedial classes” (Complete College America, 2012, p. 2). The next few pages will address the three categories mentioned previously in the literature review: (1) pre-college characteristics, (2) transitioning to college in three stages, and (3) the impact of college experiences.

### ***Pre-college Characteristics and Environmental Influences***

Todorova (2019) and Wood (2013) studied the characteristics of what students placed at-risk encounter upon entering college and found the following: a) lack of academic potential, b) inadequate understanding of the work required for college success, c) failure to make studying a priority, d) interference from family and personal relationships, e) failure to assume responsibility of learning and success, f) poor communication skills and g) failure to select a

college where they can be successful. Naughton (2016) described at-risk students as those students whose academic skills, knowledge, and academic ability are significantly below those of the typical student in the college or curriculum in which they are enrolled. Bales (2017) described this population as at-risk and underprepared because of poor high school preparation or low socio-economic background. These authors have characterized the EOF student because many come from poor high school preparation and have low socio-economic backgrounds.

In New Jersey, the EOF student is recruited from District Factors A and B. The District Factor Groups are A, B, C, D, E, F, and G and were first developed in 1975 for the purpose of comparing students' performance on statewide assessments across demographically similar school districts. The District Group Factors were calculated using the following six variables that are closely related to SES: 1) Percent of parents with no high school diploma, 2) Percent of parents with some college education, 3) Occupational status, 4) Unemployment rate, 5) Percent of individuals in poverty, and 6) Median family income (District Factor Groups for School Districts, 1990 & 2000). These factors reflect the population I studied. Students from A and B school districts come from neighborhoods that come from poverty, i.e., East Orange, Irvington, Newark, Camden, Burlington, Perth Amboy, Elizabeth, Trenton. Augustine (2010) characterized the at-risk student as one who fails to meet the normal college entrance criteria and is unable to immediately perform adequately in college-level courses and/or be accepted into a program of choice. Tinto (1993) characterized at-risk students as having goals that are not attainable. In addition, they bring with them a unique set of personal, family, and academic characteristics and skills which interfere with their success in college. Tinto (2012) found that students who entered college lacking strong support from their friends and family members tended to possess lower levels of commitment to college, integrate poorly into the academic and social structure of the

college, and exhibit behaviors and decisions leading to early college departure. However, recent research reveals that parents who are involved in the school, who talk with teachers and counselors, and who speak with their children about college more often have children who attend college in higher numbers than those whose parents are less involved (Mitchell & Jaeger, 2018). For this study I looked at students from Districts A and B (parents without a high school diploma and only some college education, low-income, and first-generation).

Researchers describe the most common characteristics of at-risk first-generation students entering college as a) low self-confidence with a deep sense of personal importance, helplessness, and lack of self-worth, b) avoidance because school is demanding or threatening, confusing and unresponsive to their needs, c) distrust of adults and adult institutions, d) a limited notion of the future, e) lack of reading, writing and mathematics skills resulting in feeling dumb, stupid, unable to pass these types of courses, f) following the pattern of their parents who possess minimal skills, have low self-confidence, distrustful of institutions, avoidance, and possesses an unknown future, g) inadequate peer relationships, h) impatience with routine, long-time sitting and listening and classrooms with little variety, and i) no sense of a relationship between effort and achievement but instead see success as a matter of completion or the task is complete (Crisp et al., 2009; Mulvey, 2009; Wood, 2013). Additional characteristics reported by Todorova (2019) include difficulties with educational planning, an unrealistic image of the purpose of school and study, lack of career focus, high levels of anxiety in test situations, and low family values and support for their education among first-generation college students. Other problems include how much to study, study conditions, reluctance to ask for assistance, difficulty in completing academic tasks, and stress associated with academic performance.

Other researchers have focused on the psychological and motivational needs of students placed at-risk. Lombardi et al. (2012) found that students with academic or psychological challenges find it difficult to achieve their educational goals. In addition, Lombardi et al. (2012) submit that these students tend to avoid what they perceive to be painful or threatening. For example, most students placed at-risk arrive on campus underprepared for the rigors of college. Students placed at-risk arrive with low achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics, and when given a choice, will often delay taking needed remediation courses or attempt to bypass them (Lombardi et al., 2012). Fear of failure and fear of success are very common for students placed at-risk. Grace-Odeleye and Santiago (2019) contended that students placed at-risk experience motivational problems because of their lack of academic success. Hall (2016) contended that students placed at-risk may be more interested in “beating the system” than in completing the actual work. There is also the belief they should be rewarded for doing anything no matter if the quality of work is worthy of being rewarded. Thus, many students placed at-risk would rather drop a class in which they are having difficulty than face a struggle to recover from their poor performance. Continual frustration with lack of success in the classroom often leads to delay or even avoidance of seemingly unpleasant and unrewarding tasks. Koch et al. (2012) and Mulvey (2009) found that students placed at-risk attribute success to luck, fate, or chance rather than to academic ability. Hall (2016) contended these students are unwilling to take responsibility for their behavior. This study was done to better understand what’s happening with these students.

### ***Transitioning to College in Three Stages***

Underprepared high school students who transition into college can have a difficult time adjusting to the rigors of academia especially first-generation college students (Longwell-Grice

et al., 2016). According to Thomas et al. (2017), students who face this dilemma usually transition to college in three stages: 1) Separation (Balzora, 2015); 2) Transition to College (Lancaster, 2014); and 3) Integration (Thomas, et al. 2017).

Separation is the first stage of the college career and requires new students to disassociate themselves in varying degrees from membership in their past communities (Thomas et al. 2017). Students come from neighborhoods where their families grew up as children. This separation can cause a student to lose sight of their academics and become homesick, longing to go back to where they fit in more easily. Most students placed at-risk come from poorer communities and can find it difficult to separate themselves due to being stereotyped as brainiacs/nerds, geeks, teachers' pets, or acting White (Balzora, 2015). Most typically, these associations are those with the local high school and/or place of residence. The process leads to the adoption of the behaviors and norms appropriate to the college and almost always requires some degree of transformation and perhaps the rejection of those behaviors and norms of the past community. New college students must disassociate themselves physically as well as socially from their past community to become fully integrated into the new community (Lancaster, 2014).

Transition to college, the second major stage of the college career, is seen as a period passage between the old and the new or specifically, between associations of the past and for desired associations with communities of the present. Stress and a sense of loss and bewilderment, if not disillusionment, can sometimes accompany the transition to college, as well as pose serious problems for the individual attempting to persist in college. Some students may find it quite difficult to cope with these adjustments due to differences in individual coping skills and educational goals and commitments. Because of individual responses to the stresses of separation and transition, students often begin to flounder and lose focus on their academic

journey. They withdraw without having made a serious attempt to adjust to the life of the college, as they seek to achieve membership in the communities of the college which are very different from their communities and/or schools. The same may also apply to students who reside at home during college (Mulvey, 2009).

In the last stage, integration, students are faced with the problem of finding and adopting norms that are appropriate to the new college setting and establishing competent membership in the social and intellectual communities of college life. Grace-Odeleye and Santiago (2019) surmise that although students in college are not often provided with formal rituals and ceremonies when they matriculate to post-secondary institutions, most institutions, especially residential ones, do provide a variety of formal and informal mechanisms to assist with the acclimation process, such as orientation programs. Students are required to establish contacts with other members of the institution, including students and faculty alike. The failure to establish these contacts may lead to a sense of isolation and not belonging, which in turn can lead to departure from the institution (Todorova, 2019).

### ***The Impact of College Experiences.***

First-generation college students face challenges once enrolled as well. Much of the literature looks at how first-generation college students fare as determined by specific measures of success. A general theme within the literature is that first-time, first-generation students are at a disadvantage in college as compared to their peers (Todorova, 2019). A student placed at-risk and first-generation students arrive at college unprepared to perform college-level work for a variety of reasons: a) inadequate schools experiences, b) completing family and work demands, c) lack of English language competency and d) unfamiliarity with collegiate processes and practices (Hall, 2016; Todorova, 2019). These students are disproportionately students of color,

first-generation college students from working-class families with English, not their primary language. They are often required to work a part- or full-time job resulting in a reduced academic load and a longer period to earn credentials (Wood, 2013).

At-risk first-generation students enter college with significant issues that must be dealt with to allow these students to have a chance at earning a college credential. Academic advising provides quality advisement for all students from initial enrollment to graduation to ensure that they make satisfactory progress towards a degree so that they graduate within a four or five-year period (NACADA, 2014). Their use of counseling and advising services especially during the initial entry into college is critical (Crisp et al., 2009). This is the time when students need the most help in dealing with numerous issues. This is also when establishing relationships between the student and the counselor/advisor takes place and sets the stage for the engagement of services throughout the enrollment period. The stronger the relationship, the more likely the student will persist while the weaker the relationship, the more likely the student will drop out (Cholewa et al., 2015). At-risk first-generation students prefer one-on-one counseling meetings which provide significant opportunities for a strong relationship to form which supports Tinto's studies (Cholewa et al., 2015; McPherson, 2015; Tinto, 2012, Engle & Tinto, 2008). The effectiveness of student retention appears to reside not in the simple availability of student services, but rather through a relationship approach where the services are seen to be an integral and positive part of the educational process which these students are expected to experience (Todorova, 2019). When services are provided in a negative fashion (i.e., when counseling and advising are required only for persons in trouble), services are considerably less effective (Cholewa et al., 2015). Negativism resulting from a requirement rather than by choice results in

stigmatizing the student as being less able or less successful than one's peers (Pham & Keenan, 2011).

#### Student Support Services for College Students Placed At-risk

The Student Support Services Freshman Year Program is a federally funded Department of Education TRIO program designed to serve students placed at-risk for possessing one or more of the following characteristics: first-generation, educationally under-prepared, economically disadvantaged, or learning or physically disabled (Federal TRIO Programs, 2019). Barbera et al. (2017) note that these students face a high risk for poor academic performance and some withdrawal from college. More attention to learning processes and contexts is essential for students placed at-risk in attempts to reverse long-standing patterns of school failure. The implementation of new freshman year programs throughout higher education is in direct response to a nationwide concern about decreasing rates of retention (Contreras, 2011; Skoglund et al., 2018). Students placed at-risk arrive at college underprepared, but with academic support such as tutoring, peer mentoring, and counseling, they can achieve academic success in higher education and receive awards, accolades, and recognition for their accomplishments (Paloyo et al., 2016). These students carry the title of "honors" as referenced in the literature.

According to Tinto (2012), one goal of pre-freshman programs is to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of campus offices related to student recruitment. To do so, coordinators should capitalize on student data and involvement in pre-freshman programs offered by the institution. Students in these programs generally have already shown college aspirations and academic potential and have been oriented to the college. Therefore, pre-freshman programs offer institutions an opportunity to recruit and assess student ability based on previous contact with students and schools.



Pre-freshman programs can support students facing limited resources in their schools. Outreach programs create opportunities by assisting students on their path to college, which in turn improves their access to college (Tinto, 2005). To give an example, federal TRIO programs have significantly improved access for many first-generation college students. TRIO is a series of programs created by the United States Congress to address the barriers that stand between low-income students, many of them first-generation college students. Initially, TRIO was comprised of three programs, but it has grown to include Educational Opportunity Centers, Upward Bound, Talent Search, Gear Up, TRIO, Student Support Programs, and the Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Programs (Federal TRIO Programs, 2019).

In 2011, the College Board conducted a National Survey of Outreach Programs, which had 374 programs surveyed (Tinto, 2012). The programs were TRIO, Gear Up, University Funded, University Nonprofit, and Other (Partnerships, Private, and other Federal). To describe in detail the scope of their study cannot be done in its totality in this paper, but it is important to note the role these programs play in the educational journey of many first-generation college students. The results of the College Board survey showed that TRIO had a positive impact on participation (28%), and others did as well: University Funded (17%); Nonprofit (14%); Partnerships (13%); Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness through Undergraduate Preparation (GEAR UP) (10%); State Funded (7%); CACG (4%); Private (4%); and Federal (3%; Tinto, 2012). TRIO programs help with academic skills and also give them the support and guidance necessary to pursue their goals (Tinto, 2012). Several national studies have been conducted by the Department of Education to assess the impact of the individual TRIO programs and have found positive outcomes across the programs (Tinto, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Students whose parents have not attended or completed college stand to benefit from participating in pre-college programs. Programs that focus on strategies that have shown use in increasing enrollment for first-generation college students are critical to increasing access for this population of students. Early outreach, academic preparation, and financial support are all strategies that can support first-generation college students in their path to college (Tinto, 2012). Pre-college programs can increase college readiness, help students better manage the financial aspects of college, and acclimate to the college environment (Johnson, 2017). In addition, much of the research has shown positive gains for participants in terms of postsecondary enrollment, retention, and completion (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Many students who participate in these specialized programs go on to become honors students and some are inducted into honors programs (Buckner et al., 2016; Mead, 2018; Stewart & Alrutz, 2014; Vander Zee et al., 2016). I am mentioning this because EOF students come from disadvantaged and under-resourced schools. The challenge may not be the students' abilities but the environment and disadvantaged schools they are in for many years. A strong academic and social support system in college may enable them to move from at-risk to honors status.

### **Utilizing Special College Programs**

The federal Student Support Services program introduced special college programs to all colleges and universities. Special college programs were designed to give academic support to students who need additional attention and structure in their study habits such as tutoring, learning communities, and small study groups. However, there are other special college programs aimed at supporting the needs of students and how they wish to learn: tutoring, learning communities, academic advising, academic support services, supplemental instruction,

intrusive counseling, and mentoring, developmental and remedial courses, peer mentoring, and pre-freshman programs. Each of these will be described in more detail in this section.

Researchers have said utilizing special college programs can increase retention and graduation rates (Kitchens, 2016; Naughton, 2016; Patron, 2012; Small, 2018; Zisel, 2018). Their study results led the authors to suggest that academic resilience can be fostered by programs that offer both learning communities and academic support services. When programs focus solely on the academic component, they miss the opportunity to help students adjust to the way of life of the college. Therefore, learning community and academic support services play a critical role in serving as the necessary vehicle for encouraging resilience in students placed at-risk turning to honor students.

### *Learning Communities*

McPherson (2015) defined learning communities as the purposeful restructuring of the curriculum to link together courses so that students have greater coherence in what they are learning. Learning communities also increase the intellectual interaction of students with faculty and fellow students while also utilizing collaborative and active approaches to learning, some form of team teaching, and interdisciplinary themes, which ultimately can positively affect student retention and persistence (McPherson, 2015). Many at-risk programs such as the Opportunity programs in New Jersey and federal TRIO programs utilize learning communities as part of their efforts to engage students academically with faculty as well as each other (State of New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, 2014). Researchers contend that learning communities tend to share similar characteristics: (1) faculty and students are organized into small groups; (2) curriculum is structured and integrated; (3) students establish academic and social-support

networks; (4) students are given a setting in which to define the expectations of college life; (5) faculty collaborates in meaningful ways; (6) faculty and students work together on specific learning outcomes; and (7) academic support services are provided (Bronkema & Bowman, 2017; Matthews et al., 2012).

Lee-Johnson (2019) contends students who achieve greater social and academic integration are more likely to reach their goal of college graduation. Lombardi et al. (2012) argue that failure to achieve social and academic integration contributes more to voluntary attrition than any other factor. The group mentality of learning communities serves to boost the confidence levels of students placed at-risk, thus increasing self-esteem and the potential for academic success (Davis, 2010). Cooperative learning moves away from the traditional lecture format and invites students to look forward to the class, to feel respected and needed in the pursuit of knowledge, and to respect and rely upon each other in these endeavors (Johnson, 2017). Special college programs and learning communities embody academic support for students placed at-risk in colleges and universities.

### *Academic Support Services*

Academic support services are programs that support first-generation students during their college journey. These programs offer workshops that support the student. For example, time management, math anxiety, and study skills are the most popular workshops students attend. Academic support programs assist first-generation students in overcoming the academic challenges they are likely to find in college, but those challenges are not restricted to the classroom setting (Small, 2018). An example of this can be found in a study by Jehangir (2009), who conducted multiple case studies to focus on the impact that a learning community program can have on low-income, first-generation college students at a four-year institution. The author

explained that a learning community is a type of academic support service. Rather than trying to resolve obstacles for students, it has the goal of providing a space where the experiences of first-generation students are expressed and negotiated. Five themes were identified by the participants that related to their need to find: (1) their sense of belonging in their environment, (2) the ability to express themselves in their world, (3) a sense of imbalance at questioning their identity, (4) a connection between their experiences and knowledge with the outside world, and (5) to perform a change in regard to their identity and communities.

In terms of student retention and persistence, the focus of special programs within academic services is on providing supplementary support to college students in addition to practice with classroom lectures. For this study, academic services are divided into seven categories: academic advisement, intrusive counseling, supplemental instruction, tutoring, peer mentoring, pre-freshman summer programs, and careers (Fountain, 2021). As an Opportunity Counselor, it is vital to have knowledge of these seven categories, because when you are advising a student, you may need to refer him/her to these services. These categories are the core components in advising Opportunity students.

### ***Academic Advising***

As part of the EOF program, academic advising is a requirement, and each student seeks advisement from their counselor and their faculty advisor. Although all students need guidance selecting courses, first-generation college students need more guidance as they are the first in their family to go to college and there may not be anyone in the family who can assist them. Academic advisement provides first-generation college students with the guidance needed to navigate their college journey. The view that advising and counseling are an integral part of the college experience manifests itself on campus in several ways (Cholewa et al., 2015; Pham &

Keenan, 2011). On some campuses, such programs are housed in a central location. Frequently they are in the student center or a place where those students naturally frequent. At my campus, support services and advising, and counseling are offered in the library and the Center for Academic Success (CAS). These locations are often bright, cheerful places staffed by warm, friendly, and competent people who are visibly open to student contact which results in a well-developed and maintained relationship. Effective counseling and advising programs may be systematically linked to other student services and campus programs. Often the counseling and advising locations are part of an integrated network of programs aimed at student retention and are administratively tied to both admissions and orientation programs. Through this integrated approach, student needs are addressed by institutional support services which include a feedback loop to continually monitor students' progress. This holistic approach to the student is the focus of effective retention programs.

### ***Intrusive Counseling***

The term "intrusive counseling" has been used since the 1980s to describe counseling that involves investigative and open-ended questions (Caire, 2019), personal contact, student responsibility for decision making, student recognition of causes of poor academic performance, and problem-solving for the future (Higher Ed Jobs, 2017; NACADA, 2013; Rowh, 2018). EOF students come with a myriad of challenges and most times will not self-disclose this information without probing and asking intrusive questions into their family backgrounds. This is one way to help them to open up and trust their counselor. First-generation EOF students placed at-risk enter college with significant issues that must be dealt with to allow these students to have a chance at earning a college credential. Researchers describe the most common characteristics of first-generation students placed at-risk entering college: a) low self-confidence with a deep sense of

personal impotence, helplessness, and lack of self-worth, b) avoidance because school is demanding or threatening, confusing, and unresponsive to their needs, c) distrust of adults and adult institutions, d) a limited notion of the future, e) lack of reading, writing, and mathematics skills resulting in feeling dumb, stupid, and unable to pass these types of courses, f) following the pattern of their parents who possess minimal skills, have low self-confidence, distrust of institutions, avoidance, and possesses an unknown future, g) inadequate peer relationships, h) impatience with routine, long-time sitting and listening and classrooms with little variety, and i) no sense of a relationship between effort and achievement and instead see success as a matter of passing (Barbera et al., 2017; Harackiewicz et al., 2014).

### ***Supplemental Instruction***

Supplemental instruction (SI), as defined in this study, is an academic support model that uses peer-assisted study sessions to improve student retention and success within targeted historically difficult courses (Skoglund et al., 2018; Alfredo et al., 2016). The SI program provides peer support by having students who succeeded in traditionally difficult academic courses (e.g., biology, college algebra) help other students complete these courses. SI is a non-remedial approach that provides regular review sessions outside of class in which students work collaboratively by discussing readings, comparing notes, working together to predict test items, and sharing ideas for improving class material. Courses selected for SI tend to be “gatekeeper” courses for first- and second-year students—generally those classes that have a 30% or higher proportion of students who receive a “D,” fail, or withdraw from the course. Out-of-class review sessions are led by “SI Leaders,” students who took the class already and did well (Moore et al., 2007; Yue et al., 2018).

*Developmental or Remedial Courses*

By entering college unprepared and with numerous other issues, these first-generation students placed at-risk are typically required to complete one or more remedial reading, writing, and mathematics courses. Additionally, these students must take multiple levels of subject matter to gain the required knowledge to perform college-level work. Among 2003-2004 beginning postsecondary students (the current data shows little changes since then), 68% of those starting at public 2-year institutions and 40% of those starting at public 4-year institutions took at least one remedial course during their enrollment between 2003 and 2009, according to their transcripts (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016).

The National Center for Education Statistics (2016) notes the intensity of remediation was particularly apparent at public 2-year institutions: almost one-half of their incoming students (vs. 21% of those at public 4-year institutions) took two or more remedial courses, and 26% (vs. 9% at public 4-year institutions) took remedial courses across multiple subjects. On average, remedial students at public 2-year institutions took about three remedial courses (vs. two courses at public 4-year institutions).

NCES (2016) also noted not all students who enrolled in remedial courses passed them. About half of remedial course takers (49%) beginning at public 2-year institutions completed all the remedial courses they attempted (referred to as remedial completers in this report). The remedial completion rate among those beginning at public 4-year institutions was somewhat higher at 59%. Overall, 16% of remedial course takers began at public 2-year institutions and 15% of those beginning at public 4-year institutions did not complete any of the remedial courses they attempted (called remedial non-completers). The remaining students, about 35% of remedial course takers beginning at public 2-year institutions and 25% of those beginning at public 4-year



institutions, completed some but not all their remedial courses (called partial remedial completers).

### ***Tutoring***

One of the more academic assistance services for first-generation students placed at-risk is tutoring. Evidence suggests (Cook et al., 2015) that academic tutoring may be an effective way to help students improve their academic skills, stay in school, and/or graduate from college. One experimental study of the Match tutoring program (the Match tutoring program is now known as SAGA Innovations), an intensive small group math tutoring program in which students receive one hour of tutoring each day from primarily recent college graduates, found that students participating in Match tutoring had higher math test scores and math grades than those who did not participate (Cook et al., 2015). Tutoring should be a weekly commitment made by students who need tutoring assistance. Students are encouraged to come often since success is assured with every additional tutoring session (Patton et al., 2016). Tutors are advised to attend a training session. Some tutoring programs at colleges and universities offer a Tutor Certification program. For example, at my university, all tutors are required to attend at least 10 hours of training for each additional level of certification desired. Training consists of pertinent topics such as (a) the mission and purpose of tutoring; (b) ethics of tutoring; (c) the role of the tutor; (d) communication skills; (e) learning styles; and (f) general tutoring strategies.

Research also suggests that some comprehensive programs that may include academic tutoring and also other services, such as test-taking and study skills assistance, academic advising, mentoring, community service, and financial incentives for school performance, may help students stay in school and graduate (U.S Department of Education Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development, Policy and Program Study Services [USDEOPEPDPPSS],

2017). Two quasi-experimental studies on Talent Search, a program that provides several academic supports to students from disadvantaged backgrounds and features academic tutoring as one of its supports, found that students who participated were more likely to graduate from high school than students who did not participate in the program (USDEOPEPDPPSS, 2017).

Tutoring is a primary component of every at-risk program (Hall, 2016) and contributes to the retention of students placed at-risk (Augustin, 2010). Tutoring has a positive impact on persistence and graduation, final course grades, course completion rates, and student attitudes toward instruction (USDEOPEPDPPSS, 2017). Tutoring services include one-on-one, as well as small and large group sessions, are offered routinely as well as by appointment. Institutions must make every effort to offer tutoring support for every subject and employ tutors that possess teaching skills.

### ***Peer Mentoring***

Peer mentoring is led by students who are one college-level higher than the student they plan to mentor. Most mentoring programs for students placed at-risk offer peer mentors. The goal of peer mentoring is to provide an opportunity for first-year students to connect with an undergraduate student who has completed at least one year of college. Peer mentors can assist new students in their academic transition from high school to college. The mentoring process provides new students with the information, support, and encouragement they need to be successful in college (Davis, 2010; Salinitri, 2005). In addition, peer mentors are an excellent resource for students to feel a sense of connection to the college from a student's perspective. Some at-risk programs offer professional mentors (mentors who possess master's level credentials in the social sciences and possess professional experience in advising and or counseling).

Hegrenes (2013) argues mentoring is a transformational process by describing higher education as a developmental journey undertaken by the student. Hegrenes (2013) depicted mentoring as a process that centers on a steady dialogue between mentor and mentee in which cognitive movement is encouraged and supported. It is through this dialogue that the mentee transformation becomes purposeful and directed. Hegrenes (2013) casts the mentor as a guide who has the specific tasks of a) engendering trust, b) seeing the student's movement, c) giving the student a voice, d) introducing conflict and then providing help to overcome it, e) emphasizing positive movement, and f) monitoring the relationship to ensure the mentee is ready to "go it alone" after their freshman year.

Hall (2016) contends mentoring support services have a positive effect on first-year retention. Hegrenes (2013) argues that the mentoring process leads to student growth and empowerment and positively impacts retention as long as the mentor remains connected to the mentee. Davis (2010) states that mentoring fosters positive retention in the first year for at-risk students who face an alien culture, uncharted academic and social territory, self-doubt, frustration, and separation from their families and friends.

### ***Pre-freshman Programs***

Before students enter a pre-freshman summer program, they attend an orientation program. The length of a student orientation program ranges from as little as one day to no more than one week for students placed at-risk with a focus on familiarizing them with the college environment. An orientation includes a) the opportunity to tour the campus, b) meet program staff, faculty, and support providers, c) learn academic policy, and d) engage in academic workshops that focus on basic skill development that will help students successfully navigate their college experience (Connolly et al., 2017). Additionally, students are provided tests such as

LASSI, the Student Retention Inventory, Novel Levitz, and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to evaluate the whole student and help them understand their learning styles, personality characteristics, and aptitudes (Harackiewicz et al., 2014). All information gathered during orientation is provided to the support staff as a starting point to working with the student placed at-risk.

Students placed at-risk benefit from participating in pre-freshman summer programs (Hughes, 2007; McPherson, 2015). Studies performed by prominent researchers in the past are still prevalent today. For example, Hughes (2007) did a study with 231 first-generation college students who were first-generation and low-income who participated in a summer program called Upward Bound. The Upward Bound Program is a federal student support services program that prepares high school students for the rigors of college (TRIO/Upward Bound, 2019). The purpose of Hughes' (2007) study was to examine the impact of a federally funded program on the college entrance rates of first-generation low-income students. Their ethnicity was characterized as 200 (90%) were African American, 19 (82%) were Hispanic American, and 1 (.5%) was Asian American. Their socioeconomic status was identified in 3 categories: 1) 178 (77.1%) reported as very low, 2) 16 (6.9%) reported as moderately low, and 3) 37 (16%) reported as low (Hughes, 2007). Hughes (2007) used an ex-post facto design to collect and examine data. Based on the results, for students who participated in a federally funded program who were first-generation low-income where gender or age wasn't a factor, the socioeconomic status produced a significant effect on the college entrance rates (Hughes, 2007).

Schell's (2010) dissertation was about the challenges first-generation low-income college students face. The author noted there are "unique" obstacles low-income African American, Latino, and Native American students face; "unique" obstacles that become barriers for students.

Those barriers can be hard to overcome. The major barriers include but are not limited to: inadequate educational opportunities in K-12 school districts (Williams, 2015), family members and friends who do not encourage or fully understand the goals of post-secondary education (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014), institutions of higher education that are simultaneously facing restrictions on their financial resources (Kim & Nuñez, 2013), and pressure to maintain high academic standards (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Schell, 2010). In addition, Schell (2010) states that home life is also a contributor to these students, and it hinders their success in college (Blackwell & Nuñez, 2014; Schell, 2010). Schell (2010) interviewed 5 students in a two-part interview format. First, each participant was given a survey to collect general demographic information such as race, gender, age, high school GPA, on and off-campus involvement, educational aspirations, and parents' highest level of education completed. Secondly, the participants took part in a face-to-face interview with nine questions asking about their overall impressions and reflections about their pre-freshman summer experience. The participants were overwhelmingly satisfied with the college experience including personal growth, social interaction (better communicators with peers and faculty), and student-faculty interactions (tutoring and supplemental instruction). Studies confirmed that the rigorous intensity and strict structure of the summer program, as well as the high-quality faculty and frequent student-faculty interactions, were the most salient for the student's academic success (Schell, 2010; Swecker et al., 2013; Williams, 2015; Windrow, 2017). These studies are important as they strengthen my study about Opportunity students placed at-risk low-income and the first generation tend to do much better when they participate in a structured pre-freshman summer program. Pre-freshman summer programs have been noted for some time to be instrumental in acculturating and orienting students placed at-risk to increase success and retention in universities (Windrow,

2017). Typically, pre-freshman programs for students placed at-risk are held in the summer between their senior year in high school and their freshman year in college. Pre-freshman summer programs or Bridge programs are usually conducted for four to eight weeks, most commonly in the summer, before their first semester of college. Students take the basic orientation program and incorporate additional components such as broad academic skill workshops (time management, organization, test-taking, financial management, goal setting, and decision-making); one to three remedial courses (English, writing, math, reading); intrusive counseling/advising and tutoring; peer and professional mentoring; and helping students adjust to college life (Johnson, 2017). A multifaceted approach to retention using pre-freshman summer programs or Bridge programs, student mentors, and connection activities has shown affirmative retention results (Augustine, 2010; Johnson, 2017). These programs include academic as well as socialization skills necessary for success.

Vincent Windrow (2017) conducted a quantitative study to determine whether participation in the Scholars Academy Program made a difference in the participants' success as it relates to persistence and retention rates. Participants were first-year students who had just graduated high school before entering college. The results of his study demonstrated whether there was a difference in the academic outcomes of the minority Scholars Academy participants and the minority students who entered the university at the same time but did not participate in the summer bridge program (Windrow, 2017). I chose to explore his quantitative study because it addressed first-generation minority students who participated in a summer bridge program similar to what I did with my research.

Windrow's (2017) study began in 2012 and ended in 2015, with  $N = 300$  for the participating minority students and  $N = 4,320$  for the minority non-participating students. Like

similar summer programs, their participants learned note-taking skills, test-taking skills, exam-taking skills, the need for asking critical thinking questions, and the value of developing good relationships with their professors (Johnson, 2017; Swecker et al., 2013; Schell, 2010). The research questions that guided his quantitative research design were: 1) Is there a difference in persistence rates, or the percentage of students who stayed or were retained in school, between minority Scholars Academy participants and minority non-Scholars Academy participants? and 2) Is there a difference in retention rates between minority Scholars Academy participants and minority non-Scholars Academy participants? For the first question, the results of the data analysis showed the Scholars Academy participants' persistence rates were higher than the non-participants (91% versus 90.6%) in all four years examined except 2013.

The other years had wider gaps in persistence rates with participants outperforming the non-participants in 2012 (96.4% versus 91.8%, 2014 (94.1% versus 2.5%), and 2015 (94.2% versus 89.9% (p. 87). Regarding the second question, the results in 2012 were: 22 out of 28 participants were retained at 78.6%, while 864 out of 1,162 non-participants were retained at 70.2%.

In 2013, 26 participants out of 32 were retained for an 81.3% rate, while the non-participants were retained at 69.7% with 792 of 1,136 returning for their fall semester (p. 87-88). The students who participated in the university summer bridge program in both 2014 and 2015 were retained from their first fall semester at the university to their second fall semester at a higher rate than those who did not participate in the university's summer bridge program in either 2014 or 2015 (p. 88).

Windrow (2017) concluded that the impact of participation in the Scholars Academy might have long-term value at its university. With the number of participants in the cohorts

increased, the Scholars Academy had a greater influence on the retention rates of the respective freshmen class. Windrow (2017) stated, "...with the 2015 cohort representing 12.3% of minority entering freshmen, which was an increase from 2.3% it represented in 2012, the success of the minority Scholars Academy participants bodes well for the university" (p. 90). This study was important to me because their Scholars Academy is similar to the EOF pre-freshman summer academy. It offered academic support provided by faculty and participants learned note-taking skills, test-taking skills, exam-taking skills, the need for asking critical thinking questions, and the value of developing good relationships with their professors. This is similar to EOF programming and the population of students I studied.

### *Careers*

College students experience unique needs and challenges related to career decision-making (Pisarik et al., 2017). For example, college students generally have limited work experience and therefore may rely on family members, college professors, and others to help them to make career decisions (Powers et al., 2018). Students often volunteer to gain work experience to build their resumes. College students are prone to changing their career paths if they discover incongruence between their skills and the activities required for a career (Tracey, 2010). Self-efficacy and exploration of internal factors is crucial in making career decisions (Su & Chung, 2015).

Additionally, some college students experience anxiety when choosing a career (Pisarik et al., 2017). Counselors often see students who are experiencing career-related anxiety. Career counselors examine anxiety in the context of career choice and development to use quantitative methods that utilize a modified version of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI; Spielberger, 1983). The goal of STAI is to clinically focus on the concept of career-related anxiety. The STAI



measures two types of anxiety—state anxiety, or anxiety about an event, and trait anxiety, or anxiety level as a personal characteristic (Speilberger, 1983). Counselors should understand the context of career-related anxiety, so they can identify the signs and make recommendations to the student for assistance with coping skills (Ritzer & Sleigh, 2019; Swank & Jahn, 2017; Vela et al., 2018).

### **Honors Students and Programs**

First-generation college students make up 28.6% of Honors College and honors program enrollments (Mead, 2018). The National Collegiate Honor Council (2019) considers honors education to be:

Characterized by in-class and extracurricular activities that are measurably broader, deeper, or more complex than comparable learning experiences typically found at institutions of higher education. Honors experiences include a distinctive learner-directed environment and philosophy, provide opportunities that are appropriately tailored to fit the institution's culture and mission, and frequently occur within a close community of students and faculty (p. 197).

There are other types of programs that serve to provide students with ample opportunities to establish relationships that lead to the possibility of greater integration in the college community. Examples include fraternities, sororities, student dormitory associations, student unions, frequent faculty and visiting scholar series, extracurricular programs, intramural athletics, and lastly honors programs.

Honors programs have established a uniform protocol of goals, which are: (1) to engender feelings of academic competence and empowerment in students (Stewart & Alrutz, 2014); (2) to assist in developing positive self-concepts in relationship to academic skills

(Nichols et al., 2016); (3) to assist in meeting Program retention and graduation goals (Kampfe et al., 2016); (4) to highlight the success of students to the university community (McLaughlin, 2015); (5) to encourage students to reach their optimum academic performance level of academic performance each semester and earn a minimum GPA of 3.6 to be eligible for various on-campus and off-campus academic achievement awards, scholarships, and honor societies (Buckner et al., 2016); and (6) to motivate students to continue to succeed academically (Vander Zee et al., 2016).

### **First-Generation Students Placed At-risk Who Become Honors Students**

Students placed at-risk who may also be first-generation students discover early in their college careers that when given support services (i.e., tutoring, mentoring, and advisement) and with hard work and determination, they can become honor students. In most Opportunity programs, students are inducted into the honor society when they have earned a cumulative GPA of 3.0 and 56 college-level credits (Muindi, 2019). At the institution where this study was conducted their honors society is named Epsilon Epsilon Omega Honor Society. During the 2020 spring semester, they virtually inducted 131 students. Of the 131 students, 97 (74%) were female and 34 (26%) were male. The grade point average for those students were: 3.5-3.99 (25 female and 11 male); 3.2-3.49 (50 female and 15 male); and 3.0-3.19 (22 female and 8 males; Muindi, 2020). Researchers Goins (2014), Hébert (2011), and Young (2009) attribute this phenomenon to students placed at-risk being gifted. Gifted in a sense that students placed at-risk have it within themselves to achieve honors status as long as they have academic support such as tutoring, learning communities, and study groups.

Although the literature written by Fries-Britt (1997) is over 20 years old, it is still referenced and prevalent today. Balzora (2015), Goins (2014), and Young (2009) have all

referenced Fries-Britt (1997) in their literature when speaking about gifted students because of how he examined the definition of “giftedness.” Fries-Britt (1997) examined the definition of “giftedness” and reviewed the research on the way gifted minorities are assessed. Furthermore, she examined the factors that continue to affect the academic experiences of gifted African American men. She reflected upon important issues related to college retention and described the Meyerhoff Program, a merit-based scholarship program that seeks to meet the needs of African American students in math, science, and engineering. According to the author, the definition of giftedness is in constant change. However, traditional definitions of giftedness relate to “cognitive measures and objective criteria, such as intelligence tests” (Fries-Britt, as cited in Balzora, 2015, p. 28). Along with intellectual measures, contemporary definitions may also include assessments for artistic, creative, and leadership ability. However, Fries-Britt (1997) contended that society continues to focus mainly on a narrow set of presumptions and tools for measuring giftedness. The dominant research, which has produced such a set of presumptions and tools, comes mostly from studies of status quo Caucasian middle-class students. Fries-Britt (1997) contended that considering the stereotypes and other complex issues which African Americans face, educators and researchers must better assess the status of gifted African Americans.

Henfield et al. (2008) affirmed the thoughts of Perry et al. (2003) through a qualitative study of 12 African American students in gifted programs. The researchers noted that African American males proceeded in the honors setting under the shadow of low expectation, lack of motivation, and fear of separation from social and peer groups, particularly if they are academically oriented as opposed to athletically oriented. The researchers’ theoretical perspective challenged the narrative identity of Caucasian European Americans as the normative

standard (Henfield et al., 2008). Their study revealed three themes that concern certain threats to African American intellectual identity: a) critical issues facing African Americans students, b) navigating the perils of gifted education, and c) weighing the benefits of gifted education.

Like earlier authors Fries-Britt (2007), Oates (2004), and Perry et al. (2003) and later authors Balzora (2015) Harris et al. (2011), Henfield et al. (2008), Palmer and Young (2009), Young (2009) conducted a qualitative study of four first-generation African American male students from economically challenged backgrounds who attended Ivy League universities. Young (2009) conveyed concern about the rampant use of assessment tools based on Caucasian middle-class mainstream culture. He also explored themes that reappear in the study on masculinity by Harris et al. (2012). The participants of the study expressed concerns that relate to the stereotype among African American males that intellectual activities are incompatible with their narrative identities. The results of his study confirmed the importance of personal influences in the lives of African Americans early in their academic experiences to correct such misconceptions. Based on the small number of participants in Young's (2009) study and his description of the lack of literature on high achieving African American males, he recommended more research to analyze the experiences of high achieving African American males in competitive settings. Young (2009) noted from the data collected that the young men attended a private or parochial school rather than a public school, which made a difference in their ability to succeed in a rigorous academic program. In addition, the teachers' expectations and success in rigorous courses did contribute to the participants' overall academic achievement. Adjusting to the college environment also played a part in their success in becoming honor students. Overall, their honor status gave the participants a sense of purpose and commitment to their community, advocates and mentors to their minority peers, and respect from their professors.

### ***Retention and Graduation***

The literature suggests that honors students might benefit in terms of academic achievement, academic self-concept, exposure to and participation in academic experiences, and self-reported gains in knowledge and skills. These factors should contribute to the success of these students in terms of retention and degree attainment. Four studies found a positive relationship between honors participation and retention into the second year (Keller & Lacy, 2013; Slavin et al., 2008; Springer, 2018). However, another study found that honors students were no more likely to be retained into year two and less likely to be retained in years three and four compared to their peers (Wolgemuth et al., 2007). Retention leads to persistence and ultimately graduation.

Many of the quantitative studies on first-generation students placed at-risk focus on persistence, attrition attainment, and academic performance as measures of success for honors students. There are many existing persistence and attrition models that look at student characteristics and interactions between students and their educational environment.

### ***Persistence***

Persistence refers to the ability to continue in the face of obstacles over a long period; it reflects determination. In academic research, persistence refers to a student's continued enrollment from one term to the next. Several studies have attempted to measure the persistence of first-generation college students as compared to students whose parents attended or completed college (Geyer, 2018; Tinto, 2005). Their findings suggested that every meeting with an academic advisor increased the potential to retain that student by 13% (Swecker et al., 2013). Researchers Reynolds and Cruise (2020), Schreiner et al. (2011), Spriggs (2018), Stewart et al. (2015), and Vega (2016) stated that when students are given academic tools such as tutoring,

mentoring, financial aid, and structure, they persist to graduation. The goal at any college or university is to support students from year one to graduation (Stewart et al., 2015). This helps with persistence and graduation rates.

### ***Attrition Attainment***

As Shaw et al. (2013) noted, first-year and at-risk students are the groups at greatest risk of attrition from colleges or universities. Research indicates attrition is particularly related to prior academic performance and/or high school GPA (Shaw et al., 2013). Tinto (2012) also acknowledged that retention research has “tended to focus on theoretically appealing concepts that do not easily translate into definable courses of action” (p.65). In addition, students who attend college now are more diverse than ever before and increasingly different from the students examined in earlier studies of retention about gender, age, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, including other characteristics such as high school grade point average, college admission test scores, and first-year grade point average (Campbell & Mislevy, 2013; Shaw et al., 2013; Spann & Waddell, 2010). These characteristics should be considered to predict retention and students’ academic performance during their first year of college.

### ***Academic Performance***

At least some of the higher outcomes for honors students may stem from more frequent exposure to effective academic experiences. Seifert et al. (2007) found that honors participants reported significantly more student-centered instruction and prompt feedback; honors students also had more frequent course-related interactions with their peers. Two additional studies examined interactions outside of class generally, which suggest that honors students share particular psychological traits, goals, and behaviors (Springer, 2018). Faculty-student relationships may also be stronger as a result of honors participation, as studies have found that

honors students more frequently meet with faculty during office hours, discuss career plans and aspirations with faculty (Moon, 2012), and work on research with faculty outside of class (Moon, 2012). In the qualitative portion of Moon's study, honors students discussed social connections and self-efficacy as important benefits of honors participation (Moon, 2012).

### **Theoretical Framework**

An abundance of research exists regarding first-generation, low-income, academically underprepared, and students placed at-risk. Self-efficacy (Weng et al., 2010) and social integration motivations are the driving forces introducing the theoretical framework for this study.

#### ***Self-Efficacy as Motivation***

Poor academic performance is often indicative of difficulties in adjusting to a college environment and makes dropouts more likely. Since adjusting to a new environment would be affected by any individual, retention at college was predicted by a combination of achievement and the absence of physical/psychological distress (Weng et al., 2010). The search for predictors of academic success has long been a research theme in educational counseling literature (Small, 2018). Central to social learning theory (Weng et al., 2010) is the concept of self-efficacy which helps to determine what activities individuals will pursue, the effort they expend in pursuing those activities, and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles. Self-efficacy predicts academic performance, persistence, and the range of career options considered after controlling for other variables such as ability and vocational interests (Small, 2018).

After the introduction of social learning theory (Bandura, 1997), self-efficacy received widespread attention from vocational and counseling psychologists. Even in studies of student retention, behavioral self-efficacy has been explored as a factor affecting student retention

(Geyer, 2018). Using structural equation models to assess the relative importance of self-efficacy and stress in predicting academic performance outcomes, results identified self-efficacy to be a more robust and consistent predictor than academic stress (Small, 2018; Weng et al., 2010).

Students with science and engineering majors are more confident in their ability to complete academic requirements to earn higher grades and are more persistent in their majors (Erlich & Russ-Eft, 2011). Moreover, there is a positive association between self-efficacy and the number of hours students spent studying which is related to academic integration (Felder, 2017).

Therefore, self-efficacy is related to study habits in terms of academic integration.

Students with higher levels of autonomous motivation for attending college reported more confidence (i.e., self-efficacy) in their academic abilities and performed better academically. In addition, students with higher self-efficacy beliefs reported less physical and psychological distress and higher levels of achievement (Naughton, 2016). Stronger self-efficacy expectations result in better higher education outcomes because students with high self-efficacy perceive failure experiences as challenges rather than threats. Students with higher academic self-efficacy reported higher persistence intentions (Contreras, 2011; Hall, 2016; Hébert, 2018).

### ***Social Integration and Motivation***

Rafael et al. (2018) stated that social integration and motivation learning strategies show direct effects on first-year university experiences. Law et al. (2019) shared in their research that social integration is a motivator for persistence with students who study in small groups. Tinto's (1975) interactionist theory proposed that a student's willingness to integrate themselves socially at an institution and the perceived care for them employed by the institution increases the likelihood the student will remain enrolled at that institution. In a revision of his original theory, Tinto (1993) acknowledged other factors influence persistence, such as financial



resources, experiences, and interactions within the classroom. Braxton et al. (2011) revised and expanded upon the interactionist theory, placing additional emphasis on student social integration, perception of institutional commitment to student success, and other additional factors, such as ability to pay for school, perceived potential for an on-campus community, and perceived level of institutional integrity. This revised theory was later tested (Braxton et al., 2014) and student social integration and perception of institutional commitment to student success were identified as key variables influencing persistence into subsequent academic years at the school (Hepworth et al. 2018).

Stanton-Salazar (1997) proposed a theoretical framework encompassing various forms of institutional support and asserted that its six components serve as ingredients to "social integration and success" in college (p. 11). Characterizing these forms to the specific roles that institutional agents play in student-agent relationships, institutional agents may then be described as individuals who (a) possess and have the capacity to transmit knowledge, (b) serve as bridges or gatekeepers, (c) advocate or intervene on students' behalf, (d) serve as role models, (e) provide emotional and moral support, and (f) provide valuable feedback, advice, and guidance to students. While in these roles, institutional agents have the capacity to assist students in the college choice and admission process. Upon entering college, instructors, counselors, students, and other college personnel may provide the support needed for students to successfully transition and adjust to the college environment (Tovar, 2015).

### **Summary**

This chapter gave a brief historical background of how the American college evolved over the decades. The universities, moreover, provided the intellectual leadership of America. The Morrill Act of 1862 put federal funding at the disposal of every state government. As a

result, land-grant colleges by 1955 enrolled more than 20% of American college students (Rudolph, 1990). From 1945 to 1970, the period which proved to be a time of extraordinary rich opportunity began with the end of World War II (Hofstadter, 1952). With more opportunities opening to students who were the first in their families to attend college, the government and higher educational institutions turned their attention to creating programs that ensured first-generation student success.

In reviewing the literature, first-generation college students placed at-risk now have access to academic advising, counseling, supplemental instruction, tutoring, peer mentoring, pre-freshman programs, and career services (Small, 2018). First-generation college students placed at-risk create learning communities to increase self-esteem through self-efficacy (McPherson, 2015; Weng et al., 2010). First-generation at-risk college students also use economic (Bahna, 2017; Bourdieu, 2005; Vollebregt, 2018), social (An & Western, 2019; Bahna, 2017; Bourdieu, 2005; Coleman, 1988), and cultural (Bahna, 2018; Bourdieu, 1997; Brawner, 2018; Košutić, 2017) capitals to advance their networks and create a sense of belonging to these entities. When utilizing these services, students placed at-risk can become honor students (Mead, 2018; Ellerton et al., 2016). They join honors programs to engender feelings of academic competence and empowerment (Nichols et al., 2016).

First-generation, low-income, and college students placed at-risk have made the first step for their families and can serve as guides for future family members. The difference in earnings for low-income students can be immense over a lifetime (Pierce, 2016). Education can be a lifeline to a new standard of living for students coming from a background of poverty (Quinn et al., 2019). Thus, honors educators should not simply teach justice in the classroom but lead the way in filling their classrooms with students from all backgrounds (Bowman & Culver, 2018).

Both in the classroom and outside it, honors status can change these students' lives and offer them insights and opportunities beyond anything they have imagined (Balzora, 2015).

Colleges and universities can expand their admissions processes to carefully consider students from first-generation, students placed at-risk, and low-income backgrounds. Honors programs and colleges and universities not only increase the diversity of their programs and add richness and depth to their classes, but they also make a significant difference in the individual lives of the students who enroll (Bowman, 2018; Balzora, 2015). In researching information on first-generation, low-income, and college students placed at-risk moving into honors programs, there was little information in qualitative format. As counselors in higher education, it would be relevant to know what their lived experiences are like when moving into honors. As administrators in Opportunity programs, the results of this study might strengthen their academic structure.

Students placed at-risk come into our Opportunity programs underprepared, but many graduate with honors. Self-efficacy and motivation, like ambition, are not something that we can teach people. However, we can find out what things hinder or increase motivation (e.g., disappointment, isolation, socioeconomic change, financial rewards or lack of financial rewards, independence), and then find ways to take action to resolve those hindrances. So, if we were to find out how motivation was used by those who became honors students, we could then focus on ways to increase the number of students placed at-risk who become honors students. In the next chapter (methodology) of this proposal, I explained how I conducted my study.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Research Methodology**

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of 10 first-generation, low-income, and academically underprepared students at a metropolitan university who attended a summer Bridge program and went on to become honors students. I used a qualitative approach to get a deeper and more in-depth understanding of their lived experiences in moving from placed “at-risk” into an honors program.

Low-income students who have parents or guardians who did not obtain a postsecondary degree are defined as first-generation and low-income (Mead, 2018). These students come from cities with pockets of high poverty rates, high unemployment, and low educational attainment (Chen & Nunnery, 2019). In New Jersey, a high number of low-income families residing in the top 10 target areas are first-generation and low-income students, those cities include East Orange, Elizabeth, Irvington, Jersey City, Newark, Paterson, Passaic City, Union City, Toms River, and Woodbridge (State of New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education/EOF, 2016). These cities are generally located in several of New Jersey’s counties with the highest poverty rates in the state, including Burlington, Camden, Essex, Hudson, Mercer, Monmouth, Ocean, Passaic, and Union counties (US Census Bureau, 2019).

#### **Context for the Study**

The site for this study is a public metropolitan university, located in the northeastern part of the United States. It offers more than 50 undergraduate majors and 60 graduate programs (doctoral, masters, and certificates) at various campuses in New Jersey as well as 14 online programs, and 12 undergraduate programs in Wenzhou, China. As part of the university’s effort to recruit, retain, and graduate diverse students, it offers summer programs that support students

who do not meet the regular admissions requirements. One of these programs is the Opportunity Program. Traditionally, the program recruits 150 to 175 low-income and at-risk students who participate in the pre-freshman summer academy. During the summer academy, students take two courses (college credits or preparatory non-credits), attend weekly workshops with their counselor, and attend tutoring sessions led by peer tutors and academic specialists. The summer academy is a mandatory residential program so residential assistants will host weekly workshops as well as Sunday evening sessions. Although due to COVID-19, the 2020 cohort did not reside on campus and the classroom structure became virtual. This may need to be taken into consideration in the research study questions, because some of the participants may not have had residential experience to talk about.

This chapter puts forth a rationale for the methodology by presenting the research question, research design, participants, data gathering method, data analysis (i.e., procedures, instrumentation, and data collection), positionality, and lastly validity and trustworthiness.

### **Research Design**

I conducted a basic qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), using interviews to collect data. A basic qualitative research study is used by researchers who are interested in "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). Ultimately, the purpose of educational qualitative research is to improve our practice and the basic qualitative research design is particularly well suited to obtain an in-depth understanding of effective educational processes (Worthington, 2013). For example, this basic qualitative study was used to uncover strategies, techniques, and practices of Opportunity students placed at-risk and eventually

became honors students. Although I considered other qualitative designs such as phenomenological, narrative, grounded, ethnographic, case study, and action research, those qualitative designs reflect a different purpose and outcome from my research question. Those qualitative designs are best suited for researchers who are looking into more intense human experiences such as love, anger, betrayal, culture, and so on (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, they focus more on building theory, developing stories, putting things to action to solve a problem, or giving an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I am not exploring those foci, because this basic qualitative study design is the most common form of qualitative research found in education and it yielded a greater richness and depth as to the experiences of these students that is not as possible with a quantitative design.

### **Rationale for Methodology**

The rationale for choosing a basic qualitative study is because its focus is on meaning, understanding, process, purposeful sample, data collection via interviews and focus groups, observations, and documents. Data are collected through interviews, observations, or document analysis. It is the most common form of qualitative research in education. As an educator in higher education, a basic qualitative study design seemed beneficial. Data analysis is inductive and comparative. The findings are richly descriptive and presented as themes and categories. The goal of this research design was to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of honors students, who were once considered at-risk, but who now excel academically. I listened to how they interpreted their progression into an honors student, how they viewed their experiences, and how they made meaning of their journey in academic standing. Toward this end, a basic qualitative methodology was used to explore deeper into their experiences. Using a

basic qualitative methodology approach allowed the participants to construct reality in interaction with their social worlds. The overall purpose was to uncover participants' understandings of their lived experiences.

### **Research Question**

The primary focus in this study was on low-income and academically underprepared first-generation students who participated in the Opportunity pre-freshman summer program and who went on to achieve honors status. I explored the lived experiences of students who participated and are exceeding expectations of them as college students. It is anticipated that programming efforts might be improved as a result of better understanding the lived experiences influencing their overall success. This dissertation explored one central research question: How do college students, initially considered at-risk of not succeeding but who are now honors students, describe their educational journeys at the university?

### **Research Sampling and Participants**

The selection of a purposive sample allowed me to interview participants who participated in an Opportunity pre-freshman summer program and who moved to honors status. I chose purposeful sampling because it assumes that I want to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants are representatives of the Opportunity Program who were placed at-risk and became honors students. They were chosen precisely because of their special experiences and similar characteristics. For example, those special experiences were poverty (low income), first generation, participation in a pre-freshman summer program, grouped in learning communities, assigned to a peer mentor, among other special experiences.

### *Participants and Recruitment*

Each year the Opportunity Program tries to recruit 500 or more students. When the recruitment cycle has ended and students are vetted (must meet the income requirements to participate), typically the Opportunity Program accepts 150 plus students through the pre-freshman summer program. Although during COVID-19 they barely had 100 students. These students did receive a pre-freshman summer program, but it was virtually due to COVID-19. At the end of the pre-freshman summer program, most students passed and entered the university with a grade point average of 3.0 or better giving them a jump-start with a strong grade point average. The characteristics of the participants were traditional students who came straight from high school: first-generation (parents do not have a college degree), low-income (come from poverty), academically underprepared (low SAT and or GPA scores), male and female, ages 19 – 23, taking 12 to 18 college credits per semester, diverse academic majors, and have part or full-time jobs. From those students who were recruited and admitted into the Opportunity Program, with academic support many go on to become honors students. Those students participated in this study. They are honors students with a minimum GPA of 3.2 (Opportunity Program honors status) and some had Dean's List Honors Status (GPA of 3.6 and above). All participants participated in the pre-freshman summer program and continued their college journey with no stop-outs (no breaks from college). The participants were upperclassmen in their junior or senior year, both male and female.

First-generation students can also come from poverty. As discussed in the previous chapter, this population included students from both first-generation and low-income student populations who were also more likely to be older, be female, have a learning disability, be of minority ethnicity, be non-native English speakers, and have dependent children.



***Recruitment***

As I mentioned earlier, participants for this study was a purposeful sample of honors students who are upperclassmen in their junior or senior year, male and female, and came from all majors within the six colleges of the university. Since I was once an insider (an Opportunity Counselor) at one point and to avoid any biases, I did not recruit students, but rather an Opportunity Counselor who had access to the students assisted with recruitment efforts. The Opportunity Counselor was my point person since I am no longer in the Opportunity Program. She communicated with the Opportunity students and other counselors in the program to alert them about the study. I created a flyer and gave it to the counselor to share with the honors students. The flyer had these details: criteria for participants, completely voluntary, location, time, and my contact information. The intent was to recruit 10 participants (both male and female of all ages) from various majors who are members of the Epsilon Epsilon Omega Honor Society. I was purposeful in trying to attain both male and female participants because I thought it would be important to the study. I reiterate as the researcher; I did not include in my study any students that I previously worked with at the university.

Snowballing (Merriam, 1998) is another way to recruit participants. Opportunity students talk to one another frequently so the word about the study did spread among students and promoted by the counselors. This is also called network sampling and it is perhaps the most common form of purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Located a few honors students who fit the criteria and them spreading the word caused a snowballing (bigger and bigger) effect and it accumulated new information for a stronger study. They invited and named students until I reached my goal of 10 participants. I expected that it would not take long once snowballing began.

I gave the participants a consent form to participate in the study. The participant reviewed and signed the consent form and then I explained the study to have verbal consent as well. I then began interviews following my interview questions protocol. I asked them a series of open-ended questions about how they became an honors student and what that experience was like going from academically underprepared to honors status. The participants were invited to a second interview to do member checking on their responses and my initial data analysis. The next phase of this chapter explained how I collected and analyzed data in greater detail and the procedures in completing those tasks.

### **Data Collection**

According to researchers Merriam and Tisdell (2016), Patton (2015), Fernandez, Breen, and Simpson (2014), and Kim (2014) data analysis is best done in conjunction with data collection. Managing data is a vital part of data collection. Thinking about the theoretical framework drove the questions I asked, what I observed, and what documents were relevant to the study (Patton, 2015). Data was collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Once I had IRB approval to conduct research and the participants gave their consent, I began my interviews.

First, I conducted a round of one-on-one (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) interviews, followed by a second round for member checking with the participants. I chose one-on-one interviews to obtain a special kind of information – their lived experiences going from placed at-risk to honors status. It was necessary to interview because I was interested in past events that were impossible to replicate. For example, the honors students' experience in participating in a pre-freshman summer program or participating in a learning community. Second, a follow-up interview was used to collect data, observe, listen for similarities in experiences, and to see if any themes

emerged. It also gave me more data and the students an opportunity to clarify or add to their responses.

As stated above, there were 10 interviews and 10 follow-up interviews. Each interview had a set of notes. Documents had identifying notifications so I could access them as needed in both the analysis and the write-up of my findings. To code the data, I assigned a short-hand designation to various aspects of my data so that I could easily retrieve specific pieces of the data. For example, single words, letters, numbers, phases, colors, or combinations of these. I organized those short-hand words or phrases in the software called Delve. I looked for themes as they emerged from the rich data. I kept a reflective journal for note taking.

### ***Interview Process***

The 60–90-minute one-on-one (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) interviews created a rich, descriptive set of first-person accounts that best represent how participants made meaning of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2017). I chose one-on-one interviews because I wanted to hear about their unique experiences in their academic journey. Patton (2015) explains the main purpose for one-on-one interviews is to hear what is on someone’s mind and how they experience events. Interviewing allowed the participants to tell their lived experiences in great detail that could not be explained in a quantitative format. It was also necessary to interview because I was interested in their past experiences and events that may be impossible to replicate. In my office on campus, I used a semi-structured interview guide to help facilitate the interview process (see Appendix X for guide). The guide was not intended to be prescriptive, so prompts were used to further elicit information or to clarify an interviewee’s initial response.

I also asked questions by way of probing. Probes are questions or comments that follow up on something already asked (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). During the probing I

asked for more details, for clarification, for examples. Probing is an opportunity for me to ask who, what, when, and where questions such as: What do you mean by that? Who assisted you during your academic journey? When did you make honors status? Where were you at that time? Those questions lead to other questions such as: Give me an example of what you mean. Walk me through that experience. I used probing in the second interview as well.

### ***Follow-up Interview***

A one-on-one follow-up interview was used for member checking. It took from 45 to 60 minutes per interview. There were additional research questions that arose as a result of the original study. I conducted another study with follow-up questions, based on what I found in the first study. The interview questions were open-ended questions so that in-depth information was collected. That was another opportunity to probe and ask more questions or to clarify some details that were mentioned in the first round of interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### ***Research Journal***

I maintained a research journal during the study to ensure I was keeping a record of the research process itself. I recorded in the journal my observations about the participants and their lived experiences going from students placed at-risk to honors status. While conducting the interviews that were enriched and gave context to the data collection, maintaining a journal allowed me to reflect on the observations, thoughts, perceptions made during meetings, unforeseen casual conversations relevant to the study, challenges encountered, and other qualitative data. I used a journal to capture my thoughts and to have the opportunity to go back to it when I started to write the final dissertation chapter and perhaps publish an article that speaks to research journals.

I used a research journal to make notes, write down themes and patterns, observations seen in the interviews. Codes were created by me and the Delve software (to maintain order and organization). I also used the research journal to reflect on the assumptions that I brought and that are at play as I interacted with the participants. I kept a research journal in a virtual cloud for safe storage as well as a hard copy in a locked drawer and I am the only one with a key.

### **Data Analysis**

I used the constant comparative method to analyze the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The constant comparative method of data analysis was introduced by Glaser and Strauss (2009) as the means for developing grounded theory. The constant comparative method of data analysis is inductive and comparative and has been widely used throughout qualitative research to generate findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each interview had a set of notes and documents with identifying notations so that I could access them as needed in both the analysis and the write-up of my findings. I created an inventory of my entire data set. I took inventory of interviews, field notes, documents, and memos I wrote while collecting or thinking about the data. The data set was organized and labeled according to the organizing scheme that made sense to me. I assigned some sort of short-hand designation and colors to various aspects of my data so it could be easily found. For example, Participant 1 transcription will be coded blue; Participant 2 transcription will be coded green. I will have one hard copy of the entire data set, along with my organized scheme and they were set aside from the data set that I worked with when I did the analysis. The data is stored in multiple places, including on a cloud storage site and Delve software. The analysis took place immediately, with the first interview.

### **Recording and Transcribing Interview Data**

I audio recorded and video recorded the interviews. Participants who did not come to campus for various reasons were video recorded using Zoom. I transcribed the first few interviews and then hired an Academic Specialist to transcribe the remaining eight interviews. Hiring someone to transcribe allowed me time to spend analyzing my data instead of transcribing it. I read their transcriptions while listening to the tape to correct errors and fill in any blanks that they could not understand what was said on tape. While transcribing, I used verbatim transcription of recorded interviews which provided the best database for analysis. To speed up the process of finalizing transcriptions, I allowed Zoom to transcribe the video recordings. After Zoom transcribed the interviews, I then used my transcriptions to fix any errors or mixed words. Then I stored them in the Delve software. The Delve software numbered each line so I could identify key terms and code them accordingly.

### **Coding**

First, I thought about the purpose of the study and the research question, I looked to see how the honors students made meaning of moving from placed at-risk to honors status. Second, when I coded the data, I looked through the lens of my theoretical framework (Self-efficacy and Social Integration). I focused on patterns and insights related to my purpose and questions guided by my theoretical frame. Next, I read the data set and marked in margins what the main theme was related to that conversation. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) called this open coding. Using open coding, I captured data with a word or a phrase that seemed to be responsive to my research question. After doing that for a while, I had lots of codes of data. I went back over the data and asked myself these questions: What are the main themes that emerge when I think about the study? What main insights have I seen? and What are the answers to my research question?

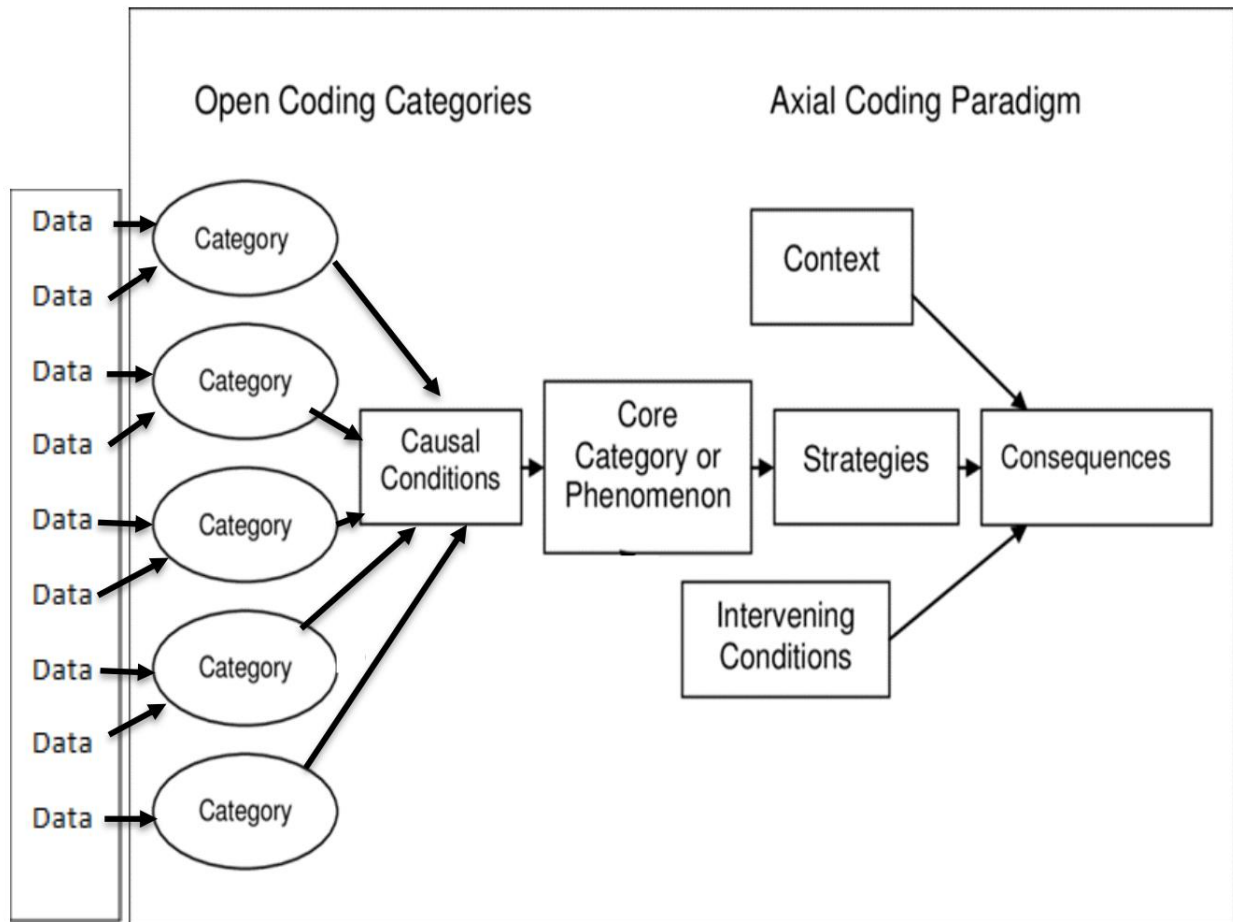
After I answered those questions, I looked at the individual data bits to make sure it supported what I thought I saw in the data set. Using the constant comparative method, I combined the codes from open coding above, into fewer, more comprehensive categories. I read through the data myself to see what themes emerge before storing them in the Delve software (LaYee, 2020). By doing this step, myself, I determined what main themes emerged when I thought about the study, what main insights had I accumulated, and what was the answer to my research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Lastly, I went back and reviewed to see if the data supported what I thought I saw. I developed categories using the constant comparative method as described above. I combined the codes from open coding, into fewer, more comprehensive categories (axial coding; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In addition to what I stated above, I organized the data collected from the one-on-one interviews and from the follow-up interviews. I used a qualitative software called Delve, which is software that organizes data (LaYee, 2020). Delve saved me time by automatically collating codes and keeping codes in a codebook. It also strengthened analysis and reporting, enabled collaboration (an online platform for sharing), and it offered 24-hour customer service assistance.

Once all of that was done and I had identified a tentative scheme of categories and themes or findings, I sorted all the evidence for my scheme into categories. I worked with 25 to 30 categories early in data analysis, then worked at reducing and combining them to 5 or 6 themes that I used in the end to write my narrative. I knew this was complete because I had determined a clear understanding of the phenomenon and had assigned all data to a category. Also, I checked with my methodologist numerous times to agree that the categories made sense considering the data. This strategy helped ensure reliability in the study. Next, I created file folders in Google Docs and a hard copy in a locked drawer, each labeled with a category name. I

determined the actual names of the categories/themes/findings. I looked for the terms, concepts, and categories that reflected what I saw in the data. Each unit of data is coded according to its theme and put into a file folder. Each unit of data placed in a category included original transcript, field notes, and audio tape so when I went to review the context of the folder everything was in one place. The benefits of qualitative coding are: (1) systematic and rigorous; (2) find quotes quickly; (3) find patterns and themes; and (4) check for biases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Throughout this process, I thought about any biases that I might bring into the study beyond my theoretical framework. Again, I asked myself questions: What might I be projecting onto the data based on my own beliefs and life experiences? How does my positionality affect what I see? How am I guarding against my biases?



*Figure 1. Coding Flow Chart***Positionality**

I was one of four Academic Advisors and Counselors in an Opportunity Program. I am an African American middle-aged woman. I am an educator with 18 years of experience in higher education and I am in the health and wellness counseling profession. I worked with Opportunity students for more than 30 years, starting in an urban school district. I am a scholar. I co-authored an article written about Opportunity students and how with academic support they can achieve and persist to graduation from college (Cholewa et al., 2017). Presently, I am a program Director working with a special admit population of academically underprepared students.

I know firsthand the rigors and challenges Opportunity students face. I too was an Opportunity student. I entered college through an Opportunity Program in New Jersey. I had a

counselor who gave me guidance and structure during my time as an undergraduate student. Like many Opportunity students, at first, I did not take advantage of the academic support the program offered. It took a few semesters before I realized that going to tutoring and seeking help would make me a better and stronger student. Once I realized that seeking help and creating study groups was a viable option for me, I took full advantage of each opportunity. I would go to the library with students from the Greek organizations who studied in small groups. I started going home on weekends so I could get my work done. Soon, I could see a change in my grades.

Most Opportunity students have part- or full-time jobs. I was no different; as an Opportunity student, I worked full-time while taking 12 to 15 credits. That's when I transferred to a community county college, to earn an Applied Science degree in Office Systems Management. I realized that I needed to see the fruits of my labor pay off sooner than later. I made the Dean's list often and was advised by my Opportunity Counselor to take honors courses. I took those courses and graduated with honors status. After graduating from the community county college honors program, I enrolled back into a four-year college and transferred those earned credits to work on a Bachelor of Science degree. Since I worked full-time, I took online courses. I made Dean's list often and was inducted into an honor society.

Many years later, I decided to go back to college to earn a master's degree and when I registered for classes, I was automatically labeled an Opportunity student. Even though I did not need academic support, my social security number said I did. Once you are accepted into college under an Opportunity Program, you are always an Opportunity student. Therefore, if I wanted academic support even in graduate school, it was available, and I was assigned an Academic Advisor and Counselor.

During the coding process, I thought about what biases I might bring to the study beyond my theoretical framework. I asked myself these questions: What might I be projecting onto the data based on my own beliefs and life experiences? How does my positionality affect what I see? Keeping these questions in the forefront of my study helped to alleviate any biases. In addition to those questions, I used critical friends and member checking to alleviate any biases.

### ***Critical Friends***

The critical friends were my peers who listened as I talked through and clarified my ideas and who provided honest and impartial feedback. This helped me to adopt a more independent stance towards my research project and to ensure that my research plan was coherent. My critical friends reviewed drafts of transcriptions and listened to audio tapes to be certain my transcriptions are accurate. Herr and Anderson (2014) stated that critical evaluation is a key component in maintaining the quality of your research. My critical friends also gave me guidance in developing themes. I also used a critical friend who is not connected to the Opportunity Program. A critical friend that had no relationship to the participants or the Opportunity Program assisted me in establishing themes as well. Using critical friends was important to me because they helped to avoid any biases in the study.

### ***Member Checking***

Member checking is another tool to practice trustworthiness. I used member checking as an opportunity to understand and assess what the participants accurately described in my writings and interpretations. Member checking allowed the participants to correct errors and challenge what was perceived as wrong interpretations. It provided an opportunity to volunteer for additional information. I used member checking to get the participant on record with his or her factual reports and interpretations. Herr and Anderson (2014) said it is not uncommon to use

member checking as a form of validating the participants' conversations as they were told. This procedure of member checking provided an opportunity to summarize preliminary findings. I used member checking to provide the participants with the opportunity to assess the adequacy of data and preliminary findings as well as to confirm particular aspects of the data.

### **Trustworthiness**

Given my positionality and that I have worked in the EOF Program, I needed to ensure trustworthiness. To stay objective in this process as the researcher I needed to be able to hear it with fresh eyes and fresh ears. Here is how I attempted to ensure trustworthiness. I used critical friends, member checking, and a reflective journal to establish and maintain trustworthiness in my study. Critical friends who are colleagues and who have no relationship to the Opportunity Program were used to maintain trustworthiness. Member checking added trustworthiness because it allowed me to check my analysis/interpretation with the participants themselves. I used a transcription process to identify the thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and experiences of the honors students, which, in turned, facilitated me in moving deeper into the investigation and capturing participants' voices to a greater extent.

Reflective journaling was my way of maintaining a detailed journal during the interview. The journal contains an outline of topics discussed in each interview. This helped me to keep track of what has already been covered in the interviews and to go back to specific conversations when I wanted to follow up on something that the participant had said. Without reflective journaling, I would have wasted time listening to tapes and re-reading transcripts looking for specific things. In one-on-one interviews, such notes helped me remember the striking themes or moments in each interview (Taylor et al., 2016). Reflecting on journaling and transcribing helped me through the process of self-awareness, representing others, and understanding how

knowledge is generated. I elaborated further on how critical friends, member checking, and reflective journaling added trustworthiness to my study.

### **Summary**

This chapter gave an overview of how I conducted a basic qualitative study on students placed at-risk, underprepared, low-income, and first-generation college students who become honors students. After reading a plethora of journal articles and dissertations on qualitative methods, I chose to use a basic qualitative method to interview students because it fits my purpose to learn how students placed at-risk become honors students. The honors students answered questions derived from the research question: How do college students, initially considered at-risk of not succeeding but who are now honors students, describe their educational journeys at the university? It was fascinating to know the impact honors programs have on these students. The semi-structured interviews and follow-up interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then coded by me. To keep my data organized, I used Delve, a qualitative computerized software.

Through a step-by-step process, I explained how I would code, analyze, and transcribe the data. Throughout the study, I used member checking and consulted with critical peers to make sure I was practicing ethical behavior and made sure I kept my biases out of the study. I analyzed the transcript reports to determine any themes, patterns, or commonalities among the honors students, and then shared the results of these findings in Chapter 4. Also, I delve deeper into Chapter 4 about how students placed at-risk turn into honor students and what it feels like to achieve this status as a scholar.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Methodology**

In the previous chapter I discussed the methodology and the theoretical framework so the reader could understand how I planned to conduct my research study and gather data. In this chapter, I will share the findings to the research question in this study: How do college students, initially considered at-risk of not succeeding, who are now honors students, describe their educational and personal journeys at the university?

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of those students who are not expected to be successful or excel in college and then move forward to become honors students. Thinking about the purpose of the study and the research question, I was interested in learning how the honors students made meaning of moving from placed “at-risk” to honors status in college. A basic qualitative inquiry was conducted, using a guided interview method to understand the experiences of 10 participants who entered the university placed at-risk, but with academic and family support became honors students. I chose to study these participants because they had a similar experience of moving from being placed at-risk to honors.

This qualitative study yielded a deeper understanding of these students’ personal experiences through their journey. The theoretical conceptual framework to be considered was Social Integration Theory (Rose et al., 2014; Tinto, 1975) and Self-Efficacy Theory (Seay, 2015; Watkins, 2018). These two theories guided my inquiry as I listened and analyzed the students’ experiences of their personal and academic journeys through a Northeastern university.

Chapter four will begin by providing participants’ demographic information with a table illustrating a brief description of each participant. This chapter will then focus on the three themes that I identified through a careful analysis and review of the interviews.

### **Description of the Participants**

Each participant was interviewed individually twice and asked about her/his viewpoints and experiences related to how they were once placed at-risk and then became honors students. The participants were upperclassmen (juniors and seniors). The participants are identified by pseudonyms which are not related to their real names. Table 1 provides a summary of the demographic data of the participants interviewed. The table includes their pseudonym, whether they were at-risk academically and or economically, first generation, age, race, admit status to the university, cumulative GPA, and how many times they made Dean's List and EOF Honors List.

### **Themes and Data Analysis**

While analyzing the data I kept my research question in the forefront of my inquiry. In response to this research question, three themes emerged from the qualitative data analysis gathered from interviews of the 10 Opportunity students. During the data collection process, I engaged in active listening and reflective journaling to fully capture participants' experiences. Data collection and data analysis were conducted simultaneously, and critical friends were utilized to help assure clarity in the information being collected and presented.

I used the constant comparative method to analyze the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I took a second look at the themes, concepts, and models and developed some categories using the constant comparative method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The constant comparative method combines the codes from open coding into fewer, more comprehensive categories. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) call this axial coding. In using this method three themes were identified: 1) Navigating College: Challenges that Forced them to Seek Help, 2) Putting in the Work, Time Management, and Asking for Help Fostered Motivation and Self-Efficacy, and 3) Creating

Trusting Relationships using Self-efficacy. Over the next pages, I will elaborate on each theme. I will begin with theme number 1.

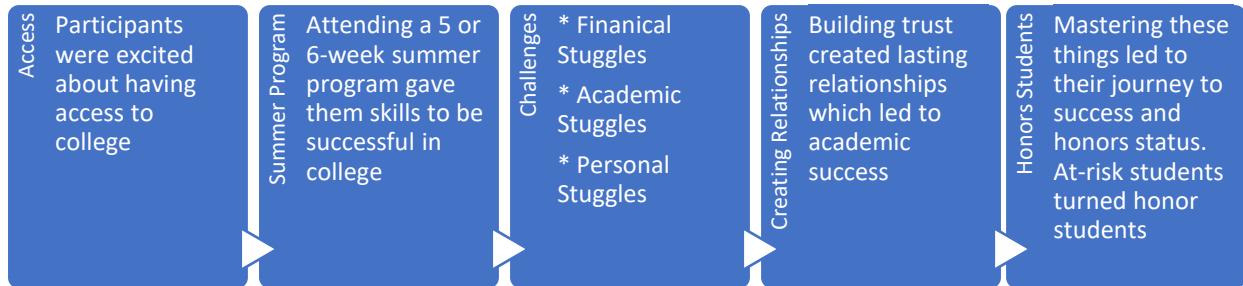
### **The Arc of Their Stories**

Before discussing the themes of this study, I will share the overall “str” that I heard from my participants. This “arc of their experiences” was consistent with most of the participants. In the beginning, they were excited to gain access to a four-year college experience and they were motivated to participate in the Opportunity program. Their confidence was high at this point in their journey. They passed their summer courses and did well in the summer program. However, when they started the academic year, they struggled with the increased number of credits, and most were failing within the first semester. Challenges such as financial struggles, academic under preparedness, and personal responsibilities (i.e., family and employment obligations) hindered their success. They then began to reach out to their Opportunity Counselors, and they realized that they could seek help. This part of the journey is reflected in my first theme of “Navigating College: Challenges that Forced Students to Seek Help.” They began to go to tutors and faculty for academic support and sought peers to assist them as well. These skills building phase of their journey relates to their self-efficacy and is reflected in the second theme of my study “Putting in the Work, Time Management, and Asking for Help Fostered Motivation and Self-Efficacy.” As their confidence and self-efficacy grew that also discovered the importance of creating relationships to improve their skills. They built lasting relationships with peers, faculty, and support staff at the university. They realized the importance of creating relationships is what gave them the structure to be successful and to continue to earn honors. This is reflected in my third theme “Creating Trusting Relationships and Self-efficacy”. The final part of their journey



was their ability to be successful in college and maintain honors status feeling proud, confident, and hopeful for their future. (See Figure 2.)

*Figure 2. The Arc of Their Stories*



### **Theme 1) Navigating College: Challenges that Forced Students to Seek Help**

The participants shared that they came to the university through a conditional acceptance Opportunity program (EOF). Each participant in different ways shared that they entered college cautiously and they did not expect to do well in a university setting. Overall, the participants shared that they were unsure of themselves academically because they had always been told they were not college material, and that they should pursue other options in life. They talked about the opportunity program as an opportunity to attend college by participating in a six-week summer program. This was their entrance into the university. Overall, they consistently shared that with the help from the Opportunity staff and faculty they found support and help. They discovered they could achieve. Alice said, “no one understood that besides people in college, so having the support from the tutors and faculty was helpful. So, the support at the University has absolutely been my number one support system, and the only thing that's getting me through this smoothly.” Amanda stated, “So, um, that helped like to... I had the extra support of like... I am EOF so, I had the extra support where they were like, ‘No, don’t just settle for that, you paid for those courses. Go talk to someone.’”

The summer Opportunity program was their entrance into college. Therefore, when they encountered challenges, they were offered help with tutoring, course selections, and career readiness. The ones who succeeded are the ones who took advantage of the support and guidance. They were offered practical strategies and they passed the summer program. However, their first full year was not as successful. They began to struggle and were not sure what to do; they did not have sufficient strategies to succeed, and their confidence wavered. They failed to use the skills that were taught to them during the summer program. They believed the skills they learned would automatically kick in without giving thought to the implementation process. At risk of academic failure in the face of challenges for which they were unprepared, they eventually had to seek help and support. Below I will review their challenges and how they sought out help.

### *Challenges and Seeking Help*

In this section I lay out the various challenges they faced. As stated above, these participants entered college unsure of their abilities to be in college and without a lot of academic confidence. As you will hear these challenges, at times, had them questioning their confidence to be successful.

Darrel said,

It kind of takes a toll on your confidence and the work, and that in the work that you know that you can do. When you see a lot of lower grades, it takes a toll on your confidence. Um, your mental confidence, your emotional confidence.

The challenges were financial, academic, and personal. When reviewing the transcripts, these participants shared their challenging life circumstances, but the challenges eventually forced them to rely on others.

Nine of the 10 decided in their senior year of high school that attending college was critical for a successful future. Some came from poverty and disparaged communities and wanted better lives for themselves. Some were in gangs and no longer wanted that lifestyle or to die at a young age like their friends. Some didn't want to live in poverty anymore and saw that college would give them options.

Darrel shared, "the challenges I faced my first year was having to take care of my parents when they got sick with COVID. I couldn't focus on schoolwork. Sometimes I missed classes to take care of them." Les said, "I was forced to ask for help because the struggle was real." Joy also felt the challenges when she had to take care of her sickly father. She shared, "it was a challenge to balance school and taking care of my father. I know I had to because there was no one else to do it. I was an only child and my mother left us."

Relying on others was not something this group did easily. It was an obstacle they had to overcome to be productive students. Les stated, "Um! As I said, I didn't seek out help or be able to freely talk to my professors or being open to my professors asking them for help."

Most participants expressed their unease in asking for help because they had not had positive experiences in high school and did not know they could ask for help.

Les said,

I remember being like very nervous, like very scared, you know, because, like I was fresh out of high school, you know, social like experience, you know, definitely took a toll on my self-esteem because I didn't get the help I thought I should have got from my high school teachers.

Joy shared,

I never saw myself really getting that great education. That's why I say um that I didn't see myself going to college. Well, honestly, honestly, if well for me, I must say I'm gonna talk about my college experience because my college experience is kind of different from high school experience. That's what I want you to talk about.

Many Opportunity parents of students placed at-risk cannot advise their children as they navigate this uncertain college experience. For Opportunity students who are learning the social and structural dynamics of higher education in real time, the costs and benefits of asking for help are less clear because many of them are first generation. The participants shared that they could not turn to their parents for help because their parents had no experience with college. Samantha shared,

Because, of course, as a first-generation student, you don't have anyone to tell you to ask for help. You just kind of go with whatever others say. And so, for me I didn't ask for help at first. It was the EOF Program that I became dependent on um, and they were really really helpful in terms of, you know, directing me to the writing center in the library.

Samantha's experience makes the role of other supportive adults even more important – these students do not have as large a network or safety net of experienced adults as those who have college educated parents might have. Samantha said,

If I need any help with my papers, you know, or any online sources that would help me, you know, get a better understanding of what I can do to improve, you know, whatever I would need help with in, for example, writing for my counselor, or professor, which she would send me links to appropriate writing center like you know how to make an appointment and basically all of that stuff.

These participants, who came to college believing that asking for help communicated weakness were less likely to proactively communicate their challenges. Many of the participants expressed that they didn't ask for help until their academic situation became critical. They shared that they didn't ask for help until they failed a course or exam. In addition, they didn't know there were resources available until the EOF counselor told them. Samantha shared, "it wasn't until I failed math two times before I realized I needed help. My counselor advised me to go to tutoring. When I went to tutoring, it helped, and I passed the math class on the third try."

When I explored these external challenges and asked why they were hesitant to ask for help, it became clear that this sample of students either did not realize they could ask for help or found themselves overwhelmed with work, family, and other obligations. What I heard them say was that they did not ask for help because it was not available in high school, or they believed they could handle it on their own. Samantha shared,

Helpful in terms of the course work? No, honestly. Um. Yeah, I did not think I could get help. Helpful in terms of having things explained to me in class, I didn't feel comfortable asking for help in class either.

Mark stated,

My sister did not go to college. She graduated from high school. Um, my brother did try to go to community college, but at that time it was very hard to pay it off. He couldn't get any kind of aid at all, no federal or state. He was trying to work and go to school at the same time, but unfortunately, I think it was too much for him when he just said, you know, let me just start working full time. Watching my sister and brother go through those struggles made me want to work harder in college.

However, before they realized they could become an honors student, these participants shared that they had to learn how to navigate those murky waters which are those tough math and biology courses, managing working full or part-time while taking 12 to 15 credits each semester, working with a difficult faculty member, and or taking care of their siblings or a sick relative.

What I came to understand from talking with the participants, once they reached out for help from the Opportunity program, is that they began to get better grades and eventually made EOF Honors and Dean's List. Samantha said,

My first year was a struggle because I did not ask for help. Even though the Opportunity Program was there for me, I did not take advantage of its services. So, I had my EOF counselor and she was really, really helpful and she really understood whatever I was going through and she really helped me through the process, and you know she applied a lot of resources for me to use, so, it was an overall really good experience with them.

Although the Opportunity students were achieving academic honors and found the EOF program helpful, they still endured financial, academic, and personal struggles.

**Financial Struggles.** Participants shared financial struggles that interfered with their academic success. While they were in college trying to earn a degree, their current present lives demanded attention, so they could stay afloat financially, literally keep a foot in the door of college life. Financially, Joy struggled to get enough hours at her new job to keep up with her payment plan. Most of the participants did not have enough savings to cover their textbooks and pay for school at the start of each semester. Mark shared,

I moved back in with my parents, so I still have those bills to pay. I pay my parents and don't pay my bills. You know I paid for my phone bill. I pay for my car insurance. I pay

for my car loan. I pay for my um, my school, my books, you know. I pay for my gas in my car, which right now is a little crazy.

They looked for other ways to pay for textbooks such as scholarships, book vouchers, and free e-books. Samantha noted, "I looked for scholarships to pay for my books. I even borrowed textbooks from the EOF Book Lending Program." Although they were able to secure financial assistance, sometimes they struggled with major courses which caused them to seek help in other ways.

**Academic Struggles.** Academically, the participants struggled in their study skills or lack of study skills (poor study habits) carried over from high school. They had to seek help on how to learn to study. During the summer program, study skills were introduced, but if the student doesn't continue to use them, it can become a lost skill to have. Although they told me that during the summer program they did learn how to study, taking 6 or 9 credits in the summer was no comparison to taking 15 and 16 credits in the fall and spring semesters. Again, they struggled academically, but they learned how to seek help when needed. They did not enter the Opportunity program with this skill. The participants shared that to be successful at this university you must be connected to the EOF services provided such as tutoring. Like all college students, tutoring is offered, but if you don't seek it out, you can't get the help you need. Mark said, "I would go to tutoring three or four times a semester, I would actually go and it's also those times where I'm like extremely stressed because of school and because of work." Jane shared, "I would go to tutoring about once a week for an hour each session." Darrel explained, "I could see a tutor this day at that time or this day that time, it's a lot of planning, scheduling and just going for all the extra help and resources that the school has offered me." Often, the challenges that the participants in this study faced were academic insecurities. However, during the summer

program, many students turned to family and friends for support. Weekend passes gave the students the opportunity to reset and start fresh for the next week.

**Personal Struggles.** Participants shared that their family expectations were daunting in such a way that they felt extreme pressure to do well. Being the first in their family to go to college yielded presuming stress in their personal lives. Joy experienced traumatic family events that left her distraught and unable to focus on school. Joy shared, “My father got sick, and I had to take care of him, so my academics suffered.” Darrel faced physical and mental health issues as he was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD), and all but one participant struggled to decipher and meet expectations in one or more courses. Darrel said,

I suffered with ADD, so it was harder for me to stay focused in high school. I did not have tutors to assist me. I had a teacher’s aide, but she was not helpful. I got the help I needed when I came to college. I went to tutoring every day and it helped.

Despite the personal struggles, participants shared their excitement by making EOF honors and Dean’s list. They also shared how their parents were proud of their accomplishments. Joy said, “my parents were just as excited as me when I made EOF Honors, and the response that I received from my dad. I remember him telling me that I know you could do it.”

Darrel shared,

You're eligible for honor societies. There's so many Perks to doing well, and for yourself that it helps you in ways you would never even expect it to. My parents have definitely been like extremely proud of me, knowing that the sacrifices that they've done, and that I'm able to make them proud is the biggest achievement.

Alice stated,



It's kind of crazy because I graduated high school with the 2.6, and when I got my first honors I was very confused. Honestly, I didn't really know what I was doing to get on to honors, so I just kept doing what I was doing, and that's always homework, and always being with friends that are doing homework, and also trying to maintain honors.

### ***Summer Academy and First Year Challenges of Time Management and Procrastination***

A subtheme that emerged from the data regarding challenges and seeking help was the experience of first year challenges as they transitioned from the summer program feeling more confident into the real world of college coursework and expectations. All participants came into college with some fear and low expectations of being successful. In transitioning to college, Opportunity students participated in a summer academy. The summer academy gave students a head start to their college environment. This was reflected in their low confidence prior to attending the summer academy. Nine of the participants who attended the summer academy shared that their level of confidence was boosted as a result of their attendance in the program. Their confidence reflected their ability to successfully complete the summer academy. Samantha indicated,

I don't know what it's called I forgot, but the EOF writing tutoring thing that I learned in the summer program I used that and that was really, really helpful for me at least, it was for me, I mean the comments to the feedback was extremely helpful, so I did better.

Les shared, "But that supportive system in the summer program really helps a lot. It really does, especially when you're feeling down."

In reviewing my journal notes taken from the data, their responses to transitioning into college revealed two consistent issues that impacted their early transition to academic work. Procrastination and time management were voiced as obstacles they had to overcome to be

successful in college and eventually move on to an honors level student. Participants Samantha, Amanda, Jane, Ava, Joy, Alice, Les, and Darrel noted their struggles with procrastination and time management which was also a struggle in high school. They also shared that being immature played a major role in their adjustment to college. Over time as they matured, they saw the need to be successful in college which led them to becoming honors students. Samantha said, “I didn’t realize how much different college would actually be when I entered. I was young and immature.” Alice shared, “I was only 17 when I came to college. I didn’t know what to expect.”

The students in this study shared that navigational challenge was learning they procrastinated in one way or another as it pertains to their course work. The students took personal ownership of their procrastination and tried to eliminate it as much as possible. Les shared, “I used to procrastinate when I first started college. I learned quickly to get my assignments done on time, or I would fail the course.” They spoke about managing their time wisely and making small adjustments to overcome procrastination. Mina shared, “If you are putting off assignments that can be done today for tomorrow, that’s procrastination and not managing your time wisely.” Alice said,

When I was in the summer program, I procrastinated and didn’t get my work done on time. I was doing that in high school too, but the teachers never said anything about it. I didn’t learn that it wasn’t okay until I came to college.

While it did not prevent them from moving forward academically, it was expressed as a frustration and a potential roadblock to being successful. Procrastination and time management often go together. Some people procrastinate because they have poor time management skills.

The participants shared their challenge in navigating college was linked to having poor time management skills. This seemed to fuel their procrastination on completing assignments.

They shared that they knew the importance of time management but at times struggled with it. Jane shared, “Conquering time management is an Art, and it can be mastered if you practice good time management skills.” Mark commented, “So that was also hard balancing like school, and helping out with work as well as events. Making time for both was hard, but I learned how to do it.” In the margin of my notes, I recorded the participants noted that for them to continue to make EOF Honors and or Dean’s List they had to conquer time management and better organize their time. What they shared was that every semester they would take their syllabi, review the assignments, and write down on paper or computer or tablet the due dates of every assignment, test, and quiz. They also shared with me that they had some sort of reward system for every assignment completed on time. For example, Ava said, “As I complete an assignment and turn it in, I reward myself with a night off from studying.” Joy explained, “So that was also hard balancing like school, and helping out with work as well as events. Making time for both was hard, but I learned how to do it.”

Mark shared,

But I want to say I was able to organize my time management skills. I was able to pretty much, you know as soon as I got out of work. Let me do my homework, since they're do a little bit um earlier than the rest, or sooner than the rest, as well as let me work little by little, on different essays.

### ***Seeking Help***

These 10 Opportunity students who did become honors students navigated their challenges of university life by seeking help. They shared that they navigated their way through college by seeking help from their counselors and faculty. Seeking help was not a part of their repertoire, it was something they had to learn. They also shared how they sought support from

family and friends and while appreciated, it was not sufficient, they needed that academic support for success. Jane shared,

And that actually helps motivate me to strive even higher than why I'm setting a goal for so with that they're always very supportive of me doing my think is best for my academics and they're always very encouraging kind of like my little cheerleading team. If I could say that um yeah they've been they've been great they're always just like so happy to see my achievements and I had that has really helped. So, my family reacts almost the same way as my friends very excited almost jumping up and down very proud. Like my mom would hang up any piece of paper saying that I've accomplished anything, or she'll put it in like a book and that has also helped me. Keep my motivation up, because it's like I'm making someone proud and happy about my academics, because she didn't get a chance to do it.

For students placed at-risk who entered college with negative mentalities about seeking help, asking for help involved a double exposure: admitting weakness and revealing a potentially stigmatizing academic or life situation. Jane said, "Where I come from if you asked for help you were considered dumb or stupid." To gain the intended benefits of the Opportunity program they were accepted into, they had to first build trusting relationships with program staff. Whether students reached out for help from the programs depended on the meanings they attached to seeking help and the strength of relationships they had with program staff. Mark noted, "I always went to the EOF Tutoring Center because I felt welcomed there and they always helped me with math." Most did not realize, initially, that they could receive support. They had not learned this skill in high school. Amanda said, "I didn't need help in high school, so I didn't think I needed help in college."

*Family and Friends Support*

Some shared that navigating college can be a daunting experience for first-generation and students placed at-risk. Most of the participants in this study are from single parent families and they did not attend college. They shared that first-generation students have no idea what murky waters lie in their paths to success in college. It was more stressful for them as college students who are labeled at-risk. They also said a sense of belonging can be difficult for some first-generation college students. For many of them they were told “you are not college material” by their high school counselor and some family members. But many of them felt the love and support from family and friends. Les shared, “It's that supportive system that you've got that helps you out.” Mina shared, “I would be panicking last minute, and you know I would turn to my friends, and my friends would be like you got this.”

They were accepted into this special admit program and with academic support they became honors students earning a cumulative grade point average ranging from 3.0 to 4.0. To the contrary of what they were told in elementary and high school, many of them with support from family and friends are striving to graduate with honors status. Mark expressed,

So, having my parents, my friends, telling me to go at it was hard. Even sometimes my friends would want to go out, even though sometimes they would say they finished all their homework, and it's not like that. I'll go with you; you know I still have work to do. Something they would say would keep me motivated. So that helped a lot, and I feel like to this day. It's that supportive system that you've got that helps you out.

In conclusion, each participant expressed the ability to manage their time better and not procrastinate as they gained skills that helped them transition into college level work and then kept them moving forward to honors level coursework. They conquered their challenges and

faced them head-on. They met with faculty and staff for help and looked to family and friends for support. They conquered time management and procrastinated less. Seeking help from staff, faculty, family, and friends, these students started to have a feeling of belonging and they carved out a place for themselves as successful students. The second theme below is about how they motivated themselves through self-efficacy to make honors and how they continued to make honors each semester going forward.

### **Theme 2) Putting in the Work, Time Management, and Asking for Help Fostered Motivation and Self-Efficacy**

As stated in theme 1, these participants are precarious and were not motivated in high school so that behavior carried over into their college experience. As noted in theme 1, their experiences in high school were different than in college. In my study, I found that self-learning strategies on participants' academic accomplishments increased their self-efficacy and indirectly influenced achievement motivation. This theme emerged from the participants spending so much time talking about who motivated them to achieve honors status and to continue to make honors status semester after semester. They shared how learning new skills played a role in their honors success. Participants told me their faculty, counselor, family, peers, and friends motivated them to learn new skills that enhanced their ability to be successful.

Social integration theory posits the importance of social and academic integration with college students and this approach was paramount in understanding these students' experiences. Because Tinto's (Tinto et al., 1994) model states that students have background characteristics and attributes that help determine their institutional fit, it seems necessary that I examine how these characteristics and attributes affect the honors students who were once placed at-risk. The participants in my study discussed the importance of interpersonal relationships and active

involvement within the academic setting as helpful to maintaining their improved academic status. Joy felt a connection to friends in the residential halls, which gave her a sense of belonging in the college environment. This sense of being with others while studying gave her greater confidence and improved her ability to focus on academics. Students expressed that academic support programs, mentoring, tutoring, and social engagement motivated them to achieve higher grades. Social engagement in academic and social events seemed to foster greater confidence with these participants. They also stated they were building lasting relations with various groups that helped them succeed. Joy said,

Well, I could stay here with you. You could do your assignment. I did my assignment. We could just put some music on, and then we could just study. Therefore, it was just like having that energy in that safe space for us to work on things. It was just making me feel like you know, you are right. You are pushing yourself. You're pushing me so we're a great supportive group.

Mark expressed,

Um, for starters, for you know, my professors were always pretty much, very helpful um resource, wise as well because of the fact that you know I needed it. I do need that help. I needed that held badly so, and also them not giving up on me. You know we're human. They're always going to be times where we don't. We think that we're going to fail. We're not. We don't want to keep going, you know, but we always need those. You know. That voice that helps us, you know, letting us know that we can, you know don't give up on it, having those kind of professors as well as my friends and family, cheering me on, and let me know that even if you fall, you know, get right back up. You know we're here to help you, and that's what helped me out tremendously.

Samantha shared,

I wouldn't be able to meet deadlines, or I would be panicking at the last minute, and you know I would turn to my friends, and my friends would be like you, You got this. Like they would basically like motivate you to keep going, and you know, like I'm. I'm thankful that I have such a great support system in friends and family, where my family would also be supportive of, you know, kind of give me that space where they would not bother me at all, or distract me, because I don't usually go as a commuter. I would usually be at home, and you know a lot of things go on in the background at home, and it's very difficult to focus. I'd sit down on the laptop to work for like, maybe five, ten minutes, and then I would get up and take a break, or, like you get distracted, so they would kind of like, direct me back to where I need to be focused.

Talking with them gave me a better understanding of their perseverance and determination to make honors. They persevered and endured even when people told them they would never get into college. Mark shared,

You always have to surround yourself with people who think like you, because if you don't surround yourself with the people who think like you, they will never understand why you are pushing yourself a certain way, so I always had to.

### *Honors Students Motivating Themselves for Academic Success*

These honors participants are motivated by family, college personnel, and peers to work harder each semester to continue their honor status. Not only do they rely on those people for motivation, but the participants also shared that they motivated themselves to achieve honors status. Reviewing my journal and re-reading the transcriptions, this is what I noted; the participants were motivated to achieve honors status because they loved the positive attention



they received. The participants sought help when course work was difficult. Seeking help and going to tutoring prove to be beneficial and it motivated them to strive for honors. They adored being recognized by the Opportunity program each semester when they made EOF Honors. They even shared how they were motivated to do better semester after semester because of the certificates and awards they received from the Opportunity program. Family and friends are invited to cheer them on. These external recognitions motivated them to sustain their performance. For some, these events were the highlight of their semesters. This was encouragement to continue to be an honors scholar. Alice explained,

My counselor said you're smart. Get out there, and you know, fight that fight, and you know he was right, and I did. My siblings, you know, with their teasing ways, I knew that they were proud of me because they even told me themselves and that motivated me. The director said look around you. She made us look around and said: The people that you are sitting with will no longer be around you. I think that motivated me.

Participant Amanda said,

When I think about this interview the one thing I just thought of is I feel like in some ways being at-risk from a hard situation can push you to work harder than someone who is from privileged and maybe someone who is getting the grades just because they are known or whatever.

While the encouragement from support persons (family, EOF staff, and friends) fostered greater motivation to seek honors status the students also shared that learning skills through the program such as focusing on the work, better study habits, time management, and the ability to ask for help further propelled them to seek honors status. Joy shared,

It was mostly just like balancing life and my major. I like my major, is so hard and so much time needs to be committed to it. I'd be doing homework like for twelve hours, and barely put a dent into it like it's actually my five-hour classes don't even do much either. Like my homework takes up so much time throughout the week, like, I think if I didn't manage my time better, I would not be in my major.

When I asked participants what they thought they would need to do to achieve honors success, I wrote in the margin of my journal, participants seem to emphasize putting in the work, time management, and asking for help. The data demonstrates that participants often reflected on what they anticipated being different about college and demonstrated self-awareness about their experiences in high school. Amanda's level of confidence rose after making the Dean's List. She said,

I guess I didn't feel any sort of way because I didn't know what Dean's List was. My excitement came later. I told my mom, oh yeah, I made Dean's List. She's like. That's really good. What does that mean? Who is Dean?

Even though they were motivated to achieve honors, they shared that external challenges can be a barrier to achieving honors success as well. These barriers can hinder academic success for honors students.

### ***Greater Self-confidence and Pride in Achieving Honors Success***

The subtheme of overcoming barriers and gaining greater self-confidence or self-efficacy and pride in one's accomplishments seemed to enable these participants to become and remain honors students. Participants shared internal conflicts they encountered in trying to maintain their honors status that I believe are important to fully understand their success. These honors students expressed being critical of themselves and creating undue pressure and stress on themselves. The

impostor phenomenon was very real for some of these honors Opportunity students. The external barriers and internal conflicts combined to manifest in feelings of being an imposter. These feelings created barriers to these Opportunity honors students' sense of competence and empowerment, which impacted their level of accomplishment. They questioned themselves whether they really earned the right to be called honor scholars. This is apparent in a statement made by Joy,

To be successful here, I feel like you need to be really organized. You need to be time oriented. I know if I'm not time oriented, I do stuff at the last minute, I'll start stressing.

I'm not trying to do that? Sometimes I think I have impostor syndrome. Unsure of myself and my ability to continue to earn honors.

Mark shared that he felt similar, "I did like my little happy dance if that describes anything. Um! It was such an empowering moment for me, because never in a million years I thought I was going to get on the Dean's List."

These barriers did not help them navigate their way through high school and into college. However, overcoming those barriers and gaining skills to alleviate procrastination improved their time management skills and made them better students. Reaching out to supportive others also helped them feel less of an imposter and feel as if they were "college material." Battling the impostor syndrome caused some of the students to seek professional help i.e., counseling. They expressed the importance of reaching out during these difficult times. Mark indicated he didn't want to have that feeling of failure again. That is what motivated him to continue to make honors. He shared this in our interview,

I guess the idea was also again like not to fail again. If that makes sense. Um, just pretty much like being worried about going to that first place again, and um that being like

some sort of motivation. So that was pretty, my like scare, as in like. I don't want to go back to that place of feeling like a failure again, and because of that I was um getting myself more organized. Excuse me getting more organized, being able to go to different people helps if I needed it, using the different programs that college has to offer. Um, because I know what to call it. Not a lot of students use them. Um, you know they're there. Yes, and even the professors always tell us like, Hey, it's there. You guys pay for it like use it, and actually being able to use that kind of um. Those resources really did help a lot.

Jane explained,

Um, I just I really just pushed myself to do it, I said it would only be for 16 weeks it's not forever and luckily what I could look at what I usually do is tell myself, oh, this is my favorite class I can look forward to this at the end of the week, and that usually helps. I usually try to surround myself with people that are like minded when it comes to academics, so people that are trying to strive higher.

To summarize, the participants became very prideful after achieving honors status. They shared that attending the honors ceremonies and receiving praise with certificates, awards, and plaques gave them satisfaction that they did not have in high school. Mark shared, "I finally know what academic success feels like." Support from their peers, faculty, and family increased their motivation to earn honors. Having honors distinction gave them a sense of belonging to the college environment and receiving accolades from the Opportunity program increased their self-efficacy to work harder to continue to make honors. The participants started to realize that missing a few parties or not going out with friends was a good thing because the rewards outweighed the missed parties and loss of a few friends. They motivated themselves to make

honors semester after semester by encouraging themselves. As a reward, they took time off from studying when they received good grades on tests and exams. It was a reward system they built to encourage self-efficacy. They also achieved academic success once they overcame their barriers of procrastination, time management, and imposture syndrome. The participants found themselves successful and having academic achievement success felt extraordinary for them. They used self-efficacy as a motivator to create trusting relationships as they continued their college journey. Theme 3 explains how the participants in this study used self-efficacy to create trusting relationships.

### **Theme 3) Creating Trusting Relationships and Self-efficacy**

One of the fundamentals of Albert Bandura's (Seay, 2015) social cognitive theory that explains the essentials of human-environment interaction is self-efficacy theory. Self-efficacy played a major role in the participants' lives. As stated in theme 2, the participants used social integration and self-efficacy as they continued to improve their study skills and created social supports in their academic journey in college. When taking complex courses, students shared that they would strive to improve their assumptions and strategies in the course, rather than look for excuses such as not being interested or seeing the relevance of the course. They began to rethink their approaches to coursework and thus enhanced their self-efficacy in learning new skills to get better grades. The participants in this study not only persisted in their course of study in order to graduate, but they also reached out to others within and outside the immediate context of the learning environment. They learned new skills and became more confident in their skills while being motivated and supported by others to maintain their success.

*Self-efficacy or Self-advocacy*

Rather than associating seeking help with negative connotations, the participants equated asking for help with self-efficacy or self-advocacy. Self-efficacy or self-advocacy is one's belief about his or her own capacity to accomplish a given task. Therefore, I explored the relationships among self-efficacy or self-advocacy, as it relates to the Opportunity honors students.

Samantha, Amanda, Mark, Joy, Alice, Les and Darrel who socialized with faculty, peers, and friends learned that communicating their struggles and asking for help were positive signs of self-advocacy. They learned in college to take advantage of opt-in structures and support (i.e., tutoring and peer group tutoring) and reaching out for help was easier for them. Les and Darrel experienced overcoming institutional marginalization in elementary and high school and they had learned to form positive help-seeking orientations and their definition of proactively communicating challenges resulted in greater self-efficacy to be successful. Participant Darrel said,

It's just not showing within your work. It can be very discouraging. So, with self-advocacy, and just to make sure you're building yourself up and having your confidence is what definitely helped me push myself to get to honors. So, it's like not being where you want to be academically, physically, mentally. It can kind of take a toll on what you feel as though you could bring to the table. So, you're constantly seeing lower grades, C's. Maybe even an F. And you just know that you're putting your all, but like it's just not showing within your work. It can be very discouraging.

Alice used self-efficacy as motivation by not repeating her mother's mistakes. She shared,

Oh, okay, so this is gonna sound bad, but I kind of like viewed my mom as motivation, because I knew I never wanted to be like her not saying like she's a bad mother, or

anything but just seeing her struggle as a single mother of 5, working like every single day to get paid the bare minimum, like paycheck, to paycheck and like struggling by yourself. I knew I did not want that for me or my kids in the future. So, I always pushed myself to go to college to do what I actually love and want to do in the future, and I'm on the road to doing that so absolutely, absolutely.

The participants in this study did not know what to expect in college. Even the participants who transferred from a 2-year college to a 4-year college had challenges adjusting. They found it important to create trusting relationships with Opportunity staff, faculty, and friends. Amanda shared,

So, my self-efficacy has gone up so much since I started making new friends on my own. In high school I was shy, and I didn't like talking. But in college I used self-efficacy to empower myself. And part of it is because every time you take down a challenge (finding a new friend in this case) that you don't think you can do, and you do it, you feel so much stronger. It has increased a lot through school.

The participants who had frequent interactions with program staff members yielded meaningful relationships and many tangible benefits for them over the course of their three or four years. The data showed that having deep, trusting relationships with program staff, peers, and professors was important to becoming honors students and adapting to the institutional environment. Darrel shared,

Um, school can be very stressful at times, and you feel as though the workload may be really hitting you hard. But with these peer mentors and the counselors that you're given is definitely a gateway and an outlet for you to talk, and just let your feelings go um, and make sure that you have those times. So, they would say to me, all right focus on

yourself, de-stress. Take a little break. When you are done come back and attack two times harder.

Les said,

Disregarding that it's mandatory, I will study, and I will make sure I go see a mentor at least every week, just so that I have the distress time. Just that I'm keeping up with my schoolwork in areas that I'm lacking. I can make sure that I'm getting help. So, when classes, and class exams, assignments and everything come around, I know that I know much more than I did before.

As I explored further, I discovered their level of confidence varied depending on their support systems or lack thereof. Their support systems were family, friends, faculty, and counselors. Participants shared that their level of confidence related to their decisions to seek help from these support persons. In reviewing the conversations of the participants, I came to understand their level of confidence entering the university was low and then rose as they sought help. Unfortunately, after taking 29 or 30 credits in their first year and failing in one of those semesters, their level of confidence diminished again. It was only until they sought assistance from the Opportunity program, they felt encouragement. Once again, the data showed when students reached out for help their confidence and self-efficacy increased.

### *Creating Relationships with University Staff and Systems*

The university staff have a clearer understanding of university systems and structures and could extend tangible benefits (i.e., employment through work-study), academic advising feedback, career choices, financial aid support, and intangible benefits (i.e., encouragement, accountability). However, whether or not students-built relationships with program staff and professors had less to do with students' intentions and more to do with the interaction between



their orientations toward seeking help and the program structures they encountered. The students in this study who fostered these relations discovered resources that helped them navigate the university systems and enhance their self-efficacy. For example, although Mark and Mina entered college with a strong desire to utilize support services and develop relationships with their Opportunity counselors, the six-meeting structure exacerbated rather than mitigated their internal dilemma about asking for help. Mina said, “I have a family at home to take care of, I can’t attend six meetings every semester. I will come to as many as I can. My family must come first since I am a wife and mother.”

### **Conclusion**

The 10 participants responded to the overarching research study question by sharing their lived experiences going from at-risk to honors students. The three emergent themes from the data analysis were: 1) Navigating College: Challenges that Forced them to Seek Help, 2) Putting in the Work, Time Management, and Asking for Help Fostered Motivation and Self-Efficacy, and 3) Creating Trusting Relationships using Self-efficacy. The participants used self-efficacy or self-advocacy to empower themselves to seek help when they needed it and did not eternalize it as failure. They used the university resources to gain knowledge of the things they did not know or the subjects they needed help with. They used self-efficacy or self-advocacy to form peer-tutoring groups and get good grades and eventually made honors. The arc of their stories is their journey to academic success and honors status.

In chapter five, I will discuss how these findings relate to the literature, my theoretical framework, as well as discuss the limitations of the study, suggestions for future studies, and implications for counseling in higher education.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Overview of the Study**

This chapter provides an overview of the study, a discussion of the findings in relation to the literature, theory, and a discussion of implications for policy and practice. The chapter concludes with discussing the strengths and limitations of the study with recommendations for further study.

This study examined the lived experiences of 10 Opportunity students who were not expected to be successful or excel in college and then moved forward to become honors students. This research study utilized a qualitative inquiry to collect data from in-depth interviews. These interviews were semi-structured and consisted of open-ended questions that were continually evaluated, analyzed, and recalibrated as needed to achieve data collection saturation. This basic qualitative research design was used to explore their individual thoughts and experiences related to their honors status. The diverse Opportunity students were upperclassmen (juniors and seniors), male and female, ages 20 to 22, labeled at-risk (academically underprepared), low-income (economically disadvantaged), attended a summer bridge program, and identified as first-generation. Participant Ava was not a traditional college student. Ava was 42 years old, did not participate in a summer bridge program, and did not identify as at-risk. I used the constant comparative method to analyze the data, in using this method, four themes were identified.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings from the analysis of data showed a set of themes that described how Opportunity students who were once placed at-risk interpreted and communicated their experiences and how their experiences related to their motivation and self-efficacy to continue to strive for honors status. The identified themes were: 1) Navigating College: Challenges that

Forced them to Seek Help, 2) Putting in the Work, Time Management, and Asking for Help Fostered Motivation and Self-Efficacy, and 3) Creating Trusting Relationships using Self-efficacy. The next few pages will expound on each theme as it relates to literature and the theoretical framework of social integration and self-efficacy.

***Navigating College: Challenges that Forced them to Seek Help***

This study found that Opportunity honors students struggled their first year and had challenges navigating their way through the rigors of college. This overall finding is consistent with existing literature for underprepared or at-risk students. The literature refers to three stages of transitioning into the college environment: 1) Separation (Balzora, 2015); 2) Transition to College (Lancaster, 2014); and 3) Integration (Thomas, et al. 2017). During their first year of college, the participants in this study went through each stage as they navigated their way through those challenges. They had no idea of the challenges that come with a college education (Thomas et al. 2017). The participants discussed many of the challenges that they experienced that are also in the literature on underprepared first-generation students. Challenges such as separation from their communities and families which caused loneliness and homesickness (Thomas et al. 2017, Lancaster, 2014), poor preparation for college-level courses (Todorova, 2019), poor study skills (Todorova, 2019), and poor time management which caused procrastination (Cholewa et al., 2015) were just some of the challenges they encountered. These challenges must be addressed so first-generation, and students placed at-risk can do well in a college environment.

Another challenge one participant shared with me was academic bullying. If she received a grade less than a B, she was called negative comments or names such as “dummy” or “idiot”. Her so-called friends would pass judgement on her and make fun of her. She shared that they

would say things like “All that studying you did was for nothing.” When researching the literature, I found nothing that spoke about how to deal or cope with academic bullying. What she did share with me was when she repeated the class and earned a B or better grade, she would celebrate her achievement with some sort of reward. Creating regards for improved grades is reflected in the literature (Grace-Odeleye and Santiago, 2019).

Thomas et al. (2017) wrote in an article on how important it is to be organized in college. My participants discussed how they learned that being organized was crucial to their success. Balancing academics, student organizations, and Greek Life was a challenge for four of the participants. They found it impossible to keep up with so many things simultaneously. To maintain honors status, they found it necessary to create a month-by-month calendar for each semester. In the calendar they would put their class and homework assignments, monthly meetings, membership intake activities, workshops (both academic and social), and personal and social activities outside of college life. One participant decided that being in a relationship and maintaining honors was overwhelming. She had to pick which one was more important at that time.

### ***Putting in the Work, Time Management, and Asking for Help Fostered Motivation and Self-Efficacy***

In this theme the participants expressed how they learned to seek help from others and create a social engagement to maintain better grades. Also, in terms of academic skills building, participants in this study reported attending tutoring sessions and small study groups also encouraged them to study. Going to their academic advisor for guidance helped them better prioritize and learn how to improve their study skills. Time management and procrastination of doing their assignments came up consistently as a challenge. They also shared how getting

involved with social activities on campus enabled them to feel part of the academic community and helped them feel like they had the ability to be successful in college.

Rafael et al. (2018) stated that social integration and motivation learning strategies show direct effects on first-year university experiences. Becca (2021) shared in her research that social integration is a motivator for persistence with students who study in small groups. Universities embrace commonly held values about college success which includes tutoring, academic advising, social integration in small groups. In this study, achieving this success became a difficult task given the multiple and compounding challenges my participants faced within and outside the university. The results of this study showed that social integration was paramount to the success of the honors students achieving honors each semester. Social integration with peers helped them stay motivated to achieve honors. Their social self-efficacy drove them to continue to be persistent about making honors. The study found that encouragement from peers, family, staff, and faculty motivated the honors students to work harder each semester to make honors.

Being a part of something greater than themselves motivated them and gave them a sense of hope, knowing that their peers are working towards the same goals (Tinto, 2013). The participants shared that they are members of clubs associated with their majors. Some are members in Greek Life. Greek organizations share common principles that foster scholarship, sisterhood, brotherhood, and community service. These clubs and Greek organizations offer tutoring services, small group workshops, and mentoring for their members and for students who are interested in membership. A couple of participants are members of Student Government. In Student Government they advocate for the student body in the university. Student Government, clubs, and Greek organizations are working towards common goals which are persistence, graduation, and student success.

To remain honor students, the participants also discussed staying focused on their academics. They shared that time management was key to their success. They discussed seeking help by going to their EOF counselors and faculty and found assistance from their counselors on managing their time better to focus on assignments. Faculty were supportive in helping them better understand assignments and the importance of deadlines. In terms of academic skills building, participants in this study reported attending tutoring sessions and small study groups also encouraged them to study. Going to their academic advisor for guidance helped them better prioritize and learn how to improve their study skills. Reaching out to others and learning new skills (self-efficacy) was essential to their academic success and is cited in the literature as well. Small (2018) stated that self-efficacy predicts academic performance and persistence in college. In relationship to academic skills building and developing positive self-concepts, honors scholars build character (Nichols et al., 2016). The data analysis also revealed that self-efficacy is a monumental motivator to their continued success in honors. This finding supports previous research that motivation embraces self-efficacy (Seay, 2015; Watkins, 2018).

In addition, a finding that I did not see in the literature was how “at risk” students perceived themselves as they entered college. The label of being “at risk” did not seem to resonate with these participants. It was interesting to learn that the participants did not think of themselves as students placed at-risk. Rather they defined the word at-risk as not earning a college degree. They shared to be at-risk would mean to choose the path that did not lead to a higher education degree. The participants in this study want to become teachers, lawyers, scientists, counselors, social workers, and doctors. This finding I think is important as we view and understand underprepared students.

*Creating Trusting Relationships using Self-efficacy*

Self-efficacy is commonly defined as the belief in one's capabilities to achieve a goal or an outcome or academic success (Small, 2018). These participants shared that creating trusting relationships with faculty, Opportunity staff, and peers increased their self-efficacy or self-advocacy. As stated in Chapter 4, these participants were able to make honors semester after semester because they had developed a relationship with people who supported them and gave them added attention. They also shared that giving students a reward (i.e., certificate or trophy) after achieving honors or even increasing their GPA would be rewarded with some sort of celebration (Paloyo et al., 2016). These ceremonies gave these participants the recognition they needed to preserve and continue to make honors. They also shared that receiving praise from family and friends made a huge impact on them striving to make honors and Dean's list (McPherson, 2015). For many of these participants, they did not receive honors in high school so to make honors in college is monumental for them and their families.

The participants shared with me the importance of creating relationships. They said creating lasting relationships gave them a greater sense of belonging, reduced anxiety, and provided support when needed. These relationships were important for the participants' success in college. The creation of relationships in creating academic success is reflected in the literature as an important source of self-efficacy and skills building to be successful in college (Nichols et al., 2016).

In this theme, I learned again, the importance of creating relationships to be successful. Many times, counselors will focus on tools for time management or study skills, yet creating trusting relationships, as seen from my study, were critical to my participants success as honors students. I didn't fully comprehend the vital and essential role relationships played until I heard it

from the participants in this study. What also surprised me when talking to the participants is how self-efficacy was re-defined for them as creating relationships and learning skills from others in such a way that if they didn't continue to motivate themselves semester after semester, they would not have made honors or dean's list. Even with the support of family, friends, academic advisors, and faculty; their self-efficacy of maintaining their newfound skills with the help of others rose to the top as the strongest motivator for academic success.

#### Theoretical Approaches in Relation to Findings

Self-efficacy and Social Integration were the theories selected as the theoretical framework to be used for this study. Self-efficacy Theory, in general, refers to one's judgments about one's ability to organize thoughts, feelings, and actions to produce a desired outcome (Watkins, 2018). Social Integration Theory refers to students' perception of connection to their institution, faculty, friends, and family (Rose et al., 2014). Both lenses are reflected in the findings of my study. The participants discussed their ability in learning new skills and their confidence in becoming a better student over time. The participants also shared that their relationships and engagement with faculty, staff, peers, and family was also essential to their academic success.

My findings also point to an unsettled tension in the two theoretical approaches commonly used to understand student retention. On one hand, they bolster the value of a developmental approach by demonstrating that the beliefs and meanings students held about themselves, as being successful and asking for help, influenced how they engaged with key university personnel and programs. On the other hand, these findings also illustrate the limitations of viewing Opportunity students' successes through an individual psychological lens. Many of the challenges that the Opportunity students encountered in their first year were not a



product of Opportunity's social and structural environment. The structure of the Opportunity program is rigorous. According to the participants, although they gained new skills during the summer academy, more attention is needed during the academic year. Here is where the unsettled tension lies with student retention.

The analysis of data from this study reflects that as participants gained more confidence in their abilities to be successful (higher academic self-efficacy), they also shared greater persistence intentions for graduation. Their goal to be an honors student and then graduate became part of how they viewed themselves as a student. We know from the literature that when students perceive difficult college tasks as challenges, these stronger college self-efficacy expectations lower their academic stress and maintain psychological and emotional health (Watkins, 2018). This was evident in my participants' responses. However, these participants did not attain this self-efficacy completely on their own. Program staff, faculty, peers and family assisted these students in feeling better about their achievements that lead to greater success. Family support systems offered a secure base throughout the honor's student life, which provides important sources of confidence and may reduce stress. The honors students in this study used self-efficacy to increase participation in social activities with friends and discussions with faculty. These performance attainments resulted in the participants' positive academic outcomes, improved overall confidence, and increased the likelihood that these honors students felt connected to their environment leading to graduation. These expressed participant values and outcomes reflect the theoretical theories of this study.

According to the findings in this study, self-efficacy, in particular, denotes confidence in performing academic tasks such as reading textbooks, asking questions in class, preparing for examinations, attending tutoring sessions, and creating small study groups (Small, 2018).

Stronger self-efficacy expectations result in better college outcomes because honor students with high self-efficacy perceive failure experiences as challenges rather than threats (Watkins, 2018). That leads me to expound on how the institution, faculty, and counselors can work with Opportunity students and potentially move them to honors programs. The participants in this study started to see failure in their first year of college as an opportunity to seek out help. Rather than using failure as a debilitating threat that eventually crushed their confidence level, they went to tutoring and created small study groups that bolstered their confidence level which led to self-efficacy and social integration. The participants found that when they encouraged themselves to make honors each semester their family, friends, faculty, and the Opportunity program praised them for their academic achievements with an honors recognition ceremony. At the honors recognition ceremony family, friends and faculty are invited to share sentiments in their accomplishments. My findings support previous literature where scholars argued that social integration and self-efficacy can be a motivator for success with Opportunity students (Tinto, 1975; Jones, 2010; Pan, 2010; Weng et al., 2010; Rienties, 2012; McPherson, 2015; Rose et al., 2014; Seay, 2015; 2016; Watkins, 2018; Sun et al., 2022).

### **Implications for Practice**

This study will help stakeholders, who are engaged with this population, to learn more about the experience of students who initially struggle in college and then are successful in college and particularly the ones who graduate with honors. In this section, based on my findings, I provide possible implications for higher education professionals (program staff and faculty) working with this population, counselors that interact with underprepared students who go on to become honors students, and counselor educators who are preparing counselors and higher educational professionals to assist underprepared at-risk students at the college level.

*Higher Education Professionals*

Through my investigation of a small group of Opportunity students (who were once placed at-risk), my findings show in addition to academic support, they used self-efficacy and created relationships with others to achieve honors status. Based on this study, utilizing support systems and programs yields a greater potential for academic success with Opportunity students. When it came to seeking help, study participants prioritized relationships over academic advisors and faculty professional roles. All study participants could point to at least one instructor and one counselor who had demonstrated care about their personal well-being and whom they felt comfortable reaching out to him/her. The support was not just academic, but a real caring for them as a person. The result of the participants reaching out gave them academic success. They were able to better understand the material and better navigate the situation for success.

Staff and faculty need to prioritize relationship building in both individual interactions with students and in program and course structures. Beginning individual meetings with simple check-in questions like, "How is your semester going?" "Is there anything I can do to assist you further?" "How has your week been? How are you feeling today?" "Last we spoke, you were concerned about your mother, and how is she doing? Rather than, "Did you register for classes yet?" indicates interest in students' personal well-being and creates a bridge to relationship building.

My findings suggest program staff and faculty who work with Opportunity students need to structure their programs to ensure regular interactions with students. Specifically, by making advising meetings mandatory during the first year or requiring students to attend office hours at least three times a semester and explaining why this policy exists, staff and faculty would reduce the burden on new Opportunity students to figure out how to build these relationships themselves

and why. The importance of relationships in this process warrants faculty and staff connecting consistently and regularly with these students. Additionally, based on my data collection, I suggest program staff and faculty explicitly ask students about their past experiences and beliefs about asking for help to leverage these insights to support students who are reluctant to seek help. My findings indicate that potential interventions include assigning students to peer mentors who entered with similar mindsets, sharing student scenarios that link self-efficacy or self-advocacy and asking for help, and describing the people they themselves lean on for support, i.e., family and friends.

According to my findings, program staff and faculty might consider a more invitational approach associated with students asking for help by demystifying the process and creating spaces for nonjudgmental discussion and feedback. Rather than providing generic advice like, "Seek help," "Go to tutoring," staff and faculty should communicate what types of guidance or support students typically seek from them and how they evaluate and fulfill these requests. They could normalize the process of asking for help from these students.

Academically, although course syllabi state necessary procedures with assignments and deadlines, it should be repeated throughout the semester communicating class policies on extensions and absences and creating an online forum whereby students can anonymously ask questions about these policies can enhance the quality of information between the Opportunity student and the university. Further, if program staff would check in and ask students where the student is on key tasks (e.g., registering for classes) and where these tasks rest on their priority lists, and what could get in the way of completing these tasks, then program staff would provide Opportunity students with a much needed, nonjudgmental space to articulate their priorities, discuss potential obstacles, and collaboratively devise solutions. These participants did seek out

help and were introduced to tutors and small group dynamics, but most college students who are not in special admit programs do not seek out help for whatever reason. From what your participants shared it may be advisable for universities to be trained as active success coaches and mentors that would reflect the mission and values of equitable education.

Based on the outcome of this study, a training course could be created that teaches faculty and staff about the importance of caring about the student and taking time to ask about other parts of their life, and if they are doing well or if they need anything. The participants shared that they liked visiting their professors and counselor on a frequent basis. They suggested creating multiple points of contact throughout the curriculum. This emphasizes the need, throughout the semester, the values of tutoring, face-to-face peer mentoring, and on-going academic support. Implementing comprehensive, integrated, and long-lasting support programs, i.e., tutoring, peer mentors, academic coaches etc. is vital. So additional training is needed to assist program staff and faculty in responding to these students. Here are some additional recommendations the participants shared with me that they thought would help motivate them to achieve honors status continuously:

1. Require or incentivize regular participation in enhanced advising activities and counseling sessions. For example, if a student attends all 6 required meetings with an advisor, then celebrate their accomplishments.
2. Offer students' performance-based monetary incentives. If funding is not available as an incentive, celebrate their honors every semester with a ceremony, certificate, and refreshments. Invite family, staff, and faculty who supported them during the semester.

3. Teach students how to use self-efficacy to engage themselves as active learners.

Remind them to celebrate their victories small and large. Encourage them to take time to breathe and that their well-being is most important.

In summary, the participants shared that it takes a village to support them in their academic success. Faculty, tutoring, support groups, family and friends working together to create mentoring and bonding relationships. The participants shared that having support systems in addition to self-efficacy produced honors scholars.

### *Counselors (in General) Working with these Populations*

Practitioners, therapists, and counselors need to have some knowledge of Opportunity student's struggles and circumstances before beginning the counseling process. A thorough understanding of their background and family dynamics is important in the counseling relationship. As evidenced in my study, building trust with Opportunity students allows them to open up and share their experiences (both marvelous and dramatic). Given the disproportionate Black and Brown students who attend college underprepared, Caucasian counselors may benefit from an increased effort to understand the multicultural elements included in these types of therapeutic sessions and evaluate the possibilities of developing increased multicultural capabilities that do not focus on diversity in race but more specifically, African American and Latino people.

The data of this study show that this population of students need a more holistic approach to counseling that would include counselors exploring the lives of how the students placed at-risk move into honors. My participants stated that the counselors who took the time to understand their world from a cultural context were counselors that they would open up to more for greater support and guidance. When practitioners, therapists, and counselors engage in these practices,

an increased connection and compatibility will be re-established. This would increase trust in the counseling relationship. The data also suggests that Opportunity students seek additional academic support through tutoring, peer mentoring, coaching, and staff and faculty engagement. They shared that the more they stayed engaged with their peers and faculty the more they were encouraged to study and perform better in their classes. Counselors need to stress to these students the importance of staying socially and academically engaged with this population and encourage their participation in seeking help.

It should also be noted that the Opportunity students in this study shared that family plays an important role in their lives. A counselor may need to meet with the family (with the student's permission) to peel away the layers that may be interfering with the college student's academic success. It is important to teach the honors students how to explain and express to their parents the importance of studying long hours and not having the time to watch their siblings or prepare dinner most nights. In this study the participants reported that as first-generation students' their well-intentioned parents/guardians did not always understand the rigors of college and that it must be explained to them in a respectful manor so not to create a divide between the parents/guardians and the student. The counselor may be the person to assist parents and family on the expectations and needed support for their child to be successful in college.

### ***Counselor Educators – Preparing Future Counselors to Work in Higher Education***

Counselor educators are the first line of trainers in counselor education. They need to be equipped with information to assist counselors-in-training regarding Opportunity students and special admit populations. As my study found, not every college student is the same and the needs of this population may vary. Counselors-in-training who plan to work with college students need to have a better understanding of the population the college admits. I teach two

courses at my institution. One is about the history of higher education and the other is about how student affairs plays a major role in every student's life. In the classroom I always share my experiences on how I counsel Opportunity and special admit students. I review with them academic success plans, how to create small groups for probationary students, how to teach a student to study, and so much more. The research data was consistent with all 10 participants that when their counselor asked about how they were doing before beginning their academic advising session it meant a lot to them. They shared that they felt loved. They felt important. They were encouraged to do well in their classes. They shared that they did not want to disappoint their counselor or their family. Therefore, I feel it is important for counselor educators to teach our upcoming counselors that personal attention and praise goes a long way in higher education. In addition, not all learning needs to be in the classroom. Take counselors-in-training to workshops taught by college counselors. Allow them to experience what it is like to teach a workshop to students who have academic needs. Perhaps, add to the Internship course an experience of co-teaching with a college counselor. The Opportunity programs are always looking for extra assistance during their summer academies. That is a win-win for the Opportunity program and the counselor-in-training. The Opportunity student receives double the attention, and the counselor-in-training receives group hours.

In addition, the counseling curriculum for higher education counselors would benefit by adding a course on college advisement. Three credits for in-class preparation and one credit for out-of-class preparation (an internship in a higher education setting). Teach the counselor-in-training how to move towards professional advising with centralized training and support to focus on opportunities for both (a) providing guidance and on-going support to advisees, (b) create consistency in the student experience. Use technology for increased efficiencies and



caseload refinement to further support staff with complex roles, i.e., sharing more details about the student's need and enabling multi-modal outreach methods without breaching the student's confidentiality. Establish a consistent set of expectations, practices, procedures, and policies for all counselors-in-training and develop centralized training and support resources to aid in their implementation.

Counselors-in-training can learn an abundance from Opportunity students. Training that they can't get from a textbook or in a classroom. Researcher Cross (2022) understands that underrepresented students are less likely to have family and peer support groups prior to college enrollment, and relationships between student families and college counselors is a valuable access strategy for low-income underrepresented students. This is a factual statement for Opportunity students from this study. As first-generation students, they are the first to go to college in their family and they have no one to consult about the college experience thus the reason why college counselors play a pivotal role for them in college. They can learn about their family dynamics and how to assist in navigating through the difficult conversations young adults have with their parents/guardians. In summary, the participants shared that meeting with counselors-in-training about their academics, personal struggles, relationships, social, and careers was an important aspect of their meetings. They shared that talking with someone who is closer to their age makes the counseling sessions more like friendly conversations.

### **Implications for the Opportunity Program**

After a student successfully completes the summer Bridge program, most feel a sense of empowerment thinking they have overcome their shortcomings as an at-risk student. However, my participants shared that although they passed their summer courses, they did not do well during their first year because they either took too many credits or they procrastinated and

became overwhelmed thus failing a course or two. Four to six-weeks during the summer Bridge program is not enough time to ascertain if a student will do well taking 15 or 16 or 17 credits during their first semester of college.

During the student's first year of college there is a need for continued engagement according to my participants in this study. Offering workshops about tutoring, academic planning, and careers were not enough to keep them motivated to succeed academically. Social Integration played a large role in the participants' college life. I suggest Opportunity programs focus more on utilizing student assistants, peer mentors, student leaders, fraternities and sororities, student organizations, and clubs as a way to keep Opportunity students engaged and focused during their first year of college. Remove the word "mandatory" from emails, letters, and flyers. Today's students do not like to be mandated to do anything. Instead have your student leaders recruit first year students to come to peer lead activities and workshops. Activities that promote continued learning are an extension to the summer Bridge program.

In New Jersey the Opportunity Programs, policymakers and practitioners have extended bridge program provisions and goals beyond the entry point and continue to provide comparable support to participants throughout their enrollment. An extension of bridge program activities beyond the summer and first year is a valuable aspect of bridge program design that ensures a continuation of whatever gains students achieve as well as opportunities to collect and analyze additional data regarding the efficacy of bridge program design and other academic and support structures available at the college (Cross, 2022). This research study suggests that bridge programs can serve as gateways or supplementary provisions to ensure that students are consistently and continuously developed. Continued tracking and engagement of participants

could extend the academic and social gains made by these students during the tenure of the academic year.

### **Strengths of the Study**

One strength of this study is that the participants within the sample were diverse and reflective of the typical underprepared student participating in opportunity programs. This study is significant because it will contribute to the literature on the more personal journey and learnings of students who were placed at-risk and became honors students. This study addresses a gap in the research literature by focusing on a greater understanding of what the individual has experienced and has gained. This study will benefit counselors in higher education who work with Opportunity students as well as special admit populations. Counselors will learn what motivates at-risk and special admit students who become honors students. It will also shed light on what additional services can be added to their psychoeducational workshops that promote academic success.

### **Limitations**

While the in-depth nature of this study helps us to better understand students placed at-risk who became honors students, it is also based on a small sample of Opportunity students at an urban public university. The participants who participated came from a variety of high school contexts and family backgrounds, but all had two things in common: they agreed to participate in an academic support program, and they agreed to participate in this study. This group of Opportunity students may have been more aware and willing to seek support and share their experiences than students who chose not to participate.

Another limitation of this study was that it was conducted with only one university, and it reflects only students in the more urban Northeast. In addition, another limitation of this study

could be my positionality within this population. I am an alumna of an Opportunity program. Therefore, one related consideration is that participants identified have a similar background as I did when I was in college. I may have heard their stories through my own similar but different lens. This is why I utilized critical friends; however, this might have been a limitation in guiding the conversations and exploration with the students. This limitation also considers an assumption that many minorities have toward each other, that we are all from single family households with economic and financial needs. The findings in my study do not imply that the experiences of these Opportunity students are the same for all Opportunity students. However, the commonalities that do exist amongst their experiences merit further research.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study explored the lives of 10 Opportunity students. It is also important to remember that EOF serves only a fraction of the university students, so future research that includes EOF students not associated with any program or who chose not to participate would be especially useful. This may suggest a larger quantitative study examining or comparing various levels of student preparedness for college and their migration to becoming an honors student. Also, while this study reveals the experiences of students placed at-risk who moved into honors, it does not shed light on any specific gendered dynamics of seeking help, as it includes both men and women and lacks gender specific comparison. This study revealed that procrastination was a sufficient challenge for these students, but future studies might consider the motivation behind procrastination. The study also did not explore the dynamics of racial minority students operating in a PWI (public White institution) and future studies examining the influence of this racial dynamic could be beneficial as well.

This study was done with the 1 EOF program in New Jersey. There are more than 50 EOF programs in New Jersey. It would be interesting to know if the outcomes would be the same or similar with students from other institutions who have inducted students into their EOF honors program. It would also be interesting to know if EOF students placed-at-risk who turn honors attending two-year institutions (community colleges) have a different experience than EOF students attending four-year institutions.

In addition, it would be beneficial to explore the cultural identities and worldviews of these students as they were able to be successful when counselors, faculty, and others took the time to learn more about their cultural background. Even when the participants were given strategies and skills to overcome procrastination, they still procrastinated with schoolwork and submission of assignments. Another recommendation for future research is to look through the cultural lens to see if culture has any impact on their reasons for procrastination.

### **Conclusion**

The primary focus in this study is on low-income and academically underprepared first-generation students who participated in the Opportunity pre-freshman summer program and who went on to achieve honors status. I explored the lived experiences of students who participated and who exceeded their expectations as college students. This chapter was a review of the themes that emerged from the lives of 10 Opportunity students who were once placed at-risk but with academic support from staff, faculty, peers, and family they were able to achieve honors status and how their experiences relate to existing literature as well as my guiding theories.

My primary goal with this study was to answer the research question and learn about the lived experiences of Opportunity honors students and the journeys and obstacles they overcame to become an honors scholar. As an EOF alumna I can appreciate the sacrifices they made to

become an honors scholar and the challenges they overcame as a part of their journey. My goal in this study was to produce a qualitative study that emerged in the literature related to the concepts being explored, as well as utilize a methodology best fit this study. I then presented the data that emerged, along with analysis of the findings. After a discussion of limitations, suggestions, and directions for further research I concluded my study by answering the research question: How do college students, initially considered at-risk of failing but who are now honors students, describe their educational journeys at the university? This study illuminated these students' experiences and found that motivation, determination, social support through relationships, and self-efficacy helped these Opportunity students, who were once placed at-risk, to become honors scholars with academic support systems in place that engaged them toward academic and personal success.

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## Tables

*Table 1. Participants Demographics*

Name	At-risk	First Gen	Gender	Age	Race	1st Admit or Transfer	GPA	Dean's List #	EOF Honors List #
Samantha	Economically Disadvantaged	Yes	F	22	Asian	Transfer	3.789	3	4
Amanda	Academically & Economically Disadvantaged	Yes	F	22	Caucasian	Transfer	3.942	6	6
Mark	Academically & Economically Disadvantaged	Yes	M	21	Hispanic	Transfer	3.979	3	3
Jane	Economically Disadvantaged	Yes	F	22	Hispanic	1st Admit	3.659	6	6
Mina	Did not identify as at-risk	Yes	F	54	Hispanic	Transfer	4	2	2
Ava	Economically Disadvantaged	Yes	F	22	Caucasian	Transfer	3	0	2
Alice	Academically & Economically Disadvantaged	Yes	F	22	African American	1st Admit	3	2	3
Joy	Academically & Economically Disadvantaged	Yes	F	21	African American	1st Admit	3.111	2	5

FROM AT-RISK TO HONORS STATUS

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Les	Academically & Economically Disadvantaged	Yes	M	21	African American	1st Admit	3.2	0	3
Darrel	Academically & Economically Disadvantaged	Yes	M	21	Egyptian	1st Admit	3.174	0	4

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**Appendix A: Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval**

Institutional Review Board  
School of Nursing & Graduate School Building  
Room 333  
Office: 973-655-7583  
Fax: 973-3022

Jul 21, 2022 11:08:57 AM EDT

Dr. Leslie Kooyman  
Ms. Billie Bailey  
Montclair State University  
Department of Counseling  
1 Normal Ave.  
Montclair, NJ 07043

Re: IRB Number: IRB-FY21-22-2362

Project Title: **SS A qualitative study exploring the lived experiences of at-risk college students who become honors students**

Dear Dr. Kooyman and Ms. Bailey:

After review, Montclair State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study's modification on **July 21, 2022**. It is valid through the current approved period.

*This study has been approved under the conditions set forth by current state regulations due to COVID-19 and Montclair State University [Restart Plan's Research](#) guidance's. You are required to follow the approved plan for face-to-face research interactions. If you have any questions about the impact of COVID-19 with regards to the methods proposed in your study, please do not hesitate to contact us.*

This submission included the following changes, summarized below and detailed within the modification:

- Update to study start/end dates
- Update to recruitment email and consent form to explain the revised interview process and the new follow-up interview process (replacing the focus groups)
- Update to interview guide

Should you wish to make additional changes to the IRB-approved procedures, prior to the expiration of your approval, submit your requests via a Study Modification in Cayuse IRB.

After your study is completed, submit your Project Closure.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB requirements, please contact me at 973-655-2097, [cayuseIRB@montclair.edu](mailto:cayuseIRB@montclair.edu), or the Institutional Review Board.

Sincerely yours,

Dr. Dana Levitt  
IRB Chair

**Appendix B: IRB Approval from Kean University****KEAN UNIVERSITY  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD  
NOTIFICATION OF REVIEW****Federal Registration # IORG 0003969****IRB # 22-011911****P.I. Name: Jane Webber****Research Advisor: N/A****Project Title: A Qualitative Study Exploring The Lived Experiences Of At-Risk College Students Who Become Honor Students**

The project identified above has been reviewed and **approved by the IRB (IRB Identification number: IRB00005690)**. The approval is only effective for this research study as described in your application and for the duration of one year from the date of this letter. You are expected to conduct the study in compliance with OHRP regulations and adhere to all University policies and ethical standards.

This decision is based on the following assumptions:

1. The application you submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) provided a complete and accurate account of how human subjects are involved in your project.
2. You will carry on your research according to the procedures described in this application.
3. If any substantive changes are made, you will resubmit the project for IRB review.
4. You will immediately report to the IRB Chairperson any problems that you encounter while using human subjects.

On behalf of the IRB,

Date: 2/9/2022

Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer and Accompanying Emails

 **KEAN**



**One-on-One Interviews on  
Zoom.us**

**Juniors & Seniors**

*Criteria for this study*  
Dean's List  
EOF Honors  
First  
Generation

Appointments will be made via email.  
(The interview will take up to 1 hour.)

**CALL FOR EOF  
Honors Scholars  
2021/2022**



For further Information contact:  
Billie J. Bailey at  
[baileyb@kean.edu](mailto:baileyb@kean.edu)



**MONTCLAIR STATE  
UNIVERSITY**

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**Appendix D: EOF Counselor Recruitment Email**

Dear EOF Scholars,

You have been selected to participate in a research study exploring the lived experience of students who become honors students.

**YOU WILL RECEIVE COMPENSATION IN THE FORM OF AN AMAZON FIRE TABLET IF YOU CHOOSE TO PARTICIPATE.**

Please see the attached documents with information. If you don't wish to participate, please let me know.

**Also, if you ever had Mrs. Bailey as your EOF counselor, unfortunately, you will not be able to participate.**

Please let me know of your interest ASAP.

Best,

**Dr. Debora Rivera, Student Development Specialist**

Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) Program

Hutchinson Hall, Suite 305

Pronouns: **She/Her/Hers**

**Kean University**

[1000 Morris Avenue](#)

[Union, New Jersey 07083](#)

Office Phone Number - 908-737-4048



**KEAN**



**Bridge to Success  
Program**



**Appendix E: Recruitment Email**

Dear EOF Honors Scholar:

I am writing to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a research study. You are no way obligated to participate in this research study, participation is completely voluntary. The title of the study is *A qualitative study exploring the lived experiences of at-risk college students who become honor students*. The purpose of this study is to better understand your experiences, both within and outside of the academic context, which influenced how you went from an academically underprepared first-generation student to go on and become an honors student. If you are a junior or senior, and first-generation college student who participated in a pre-freshman summer program through EOF, you may be eligible to participate. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate.

**Interview process.** I am asking you to participate in a 60-minute interview to hear your first-person account of your educational journey. The interview can be in-person on Kean's campus in Hutchinson Hall, room 305 Q or on Zoom. I will use a semi-structured interview guide to help facilitate the interview process. The guide is not intended to be prescriptive so prompts will be used to further elicit information or to clarify your responses.

The one-on-one interviews and follow-up interviews will be audio recorded and video recorded for transcription purposes. The transcriptions will be reviewed, given a theme, and then coded for analysis.

**Follow-up interview process.** A follow-up interview will be video graphed and tape-recorded. The cassettes from the auto-tapping will be transcribed. The video recording will be used for observations. To secure confidentiality, the transcriptions will be locked in a secure file cabinet. There is one key, and I am the only one who has access to its location.

If you have any questions, please contact Billie J. Bailey at [baileyb1@montclair.edu](mailto:baileyb1@montclair.edu) or [baileyb@kean.edu](mailto:baileyb@kean.edu), Dr. Leslie Kooyman at [kooymanl@mail.montclair.edu](mailto:kooymanl@mail.montclair.edu), or Dr. Jane Webber at [jwebber@kean.edu](mailto:jwebber@kean.edu).

Thank you for considering participation in this study. This study has been approved by the Montclair State University Institutional Review Board, Study no. **IRB-FY21-22-2362**. It has also been approved by Kean University Institutional Review Board, Study no. **IRB# 22-011911**.

Sincerely,



Billie J. Bailey, MSU Doctoral Student  
Director, Kean University, Bridge to Success Program (formerly PASSPORT)  
C: Dr. Leslie Kooyman, MSU Faculty Member  
Dr. Jane Webber, KU Faculty Member

**Appendix F: Approval Letter to Study EOF Population**



**Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) Program**

1000 Morris Avenue  
Hutchins Hall, Suite 305  
Union, New Jersey 07083  
(908) 737-4045  
Fax: (908) 737-4040

September 23, 2021

Attn: Institutional Review Board  
Montclair State University  
1 Normal Avenue  
Nursing & Graduate School Building, Room 333  
Montclair, NJ 07043

Re: *A Qualitative Study Exploring the Lived Experiences of At-risk College Students Who Become Honor Students* & Dr. Leslie Kooyman, MSU PI, Dr. Juneau Gary, KU PI & Billie J. Bailey, PC

Dear Review Board:

This letter serves to give permission to Dr. Leslie Kooyman, Dr. Jane Webber, and Ms. Billie J. Bailey to complete their research project, *A Qualitative Study Exploring the Lived Experiences of At-risk College Students Who Become Honor Students* during Spring 2022, Academic Year 2021 - 2022 at our institution.

Dr. Kooyman, Dr. Webber, and Ms. Bailey will have access to our EOF students, employees, and records to conduct their research project. The research project has been described to me to my satisfaction.

Sincerely,

Ruben Melendez, Director  
Educational Opportunity Fund Program

**Appendix G: Interview Prospective Agreement****KEAN****PASSPORT  
Program****A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AT-RISK  
COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO BECOME HONOR STUDENTS****STUDY #: IRB-FY21-22-2362  
KU STUDY #: 22-011911**

We are asking you to take part in a research study being done by Billie J. Bailey a student at Montclair State University.

We would like to interview you to learn more about: How do college students, initially considered at-risk of not succeeding but who are now honors students, describe their educational journeys at the university? The interview will last about 45 minutes.

You can skip questions that you do not want to answer or stop the interview at any time.

We will keep the data we collect confidential, and we will not share your personal information with anyone outside the research team.

Being in this study is optional. Please tell the researcher if you do not want to participate.

- **Compensation:** To compensate you for the time you spent in this study, you will receive an Amazon Fire Tablet at the end of the focus group.

**Benefits:** You may benefit from this study because you are contributing to the literature what we do not know about the lived experiences of students placed at-risk who became honors students. Others may benefit from this study because it can help to inform the community, parents, school leaders, and politicians of the validity and continued support needed for federally and state-funded programs for low-income and academically underprepared students as these students can become honor students and productive members in society (Watkins, 2018).

Questions about the study? Please contact Billie J. Bailey, Director at Kean University, PASSPORT Program at (908) 737-4072 or Dr. Leslie Kooyman, Associate Professor at Montclair State University, College of Education and Human Services at [kooymanl@montclair.edu](mailto:kooymanl@montclair.edu) or Dr. Jane Webber, Associate Professor, Nathan Weiss Graduate College, Counselor Education Department at [jwebber@kean.edu](mailto:jwebber@kean.edu)

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you can call the MSU Institutional Review Board at 973-655-7583 or email [reviewboard@montclair.edu](mailto:reviewboard@montclair.edu)

This study has been approved by the Montclair State University Institutional Review Board.

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Reference: Watkins, S. R. (2018). Contributions of student affairs professional organizations to collegiate student leadership programs in the late twentieth century. ProQuest Central; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

## Appendix H: Adult Consent Form



College of Education and Human Services

Department of Counseling



KEAN



PASSPORT  
Program

### ADULT CONSENT FORM

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you sign this form.

**Title:**

**MSU Study Number:**

**KU Study Number: IRB# 22-011911**

**Why is this study being done?** The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences, both within and outside of the academic context, which influenced low-income and academically underprepared first-generation students to achieve honors status. This qualitative study is to explore the phenomenology of the lived experiences of 10 to 12 academically successful honors students from a metropolitan university. The 10 to 12 participants are Opportunity students who are first-generation, low income, and academically underprepared for the rigors of college. These students were selected because they fit the criteria of being placed at-risk and low-income. To investigate the research question posed in Chapters one and two, I will use a qualitative approach to get a deeper and in-depth understanding of their lived experiences in moving from placed at-risk into an honors program.

**What will happen while you are in the study?** Once I have IRB permission to conduct research and the participant's consent, I will begin my interviews. First, I plan to conduct a round of one-on-one interviews, followed by focus groups with the students. I will keep a reflective journal. The following paragraphs will explain the procedures for this study.

#### **1. Interview process**

During the 60-90 minutes, one-on-one interviews will create a rich, descriptive set of first-person accounts that best represents how participants make meaning of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2017). In my office on campus, I will use a semi-structured interview guide to help facilitate the interview process. The guide is not intended to be prescriptive so prompts will be used to further elicit information or to clarify an interviewee's initial response. The interview will be taped recorded and transcribed. To secure confidentiality, the transcriptions will be locked in a secure file cabinet. There is one key, and I am the only one who has access to its location.

**2. Focus Groups.** I will conduct two focus groups (5 or 6 participants in each group) to take my emergent understandings back to the participants as well as elicit more of their narratives. Focus groups can be catalytic, that is, as students talk together I will have the opportunity to hear them stimulate and build on each other's thinking. The focus group will last 60-90 minutes. This will help with establishing trustworthiness wherein the participants "recognize" themselves in my interpretations of their narratives (Herr, 2020). Ten (10) students will gather in a private

conference room where they can share their lived experiences going from at-risk to honors. I hope to have an equal number of females and males so that the conversations are rich and plentiful. The focus group will be video graphed and tape-recorded. The cassettes from the auto-tapping will be transcribed. The video recording will be used for observations. To secure confidentiality, the transcriptions will be locked in a secure file cabinet. There is one key, and I am the only one who has access to its location.

**Research Journal.** I will maintain a research journal during the study to ensure I am keeping a record of the research process itself. I will record in the journal my observations about the participants and their lived experiences going from students placed at-risk to honors status. While conducting the interviews and focus groups that will enrich and give context to the data collection, maintaining a journal will allow me to reflect on the observations, thoughts, perceptions made during meetings, unforeseen casual conversations relevant to the study, challenges encountered, and other qualitative data. In other words, I want to use a Journal to capture my thoughts and to have the opportunity to go back to it when I start to write the final dissertation chapter and perhaps even publish an article that speaks to research journals.

**Time:** This study will take about 60 minutes for the interview and 60 minutes for the focus group.

**Risks:** There are no major risks to participate in this study. As you reflect on the past, you may experience feelings (physical or psychological) about being a student who was placed at-risk prior to entering college.

Data will be collected using the Ellucian Datatel and Student Experience; we anticipate that your participation in this presents no greater risk than everyday use of the Ellucian Datatel and Student Experience. Please note that email communication is neither private nor secure. Though we are taking precautions to protect your privacy, you should be aware that information sent through email or internet could be read by a third party. Only research announcements and flyers will be used in an email.

**Benefits:** You may benefit from this study because you are contributing to the literature what we do not know about the lived experiences of students placed at-risk who became honors students. Others may benefit from this study because it can help to inform the community, parents, school leaders, and politicians of the validity and continued support needed for federally and state-funded programs for low-income and academically underprepared students as these students can become honor students and productive members in society (Watkins, 2018).

### **Compensation**

To compensate you for the time you spent on this study, you will receive an Amazon Fire Tablet at the end of the member checking meeting.

**Who will know that you are in this study?** You will not be linked to any presentations. We will keep who you are confidential.

You should know that New Jersey requires that any person having reasonable cause to believe that a child has been subjected to child abuse or acts of child abuse shall report the same immediately to the Division of Child Protection and Permanency.

Although the researchers will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data, the nature of focus groups prevents the researchers from guaranteeing confidentiality. The researchers would like to remind participants to respect the privacy of their fellow participants and not repeat what is said in the focus group to others. Please do not share anything in the focus group, you are not comfortable sharing.

**Do you have to be in the study?**

You do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be included in the study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. You can leave the study at any time and will still receive the compensation promised.

**Do you have any questions about this study?** Please contact Billie J. Bailey, Director at Kean University, PASSPORT Program at (908) 737-4072 or Dr. Leslie Kooyman, Associate Professor at Montclair State University, College of Education and Human Services at [kooymanl@montclair.edu](mailto:kooymanl@montclair.edu) or Dr. Jane Webber, Associate Professor, Nathan Weiss Graduate College, Counselor Education Department at [jwebber@kean.edu](mailto:jwebber@kean.edu)

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you can call the MSU Institutional Review Board at 973-655-7583 or email [reviewboard@montclair.edu](mailto:reviewboard@montclair.edu)

This study has been approved by the Montclair State University Institutional Review Board.

**Do you have any questions about your rights as a research participant?** Phone or email the IRB Chair, Dr. Dana Levitt, at 973-655-2097 or [reviewboard@montclair.edu](mailto:reviewboard@montclair.edu).

**Future Studies** It is okay to use my data in other studies:

Please initial:            \_\_\_\_\_ Yes                            \_\_\_\_\_ No

As part of this study, it is okay to audiotape and videotape me:

Please initial:            \_\_\_\_\_ Yes                            \_\_\_\_\_ No

**One copy of this consent form is for you to keep.**

**Statement of Consent**

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I am 18 years of age or older and have received a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print your name here

\_\_\_\_\_  
Sign your name here

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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Name of Principal Investigator  
Date

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Signature

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Reference: Watkins, S. R. (2018). Contributions of student affairs professional organizations to collegiate student leadership programs in the late twentieth century. ProQuest Central; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.



**Appendix I: Delve Software Training**

LaiYee from Delve <laiyee@twentytonine.com>

Mon, Sep 13, 10:07 AM

to me

Hi Billie,

Thanks for enrolling in Delve's Qualitative Analysis Course. We are excited that you are on your way to learning how to find themes and patterns in your data.

The qualitative analysis part of research can feel very overwhelming. How do you make sense of all the transcripts, notes, and data that you've collected? Where do you start? And especially if you haven't received much guidance on this process, it can make you feel stuck.

That's why we created this course. We wanted to provide a way to help you overcome these challenges and show you how to find themes and patterns in your data and turn your qualitative coding into your final research report.

In this course you will learn:

How to turn your research questions into your initial set of qualitative codes

How to use qualitative coding to find themes and patterns in your data

How to know what and how-to code

How to turn your coding into higher-level theories

And how to turn your codes and theories into your final report or paper

It might sound like a lot, but end-to-end the course should take you approximately 1 hour to complete. And at the end, you'll have all the tools you need to finish your research report.

Complete the Qualitative Analysis Course

Thanks again for your interest in our course. And if you have any questions, please feel free to reply to this email.

Best,

*LaiYee Ho*

LaiYee Ho

Co-Founder of Delve

P.S.

If you have already completed the course (wow that was fast!), you can turn the theory into practice by signing up for the Delve Qualitative Analysis tool. Start your free trial [here](#).

## Appendix J: Interview Protocols



### A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AT-RISK COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO BECOME HONOR STUDENTS

MSU STUDY #: IRB-FY21-22-2362

KU Study #: 22-011911

#### Interview Questions

- A. Review Adult and Consent Agreements
- B. Review Video and Audio Recording Agreements
- C. Do I have your permission to record this interview?
- D. Remember you do not have to answer any questions you are not comfortable answering.

*Turn on Zoom video recording and tape recorder.*

#### *One-on-one Open-ended Questions Interview Format*

**Research question:** How do these college students, initially considered at-risk of not succeeding but who are now honors students, describe their educational journeys at the university?

**Interview Question #1:** Think back to your acceptance at Kean University. What feelings did you have when you were accepted to the University as an Opportunity student? Be very descriptive in your response.

**Interview Question #2:** Most academic underprepared students go through elementary, middle and high school labeled “at-risk”. Describe for me how you identify with the label “at-risk”?

**Interview Question #3:** Back when you were labeled at-risk where did you see yourself five or 10 years later?

**Interview Question #4:** How did you move from a student considered at-risk of succeeding, to an honors student?

**Interview Question #5:** You have become an honors student. When you think about that, what has helped you achieve that success?

*Depending on what the student tells me will decide if I continue to probe for more details.*

**Interview Question #6:** Describe how you felt the first time you made the EOF honors (3.0 or higher).

Follow-up question: Describe how you felt the first time you made Dean's list (3.6 or higher).

**Interview Question #7:** It's not easy to maintain a 3.0 during your first two years of college. How did you go about that?

Follow-up question: What challenges did you face in maintaining this honors status?

**Interview Question #8:** You are an honors student; how were your friends supportive in your academic journey?

**Interview Question #9:** How did your family respond to your honors status?

**Interview Question #10:** How do you manage the possible pressure and expectations becoming an honors student?

Follow-up question: Are there any down sides to being an honors student? If so, describe those for me.

**Interview Question #11:** Colleges and universities have academic support services i.e., tutoring, mentoring, learning communities, and study groups. Did you utilize any of these?

Follow-up question: Were any of them helpful?

Follow-up question: How often did you go to those support systems?

**Interview Question #12:** Throughout your educational journey what motivated you to continue your success as an honors student?

**Interview Question #13:** You worked hard to get to this place of honors status, where do you see yourself moving forward?

**Closing Question:** Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your honors status that I did not ask?

This concludes our interview. I will transcribe your answers and follow-up with you at a later time. Is that alright with you? Does this time work best for you?

### **Follow-up Interview**

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me again.

- A. Review the Adult and Consent Agreements which he/she signed to continue to conduct study.
- B. Review Video and Audio Recording Agreements.
- C. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

D. Remember you do not have to answer any questions you are not comfortable answering.

After analyzing the data, I will craft questions from their interviews. For example:  
After reading the transcription of your interview and looking at your video, I would like to clarify a few things.