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Pepperdine University
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT OF SUCCESS: COMMUNITY COLLEGE FACULTY
EFFORTS TO ENGAGE IN QUALITY FACULTY-STUDENT INTERACTIONS TO
CONTRIBUTE TO A FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT'S PERCEPTION OF BELONGING

A dissertation proposal submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Dalia R. Juarez

June, 2017

Dr. Lisa Bortman, Ed.D.—Dissertation Chairperson

This dissertation, written by

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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DEDICATION

No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge. The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and his lovingness. (Gibran, 1923)

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. Gracias a mi mamá y abuelos (en memoria) que sin ninguna experiencia o saber cómo, continuamente me apoyaron en mis estudios. Lo que he logrado, refleja los sacrificios que hicieron para mí. Mamá, me han tomado muchos años para darme cuenta de que los momentos en que me dijo que dejara de estudiar, relajarme y tomar un descanso no era porque no le importara, sino porque me veía preocupado y en su cuidado por mí, quería ayudarme a aliviar mi estrés. Siempre a querido lo mejor. Usted me dijo que extendiera mis alas y volara, y aquí estoy. Espero haberla hecho orgulloso.

To my brothers Ramon and Abraham Chavez; thank you for always being so incredibly amazing. Your support and belief in me, in everything I do, has sustained me throughout this journey. Thank you for loving me, even though you don't always like me.

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Lastly, I would like to offer my gratitude to my students. From my first class, when I was a graduate student to this semester so many years later, it has indeed been my honor to know you. Thank you for including me in your lives; for sharing your time with me, for allowing me to see you all grow and succeed, to watch you leave our campus for the next chapter of your academic lives has been my pleasure. You have shared your personal lives with me. But most importantly you have provided me with the opportunity to say, every day, for the last 13 years, *I get to go to work today!* It has been my sincere pleasure, honor, and privilege to have had a small place in your lives. Without you, my work, this dissertation would not be possible.

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To my dissertation committee:

Dr. Lisa Bortman, my chair, I can never thank you enough for choosing me as your student; I hope I made you proud with this work. Thank you for believing in the importance of this study and being a model of what it means to be a student-centered educator. You have been such a blessing. The support you provided was indispensable; I didn't know how much I needed it. You allowed the overachiever in me to flourish and I thank you for not letting me settle for less.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the role of the faculty-student interaction in the perceived sense of belonging first generation students experience while attending 2-year community college. While Strayhorn's (2012) definition of sense of belonging is referenced this researcher has developed a diagram that focuses on the sense of belonging that focuses specifically on the 2-year community college student due to the fact that the theoretical frameworks regarding sense of belonging focus, primarily, on the perception of belonging among college students attending residential 4-year colleges and universities. The sense of belonging for first-generation, community college students suggests that a student's perceived sense of belonging (what is referred to as *internal*) is influenced by the faculty-student interaction; particularly by the external (what is referred to as *behavioral*) actions of faculty. The first-generation student's perception of belonging, those students whose parents do not have a college degree, will be discussed; in particular, the research examines the experiences of first-generation African American and Latino, community college, students. The perceptions of belonging were uncovered through the use of one on one interviews and an examination of the 2014 responses by first-generation students to the University of Texas (2015) Community College Survey on Student Engagement (CCSSE). This is not a true mixed methods study as the data from CCSSE was used for reporting purposes only. The focus on the lived experience provided this study with rich and insightful material that adds to the limited body of research related to the community college as a post-secondary institution.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

According to a published study by the Census Bureau both the Latino and African American population are projected to grow steadily from 2014-2060 (U.S. Census, 2014). To have an under- or unemployed Latino or African American population is to have a weak workforce, ill prepared to take advantage of work opportunities. College continues to provide minority students, opportunities to improve their socio-economic lives. Because minority, first-generation, students do not have a history of college success in their families these students could benefit from having a sense of belonging when they enroll at 2-year community colleges. When the stress of study becomes overwhelming, when students are asked to be responsible for their success, but have never been trained to be responsible this makes it harder to navigate through the college system. A student's lack of knowing of college culture can have a negative impact on their post-secondary education experience.

Student-centered barriers included a lack of motivation and academic preparation; unfamiliarity with the costs and benefits of the higher education system; unwillingness to leave community and family; lack of family involvement in education; the necessity of having to work to help the family survive; not knowing they were capable of earning a degree; and failure to understand the consequences of changing programs and financial pressures. (Martinez & Fernandez, 2004, p. 54)

Not only do first-generation students have to contend with the pressure to succeed in unfamiliar territory, but also often the territory is designed to be unfamiliar to the student. Tovar (2015) cites a report from the Center for Community College Student Engagement, which notes:

[W]hile Latino and African American men are moderately to highly engaged in effective educational practices, they also experience the lowest outcomes, in contrast to other students. The Center attributes this in part to stereotype threat and emphasizes that community colleges must devote specific efforts to actively counteract threats through effective culturally relevant pedagogy, narratives focusing on belonging, and student-agent relationships characterized as positive, supportive, and demanding. (p. 6)

Another factor that inhibits success for first generation students is the length of time it can take to transfer from a community college to a baccalaureate awarding institution. “Only 26.2% of students who take at least one remedial course graduate from college, compared to a 59.4% graduation rate for students who are not required to take any remedial coursework” (Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011, p. 321). Developmental students are those who, through the community college assessment process, score below college-level abilities in math and English. Thus, these students must take non-credit courses prior to being eligible to enroll in the transfer-level courses that allow them to apply, and transfer, to a 4-year university. These remedial courses can fall anywhere from one to three levels below college-level writing and mathematics. A developmental student may spend one to six semesters taking non-credit courses before they become eligible for transfer-level study. According to Carnevale (2014) he asserts:

For minority and low-income students, the biggest challenge is remediation. Being African American, Hispanic, or in the lowest third of the income distribution is more strongly correlated with underpreparation than are other student characteristics, including whether a parent has a college degree. (p. 45)

The developmental to transfer pipeline is important because the Student Success Act of 2012 has limited financial aid as part of its success strategy. From the start of their academic career to their earning of a bachelor’s degree the modern student has access to 6 years of financial aid. A developmental student may very well use financial aid to cover 3 years of developmental study all the while not earning credit for the courses they complete. The significance of this process is that a student could very well use a large percentage of their financial aid while completing their community college education.

Another issue affecting the success and persistent rates of first-generation students relates to their feeling of belonging. Steel (1997) uses the term *wise schooling* to describe the practices faculty can use in their interactions with students of color. Steel advises faculty to provide

students with challenging work, to confirm that they belong-intellectually-in college, that faculty provide a safe faculty-student relationship, and lastly, that faculty show a value for multiple perspectives. While the number of African American and Latino students has increased over the years the percentage of faculty of color has not as noted in the discussion below. Many students of color report that they feel disconnected at college because the faculty, teaching at degree-granting institutions: associates and certificates as well as primarily baccalaureate or above, has remained largely male and White.

Utilizing the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, n.d.), IPEDS Datacenter, the primary investigator ran a query to determine the race, ethnicity, and gender of faculty who are employed at degree-granting institutions, in the United States, in 2015. Utilizing the statistical tables from NCES the primary investigator searched for the sum total of faculty based on race/ethnicity and gender. According to the IPEDS Datacenter there are 4,832 degree-granting institutions in the United States (associates to graduate degrees). The grand total of male faculty employed at degree-granting institutions in 2015 was 381,492 compared to women faculty that totaled 322,972. Upon further review of the data, White males totaled 282,474 faculty members, with White women accounting for 238,439 faculty positions. The data also revealed that the sum of minority faculty was much smaller in numbers compared to White faculty. Black or African American faculty accounted for 39, 876 of instructional staff at degree-granting institutions and Hispanics or Latinos totaled 31,749 of the faculty of U.S. degree-granting institutions. The teaching faculty at American colleges and universities does not reflect the diversity of today's student population.

Community colleges can develop and implement strategic plans to help first-generation students succeed and persist onto 4-year colleges and universities. Such planning can begin with faculty.

If faculty are not equipped to understand and address the nature of students' fundamental academic needs, then minority students who are less prepared will continue to confront learning environments that are ill-suited for transforming underprepared students into high academic achievers. As a result, student retention and persistence will remain problems endemic to higher education institutions. (Cole, 2008, pp. 587-588)

Community colleges can begin to examine the conditions that exist within their individual institutions to identify how they can best serve first-generation students. A good place to start is in examining the role faculty play in student success.

Statement of the Problem

The most current research on African American and Latino students paints a dismal picture of success for such a large, and prominent, group. According to Solomon, Solomon, and Schiff (2002) as a racial or ethnic group, African Americans and Latinos are underrepresented student populations despite the projections that these two groups will exceed 30% of college enrollment. A vast majority of these students are first-generation, arriving at college with little to no exposure to the college culture and environment. Most of these students are choosing to start their post-secondary studies in community colleges.

Community colleges in the United States enroll almost half of all U.S. undergraduate students. The American Association of Community Colleges (2013) reported that 13 million students attended 132 community colleges in the fall of 2011, and 41% of these students were enrolled as full-time. The AACC also reported that of all undergraduates in the United States, 45% were community college students; 59% of full time community college students were employed part time, and 40% of part time community college students were employed full time.

And while many students from historically disadvantaged groups, have used the community college system to move onto 4-year colleges and universities, much of the current research suggests that African American and Latino first-generation students remain severely underrepresented in the college success and graduation rates. “More than one half of African American and persons of Hispanic origin who enroll in college after high school graduation attend a community college. These two minority groups are the largest minority groups represented in community colleges” (Bragg, 2001, p. 96).

Among student populations that attend community college these non-traditional groups—African Americans and Latinos—have some of the highest attrition rates in the country. According to Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) report that starting at the post-secondary level of education minority students begin to report that micro aggressions are a contributing factor to why they are dissatisfied with their educational experiences. “Microaggressions are subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) or ‘mini-assaults’ directed toward people, often automatically or unconsciously” (Solorzano et al., 2000, p. 60). The research indicates that minority students experience faculty interactions differently and such interaction do have an impact on their retention and/or attrition. Schwitzer et al. (1999) reports that satisfaction with faculty relationships appears to vary by race, with White students reporting the greatest satisfaction with their faculty relationships. Also, according to Kuh and Hu (2001) interactions with faculty, in an academic nature, can have a positive effect on student success. Latino students report feeling ill-equipped to compete at the post-secondary level. “Challenging assumptions about Latinos’ potential and fostering a supportive campus climate are closely linked. Latino students often come to college with lower confidence in their academic abilities” (Culturally

Responsive, 2013, p. 71). Aside from having lower confidence the lack of exposure to college culture can make the college experience daunting. Davis (2010) asserts the following:

Simply stated, first-generation college students are unfamiliar with the culture of college, and, to one degree or another, unfamiliar with what it means to be a college student. By unfamiliar with the “culture” of college, I mean primarily that first-generation students are new to the insider knowledge, the special language, and the subtle verbal and nonverbal signals that, after one has mastered them, make one a member of any in-group, community, or subculture. (pp. 29-30)

The time spent at the community college is an opportunity for first-generation students to familiarize themselves with college culture, learn how to build supportive relationships with faculty, and gain a sense of belonging. For first-generation students their previous educational experiences have not necessarily prepared them for success in post-secondary education. A study by Polite (1999) found that for 115 Black males enrolled at Metropolitan High School, teachers did not discuss college as a post-high school opportunity and that only 1 out of 15 Black males were prepped for college-level work. Counselors did not direct these youths to college prep opportunities. A potential reason for such behavior is attributed to policies that are in place. High schools find themselves “teaching to the test” and are focused on attaining graduate completion rates rather than preparing the student for college-level rigor. Finn et al. (2002) suggests that researchers and practitioners review the processes that are in place that lead to some students taking advanced classes while other students do not. A social factor that affects the ability to persist and succeed at the college level is that minority students are often first generation, at-risk, college students which means that they lack the social capital that Tinto (2005) posits is needed for success. Providing a sense of belonging to students of 2-year community colleges could potentially increase their chances of graduation and can improve their academic performance.

[Rendon reports] that many nontraditional students do succeed in college, and these students could identify the experiences that had helped them to succeed. When we asked nontraditional students why they were still in college while others had left, they related incidents when someone, either in or out of class, took an active interest in them, when someone took the initiative to lend a helping hand, to do something that made them believe they were capable of doing academic work. (Rendon, 2006, p. 2)

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceived sense of belonging first-generation community college students experience as part of their interactions with college faculty. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of African American and Latino students who self-identified as a first-generation student and were attending a 2-year community college. The study explores the perceived sense of belonging that first-generation students, specifically those who are at least in their second year of study, developed as a result of faculty-student interactions. In addition, these factors were explored as aspects that impacted a first-generation student's perceived sense of belonging as a component of a student's intention to persist at the community college.

Research Questions

This study examines the perceptions and attitudes of first-generation, African American and Latino students (enrolled in community college) concept of sense of belonging as developed through their relationship with faculty. The research questions developed for this study focus on the perceptions/experiences of first generation community college students. Specifically, the study examines how the reported sense of belonging contributes to the student's experience and how it manifests itself for the student.

1. What are the experiences that contribute to a sense of belonging for first-generation students?

- 2a. How do in-class interactions, related to the faculty-student relationship, affect a first-generation student's sense of belonging?
- 2b. How do out-of-class interactions, related to the faculty-student relationship, affect a first-generation student's sense of belonging?
3. What is the relationship between first-generation students' sense of belonging and persistence?

Theoretical Construct

Strayhorn's (2012) definition of sense of belonging suggests that students are driven by an instinctual need to form positive relationships while in college that influence their decisions to stay enrolled. Strayhorn defines sense of belonging as:

A basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior. In terms of college, sense of belonging, refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). It's a cognitive evaluation that typically leads to an effective response or behavior. (p. 3)

Tinto, Bean, and Astin separately have developed theoretical frameworks that examine the components affecting student retention and persistence (Strayhorn, 2012). Spady (1994) identifies causes of, and solutions to, the challenge of retention explaining that student departure functions as an interaction between the student and the college environment. During this interaction student attributes (interests, skills, attitudes, and values) are exposed to the norms of the college environment (faculty, staff, peers, and administration). If the institution and the student are in sync in their norms then the student will assimilate to the environment both socially and academically thus, they are more likely to persist.

Tinto's (1993) model of institutional departure states that, "nothing is more important to student retention than academic support, especially during the critical first year of college, when

student retention is still very responsive to institutional intervention” (p. 25). Another theorist, whose work focuses on retention is Bean (1990) who states that retention rates are reflective of student interactions with the college’s characteristics. Bean differs slightly from Tinto in that he believes that what a student believes about himself or herself shapes their attitudes and is a predictor of persistence. Astin’s (1984) theory of involvement also places an emphasis on the importance of the institution providing students with an environment where they can participate in clubs and organizations, find campus employment, and a robust residence hall environment. “...a highly involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students” (Astin, 1984, p. 518).

As Strayhorn argues, sense of belonging is a basic human need, a fundamental motive, which drives human behavior. When students feel they belong there is the feeling of being in a state of equilibrium, a state of psychological well-being, which is important to the social and academic integration of students (Tinto, 2013) into the college environment. An important aspect of Strayhorn’s theory is his assertion of Maslow’s (1962) hierarchy of needs that states that needs are “domain- and situation-specific.” “Quite often, students’ academic and social involvement influences their sense of belonging on campus and vice versa” (Strayhorn, 2008, p. 9). Strayhorn’s theory suggests that the degree to which a student is involved in their academics and the level of social engagement determines their sense of belonging; thus, implying that the students are in control of the degree to which they feel they belong. “By interacting frequently (and in positive ways) with others on campus, students establish meaningful relationships (e.g., friendships), which, in turn, can be seen as supportive resources that can be brought to bear on the college experience” (p. 9). Though Strayhorn, along with Tinto, Bean, and Astin, has

contributed greatly to the study of student retention their work remains focused on the success of students at 4-year residential colleges and universities. As such, it was important for this research to develop a theoretical framework better suited for the study of student success at 2-year, public, community colleges.

Two-year community colleges are non-residential; students do not live on campus as community colleges are commuter institutions. This fact alone means that the experience of belonging for students at community colleges is already different from the experience that “traditional” students will encounter when they chose to live on campus. Looking at the work of Strayhorn (2012), Tinto (1993), Bean (1990), and Astin (1984) and applying it to a nonresidential community college, the most significant measure of similarity that their studies have with community colleges is the faculty-student interaction. For this particular study the focus was on faculty-student interaction and its effect on the community college student’s perception of sense of belonging as it impacts student persistence.

Paradigm Shift

Witt, Wattenbarger, Gollattscheck, and Suppieger, (1994) cite the *Charles E. Stuart v. School District No. 1 of the Village of Kalamazoo* case of 1874, as pushing the idea of high school education to the forefront of education discourse, thus leading to an increased enrollment of 600% over the following 30 years. Witt et al. (1994) explains that the increase in enrollment led to the idea that high school could include 6 years, with 2 years devoted to college study in an effort to make college more affordable. Vaughan (2000) writes that California, in 1907, was the first state to offer 2 years of college classes for students while they were in high school. When community colleges were first established the purpose of the institution was to alleviate the responsibility of the state university from teaching undergraduate courses. This new model of

instruction allowed universities to focus their attention solely on upper-level courses that would lead to degree attainment. As the years progressed additional factors contributed to the growth of community colleges: “baby boomers born after World War II, the civil rights movement, and an increased commitment by the federal government to provide additional funds to college students (Vaugh, 2000). Sterling (2001) states that by 1927 the community college was in a state of transition from serving students academically to training students for semi-professional jobs. New programs were established, outside of academics, to offer vocational training and certificates, and the development of financial aid changed the demographic of the student population as well since previously cash strapped students could enroll. What is evident is that there is a paradigm crisis in the 2-year community college. The needs of students in the 21st century are vastly different than those students of the early 20th century. According to the AACCC (2013):

As of January 2013 there were 1,132 2-year institutions, 986 of which were public, 115 were independent and 31 were tribal. The fall 2011 head count for community college students was 13 million, with 8 million in credit classes and 5 million in noncredit classes. The average age of the students was 28; 67% were women, 43% were minority, 40% were first generation, 41% were full-time, 59% were part-time, and 34% were Pell Grant recipients. (p. 1)

The literature has revealed first-generation college students experience feelings of isolation during their experiences in post-secondary institutions. The current community college, first-generation, student does not need just academics; they need social support to see them through the collegiate experience as well. Since the 1970s student retention has become an area of interest to researchers. Spady (1971), Tinto (1975, 1993), Kamens (1971, 1974), and Astin (1977, 1985) have often been cited as leading experts in the field of student retention rates in college. The research on retention continues today. Hurtado and Carter (1997), Strayhorn (2012), Tovar and Simon (2010) have continued to add to the study of student retention.

Strayhorn (2012) affirms the need to continue to research the area of retention, as it is affected by sense of belonging as it affects the diverse institutions students attend.

Throughout this interaction a student's attributes (values, interests, skills, attitudes, etc.) are exposed to norms of an environment (faculty, peers, administrators). If the student and the environment are congruent in their norms, the student will assimilate both socially and academically, increasing the likelihood of persistence. (as cited in Seidman, 2012, p. 23)

Similarly, Tinto's (1993) theory built upon Spady's model about the nature of student departure. Tinto's theory "incorporates elements of both the psychological and organizational theoretical models. It purports that a student's entry characteristics, coupled with his or her initial commitment to the institution and to graduation, influence student departure decisions" (as cited in Seidman, 2012, p. 23). Kamens (1971, 1974) offered a sociological perspective to "demonstrate how institutions with greater size and complexity, along with superior capacity to place graduates in prestigious social and occupational roles, have lower rates of attrition than do other types of postsecondary institutions" (as cited in Seidman, 2012, p. 23). Lastly, Alexander Astin (1977, 1985) and his colleagues at UCLA have studied retention since the 1960s. Astin's work from hundreds of colleges concluded that involvement was the key to retention. "Simply put, the more students were involved in their academic endeavors and in college life, the more likely they were to be retained" (as cited in Seidman, 2012, p. 23). While the work of these researchers is well-respected in the study of higher education these studies do not to examine how success rates are impacted at 2-year community colleges where the environment and student body is much different and not akin to that of a 4-year, residential institution.

Thus, the areas that impact success at the residential institution are not appropriate to the study of student success at the 2-year, public-open access-community college. "An open door mission is a commitment to providing comprehensive programs and services for all of the constituents in their communities regardless of racial, ethnic, economic or academic

circumstances” (Bragg, 2001, p. 96) The 2-year student at the community college under study is typically at-risk for dropping out because they are developmental-an individual who has entered college despite a lack of college preparation (Dozler, 2003). According to Boylan, Bonham, and Bliss (1994) by 1994 an estimated 650,000 students in the United States were required to enroll in at least one developmental education course. Researchers in the field of higher education include the following as at-risk factors: first-generation college student, placement in developmental or remedial education courses, lower socioeconomic status, being a minority student, and having disabilities. The open access of the community college calls into questions whether the theories that have been often used to assess student success, persistence, and attrition trends at the 4-year residential institution are appropriate to measure student success, persistence, and attrition at the 2-year community college (American Association of Community Colleges, 2013).

Importance of the Study

The study of sense of belonging as it relates to first-generation community college students adds to a limited body of knowledge when it comes to research regarding community colleges. Townsend, Donaldson, and Wilson (2004) report that between 1990 and 2003 only 8% of the estimated 2300 articles published in five major higher education journals mentioned community college and community college students. In regards to sense of belonging the majority of the research is concentrated in the 4-year residential college and university. The majority of the research indicates that students of color feel isolated and ostracized because they find it difficult to form strong and supportive relationships with faculty. This particular study is significant because the community college student body is largely comprised of minority ethnic groups. According to the data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement

(2014) the college enrolled 7,611 students that identified as follows: 74% full-time, 26% part-time, 62% are between the ages of 18-24, 47% Hispanic/Latino, and 29% black or African American. It must be noted that the primary interest of this research was, first and foremost, access to first-generation students. Only these two ethnic groups were sampled because they have the highest enrollment numbers at the research site. No effort was made to differentiate among the demographics. Specifically, the results of this research could be used to implement strategic approaches to guiding the faculty, staff, and administration of the community college in building quality relationships with its minority male students in an effort to positively impact their success rates. It is the hope of this researcher that the work undertaken at the community college can prove beneficial to other 2-year community colleges as an example of how inquiry could lead to campus specific practices particular to their student body.

Key Definitions

- *First-generation students*: a student whose parents or guardians does not possesses a 4-year degree.
- *Sense of belonging*: a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior. In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation or connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). It's a cognitive evaluation that typically leads to an affective response or behavior.
- *Community college*: open-door institutions, which do not have a formal admissions board that denies or offers admissions to students.

- *Student success*: The percentage of students who persist from 1st to 2nd year, from 2nd year to 3rd year, from 1st year to degree completion, from 1st year to certificate, from 1st year to transfer. An examination too of the numbers of students who persist.
- *Persistence*: continued enrollment (or degree completion) ... within the same higher education institution.
- *Underrepresented student populations*: Low-income, immigrant, first-generation, and ethnic minority.
- *Faculty-student interaction*: The willingness of faculty to remember students' names and acknowledge students in a friendly, informal way, students are likely to leave the encounter with a positive perception about the faculty member, thereby increasing the likelihood that the student would intentionally pursue future contact with the faculty member.
- *Micro aggression*: the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.
- *Non-traditional student*: Those students that may attend part-time, single-mothers, senior citizens, and 25 years or older.

Assumptions

Based on the research available it is assumed that when students of color—African American and Latinos—are in a college environment where the majority of faculty members are also minority that the success and persistence rates would be higher than those of comparable community colleges. According to Provasnik and Planty (2008) “At community colleges, there

is relative parity in the percentage of male and female faculty compared with public and private 4-year institutions where males predominate (constituting about 60 percent of faculty members). In addition, at community colleges, there are greater percentages of Black and Hispanic faculty than at public or private 4-year institutions” (p. 9). Another assumption to consider is that student will report having had positive interactions with faculty, due to the faculty demographics. Of the 241 faculty at the research site, the self-reported demographics are as follows: 79% of faculty identified as White, non-Hispanic; 5% as Hispanic, Latino, Spanish; 7% as Black or African American, Non-Hispanic; and 4% as Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander. Less than 1% of the faculty members are American Indian or other Native American. Because this study uses the phenomenological approach, it can be assumed that this research site can serve as a model to other community colleges that are also interested in using inquiry to determine how to best serve its first-generation students.

Limitations

The most significant limitation of this study is that it is focused in the specific context of the research site. This study did intend to examine the perceived sense of belonging of first-generation students at this particular 2-year community college located in the Southern California area. The sample size for this study is also a possible limitation. The small sample size means that the researcher has more of a challenge to establish a significant relationship from the data. The fact that there is a limited amount of research available on the community college is another reason why the research for this dissertation is limited to first-generation students and their perceived sense of belonging. As stated earlier, much of the scholarship regarding college success focuses its attention on the 4-year residential institutions. A potential reason why this may be the case, as revealed through the research, is that the topic of student success is much

more widely studied at 4-year residential institutions as opposed to community college institutions. Due to this particular limitation, researchers have an opportunity to engage in further research regarding student success at 2-year community colleges, and in particular to study student success among first-generation students. Another limitation to this particular study is that it relies on self-reported data and thus, bias such as, selective memory, telescoping, attribution, and exaggeration. A further limitation to this study was that the primary investigator intended to interview first-generation African American and Latino students and did not interview first-generation students from other ethnic groups.

Summary

While the topic of student success is widely studied at 4-year residential institutions the same cannot be said about student success at 2-year community colleges particularly as first-generation students experience it. As Strayhorn (2012) has stated, faculty-student interactions can have a positive effect on students' perceived sense of belonging and potentially impact their academic success in a positive manner. Because Strayhorn's theory focuses on faculty-student interactions at 4-year residential institutions the researcher for this work developed the Community College Sense of Belonging to study the perceived sense of belonging among first-generation students, of color, at 2-year community colleges. Along with the use of one-on-one interviews the researcher also included a review of the 2014 results from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Synthesis of Literature Review

The articles used in this research emphasize the significant role that community colleges play in helping to prepare almost half of the United States' population of college-age individuals. The literature also affirms the difficulty that first-generation students can encounter at, mostly, 4-year institutions. As well, it is noted throughout the literature that for first-generation students of color campus life can be quite difficult due to the feelings of marginalization they report. First-generation students, those whose parents have either no college experience or whose parents attended college but did not earn a baccalaureate degree, find it difficult to integrate themselves in the campus culture. The literature reports that students face a difficult time in finding their sense of belonging in an environment they feel does not reflect them culturally. The literature does affirm the significant role that faculty have in helping students find a sense of belonging. Several sources speak to the value of the faculty-student interaction (both within and outside of the classroom) as a means of developing a feeling of mattering on the part of the student. The sources used in this research point positively to the theoretical frameworks posited by Strayhorn (2012) as contributing to an understanding of the importance of sense of belonging for college students. It is crucial to realize though that this discussion of sense of belonging often does not include a study of the first-generation student in the community college. In fact Marti (2009) observes that there is "bias towards" the study of student engagement at 4-year institutions. Townsend et al. (2004) report that of an estimated 2300 articles published between 1990 and 2003 in five major higher education journals, only 8% mentioned community colleges. The information presented in this literature review is intended to offer insight into the importance of the faculty-student interaction as it contributes to the perceived sense of belonging on the part of

the first-generation community college student. Information gleaned from well-respected researchers and theorist has been used to develop a theoretical framework that would allow for the study of sense of belonging for the community college student.

The Community College Literature

It has been noted at times that the general public and student populations refer to community college as Grade 13 and beyond. They are not necessarily incorrect. Community colleges were founded as an extension of the high schools. In 1874, Charles E. Stuart v. School District No. 1 of the Village of Kalamazoo helped to increase the number of high school students nearly 600% (Kelsay & Zamani-Gallaher, 2014) by extending the high school curriculum to include 2 years of college in an effort to make college more affordable for the everyday student. Joliet Junior College is recognized as the oldest community college in the United States. Then principal, J. Stanley Brown—also the superintendent of the Joliet high school district—advocated for the inclusion of advanced courses, beyond the 12th grade, to help high school students transfer so that they may complete their baccalaureate studies at a 4-year institution. His concept of the “junior college” allowed students in the district to transfer as college juniors from Joliet high schools to local 4-year colleges.

History. At the start of the 1900s, California and Wisconsin quickly took notice of Brown’s junior college and began to establish statewide community college system. California passed legislation to allow high schools to offer college-level work. “David Starr Jordan, president of Stanford University, wrote that he was looking forward “to the time when the large high schools of [California]...will relieve the two great universities from the expense and from the necessity of giving instruction of the first 2 university years” (as cited in Kelsay & Zamani-

Gallaher, 2014, p. 5). As the 1900s moved forward other states: Mississippi, Michigan, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas also established junior colleges.

Throughout their history, community colleges have served a diverse student body. This diversity had a direct impact in how community colleges scheduled course offerings. In order to accommodate working students the institutions began to offer night and weekend classes. Two-year colleges were seen as having a vital position in the democratizing of higher education. With the Truman Commission (1947) community colleges began to expand the scope of services they offered, and gained a stronger position within the state. Separate college districts were established and educational leaders advocated for funding for 2-year colleges as separate entities from, but equal to, 4-year colleges and universities. Community colleges changed from charging a flat tuition rate to a per unit fee (Sterling, as cited in Kelsay and Zamani-Gallaher, 2014). While community colleges were changing to meet the needs of the student population it was not until the 1960s that the most significant expansion of community colleges took place.

Historically, the increase of women and minorities in community colleges took place during the 1960s. With the establishment of federal financial aid women, minorities, and financially strapped students were able to take advantage of the educational opportunities offered by community colleges. By the 1970s about 1,000 community colleges, across every state, had an enrollment of 2.5 million students (Witt et al., as cited in Kelsay and Zamani-Gallaher, 2014). Several states, had multiple community colleges, but the most significant location of community colleges was in those rural areas where there was not a 4-year college nearby. The open-door (open-access) mission of community colleges was central to their success. This policy allowed high school graduates, high school dropouts, and working adults to obtain a college education. As community colleges began to grow the programs and fields of study available started to

reflect the growing needs of its student populations. Technical programs aligned with local industries were established. There was an emphasis on vocational training and the offering of career training instruction. The changes that took place from the 1960s through the 1980s indicated that the nation's community colleges were able, and willing, to accommodate the increasing number of 2-year college students and their career and educational needs. According to Cohen and Brower (2003) by the 1980s only one-third of all students enrolled in community colleges were full-time.

The community college student of today is by no means the same college student of years pass. As the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s showed, community college students represented a diversity of needs and wants. Thus, how community colleges measure *success* is dependent on students' initial purpose for enrollment: personal growth, to learn English, career advancement, skill development, learning as a hobby for retirees, degree or certificate attainment, or transfer to a 4-year. The varied reasons why students enroll in community colleges complicates the idea of what constitutes success not only at the state level but also from college to college. In January 2015 President Barack Obama spoke of the importance of the community college in helping Americans of all ages and backgrounds have access to the skills and knowledge needed to compete for jobs in the coming years. In fact, President Obama has said that a community college education should be as free and universal as a high school education. Then President Barack Obama (2015) in his speech "America's College Promise" proposed that, for responsible students whose work ethic would allow them to persist, two years of community college should be free.

The community college of today. A review of the current literature of the community college indicates that indeed the community college is not just an extension of high school. "The

invention of the 2-year community college is the greatest innovation of the twentieth-century in America higher education” (Coley 2000, p. 4). As the current literature states, the 2-year institution offers access to higher education throughout the United States. “The number of community colleges within a state varies from a handful to more than 100. While no two are exactly alike, they share the goals of access and service” (American Community College Turns 100, 2000, p. 6). Since their beginning, community colleges have been a place with several foci. According to Bragg (2001) community colleges were charged with serving students who, primarily, would transfer to other baccalaureate granting institutions. Community colleges enrolled a non-diverse student body: White, male, college going, and traditional age. Even at its start, community colleges have had diverging foci when it pertains to the type of instruction it offers: vocational, community engagement, and transfer. Community colleges have continued to serve a growing number of students who have affected the diversity of the community college and have affected the community college mission and purpose of service. Having a willingness to change with the times has served community colleges well. The tenets of which the community colleges are founded upon allow for a diverse student body. The community college’s opened admissions practice means that non-traditional students can have access to the same educational roads provided to students entering a 4-year institution directly after high school. As well, the community college is a cost-effective approach to a college education. Bragg also contends that the community college’s low-cost and open-enrollment policy has contributed to a diverse student population who are seeking programs and services that will afford them an opportunity for advancement regardless of the student’s racial, ethnic, economic or academic status.

Because of their open access policy, community colleges are a place where individuals who have historically been excluded from higher education can register for a wide variety of courses. Gage and Drumm (2010) in their research found a correlation between high enrollment rates to, what they observe is, the practice of the community college hiring faculty and staff that work collaboratively to define student success and then allow themselves the opportunity to use that definition to fill the academic needs of its students. It has been claimed in the research of Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, and Klingsmith (2014) that faculty members, focused on students, will lead the community college through the initiatives necessary to foster a sense of belonging. Gnage and Drumm (2010) propose that colleges must make sure to hire faculty focused on student success, as their interaction will directly affect the lives of students and their success. As mentioned earlier the term *success*, in community college is mercurial. The focus of students at the community college changes and thus, so does the focus of the community college. Not all students who enroll in community college are interested in transfer.

Since 1980, the transfer function of community colleges declined significantly. According to Martinez and Fernandez (2004) they report that the percentage of community college students who transfer to a senior institution ranges from 5 to 15%. With such low transfer rates, students who are already considered nontraditional and at risk may find it difficult to persist in their personal and academic lives. McClenney (2004) notes that community colleges must do their work with the highest levels of commitment and quality if they are to prepare students to thrive in society. Since the student population differs from community college to community college what constitutes a quality community college education is subjective.

An alternate view of quality, articulated by George Kuh, director of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), is that quality, at least for undergraduate education,

should be defined in terms of the student's educational experience--in particular, the student's active engagement in his or her own learning at the institution....It is this view of quality that makes the most sense for America's community colleges. (McClenney, 2004, p. 18)

Much of Kuh et al.'s (2011) working definition of quality is the idea that the educational experience is a result of the student's "active engagement." While there are a variety of engagements a student can participate in the focus of this literature review will discuss faculty-student interaction as a marker of active student participation.

As an open-access institution community colleges do not have a formal admissions process, as do 4-year residential colleges and universities. The community college is open to students of all ages, sexual orientations, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, socio-economic backgrounds, citizenship and residential status and does not require students to hold high school diplomas or to have taken any standardized test for admissions. According to Wyner (2014) community colleges educate 4% of the entire U.S. population (13 million students) due to its low costs, which puts community colleges in a position to prepare those seeking to become skilled workers for jobs in manufacturing, technology, health care, and other high growing fields. Community colleges have a responsibility for preparing students to persist in their academics and careers. For many students who are considered at-risk, this preparedness can either encourage or dissuade individuals from persisting. Earlier researchers note that first-generation students have different characteristics and experiences than the traditional students higher education usually serves, thus they are an at-risk group in need of more researcher and attention from administration is they are to survive and succeed in college (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Retention rates are a key factor in the overall infrastructure of an institution; the institution needs students to serve through its programs and services.

As well, it should be noted that the current research expects the minority-student community college population will grow. Baker and Griffin (2010) noted, “Today’s college students are from increasingly diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and it is anticipated that students of color will be approximately half of all college attendees by 2020” (p. 2). This trend is already evident in the community college populations. Bragg (2001) notes that nontraditional and minority students are the most active enrollees at community colleges, which means that community colleges are serving a much more diverse population than 4-year colleges. As the research shows community colleges are in a position to provide not just a quality education to its students, but to assist its student population in persisting through the challenges they may encounter. While not a residential institution community colleges can have a positive impact on a student’s sense of belonging by promoting and encouraging its faculty to engage actively and purposefully in faculty-student interactions.

The community college student. Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008) acknowledge that there is no clear definition of first-generation students in the literature, but a common definition is that first-gen students are the first in their immediate family to attend college. Being the first in the family to attend college puts the student at-risk. Without family members to guide them through the academic process, or discuss with them the need to persist through the hard times, first-generation students can be at-risk for dropping out.

As found in the current literature, the traditional college student is usually White, male, and attends a 4-year residential college or university. The current literature is very specific in defining the characteristics of the community college student. As the research reveals, to be a first-generation student implies that there is an academic deficit. According to Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008) the recruitment and retention of students from working-class backgrounds is made much more difficult because they have been less prepared for college, feel

less supported, and lack a sense of belonging at the colleges they attend. The research shows students attending community college, self-report, that they are not prepared to handle college-level work and rigor. Rendon (2006) reported that:

Students [who] do not consider themselves to be college material, ranging from students who didn't make good grades in high school to those who were involved in gang life....single mothers and fathers...students who have been told they will never amount to anything, students who have lived in poverty and who are the first in their family to attend college. (p. 2)

Students from marginalized groups often report difficulty in achieving success in college due to a lack of success in the pre-college life and a lack of successful college-going individuals in their lives, particularly for first-generation students who would be the first in their family to attend post-secondary institutions.

The literature also reveals that first generation students are transitory due to the commuter aspect of the community college. Iverson, Pascarella, and Terenzini (1984) note that when compared to students living on campus, commuting students are less likely to participate in educational and developmental activities that could have a positive influence on their experience. Also, the researchers found that commuting students are less likely to participate in non-required social, intellectual, and cultural activities, and are less likely to interact with faculty. Lastly, the commuter student is less likely to be influenced by their college experience.

Through further examination of the pre-existing literature, researchers have noted that community college students' lack of sense of belonging at 2-year institutions can be detrimental. McArthur (2005) noted that, perhaps, it is the commuter aspect of the community college that contributes to a student's decision to leave campus once class is over. The commuter student, potentially, is heading to a home life where they may receive little, if any, support for their academics or where utility and family obligations are placed before their academics. Unlike the

community college student, residential students are afforded the opportunity to focus on their studies and form support groups that keep them focused on their academics. In a more recent article Baker and Griffin (2010) assert the importance of the faculty-student relationship for the community college student: “While they may have adequate to ample social and emotional support, academic support through faculty interaction may be particularly important to first generation students due to their limited experience with college” (pp. 2-3). As the definition first-generation student suggests, upon entering post-secondary institutions, these students have few academic role models. In a study by Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2006) they reported that faculty-student interaction has the potential to guide students towards educational activities and commitments that would positively affect their membership in the campus community. It is believed that students perceive they are capable of accomplishing more than they think is possible and view themselves as full members of the campus community because of their interactions with faculty. It is these competing values—home obligations versus academic obligations—that, according to the research, place community college students “at risk.” Along with the term “first generation,” and “first year,” as used in the literature, these terms define a group of college students who may exhibit low retention and persistence rates. Specifically, the current research focuses on the Latino population and their success, persistence, and attrition rates in post-secondary education.

First year students, especially those that are first-generation students, are at a particularly high risk of dropping out before their second year. Because many students do not persist to their second year of college study each academic institution must determine for itself how best to assist their students. Fike and Fike (2008) contend that, “Interventions should be tailored to each institution and then evaluated to make sure they are meeting the unique needs of the institution

and its students” (p. 68). The risk for attrition, as the literature reveals, is even greater for community college students. McArthur (2005) asserts that the barriers to success are often most significant and looming for the community college student who is often at risk for early departure. The research indicates that an at-risk student is one whose attention is focused on other areas of their life besides education. A review of the current literature indicates that first generation students have no academic role model to emulate. This deficit puts them at risk of not, eventually, graduating. According to Schreiner et al. (2011) their research indicates that:

First-generation students graduate at one-third the rate of students whose parents have college degrees; less than 29% of low-income students graduate, compared to 73% of high-income students and 55% of middle-income students. African American and Latina/o student graduation rates lag 16 to 25% points below the rates of Asian Americans and European Americans (p. 321)

With no prior role models to model academic success, first generation students, according to the literature, are at risk of failing. Schreiner et al. (2011) claim that those students who come from families where there is not a history of higher education graduates are at-risk of not succeeding versus those students who come from families with college graduates. The current literature reveals that African American and Latino students are largely considered first-generation because they come from families where there is little, to no, access to models of college success

As previously stated in the literature, first-generation, minority students are at a high risk of failure in their pursuit of post-secondary education. Whether students attend 4-year residential institutions or a community college, internal and external factors contribute to their perceived sense of belonging. It is this perceived sense of belonging that could potentially be a catalyst for persistence and retention for the at-risk student.

Sense of Belonging Literature

According to the literature, student's persistence is not just impacted by risk factors such as age and ethnicity. Nakajima, Dembro, and Mossler (2012) contend that studies pertaining to persistence in community college students tend to focus on areas such as registrations trends, age of student, academic performance, ethnicity, and a student's financial status. The researchers observe that recent research has just begun to investigate how faculty-student interactions affect student persistence. A sense of belonging has, in research studies, been examined as a factor that can contribute to student success at the collegiate level. As Tinto (1993) has explained, when a high school student moves to a post-secondary institution he or she carries with them the skills and ability to adapt to their new environment. It is the use of these skills that allows the student to feel as if they belong at their new college or university because they are able to form meaningful relationships. Residential programs, and first year student services that colleges provide all contribute to the sense of belonging so crucial in a student's retention after the first year. Tinto's theory has direct applicability to the 4-year residential environment. The meaningful relationships Tinto speaks of, in part, refer to that of the faculty-student relationship. As the literature suggests, studies pertaining to faculty-student interaction are focused on the 4-year residential institution. Wirt and Jaeger (2014) report that the existing literature regarding faculty-student interaction at the community college is not researched to the same degree that the relationship is studied in the traditional-aged, Caucasian, student at a 4-year college or university. As Tinto (1993) has suggested in his work, it is the student who arrives at college with the skill set needed to succeed that will allow them to navigate the college system. First-generation students often lack the skills necessary for collegiate success.

As a high-risk group, first-generation students are in need of additional support to persist through their first year. If indeed the college can help make a difference in a student's persistence than community colleges in particular have a responsibility to make students feel as if they belong so that when they transfer to their 4-year college or university they will know how to advocate for themselves and create that sense of belonging for themselves in their new environment. A sense of belonging can be created through faculty-student interactions. Baker and Griffin (2010) observed that, "Women and students of color are often in search of faculty members who understand and connect with their social and educational experiences, which may differ significantly from those of the White males who dominated college campuses in the past" (p. 2). Faculty, it seems, can be a driving force in creating a sense of belonging for students.

The topic of sense of belonging has been widely written about. In fact, Tinto (1993), Astin (1984), Strayhorn (2012), Hurtado and Carter (1997) attribute a sense of belonging to the persistence rate of first year students at 4-year colleges and universities. Little has been studied about sense of belonging as a potential factor affecting persistence at 2-year, public, community colleges. Thus, this literature review will have to start broadly if educators at 2-year community colleges are to consider sense of belonging as a factor in student success and persistence. This literature review will answer several questions that will be used to explain why sense of belonging should be studied at the 2-year community college. These questions are:

1. What is sense of belonging as it relates to post-secondary education?
2. What are the attributes of the community college that make it a separate entity from 4-year colleges and universities?
3. What is faculty-student interaction and how does it affect students and their success in the community college?

4. Why are first year community college students considered first-generation, non-traditional, and at risk?
5. Why is the community college a starting point of postsecondary education for Latinos?
6. What are the experiences of African American students in post-secondary education?

Post-Secondary Institutions

In order to move forward with the discussion to follow it is imperative to begin with a working definition of sense of belonging that will guide the following discussion regarding the relationship between student success and sense of belonging. While the definition differs slightly from theorist to theorist I have chosen to use the following as the working definition for this research as developed by Strayhorn (2012):

Sense of belonging is framed as a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior. In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). It's a cognitive evaluation that typically leads to an affective response or behavior. (p. 3)

In 1997 Sylvia Hurtado and Deborah Faye Carter published "Effects of College Transition and Perceptions of the Campus Racial Climate on Latino College Students' Sense of Belonging."

Like Tinto (1993) and Astin (1993), Hurtado and Carter (1997) sought to find out what measures can be used to determine student persistence from the first to the second year. Hurtado and Carter "contend that understanding students' sense of belonging may be key to understanding how particular forms of social and academic experiences affect these students" (pp. 324-325)

who have historically been excluded from education. Strayhorn (2012) reports that:

Although a good deal is known about sense of belonging as a basic human motivation, factors that influence students' sense of belonging, and the influence of sense of belonging on important outcomes such as achievement and plans to stay in college, comparatively little is known about differences that exist in terms of college students'

sense of belong, as well as social identities and campus environments or conditions that create a sense of belonging for such students. (p. 2)

For students in the college or university environment sense of belonging is essential to their academic success. Strayhorn (2012) emphasizes that performing poorly on a test or assignment is a deterioration in motivation and that a student's loss of motivation is related to an institution not meeting the needs of that students. Though several theorists will discuss the importance of sense of belonging for students the body of literature available has yet to focus its attention on college students as a group. Strayhorn (2012) observe, "What has amassed, to date, is best described as research on *individual* students' sense of belonging in college" (13). There is a need to examine to what extent sense of belonging influences particular student groups: first generation, first year, Latino/a, and African American students. Strayhorn continues his discussion by stating:

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

The work of Hurtado and Carter (1997) focused the research on sense of belonging on Latino students and their perception of the racial climate at a 4-year institution. Their work reveals that students who belong to groups that have been largely marginalized in post-secondary education would benefit if integration into the college culture addressed their needs. Their research takes into consideration the fact that Latinos just may experience the college environment differently from their White peers. Hurtado and Carter assert that they type of organizations that are generally available and directed to the traditional college student my not be of benefit to the Latino student population. Even if a student does not seek out his or her peers at the very least forming some sort of peer relationship can help the student feel connected to the campus. Astin

(1993), Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) have stated that the correlation between a student's persistence and degree attainment has theoretically and empirically been linked to a student's connection with peers and a positive relationship with faculty. An important consideration in this discussion is the extent to which students must be the ones to integrate into the campus culture. Students attending 4-year residential institutions will acclimate to college life through a series of pre-established activities available to them: dorm life, student services, student clubs, fraternities and sororities, and student government. The literature suggests that sense of belonging is created in a partnership between the student and the institution. "Rather than expecting students to bear sole responsibility for success through their integration into existing institutional structures, sense of belonging illustrates the interplay between the individual and the institution" (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 526). Such an interaction gives students validation, the sense that they indeed belong. Validation also occurs when faculty members allow students to voice their ideas openly in a safe environment, and when they structure learning so that students are able to understand themselves as capable of learning (Rendon, 2006, p. 3). This type of accommodation is a conscientious effort to create an environment in which the student feels welcomed. Several studies found that "A sense of belonging is lowered and college persistence decreases with negative racial climates, negative peer and faculty interactions, and perceptions of discrimination" (Williams & Ferrari, 2015, p. 379). McMillan (1996) revisited the idea of sense of community by considering the empirical dimensions that contribute to the sense of belonging, and claims the following:

In sense of community theory, spirit replaces membership as the defining aspect of this principle. Boundaries continue to distinguish members from nonmembers and provide emotional safety. Greater emphasis, however, is now placed on the spark of friendship that becomes the spirit of sense of community. Each of us needs connections to others so that we have a setting and an audience to express unique aspects of our personality. We

need a setting where we can be ourselves and see ourselves mirrored in the eyes and responses of others. (pp. 315-316)

It may very well be necessary for institutions to have a sense of purposefulness in how it tells its students that they are wanted. This is particularly true for students at community colleges.

After a year or two at a community college, many students seek to transfer to a 4-year school and attain a baccalaureate....[P]reparing students academically to transfer to 4-year colleges or universities and facilitating that transfer has always been a major responsibility of community colleges. (Townsend & Wilson, 2006, p. 439)

The question often asked by researchers is whether or not, and to what extent, does sense of belonging contribute to a student's motivation to succeed. Morrow and Ackerman (2012) report in their study of community college students that interactions with faculty and other members of the college were related to a student's intention to continue in their studies. This sense of belonging was not only related to a student's intention to persist, but was also a factor in the student's commitment to the institution. The researchers asserted that while there is research that supports their observations further research in regards to sense of belonging and persistence is needed. Unless students feel they belong at their institution there is a very high likelihood that the student may not persist to their second year of study. In an article by Tovar and Simon (2010) they reported that:

American College Testing's 2009 national statistics indicate that the first-year to second-year persistence rates in the United States ranged from a low of 53.7% for 2-year public colleges to a high of 80.6% for private PhD-granting institutions. On average, 34.1% of freshmen students did not persist to their second year of college. (p. 199).

For students of color it is particularly significant that researchers examine how sense of belonging affects their persistence. Tovar and Simon (2010) observe that much of the research regarding sense of belonging is focused on how students from racial and ethnic minority groups navigate the college environment but the research does not focus on how sense of belonging, for these students, impacts their persistence. Hurtado and Carter (1997) observed that students who

perceive they are in a hostile, racially charged, environment within the second year of study had the potential to affect a student's belonging at the start of their third year. The authors noted that Latino students, in particular, are less likely to feel that they belong, perceiving that campus life is a hostile environment. Tovar and Simon (2010) note that should the same student have early, positive, experiences at the campus their sense of belonging can increase throughout their college career. As the research suggests minority students may find it difficult to establish a sense of belonging at institutions where there is perceived racial hostility.

For students whose background has limited interaction with higher education the difficulty to feel like they belong can be exasperated. Meeuwisse, Severiens, and Born (2010) claim that for students who come from families where there is little, to no history of, college-going experiences the college culture and environment can prove particularly overwhelming, thus, affecting their potential to persist and succeed. Much of the research available on sense of belonging echoes the same insights. Sense of belonging can be achieved through positive faculty-student relationships, a supported counseling center, and through engagement with diversity. O'Keeffe (2013) reports that feeling a sense of connectedness on campus is critical to a student's academic performance as well as preventing attrition. This sense of connectedness can be developed if the student has the opportunity to develop a significantly meaningful relationship with at least one key individual at the institution. The potential of this relationship is that it could impact a student's decision to remain enrolled and committed to the earning of a degree.

If students find it difficult to belong at 4-year universities, where they have the opportunity to live on campus and get to know the ins and outs of campus life, then students attending a 2-year institution can find it difficult to navigate the commuter community college

environment. For many people seeking to enroll in college, Cohen and Bower (2003) assert that, “the choice is not between the community college and a senior residential institution; it is between the community college and nothing” (p. 53). Schuetz (2008) adds that almost fifty percent of all community college students who, upon enrollment, identify the earning of a certificate, associate’s degree, or transferring to a four year institution as their objective, end up withdrawing from their studies in their first semester of year of attendance. Many first year students leave their studies before they earn a degree, certificate, or transfer. The high attrition rate is not necessarily related to the student’s academic abilities. “Attrition is typically associated with students’ poor academic preparation, excessive work, family responsibilities, or lack of commitment to educational objectives—the deleterious effects of which are considered largely beyond the control of the college” (Schuetz, 2008, p. 306). As Schuetz states, the student’s decision to withdraw is often viewed as something the student does rather than something the student and the college interact to produce. If attrition can be prevented, then it is the responsibility of the institution to create an environment of belonging where success can be achieved. Karp and Hughes (2008) noted that, “Students’ reported integration, or sense of belonging in the institution, is positively associated with their persistence to a second year of enrollment. This sense of belonging is encouraged by students’ involvement in information networks, a group of social ties that helped them understand college life” (p. 73). Integration can be achieved when a student associates with other like-minded students by participating in student success programs, joining clubs and activities, or taking the time to make connections with faculty, staff, and other students. Karp and Hughes go on to assert that, “This theory of integration hypothesizes that students who feel connected to the social or academic activities of the college are more likely to feel comfortable there and so are less likely to leave the institution”

(p. 75). On the opposite end of the spectrum, Duggan (2001) suggested that first-generation students are less likely to integrate into campus culture due to their housing choices. In his study, Duggan found that non-first-generation students are much more likely, than first-generation students, to reside on campus; 70.0% versus 50.0% respectively. Davis (2010) in the study of first-generation students contends that, first-generation students are much more likely to attend institutions close to home and, whether or not they choose to live on campus, are less likely to view the campus space as their own. Whether the same conclusions can be drawn of the community college student is not clear. Duggan and Davis focus their attention of the first-generation student attending a residential institution. Thus, sense of belonging may very well have a diverging significance for the residential and community college student.

The literature suggests that non-traditional student groups are more likely to lack a sense of belonging. The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey is housed at the Center for Studies in Higher Education and administered by the Office of Student Research and Campus Surveys at the University of California Berkeley. In 2009 the survey was administered to 145,150 students across six institutions of the consortium to measure the immigrant college student's sense of belonging. The results of the survey, according to Stebleton, Huesman, and Kuzhabekova (2010) "suggest that the non-immigrant groups had a higher sense of belonging on average than the immigrant group. This evidence indicates that immigrant status may lead to a lower sense of belonging at major public research universities" (p. 6). How a student perceives they are welcomed at the institution affects their persistence. Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2009) found that for those first-generation students who reported a high degree of involvement on campus also reported a higher degree of academic and social integration. These same students also reflected a higher commitment to the institution and

were more likely to re-enroll in a second year of study. Social integration can occur in two specific arenas: the classroom and the college at large. In the classroom setting, the student is able to forge a relationship with their instructor and classmates. At the college level the student may join clubs, participate in student government, enroll in academic programs such as the Honors program, or the student may even work for the institution through work-study. How the student feels and perceives their place in the institution is significant to the research at hand. Freeman, Anderson and Jensen (2007) report that a student's sense of belonging within the student's institution is an important factor to the student's positive school-related experiences. The researchers contend that simply being in a classroom is not enough to create a sense of belonging, that sense of belonging is manifested through effective instruction which focused on the mastering of meaningful content, interactions with faculty that are warm and respectful, as well as cooperative peer interactions. Perhaps, as the research indicates, one reason why the body of research in this area has been limited to the individual's perception of sense of belonging is because it tends to be a relative experience. Freeman et al. (2007) note that the research is not clear to what degree the student's perception of faculty as supportive and caring is important to the student as he or she transitions into college. Nonetheless, the research does indicate that sense of belonging can affect persistence and retention.

As a community of educators the research indicates faculty have an impact in how students feel wanted, thus creating an atmosphere of belonging. All community colleges have a mission statement, how the institution intends to serve the needs of the students. Perhaps it is time to consider asking faculty and staff to determine how to include students in a purposeful manner. "Being a member of a community includes feeling part of a group. In the school, that community consists primarily of students and teachers" (Osterman, 2000, p. 324). When a

student belongs their rates of retention and persistence are improved. Osterman continues by saying that academic achievement, engagement and participation, motivation, and academic attitudes are found to be related to the experience of belonging. A student's sense of belonging can have a positive effect on their academic career and success. If community colleges and its agents are willing to engage in efforts that convey sense of belonging, then the community college student may persist. The community college system began as an institution "equal to" 4-year colleges and universities. The purpose of community colleges was to serve students as they transition to 4-year colleges or universities. Since its start community colleges have had to change their focus to meet the demands of current student populations. While they serve a wide variety of student needs for some critics, community colleges are not on par with 4-year institutions.

Faculty-student Interactions

The faculty-student relationship is an important aspect to a student's sense of belonging. In order to thrive a student must feel respected and valued at the post-secondary institution. And while the student-faculty relationship has been shown to be important, few studies, in regards to community colleges, exist in this area Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) report that studies have been conducted almost exclusively in residential institutions, while little attention has been paid to the ways in which interactions with faculty influence the educational experiences of students at commuter institutions such as community colleges. While the primary function of community college faculty is to facilitate learning, in the classroom, it is important for students to experience positive faculty relationships specifically because the community college experience is a transitory one. While the faculty-student relationship can take on many forms (mentor, friend,

confidante, and advisor) and exist both in and outside of the classroom, sometimes the simplest actions can have a great impact. Cox (2011) argues that:

When faculty members remember students' names and acknowledge students in a friendly, informal way, students are likely to leave the encounter with a positive perception about the faculty member, thereby increasing the likelihood that the student would intentionally pursue future contact with the faculty member. (p. 51)

Oftentimes students will perceive not being acknowledged as a micro aggression. When a faculty member cannot recall a student by name they are serving as a negative agent of the institution. McArthur (2005) reports that teaching faculty members are key to the community college and their work, and engagement, with students. Whether the faculty member chooses to play a mentor role, or simply engage in polite social exchange with the student, it is important to note that for many students at community colleges the faculty may be the only academic role model they have access to. McArthur echoes what previous researchers have noted about a first-generation's student lack of modeling when it comes to college success:

The faculty members represent the authority figure, the mentor, and the role model that may not appear anywhere else in the student's life. Because the faculty members are in such a position, their influence over students can be very significant. (p. 2)

A positive faculty-student relationship can help a student's academic and social adjustment and may influence their academic success. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) assert that a student's relationship with his or her faculty is of particular importance in both their academic and social integration on campus. The researchers refer to a number of studies that suggest that even informal contact with faculty outside of the classroom is associated positively with college persistence.

As previously mentioned in the literature review, community colleges were established to help 4-year universities focus their attention on students in the junior and senior level of their academics. The community college exists to prepare students for academic rigor. Barbatis

(2010) reports that positive faculty-student interactions can influence a student's study habits and an understanding of college expectations, which influence their understanding and development of skills essential to success. A relationship with college faculty is essential in helping students feel they belong and are valued members of the campus community as well as influencing self-efficacy.

When a student feels like they belong they can be successful in their academics. Tovar (2015) argues that the relationships a student builds with agents of the institution as well as their participation in various programs allows them access to resources and information that make them savvier participants in their own academics. Faculty is an important and significant resource to students. A faculty member can help a student set goals, gain a deeper understanding of the material, as well as help determine a major or career choice. Baker and Griffin (2010) assert that "interaction between faculty and students has long been lauded by practitioners and researchers as critically important to college student learning and developments. Given that learning is a social process, relationships--especially those with faculty--are powerful tools that aid in student's personal and professional development" (p. 2). It is this influence that signifies why faculty have a responsibility to help students find a sense of belonging while at the 2-year community college. Chang (2005) describes such relationships as having a positive influence in a student's degree aspirations, self-efficacy and esteem. As well, faculty-student interactions are significant enough to impact academic success, goal development and help in their adjustment to college. Chang continues by claiming that understanding the impact on such student's behavior is better understood when one considers the multiple roles a faculty member holds in their student's life: instructor, role model, employer, advisor, and a source of support and guidance.

It is important to note that simply knowing a student's name is not going to help students feel as if they belong.

It is essential for faculty to have relationships that can be developed in a quality manner. According to the literature, faculty must make sure that they are consistent and transparent in their actions with students. Moore and Amey (1998) affirm that, "Faculty can also encourage academic persistence and leadership through their own attitudes and behaviors. Because students look to faculty as role models and authority figures, they also look for congruity and consistency between expressed philosophies and actual behaviors" (p. 43). The literature suggests that a faculty member make sure their actions are inline with their words. Simply because a faculty member says they have office hours does not mean that they are inviting of students. When a student visits their office, the faculty member should have a willing spirit to meet. If a faculty member says that they are student-success focused the when a student comes to them for assistance they must be willing to give their time over to that student. What then does this reveal that educators can adapt? According to the literature available community colleges can glean a lot of information from current studies.

Large-scale studies of college impact have revealed the existence of significant relationships between the amount of time students spend interacting with faculty and a variety of educational and personal outcomes, including academic skill development, social self-confidence, academic and social integration, altruism/social activism, leadership ability, artistic inclinations, and occupational values, gains in educational and degree aspirations, satisfaction and retention. (Sax, Bryant, & Harper, 2005, p. 642)

One particular reason students need a sense of belonging, and why faculty-student relationships are so important, is that for many community college students their intent is to transfer to a 4-year college or university where they will need to create for themselves the sense of community that supported them during their early years of community college. In his study of community college students who transferred to elite, private universities Bensimon (2007) found that these

students identified individual community college faculty and staff as the primary reason for their success. Faculty members were referred to as increasing student confidence, helping students refine their academic skills and providing important information about the transfer process. Bensimon contends that students benefit from their interactions with faculty members who validate their role as students and such students felt faculty members were committed to their well-being. As the current literature reveals, for some students, interaction is indeed an important factor to their success. Nakajima et al. (2012) report that:

Helpful instructors were those who took the time necessary to work with the students as well as be available for discussions, questions, and requests outside of classes. It may only take one individual to convince the student that he or she is important and will be missed if they decide to drop out. This study verifies that it does not necessarily have to be interaction between the student and the faculty that is important for student persistence. Instead, the perception of faculty interest may be enough to change students' behaviors. (pp. 605-606).

According to the recent literature, it is essential to note that the faculty-student relationship alone is not enough to determine, or affect, student persistence and success. In their study Nakajima et al. (2012) report that thus far, the research available, does not show that there is a direct relationship between faculty interaction and persistence. The students in their sample did not persist in their college education more than students who had no interactions. What they do report, is that when students described their faculty as "being concerned" this was a predictor of student persistence in their college pursuits more than those students who did not feel that a faculty was concerned for them.

It is faculty-student interactions that, though not part of a faculty member's duties, contribute to the culture of success. Cox, McIntosh, Terenzini, Reason and Lutovsky-Quaye (2010) report that, "The educational value of faculty-student interaction outside the classroom is among the oldest and most widespread beliefs in American higher education" (p. 766). The researchers also acknowledge that few studies have been completed as to *why* some faculty

members do report more frequent out-of-class interactions with students than some of their colleagues. As the research indicates good instruction does not necessarily translate into a faculty that can develop interpersonal relationships with their students. Pattison, Hale, and Gowens (2011) report that student success is tied into more than just instruction:

Good teaching is not just a matter of technique; students are more likely to be satisfied and successful in classes where they perceive that professors primarily care about them as individuals rather than merely focusing on the transfer of knowledge. (p. 39)

And while the research shows that students benefit from faculty-student interactions it is interesting to note that students do not necessarily have the interpersonal skills to pursue such relationships. Why and how to engage with faculty outside of the classroom is not, necessarily, obvious to students. Data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (2008) indicated that during their time in college a student can learn to understand the purpose of contacting faculty outside the classroom. Yet, Cox et al. (2010) contend that for first-generation students and students with lower self-confidence or low self-efficacy may find it uncomfortable seeking out a faculty member outside of the classroom because they are unfamiliar with college norms.

For a student to seek out an instructor outside of the classroom then the faculty must make that idea clear during the in-class interaction. Rendon (2006) performed a study examining what contributed to a student's sense of mattering. Validation includes seemingly simple acts, such as calling students by name, praising their work, and providing encouragement and support. Yet the effect of such acts is very powerful. The power in this relationship lies in the fact that students, who perceive that there is a faculty-student relationship in place are more likely to report positive feelings of belonging. Sandoval-Lucero et al. (2014) report that number one theme reported by those students who identified an instructor as instrumental to their success in college was related to the instructor being accessible to the student. Several of the students also identified that their instructors were motivating which impacted their success in college.

Consider, that there are several ways in which an instructor can build a relationship with students so that they may feel like they belong at the college. Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2006) affirm that, “Informal student-faculty interaction activities—being a guest in a professor’s home, working on a research project with a faculty member, talking with instructors outside of class, and serving on committees with faculty—are positively correlated with student learning and development” (p. 40). As Maslow discussed in his hierarchy of needs the need to belong, to feel included, is one of the strongest people have. And because people have the need to belong they will develop relationships that are fulfilling.

Out-of-class contacts appear to positively shape students’ perceptions of the campus environment and seem to positively influence educational aspirations . . . and degree completion. . . . Although the reason for this relationship is not clear, it seems likely that when faculty engage students outside the classroom, and these interactions are positive, students may feel affirmed and develop a stronger bond with the institution. (as cited in Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2006, p. 41)

As the current research shows, the interaction between faculty and students can have a positive effect on students’ intellectual and personal development, not just on their heightened sense of belonging.

The implications of a positive, faculty-student relationship influences both academic and personal success. Halawah (2006) notes that “successful students consistently rated teachers as friends, helpers, and assistants. Informal interaction of college students and faculty affects students’ academic achievement, satisfaction with college, and intellectual and personal development” (p. 670). Not only can a positive faculty-student relationship have an impact on a student’s sense of belonging, but this relationship can also have an effect in a student’s post-collegiate life. Hoffman (2014) reported students’ feelings of academic confidence and being prepared for life after graduation was heightened because they had participated in informal conversations about academics. When an instructor has a willingness to become acquainted with

students outside of the classroom the instructor is creating an opportunity for growth. The current literature revealed that some institutions purposefully create programs with the intent of fostering positive faculty-student interactions. An example of the purposefulness behind creating programs with a strong FSI is that of the Stretch Program at Boise State where students are enrolled in a continuous English course with the same instructor, over the course of a year, which allows an opportunity for faculty and students to become well acquainted. Peele (2010) studied how the year-long program impacted the faculty-student relationship. He notes:

Both students and faculty get to know each other better than they would be able to in a one-semester class, and both report greater comfort, better learning and teaching, and higher overall satisfaction. The increased level of predictability—that is, students' ability to predict how their professors will react from one semester to the next—and faculty knowledge of student performance are the two areas of the Stretch experience noted by both students and faculty that offer the strongest argument for implementing a Stretch program. (p. 63)

The research presented thus far accentuates the uniqueness of the community college as well as how the institutions foster a sense of belonging for the student. Further research indicated sense of belonging and faculty-student interactions could contribute to the success of ethnic/minority students. Does the ethnic/racial background of faculty have an effect on a student's sense of belonging? For minority students, the answer might be a resounding *yes* according to the research. Lundberg and Schreiner (2004) found that, “students of color often interact with faculty whose race or ethnicity is different from their own, which may have implications for their learning” (p. 549). While students of color make up a significant percent of students at colleges and universities the faculty population continues to be predominantly White. Noel and Smith found that “among White, African American, and Mexican American students, all groups preferred to disclose more information to faculty members of their own race or ethnicity” (as cited in Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004, p. 549). While one may argue that a quality faculty-student interaction need not be determined by ethnicity or race, the reality is that students of

color feel less supported in academia because of the lack of faculty ethnic minority faculty employed at the institution. Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) surveyed 578 African American, Asian American, Latino/a, and White undergraduate students regarding their perception of the campus racial climate. Their study revealed that:

African American, Asian American, and Latino/a students were significantly more likely than their White counterparts to experience pressure to conform to racial and ethnic stereotypes regarding their academic performance and behavior, as well as to minimize overt racial-ethnic group characteristics (e.g., language and dress) in order to be accepted. (p. 182)

The research shows that students of color, whether academically prepared or not, may find it difficult to establish a meaningful relationship with faculty who are White. As is argued in the literature, perhaps if a faculty member is willing to create a culture of reciprocity in their classroom, students of color may have a positive experience with faculty and the college. Pascarella (1980) contends that the early exposures students have to in-class faculty behaviors (in regards to their accessibility outside of the classroom) then, it is reasonable to infer that faculty behavior can influence a student's attitude regarding informal, non-classroom interactions outside of the classroom. Pascarella surmises that the quality of in-class interactions can, to a degree, influence the role the faculty has in a student's out-of-class experiences.

In his current revision, Astin (1984) asserts that, "the most consistent finding[s]—reported in almost every longitudinal study of student development—is that the student's chances of dropping out are substantially greater at a 2-year college than at a 4-year college" (p. 524). The significance of the work mentioned is evidence of the importance to study the faculty-student relationship as a potential aspect of student success. In particular, it would be significant to understand how the FSI affects students of color at community colleges.

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement

The University of Texas's College of Education established the Center for Community College Student Engagement in 2008. A primary objective of the CCSSE was to serve as tool that would allow those institutions interested in improving education quality to do so utilizing data that revealed student engagement and student success. For the past seven year CCSSE has collected quantitative and qualitative data with community colleges across the United States, Canada, and several island nations. CCSSE (2015) reports that:

Since 2002, the Center has surveyed more than 2 million community college students cumulatively representing a total credit enrollment of more than 6 million students. Member colleges represent an overwhelming majority of all accredited, public, associate-degree-granting institutions in the United States. (para. 3)

The results provided by CCSSE (2015) affirm the current, and scholarly, research published regarding student engagement. When a student is actively engaged as a member of the campus community—interactions with faculty, staff, peers, and within their areas of study, there is evidence that the student is more likely to persist and continue onto higher levels of educational attainment.

Several of the theorist researching and writing on the subject of student engagement affirm the work CCSSE (2015) continues to do. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), in their 20 years of research also confirmed that students, when actively involved, in academics and out-of-class activities are more likely to gain more than those students who have no involvement. In Tinto (1993) recounts, in his study, the following observation:

Simply put, the same forces of contact and involvement that influence persistence also appear to shape student learning. Though the research is far from complete, it is apparent that the more students are involved in the social and intellectual life of a college, the more frequently they make contact with faculty and other students about learning issues, especially outside of the class, the more students are likely to learn. (p. 69)

The connection between learning and retention is the result of student engagement and it is this relationship that provides CCSSE with the conceptual and empirical base for the survey. CCSSE is, as Kuh (2001) affirms, “specifically designed to assess the extent to which students are engaged in empirically derived good educational practices and what they gain from their college experience” (p. 2). The survey asks students to report the frequency with which they participate in positive educational practices such as, participating in in-class discussions and interacting with faculty in, and out, of the classroom. Question number 11 of the CCSSE (2015) asks student to rate their perceptions of what they believe represents the quality of their relationship with instructors, 7 (the highest score) indicating instructors are available, helpful, and sympathetic, to a 1 (the lowest score) indicating instructors are unavailable, unhelpful, and unsympathetic. There are several studies, which help validate this question. CCSSE (2015) refers to Bensen and Cohen (2005) who examine the extent to which student experience rapport with their instructors, noting that such a relationship affects student attitudes and behaviors. Several of their research participants reported that they felt a rapport with a faculty member and indicated that such a relationship was a positive one. Their study also revealed that rapport motivated students to engage in pro-academic behaviors. Lundquist, Spalding, and Landrum (2003) survey 729 students at a large Western university in regards to 19 faculty attitude and behavior items and asked the students to discuss how faculty attitude and behavior affected the student’s thoughts about departing the institution. The student survey revealed that there are three key issues that contribute to a student’s thinking about leaving: a faculty member’s support of a student’s need, the timeliness in returning student telephone calls and emails, and whether or not the student perceives the faculty to be approachable.

The importance of the faculty-student interaction is evidenced by the Community College Student Survey on Engagement as there are eight specific questions asking students to respond based on their perception of the quality and frequency of such interactions. As such, the survey instrument, as it is administered in community colleges across the United States, can aid community college administrators, staff, and in particular faculty establish specific practices that could have a positive impact on the community college student and their perceived sense of belonging, particularly for those students who enter post-secondary education as first-generation students.

The Community College Sense of Belonging

The primary theoretical framework that guided this study was Strayhorn's (2012) theory of sense of belonging that suggests students are driven by an instinctual need to form positive relationships while in college that influence their decision to stay enrolled. Strayhorn defines belonging as:

a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior. In terms of college, sense of belonging, refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). It's a cognitive evaluation that typically leads to effective response of behavior. (p. 3)

Strayhorn's theoretical framework, like those of Tinto (1993) and Astin (1984) primarily investigate the sense of belonging of students attending 4-year residential institutions as they consider how residential life has an effect on sense of belonging and a student's persistence. Because these theoretical frameworks focus primarily on the residential, post-secondary, institution, a theoretical framework that focuses on the perceived sense of belonging of community college students emanated from the themes revealed through this research as they relate specifically to faculty-student interactions. Deriving from the theoretical frameworks of

Strayhorn (2012) and Astin (1984) the primary investigator developed the community college sense of belonging theoretical framework to specifically investigate faculty-student interactions as they influence the sense of belonging of community college students. The community college sense of belonging theoretical framework focuses specifically on how the actions of faculty affect the perceived sense of belonging of students and influence specific outcomes for first-generation students.

Chapters 1 and 2 referred to three theoretical frameworks that have been used widely in the study of student success, persistence, and attrition. Tinto's (1993) interactionist theory of student retention, Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement, and Strayhorn's (2012) definition of belonging assess the reasons why students persist in college.

Tinto (1993) focuses on the tools that college students bring with them when they first enroll in post-secondary institutions. Much of Tinto's research focuses on the residential college/university. Tinto observes that students enroll having knowledge of the cultural capital necessary to navigate their new environment. As children whose parents have attended and graduated from college these students understand that this new environment may present challenges that will be overcome. Along with the institutions that offer student and residential life these factors contribute to a student's sense of belong and thus when a student feels that they belong they are more likely to return for their second year of college.

Astin (1984) defines *involvement* as the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience. It follows that a student who is involved in their academics, campus life, and interacts frequently with faculty and other students may experience a greater sense of belonging. For Astin, his theory of involvement is one that reflects action; Astin emphasizes that behavior, on the part of faculty, is critical to the level of involvement on

the part of the student. Thus, involvement can be measured and observed (a student who asks questions, a student who visits office hours, a student who revises work bases on criticism).

Astin's theory does not theorize the effect such involvement can have on a student.

Strayhorn's (2012) college students' sense of belonging is the definition that will govern the research presented in this dissertation. Of the three theorists, it is Strayhorn's work that focuses primarily on sense of belonging as a factor in evaluating student success. Belonging, Strayhorn emphasizes, is a basic human need sufficient unto itself to lead individuals to act, to seek out companionship. Strayhorn reflects on the past research involving sense of belonging as a basic human function and observes that as a factor in student achievement little is still know in regards to the various ways in which students experience sense of belonging. For this particular research project Strayhorn's definition of sense of belonging guided the work. Strayhorn (2012) writes:

sense of belonging is a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior. In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). It's a cognitive evaluation that typically leads to an affective response or behavior. (p.3)

Like Tinto (1993) and Astin (1984) Strayhorn's (2012) research focuses on the phenomena of belonging of students attending residential, post-secondary, institutions. Strayhorn's work differs from the general research available on sense of belonging in that his research focuses on specific group-types: African American male students, Latino students, STEM students, Gay students, graduate students, and sense of belonging as it is experienced through clubs and organizations.

As previously stated in Chapter 1, there is a limited amount of research regarding first-generation, community college students. It is because of this missing research that the primary

investigator focused her work on studying the perceived sense of belonging of first-generation community college students who identify as African American and Latino students. Because Tinto (1993), Astin (1984), and Strayhorn's (2012) frameworks and definitions focus on residential colleges and universities the primary investigator developed what will be referred to as the Community College Sense of Belonging (CCSB) definition. Pulling from the three theorists mentioned in this work the CCSB focuses specifically on faculty-student interactions and the perceived sense of belonging. Since community colleges vary in size and scope as well as the amount of money that is allocated to resources and because the community college is a non-residential institution that requires no formal admittance process and draws a variety of students (commuter, returning, first-generation, and non-traditional) the CCSB definition did not take into account pre-set skills a student may arrive with, nor did the CCSB focus on student activities. Community colleges, like residential colleges and universities employ faculty thus making faculty the one common asset that all students come in contact with.

Latino Students

Latinos are currently the largest population of ethnic minorities in the United States with the lowest academic achievement and college success rates among all students of color. Nunez (2009) indicates that the decision to depart occurs in early.

The first year of college is the most likely time for all students who have enrolled to drop out. . . . Students of color face additional challenges in the college transition. In addition to comparatively limited institutional, familial, and financial support, students of color can encounter overt and subtle forms of exclusion in college that tend to hinder their development of a sense of belonging to university communities. (p. 22)

The current literature indicates a sense of urgency for colleges and universities to find a way to help Latino students' persist in their post-secondary education. Nunez reports that the opportunity to earn a bachelor's degree is critical for Latino students. Those Latino students who

have enrolled in 4-year universities were most likely high achieving in their elementary to high school education. Yet, it is quite possible for these high-achieving students to come in contact with hurdles that obscure their success in college, particularly as Nunez points, a new academic environment and financial barriers.

As the research stated, Latino/as who make it to a 4-year college/university (from high school) tend to be high achieving. Yet, for many Latinos they begin their academic careers at 2-year community colleges. Bragg (2001) reported that, “Hispanic students are overrepresented in community colleges, making up 12% of the enrollment nationally, but underrepresented in 4-year colleges, accounting for only 8% there” (p. 96). How and why Latino students succeed is in part, as the research shows, a responsibility of how the community college meets the needs of the Latino student population. Bragg found that, relative to other racial and ethnic groups, Latinos are overrepresented in community colleges thus, obligating the community college assure that the Latino student have sufficient opportunities for success in meeting their academic goals. The success of the Latino population is key to the economic growth of the United States. Studies indicate Latinos will make up about 29% of the total population in the United States by 2050.

According to the Pew Hispanic Center (2010) between 2000 and 2008, the percentage of native-born Latino/as grew nearly 38%, while that of the foreign born grew by 26%, for a combined growth rate of 33%. Latino/as 25 years of age or older were more likely to have less than a high school education than any other racial or ethnic group in the United States. Only 26% reportedly had graduated high school, 22% had some college, and only 13% had a college degree. (Tovar, 2015, p. 2)

The current research affirms the importance of the community college with providing the student body with the skills necessary for success. “The community college has been identified as the primary educational pipeline for Hispanic students’ entry into higher education” (Ceja & Rhodes, 2010, p. 249). A sense of belonging has been identified as a potential catalyst to increase the number of Latinos who succeed in college. Ceja and Rhodes continue by observing

that, “a final key to moving Hispanic students through the pipeline is the community college faculty” (p. 251). As the literature reveals when students perceive there are barriers in place to their success they are less likely to persist. Yet, a positive environment, where faculty members engage with students seems to have, as the literature reveals, a significant impact.

When Latino students perceive that faculty and staff care about their welfare and that these personnel engage in academic and interpersonal validation of their abilities, these students are more likely to develop a sense of belonging in college and intend to persist. (Nunez, Hoover, Pickett, Stuart-Carruthers, Vazquez, 2013, p. 71)

The term Latino, as is used in the research, is a broad term defining an ethnic group. In California, the most prominent Latino group are Mexicans. Fry (2002) notes that the highest proportion of Latinos enrolled in community college are of Mexican origin. According to Martinez and Fernandez (2004) the high enrollment of ethnic Mexicans attending community college has societal implications. The researchers report that Latinos of Mexican descent account for almost 60% of the U. S population. Several research articles use the term Latino to define a large group of Spanish speaking individuals accessing community colleges. How community colleges choose to serve the needs of this population will have a significant impact on their success rates both personally and academically. “For Latinos, community colleges occupy a unique position in higher education as sites for mining the social and cultural capital needed for upward social and economic mobility in the United States” (Martinez & Fernandez, 2004, p. 52). Another group what have largely found failure in academia are African American males in comparison to African American females. This group, as well, enters the community college system with many aspirations, but few successes.

African American Students

African American males have the highest attrition rate of all demographics. According to Uwah, McMahon, and Furlow (2008) African American males have lower achievement rates

than African American women. African American women are graduating at a rate of 44.7% to that of African American males at a rate of 43.2%. Failure to increase the success rates of African American males in college has wider, societal, implications.

The consequences of failing to properly educate African American males are grave. Not only are African American males less likely to attend and complete college, but they are more likely to be underemployed or unemployed, and they are incarcerated more than any other gender-race group. (Uwah et al., 2008, p. 296)

Another social factor that affects African American males is that of stereotype threat. African American students often experience anxiety when they perceive that there is the possibility of fulfilling a negative stereotype. Such anxiety can lead to low test scores and the setting of low academic expectations. Along with stereotype threat, African American students often report encounters with micro aggressions.

Unfortunately, micro aggressions exist on all college campuses and thus a student must learn how to traverse the very complicated college climate if they are to fit in. Bean's (1985) persistence model considers how the socialization of the students is affected by their academic performance, institutional commitment, and institutional fit. Bean describes fit as the phenomena of a student feeling as if they "fit in" at the college. Bean's persistence model is similar to the student's subject experience of belonging. Hausemann, Ye, Schofield, and Woods (2009) observe that:

Even though Bean's model of student persistence emphasizes the importance of sense of belonging on a conceptual level, sense of belonging has not been independently assessed in work inspired by his model, nor have its unique effects on persistence and related outcomes been examined. (pp. 650-651)

Particularly for students of color at the community college level it is important to help students establish strong relationships so that when they transfer they'll be able to find the same feelings of belonging. Yet, the literature currently available on African American males is overwhelmingly dismal in the discussion of success. "Educational disparities are most

pronounced among Black men who lag behind their White and Asian counterparts on the National Assessment of Educational and Progress and college entrance exams” (Strayhorn, 2008, p. 27). The research available indicates that African American males do not persist as other males from different racial groups. The research makes it clear that African American males have not been able to find success in postsecondary education. According to the U.S. Department of Education in 2006, “Black men represent the exact same proportion of all students enrolled in American colleges as they did in 1976. Of approximately 15 million undergraduate students in the United States, less than 5% are Black men” (Strayhorn, 2008, p. 27). Much of the research regarding African American males reveals that as a group, they lack the needed guidance from family structure to persist academically. Strayhorn (2008) found that Black parents lack the education and knowledge to support and guide their children to and through college (p. 27).

With so little attention paid to the community college it is critical that the research on first-generation Latinos and African American student success, in regards to faculty-student interaction, be studied. The community college, for millions of students, is their only place to access the resources necessary for individual success. The failure of the community colleges to understand the needs of the students they serve has detriments to society at large.

Conclusion

Sense of belonging is an important concept for college students, in particular it seems that the sense of belonging would be important to students who have often *not mattered*. Unless students, particularly those of color, at-risk, and first-generation, feel as if they matter on their community college campus, their retention and success rates may suffer. Chang (2005) extends the argument by citing that scholars have begun to consider how the term *campus climate* is a

reflection of the participant's attitudes and engagement with the academic environment. Faculty-student interactions, when positive, can convey to the students the message that they matter, that they are valued, and that there are faculty committed to their success. As a result of the perceived sense of belonging first-generation students, particularly those of color, can find greater success in their academic endeavors.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose statement and the research questions framing this study are restated in this chapter. As well, there is a discussion of the paradigm impacting the community college and the methodology used to assess the factors that affect the persistence of first-generation students as it pertains to their sense of belonging in relation to faculty-student interactions in the community college. A description of the research site, participant selection, including recruitment and sampling process, and how rapport was established is provided. Herein, is a discussion of data collection and the analysis procedures used in the study. Also, in this chapter is a presentation of the data collected in a pilot. Finally, a discussion of the researcher's positionality is narrated.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of first-generation, African American and Latino, students in a public 2-year community college in order describe the degree to which they establish a sense of belonging through the faculty-student relationship and how this has impacted their academic success. In terms of academic success, the primary investigator was not interested in examining grade point average, but rather was interested in studying if the students persisted in their academic endeavors as a result of their faculty-student interactions, regardless of their grade point average. This study took a qualitative approach using one-on-one interviews with 13 first-generation, African American and Latino, community college students. Integrated into this study are the results of the survey instrument the Community College Survey of Student Engagement. The goal of this study is that such inquiry will lead to the establishment of best practices for the faculty, staff, and administration at community colleges. The study proposes that faculty-student interactions with first-generation students can be purposeful and meet the needs and wants of the students creating a strong sense of belonging. Current literature

examining first-generation student success in community colleges led to the development of the research questions:

1. What are the experiences that contribute to a sense of belonging for first-generation students?
- 2a. How do in-class interactions, related to the faculty-student relationship, affect a first-generation student's sense of belonging?
- 2b. How do out-of-class interactions, related to the faculty-student relationship, affect a first-generation student's sense of belonging?
3. What is the relationship between first-generation students' sense of belonging and persistence?

Methodological Overview

Gray (2009) noted that, “phenomenology holds that any attempt to understand social reality has to be grounded in people's experiences of that social reality” (p. 22). In order to capture an authentic narrative of a first-generation student's sense of belonging, the primary investigator was able to lay “aside [her] prevailing understanding of phenomena and revisit our immediate experience of them in order that new meanings may emerge” (Gray, 2009, p. 22). Particular to this study, the phenomenological approach gave the participants of this study, first-generation community college students an opportunity to ‘speak for themselves’ (Gray, 2009, p. 22). The primary investigator needed to ensure that credit was given to the lived human experience of the research participants in order to examine how students have constructed their sense of belonging through faculty-student interactions. As well, data gathered through the use of one-on-one interviews was important to this study because it gave students an opportunity to give new and fuller meaning to the topic of a first-generation student's perceived sense of

belonging in community colleges. It is important to note that the study was purposefully focused on phenomenology. The primary purpose of using a phenomenological approach was to assess how first-generation college students at the community college feel their success is tied to the sense of belonging created through faculty-student interactions. Because there was a need to triangulate the data from the interviews, results from the 2014 CCSSE survey were used to quantify the interview responses. “Analytical surveys are highly structured and place an emphasis on the careful random selection of samples, so that the results can be generalized to other situations or contexts” (Gray, 2009, p. 29). By using the results of the survey instrument, along with a phenomenological approach it was the intent of the primary investigator to model an approach other institutions could use to establish their own practices enabling them to use interview data to complement the survey results. Through the use of phenomenological interviews and survey results it was the intent of this primary investigator to effectively communicate, and validate, the perceived, sense of belonging, as it can be established through faculty-student interactions, of first-generation African American and Latino students attending a 2-year community college.

Research Site

The research took place at a community college in Southern California. The community college is located in a city that is a subdivision of Los Angeles County. Based on the most recent data from 2014 this community college serves 7,611 students. The college has a diverse student population: 47% Latino, 29% African American, 4% Asian, 3% White, 3% two or more races, 1% unknown, <1% American Indian, and <1% Pacific Islander. Male students account for 34% of the population and female students represent 63% of total enrollment. The population, a total of 7,611 students, was registered as 74% part-time and 26% full-time. Of the students who

attended in 2014 52% (3,957) identified themselves as a first-generation student. Of the 241 faculty members who participated in the 2014 CCSSE survey faculty self-reported the following demographics: 79% of faculty identified as White, Non-Hispanic; 5% as Hispanic, Latino, Spanish; 7% as Black or African American, Non-Hispanic; and 4% as Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander. Less than 1% of the faculty members are American Indian or other Native American.

In the Spring of 2014 the research site administered the Community College Survey on Student Engagement. Students were surveyed in randomly selected classes, excluding distance learning, dual-enrollment, non-credit, and the lowest level of ESL (English as a Second Language) courses. In total, the research site collected 776 usable surveys. Of the 776 surveys that were collected, 403 students (52%) stated that neither parent had earned a degree higher than a high school diploma or had any college experience. Thus, these students are considered first-generation. Of the 403 first-generation students, 232 (57.5%) self-identified as African American (Black) or Hispanic (Latino). The primary job responsibility of faculty at the community college is instruction. The CCSSE findings were used to support the qualitative response. The following CCSSE questions were reviewed:

- 4l. Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor
- 4m. Talked about career plans with an instructor or advisor
- 4n. Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with instructors outside of class
- 4p. Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations
- 4q. Worked with instructors on activities other than coursework

As an example, the first-generation, African American and Latino, community college students responded to question 4I indicating that 25% of them had *very often* discussed grades or assignments with an instructor, 33% responding that they *often* discussed grades or assignments with an instructor, 36% noting that they *sometime* discussed grades or assignments with an instructor and 6% of respondents saying they had *never* discussed grades or assignments with an instructor. A more detailed discussion of the CCSSE results is provided in Chapter 4.

Unlike their colleagues at research institutions, community college faculty members have no research responsibilities. In regards to a student's opportunities to work with faculty on non-coursework-related activities, there seems to be little opportunity to do so. Perhaps the nature of teaching is why the first-generation students in this survey responded that they never worked with an instructor on activities other than coursework. In all other questions, African American and Latino students who were also first-generation students responded to the survey questions in the positive (sometimes, often, or very often), having had interactions with faculty that potentially contributed to their sense of belonging.

Participant Selection

All students who participated in this study were self-defined, first-generation college students. The specific guidelines for student inclusion and exclusion were as follows: (a) students could not have dual enrollment; as this was a study on the community college experience alone; (b) as governed by the Institutional Review Board all participants had to be at least 18 years of age; (c) students could be enrolled either full-or part-time at the community college with plans to transfer to a 4-year college or university.

Recruitment Methods

Students in three transfer-level courses were invited to participate in the study. The California Community College Chancellor's Office publication *Program and Course Approval Handbook* identifies a transfer course as a course that "prepares students to continue study in the same or similar area at a baccalaureate-granting institution" (p. 69). Students in these courses were invited to participate in one-on-one interviews. The classes visited were: English 1C: Critical Thinking and Composition, Political Science 1: Governments of the United States and California, and Humanities 1: An Introduction to the Humanities. The courses had enrollment from 30-50 students. In order to be able to have visited those three classrooms the primary investigator had to receive site approval from the community college where the research took place. Site permission was granted on April 1, 2016. With the approval from Institutional Research the primary investigator took 15 minutes of class time to present to students an opportunity for their participation. At this time the primary investigator provided members of the class with a flyer announcing the research project and asked all interested students to reach out to her. Each student was also provided with two more flyers and asked to provide the information to other students. Students were told that a meal, under \$10 would be provided to them from one of the local food restaurants located near the campus.

Sampling Techniques

Three forms of sampling were used in the research. Convenience was employed because of the focus of this research on first-generation, African American and Latino, students at the research site. Also employed in the study was snowball sampling. By having students refer other students to the study the primary investigator was able to interview a total of 13 students

for this study. Opportunistic sampling was employed when available. When students indicated an interest in participating in the study they were not turned away.

Interview Protocol

Per the requirements of the Institutional Research department at the research site all interviews were conducted in a private office space on the research site. In order to ensure maximum privacy interviews were scheduled one hour apart from each other so interview participants would not meet one another. During the first 10 to 15 minutes of the interview process each research subject was asked to fill out a demographic survey and they were provided with an approved copy of the Informed Consent to read, they were encouraged to ask questions, and sign. It was at this time that students were told to select a pseudonym or *pen name* that would keep their identity anonymous. As well, they were instructed to provide their pen name on the Informed Consent when granting permission to be audio recorded. Once the demographic survey and the Informed Consent were filled out the interview process was underway. The interview subject was provided with a copy of the nine interview questions so that they could follow along as the questions were asked. All interviews were audio recorded for accuracy using the application voice memos. Once the interview was completed—the shortest lasting 12 minutes, the longest lasting 22 minutes—a copy of the interview was saved using the student's pen name. While a meal was offered to students for their time, 10 of the 13 students asked for a gift card from the local eateries in the stated amount. Immediately, following the end of the interview, the audio recording was sent to the primary investigator's Pepperdine email. From the primary investigator's home computer, which was password protected as requested by IRB, the interview was sent to Rev.com, which is an online transcription service. All transcripts received were then saved on the primary investigator's password protected, home, computer.

Rapport

In order to elicit the most authentic responses from research subjects the primary investigator utilized her reputation as a personable, approachable, and student-focused instructor. The primary investigator has been a student-focused instructor at the community college-level for 16 years. As Jerome Bruner emphasizes, the primary researcher aims to discover and to describe formally the meanings that humans create out of their encounters with the world. Since the primary investigator was an instructor at the research site she utilized the convenience method by selecting three transfer-level courses to visit in an effort to solicit students for her research. Both Pepperdine University's IRB and the research site's Institutional Research requested that the primary investigator refrain from interviewing any of her current students. That is to say, that the primary investigator did not solicit students from her current teaching load of Spring 2016 courses.

Phenomenological Research

For this particular study, it seemed that the most appropriate method for gathering information was a phenomenological approach. Surveys assume that the participant understands what they are being asked and that the participant will answer truthfully. Taking into consideration that the focus of this research is to learn about the perceived sense of belonging of first-generation, African American and Latino, students at a community college, it seemed fitting to use phenomenology. Husserl (2012) writes the following:

Sciences of experience are *science of "fact."* The acts of cognition which underlie our experiencing posit the Real in *individual* form, posit it as having spatio-temporal existence, as something existing in this time-spot, having this particular duration of its own and a real content which in its essence could just as well have been present in any other time-spot. (p. 10)

The phenomenological approach provides the researcher an opportunity to learn about those experiences that the students perceived to be indicative of sense of belonging. It is this experience that is the most *real* in content, time, and space. Through the use of phenomenology the primary investigator had an opportunity to provide a description of what all participants have in common regarding sense of belonging. “The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence (a ‘grasp of the very nature of the thing,’ . . .)” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). Phenomenology provides a lens for examining self-understanding and social roles.

Kaufers and Chemero (2015) state the following:

Many examples of possibilities we project, and for the sake of which we exist, resemble what we might call social roles....you can occupy the social role of a student; you have a student ID, wear a college sweatshirt, and somebody pays tuition on your behalf. But that is neither necessary nor sufficient for understanding yourself as a student. (p. 73)

This particular citation is critical to the research undertaken in this project. While, through possessions and symbols, the students who participated in this study were current students, it is through the one-on-one interviews that an understanding of their experiences as students and the degree to which they perceive that they belong became evident. Kaufers and Chemero go on to say, “...projecting a self-understanding consists of finding things mattering and being competent in the appropriately coherent ways” (p. 73). By using a phenomenological approach there is an opportunity to add to the study of sense of belonging as it is lacking when it comes to the community college. It is because there is a limited body of study regarding sense of belonging among community college students why a phenomenological approach is appropriate to this study. Creswell (2013) writes the following:

The type of problem best suited for this form of research is one in which it is important to understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences of a phenomenon. It would be important to understand these common experiences in order to develop

practices or policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon. (p. 81)

The phenomenological approach allowed the primary researcher the opportunity to study the specific phenomenon (sense of belonging) and the use of a philosophical orientation (the meaning of the students' experiences). After the student interviews were transcribed the primary investigator had the opportunity to locate significant statements (or quotes) about their perceived sense of belonging. The primary investigator was then able to cluster the students' statements into broader themes. After this process, the primary investigator was able to write a section providing a narrative description of what and how the students experience sense of belonging.

Data Collection

Based on the five research questions presented in this dissertation it was the intent of the primary investigator to use the phenomenological approach to gather information on the lived experiences of first-generation, African American and Latino community college students, who were in, at minimum, their second year of study at the research site. Using Strayhorn's (2013) definition of sense of belonging the primary investigator then developed her own diagram of belonging that would focus specifically on the relationship between faculty-student interactions and perceived sense of belonging of the first-generation, community college student. As a result, after the interviews had been conducted, the primary investigator set upon coding the interviews. Using Strayhorn's definition of belonging the primary investigator sought to assess the degree to which students' responses addressed the following variables of interest: feelings of mattering, quality of out-of-class engagement, quality of in-class engagement, and quality of office hour visits. By coding the individual interviews, the primary investigator was able to determine the extent to which students had experienced the stated variables and to identify if such experiences

contributed to a student's perceived sense of belonging and the extent to which students identified these experience as having contributed to their success.

Validity and Reliability

According to Miles and Huberman, "qualitative studies have a quality of 'undeniability' because words have a more concrete and vivid flavor that is more convincing to the reader than pages of number" (as cited in Gray, 2009, p. 493). In consideration of the data analysis that took place the primary investigator considered the extent to which Lincoln and Guba's (1985) insights of naturalistic inquiry informed the analysis of the student interviews. "Cracks have begun to appear in sciences' magnificent edifices as new 'facts; are uncovered with which the old paradigm cannot deal or explain" (p. 7). What Lincoln and Guba refer to as naturalistic inquiry is a synonym for phenomenological; naturalistic inquiry does not intend to counter the sciences, but rather affords investigators an opportunity to practice "other ways of thinking" (p. 9). Herein, the lies the inference that trustworthiness refers to validity. There are four distinct aspects to Lincoln and Guba's idea of *trustworthiness*. These four aspects, along with the researcher's use of *member checks* "Referring data and interpretations back to data sources for correction/verification/challenge ...fall within the bounds of good professional practice, and that the *products* are consistent with the raw data" (pp. 108-109). As the primary investigator it was important to this research to address *trustworthiness* in the study of sense of belonging among first-generation students.

First, truth value—"the extent to which the findings of an inquiry display an isomorphism with that reality" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 294) was, in principle, impossible. If the primary investigator already had knowledge of the degree to which faculty-student interactions created a sense of belonging among first-generation students, there would be no need for this study.

Second, *applicability* informed the primary investigator's data analysis. In a controlled setting results have applicability from one laboratory setting to another; thus evidence of validity of the research. Due to the fact that the primary investigator had conducted one-on-one interviews within the space of a private office on the research site, it was not probable that the same environment could be easily applied elsewhere. Rather, the naturalist believes in *transferability*, "the degree of similarity between sending and receiving contexts" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 297). It cannot and should not be assumed that the research undertaken in this dissertation can be, and should be, replicated at other institutions. But rather, the results of this data could inform other community college institutions how they might choose to receive the data, and thus the receiving institution is tasked with *burden of proof* to identify how the research may have applicability at other institutions. It was the primary investigator's focus to offer as much descriptive data to allow other institutions to make judgments for themselves. Third, the naturalistic inquirer takes into consideration *consistency*. Reliability is achieved through replication. "Two or more repetitions of essentially similar inquiry processes under essentially similar conditions yield essentially similar findings, the reliability of the inquiry is indisputably established" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 298-299). Because of the interview approach, it was easy for the primary investigator to acknowledge what Lincoln and Guba (1985) term *instrumental unreliability*, instead choosing to focus on *dependability* of the interview process; the taking into account factors of instability and factors of phenomenal induced change (p. 299).

Lastly, Lincoln and Guba (1985) address the use of *neutrality* in phenomenological research. Neutrality addresses objectivity of the data presented. Scriven (1971) states, "what a number of individuals experience is objective and what a single individual experiences is subjective;...[a] quantitative sense of objectivity" (p. 300). Scriven suggests that there is a

subjective and objective sense in qualitative study. Lincoln and Guba go on to cite Scriven (1971) as saying, “*Subjective* means unreliable, biased or probably biased, a matter of opinion, and ‘objective’ means reliable, factual, confirmable or confirmed” (p. 300). By placing the emphasis of objectivity on the information provided the primary investigator did not have to place emphasis on her objectivity, but rather emphasized the data itself addressing the information’s *confirmability*.

Data Analysis

The first step in analyzing the data was to send the audio recordings of the interviews for transcription. Once the transcriptions were received each were read through, and coded manually. During this coding process two considerations were taken into account. What information, provided by the interviewee, references faculty behavior indicative of providing a sense of belonging and what information shared by the interviewee addresses the research questions of this study. Once the manual coding was completed the primary investigator used the program Nvivo to determine how many nodes were addressed through the interviews. The primary investigator used the terms: helpfulness, belonging, caring, important, and mattering to organize the interviews. In reviewing the information as it was coded the primary investigator then reviewed the data to determine which research question was answered by each node.

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of first-generation African American and Latino students attending an urban, 2-year community college. Specifically, the primary investigator was seeking to find out about the students’ perception of belonging as it was related to their interactions with faculty. This study included data from the Community College Student Survey on Engagement, which was administered by the research site in 2014. The purpose of including the CCSSE data was to examine how self-identified first-

generation African American and Latino students responded to questions regarding their perception of belonging to faculty on campus. The connection between learning and retention is the result of student engagement and it is this relationship that the CCSSE measures in the survey. CCSSE is “specifically designed to assess the extent to which students are engaged in empirically derived good educational practices and what they gain from their college experience” (Kuh, 2001, p. 2). CCSSE, in its design, has, through a validation study, examined the connection between student’s engagement and desired student outcomes.

The Community College Student Engagement survey was established in 2008 by the University of Texas’ College of Education. During the 8 years since the center’s founding and the development of CCSSE, the survey has been used in community colleges in the United States, Canada, and several island nations. More than 2 million community college students have been surveyed (CCSSE, 2015).

“The CCSSE includes items calling for student to report the frequency with which they engage in a number of activities representing good educational practice (e.g., participating in classroom discussion, interacting with faculty in and out of class, etc.)” (CCSSE, 2015, para. 4). Question number 11 of the CCSSE asks student to rate their perceptions of what they believe represents the quality of their relationship with instructors, 7 (the highest score) indicating instructors are available, helpful, and sympathetic, to a 1 (the lowest score) indicating instructors are unavailable, unhelpful, and unsympathetic. There are several studies, which help validate this question. CCSSE refers to Bensen and Cohen (2005) who researched, to what degree if any, a student reported that they had established a rapport with faculty, noting that such a relationship affects student attitudes and behaviors. Their study revealed that most students reported experiencing rapport with at least one instructor and indicated that the rapport was positive.

Their study also revealed that rapport motivated students to engage in pro-academic behaviors. Lundquist, Spalding, and Landrum (2003) survey 729 students at a large Western university regarding 19 faculty attitude and behavior items and the items that could impact a student's decision to depart. The student survey revealed that there are three key issues that contribute to a student's thinking about leaving: a faculty members' support of a student's need, the timeliness in returning student telephone calls and emails, and whether or not the student perceives the faculty to be approachable.

The importance of the faculty-student interaction is evidence by the Community College Student Survey on Engagement as there are eight specific questions asking students to respond based on their perception of the quality and frequency of such interactions. As such, the survey instrument, as it is administered in community colleges across the United States, can aid community college administrators, staff, and in particular faculty establish specific practices that could have a positive impact on the community college student and their perceived sense of belong, particularly for those students who enter post-secondary education as first-generation students.

Specifically, responses to questions 4k-4q, 11b, 36c and 36e were examined. Questions 4k-4q asked community college students to identify how often (*very often, often, sometimes, never*) they interacted with faculty at their institution

The results of the CCSSE survey allowed the primary investigator to, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) state, to establish trustworthiness. Through a discussion of the students' lived experience they were able to describe in rich descriptions their perception of belonging. Surveys assume that people know how they feel and that they will respond honestly and truthfully. However, it can be through the use of interviews that participant comments can

stimulate and influence thoughts and opinions. The language in the CCSSE survey provides a description of student status for the purpose of self-reporting if they are a first-generation student or if their parent has some level of post-secondary education. The interviews that were conducted as part of this research were with African American and Latino students, who self-identified as first-generation, and who were at least in their second year of study. Utilizing the CCSSE questions as stems, exploration questions based on the theoretical framework were developed to solicit the students' perception of sense of belonging as it relates to their experiences at the research site.

Positionality of the Researcher

For the sake of transparency please note that as a current instructor at the research site, for this dissertation, I used my position to solicit student participation for the one-on-one interviews. I shared my academic experiences with my students since I have started graduate studies. Through the dissertation process I have shared with students, in several classes, my interest in learning about student success as it relates to the community college. Since I began the dissertation process, several students have asked me about my research and have voiced interest in participating in the focus group interviews. While it was not my intention to select students that had been in my previous courses they were, nonetheless, willing to participate as research subjects.

In more formal terms I have been an active participant in the culture I researched. As an instructor at this particular community college I participate actively in developing relationships with my students. I try to create a positive, and welcoming, classroom environment, I know my students' names and ask about their experiences in school and I ask about their lives. As well, I have had positive relationships with my students outside of the classroom—whether that is

during office hours or engaging in out of school activities. Thus, as a participant in this environment I have had the opportunity to study a culture I am familiar with.

The Pilot Study

Before undertaking the formal research process the primary investigator developed a pilot study to trial-run the research questions that were to be used in the formal research interviews once IRB approval and research site permission were granted. The purpose of the pilot study was to, as Gray (2009) notes carry out a small-scale interview process before conducting a large-scale interview process in an effort to test out the research tool. The students that were part of this pilot study were African American and Latino first-generation students attending the institution under investigation. These students were in their-at minimum-second year of study and beyond. This pilot study involved five students: three women and two men. Of the five students, one was African American and four were Latino. The initial pilot study was intended to measure the extent to which the students reported experiences that fostered the development of feelings of a sense of belonging. Such responses include feeling: supported on campus, connected, perceptions that students mattered, and were cared about, that they were accepted, were respected, and valued. Astin's (1984) inputs-environment-outcome (I-E-O) college impact model served as an initial guide to the pilot study as the primary investigator was interested in the degree to which sense of belonging was a result of the college environment as it related to faculty. To a certain degree, institution's admission's processes can control some of the input variable, choosing which students to deny or offer admissions to. Once the student is enrolled the college environment can have an impact on the student's academics, experiences, retention, attrition, and persistence decisions, thus a particular outcome is achieved. Unlike 4-year colleges and universities, the community college has an open-door admissions policy and no one is turned

away. The primary investigator was seeking to assess for a student's perception of belonging. This perception of belonging is derived from: feelings of mattering, quality of out-of-class engagement, quality of in-class engagement, and quality of office hour visits. The five students that were part of the pilot study expressed similar perceptions of belonging that were revealed in the formal research undertaken

Pilot study results. This section begins with a review of the purpose of this study and the research questions of the pilot study. A summary of the findings was provided and the conclusions drawn from this pilot study are discussed. The implications of these findings are shared with respect to faculty professional development. The section will conclude with a discussion of implications for future research regarding faculty-student interactions and the impact on perceived sense of belonging of first-generation, African American and Latino, community college students. What follows is a discussion of the key findings of this pilot study and the themes revealed.

Purpose of the pilot study and research questions. The purpose of the pilot study was to examine the extent to which faculty-student interactions contributed to a perceived sense of belonging for first-generation African American and Latino community college students.

1. What are the experiences that contribute to a sense of belonging for first-generation students?
- 2a. How do in-class interactions, related to the faculty-student relationship, affect a first-generation student's sense of belonging?
- 2b. How do out-of-class interactions, related to the faculty-student relationship, affect a first-generation student's sense of belonging?

3. What is the relationship between first-generation students' sense of belonging and persistence?

The key findings of the phenomenological study reveal that specific faculty characteristics and behaviors influenced students' attitudes toward persistence and belonging.

Themes from the pilot study. The primary investigator identified three preliminary themes from this pilot study, each of which were derived from the data available from the one-on-one interviews. The three themes were: (a) students' perception of mattering is influenced by their interactions with faculty; (b) students' view of faculty as helpful is guided by faculty actions; (c) students' perceived faculty to be helpful when visiting them.

These themes were derived from a qualitative analysis of five one-on-one interviews. Each interview was recorded and transcribed by a transcription service and then coded. The codes developed were related to: in-class engagement, out-of-class engagement, feelings of mattering, and office hour visits. Quotes were then identified that supported the themes listed.

Theme 1: Students' perception of mattering is influenced by their interactions with faculty. The five students that participated in this pilot study revealed that the interactions they had with faculty had a positive impact on their experiences at the research site. Though not by name, the students identified particular faculty that had made them feel like they mattered.

Participant 1: I'm the first generation student attending college so my parents don't really know much about what goes on here...and so having that sense of belonging especially with faculty feels so good.

Participant 2: Well I've developed relationships with faculty, with professors that I've had and it makes me feel more belong to this school because I am enrolled here in this campus and they will help me with anything.

Participant 5: We talk about how we are doing. They ask me about how I'm doing in class, we talk about all of that, how is my life going, how is their life going, basically all of that. It makes me feel good.

Theme 2: Students' view of faculty as helpful is guided by faculty actions. The five participants of this pilot study spoke positively of how their instructor's actions indicated to them that the faculty was invested in their success.

Participant 4: I've received feedback both orally and in writing. This has been a good experience because it helps me get better.

Participant 2: In my math class, where we're doing group work, the teacher comes around and if we need help he checks our work...and I think that is very helpful because if you're stuck on a problem and you need help, he's available.

Theme 3: Students' perceived faculty to be helpful when visiting them. The participants of the pilot student revealed that they have visited faculty during office hours. The students identified that it was during this time that they felt they would receive the help they needed.

Participant 1: I do go talk to my teachers during their office hours. The experience is never bad. Faculty members make me feel welcome, like they care.

While also speaking positively about their experience with faculty office hours Participant 5 did speak of a negative experience.

Participant 5: For me I like to go for help, go visit their offices. But sometimes I go to their offices and teachers don't help me out, I would like to be helped out. If I don't get it, they tell me just look at the book, and when I don't get it they tell me to go to tutoring.

Pilot study conclusions. There are three propositions based upon the findings of this study. They are: (a) faculty who engage positively with first-generation students provide the perception that a positive relationship is in place; (b) faculty who provide feedback to students on their work are assisting first-generation students in developing a sense of belonging; (c) faculty who provide a sense of belonging utilize their office hours to assist students and provide clarification for the student's understanding of the material. As well, the primary investigator made the decision to omit research question 5 which asked if there was a connection between a student's perceived sense of belonging and the ethnic/race of the faculty. Upon review of the

research questions the primary investigator observed that no other questions considered race as a factor to belonging. It was decided by the primary investigator that it was not important to her, as the researcher, to place race as a primary concern. Overall, the research questions were rewritten for the purpose of clarity and specificity so there would be no overlap in regards to concepts being examined.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

This qualitative, phenomenological, study examined the lived experiences of African American and Latino first-generation community college students in regards to their perceived sense of belonging as established through faculty-student interactions. The data includes responses from 13 students as well as a retrospective analysis of data taken from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) administered by the research site in 2014. The qualitative data includes information from interview responses regarding the research participants' perceptions, experiences, and responses to questions used to gauge their perceived sense of belonging as established through faculty-student interactions. The study was also used to determine the extent to which a first-generation student's sense of belonging, as developed through faculty-student interactions, affected their academic persistence. The students who participated in this study self-identified as first-generation (neither parent nor guardian having completed college).

The information presented here recapitulates the use of the phenomenological approach. "Phenomenology holds that any attempt to understand social reality has to be grounded in people's experiences of that social reality" (Gray, 2009, p. 22). To capture an authentic expression of a first-generation student's experience the primary investigator interviewed 13 students who self-identified as African American or Latino attending a 2-year community college. The data gathered from these one-on-one interviews was central to this study because it provided an understanding of how faculty-student interactions affects the sense of belonging for first-generation, African American and Latino community college, students. Along with the results of the 2014 CCSSE that was administered by the research site, the primary investigator will present the lived experiences of African American and Latino, first-generation students and

their perceived sense of belonging as it relates to faculty-student interactions. Chapter 4 documents the results of these interviews using Moustakas's (1994) Human Science Perspectives and Models. Moustakas offers a description of five research methods that employ qualitative methods, one being empirical phenomenological research. This research utilizes experience to get the most comprehensive descriptions of the phenomena. It is because of these structural descriptions that the primary investigator was able to code for experiences that were factors of belonging: helpfulness, belonging, caring, important, and mattering as stated in Strayhorn's (2012) definition. Through open-ended questions *naïve* descriptions were obtained. Then, based on the research participants' stories the primary investigator was able to identify central themes that reveal factors related to sense of belonging.

Data Collection

Data collection followed the process outlined in Chapter 3; 13 students enrolled in the Spring 2016 semester were interviewed. The research site provided the primary investigator with permission to visit three transfer-level courses: English, political science, and humanities. The students were provided with a flyer detailing the research under study. Those students who were interested in participating were asked to fill out a demographic survey where they self-identified as first-generation, African American or Latino students who were, at minimum, in their second year of study. Students who wished to participate were then asked to read, review and sign the Informed Consent form prior to the interview process. All students were asked to select a pseudonym that would keep their identities private. Interviews were conducted in a private office space and lasted an average of 12 minutes, the shortest interview lasting 8 minutes and the longest interview lasting 30 minutes. The interviews took place in April of 2016 at the research site. Polkinghorne (1989) suggests that primary investigators interview 5 to 25 research

participants who have experienced the phenomenon. Thus, 13 first-generation students were interviewed for this study. The primary investigator set aside her experiences as an instructor at a community college, as much as possible, to understand the phenomena under examination.

Once each student had reviewed the Informed Consent form, they were told, verbally, that a recording device would be used and agreed to being recorded as was indicated on the Informed Consent where their signature was required. As each recorded interview was completed it was sent to a professional transcription service, Rev.com, for transcribing. Copies of all recorded interviews and transcription are in a zipped file and saved on the primary investigator's password-protected laptop in her home. See Appendix A and B for consent form and IRB permission. See Appendix C and D for Demographic Survey and Semi-structured Interview questions. See Appendix E and F for Community College Survey of Student Engagements and Student Survey.

Research Questions

This particular section will restate the research questions first identified in Chapter 1. Research question one addressed the experiences that contributed to a first-generation student's sense of belonging. Research question two addressed the nature of faculty-student interactions and how such interactions affect the sense of belonging of first-generation students. Research question three addressed the in-class experiences that contribute to the sense of belonging of first-generation students. Research question four addressed the out-of-class experiences that contribute to the sense of belonging of first-generation students. Lastly, research question 5, addressed the relationship between sense of belonging and a first-generation student's persistence.

1. What are the experiences that contribute to a sense of belonging for first-generation students?
- 2a. How do in-class interactions, related to the faculty-student relationship, affect a first-generation student's sense of belonging?
- 2b. How do out-of-class interactions, related to the faculty-student relationship, affect a first-generation student's sense of belonging?
3. What is the relationship between first-generation students' sense of belonging and persistence?

Data Coding and Analysis

A qualitative research approach was used to gather information regarding the lived experiences of first-generation African American and Latino students. Specifically, a phenomenological scope was utilized. In order to code for themes the primary investigator followed Moustakas's (1994) approach of using systematic steps as a process. The process of coding involves "aggregating the text...into small categories of information" (Creswell, 2013, p. 184). The primary investigator began with a short list, known as "lean coding," of four categories that were pre-determined by referencing Strayhorn's (2012) work who defines belonging as, "A student's perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to faculty" (p. 3). These four codes were: feelings of mattering, quality of out-of-class engagement, quality of in-class engagement, and quality of office hour visits. The terms used to identify how the interview content was to be coded included: helpfulness, belonging, caring, important, and mattering. Once the interview content was coded two themes emerged which are previewed here: (a) faculty-student interactions affect the self-efficacy of first-

generation students, and (b) faculty-student relationships can take the place of parental support during college for the first-generation student.

Subject Information

The students who participated in this study ($n = 13$) were all, self-identified, first-generation community college students. In regards to their enrollment status, at the time of the interviews, 12 students were attending full-time and one student was enrolled on a part-time basis. When the interview process began the 13 students were at least in their second year of study. Two students were in their third semester, six students were in their fourth semester, three students began their fifth semester, and two students were in their sixth semester of study. All research participants were, in accordance with the standards of the IRB, of age. Ten students self-identified as being between 18 to 20 years of age and three students indicated they were 21 to 23 years of age. This study sought to research the perceived sense of belonging on the part of first-generation, African American and Latino students. Of the 13 students that volunteered for this research, 10 self-identified as Latino/Hispanic and three self-reported as African American. The study did not seek to exclude any student because of gender. Thus, seven students identified themselves as female and six students identified themselves as male. Prior to the recorded interview, students were asked to fill out a Demographic Survey (Appendix C) where they were asked to select a pseudonym for the purposes of anonymity and confidentiality. What follows is a description of each participant through a self-selected pseudonym.

Description of Subjects

Structural description for Daniel Garcia. Daniel Garcia, at the time of the study, was a 20-year-old Latino male. He was enrolled as a full-time student and was in his fourth semester of study at the research site. Daniel stated that his primary reason for enrollment at the college

was that “it is beneficial to me.” He identified the proximity of the institution to his home and the programs offered by the institution and access to financial support to him as reasons for enrollment. Daniel also said that the research site was the only institution he applied to because he did not have an advisor to guide him to other colleges.

Structural description for Shane. Shane, at the time of the interview, was a 20-year-old African American female. She was in her third semester of study and was attending as a full-time student. Shane identified her educational goal as “continued education and [to] eventually be able to obtain degrees needed to teach at a college level.”

Structural description for Jasma Johnson. Jasma Johnson was a 21-year-old African American and Cambodian female. She did not indicate whether she was enrolled as a full-time or part-time student, but indicated that she was in her fourth semester of study. Jasma wrote that she was in her last semester of study at the research site and would be transferring to the University of New Mexico where she would be “surviving” the rest of her undergraduate education. She will study sign language and hopes to teach.

Structural description for Datone Jones. Datone Jones was enrolled as a part-time student. Datone Jones was a 20-year-old African American male who was in his fifth semester of study. In his demographic survey he indicated that his primary reason for enrolling in college was to better himself.

Structural description for Alice. In her demographic survey Alice identified herself as a 19 year old Hispanic female. She was enrolled at the research site as a full-time student in her fifth semester of study. Alice wrote that the primary reason for enrolling in college was to transfer to a Cal State and to get her bachelor’s degree in criminal justice.

Structural description for Juan Martínez. Juan Martínez was a 19-year-old Mexican American male. At the time of the interview he was enrolled at the research site on a full-time basis and was in his fourth semester of study. He revealed that his primary reason for enrolling in college was to become an athletic trainer for either a high school, college, or professional team.

Structural description for Elizabeth De Leon. Elizabeth De Leon was a 22-year-old, Hispanic/Latina, female. At the time of the interview she was enrolled as a full-time student, in her third semester. In the demographic survey she identified her educational goal as being admittance into a PhD program in the stem field and to later return to teaching.

Structural description for Superman. Superman identified himself as a Hispanic, 19 year old, male. At the time of the research study he was in his fourth semester of study and enrolled on a full-time basis. In his demographic survey, Superman stated that his primary reason for enrolling in college was to transfer and graduate from a university. He also stated that he intends to enhance and better his education and to become more open-minded [about] his surroundings.

Structural description for Dee. Dee was a 20-year-old female who identified herself as Hispanic/Mexican. At the time of the interview, she was in her sixth semester of study and was enrolled on a full-time basis. In her demographic survey she stated that her educational goals were to receive an AA-T [Associate Degree for Transfer] and transfer to a 4-year institution. Dee noted that she would like to continue her education and receive a PhD in Forensic Psychology.

Structural description for Victoria Mendez. Victoria Mendez did not provide any information as to her educational goal and her primary reason for enrolling in college. On the

demographic survey she stated that she was a 19 year old, Hispanic, female enrolled as a full-time student in her fourth semester of study.

Structural description for Oso. Oso identified himself as a 19 year old, Hispanic, male. He stated that he was in his fifth semester of study, and was enrolled as a full-time student. In the demographic survey he wrote that his educational goals were to finish school and have a major. He also wrote that he is motivated to have a job related to his major and he hopes his job will be something he likes to do.

Structural description for July. At the time of the interview July identified himself as a 21 year old, Latino, male. At the time of the research study he was enrolled in his sixth semester of study on a full-time basis. He stated that his primary reason for enrolling in college was to have a better life for himself and his family.

Structural description for Super Girl. Super Girl identified herself as a Hispanic/Latino, 20 year old, female. She stated that she was in her fourth semester of study and was currently enrolled on a full-time basis. In the demographic survey she stated that her educational goal was to transfer to a 4-year university to earn her bachelor's degree in psychology.

Data Interpretation

The following section offers a discussion of the themes that were identified through the coding process. The primary investigator reviewed each respondent's transcription looking for language that related to concepts of helpfulness, belonging, caring, importance, and mattering.

These were derived from Strayhorn's (2012) working definition of belonging which states,

sense of belonging is framed as a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior. In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the

group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). It's a cognitive evaluation that typically leads to an affective response or behavior. (p. 3)

Once the transcripts were reviewed the information was entered into Nvivo software. Nvivo is a software that allows researchers to upload interview transcriptions and conduct a query for key terms related to the researcher's subject. With Nvivo the term "node" is synonymous with "themes." Thus, for the primary searched for key terms related to Strayhorn's (2012) definition of belonging. Each of the interviews was processed to create nodes in the software to identify the number of times the terms were used by students during their interviews.

Table 1

Interview Subject's use of Strayhorn's (2012) Sense of Belonging

Term	Coding reference
Helpfulness	24
Belonging	20
Caring	6
Important	6
Mattering	5

Table 1 refers to the number of times the terms related to the phenomena of belonging were used by the research participants. As Husserl (2012) reminds us, the "sciences of experiences are science of fact" (p. 12). Thus, for the research participants their experiences with faculty as helpful, caring, as exemplifying instances of the student belonging, being important, and mattering are their facts.

Through a review of the interviews, nodes, and research questions themes emerged as being significant to the perceived sense of belonging of first-generation, African American and Latino community college students, which related to the research questions developed for this study. What follows is a discussion of those themes.

Theme 1: Positive faculty-student interactions affect the self-efficacy of first-generation students. This theme is defined as a positive relationship between a faculty and student wherein the student views him/herself as capable of completing academic tasks and pursuing academic related goals. Self-efficacy is sufficient enough to assist a student in persisting through negative encounters with faculty. The student is able to navigate through negative experiences and continue with their studies. Characteristics of this positive faculty-student interaction are related to Strayhorn's claim that the student perceives that they are important and are cared about. The theme answers three research questions: (a) What experiences contribute to sense of belonging? (b) How does the faculty-student relationship affect sense of belonging for first-generation students? (c) How do out-of-class interactions affect the first-generation student's sense of belonging?

When students were asked about the types of experiences and interactions that they had that contributed to a sense of belonging a theme of self-efficacy was revealed. Participants discussed instances where faculty shared their own academic experiences (past and/or present), communicated to the student that they want the student to be successful, and where the faculty conveyed their belief in the student's academic ability

Data collected around the concept of sense of belonging led to an explanation of how students felt that they mattered to faculty. If the student discussed how their discussions with

faculty were about academics, future career, ways to be successful, and/or challenges they have experienced. The following experiences were shared:

Victoria Mendez: There is one [professor] who asked me one day, “Can you stay after class?” I was like, “okay, why me out of other students?” She just sat there and she told me, “I know you’re going through something at home.” The fact that she looked at me and she saw something was wrong with me, it’s like she is paying attention. She is just not there teaching the class. She sat there and she told me her life experiences. She talked with me and she helped me out a lot. I was glad that she actually noticed. She helped me grow. It’s an awesome feeling.

Victoria felt her teacher cared about the personal challenges she was experiencing and when asked about those challenges Victoria noted that her professor was “paying attention” and this gave her an “awesome” feeling which correlates with Strayhorn’s (2012) claim that sense of belonging is the perception of being important to faculty.

Similarly, Superman felt that an instructor’s willingness to have out of class communication was important to “striving for success.”

Superman: When professors tell you, to me personally, that anything is possible, you have to put your effort into it. I mean, yeah, it’s going to be difficult, during your road to success, but you have to easily overcome those obstacles because you can’t let that from stopping you. You have to keep going in order to strive for your success.

Superman’s self-efficacy was evident when he focused on putting effort into his studies and not letting obstacles stop him. The student also expressed what it felt like to have an instructor talk them through their challenges.

Superman: I remember I was stuck on it for like a week, I didn’t know what I was doing, until he gave me the steps. Oh, you should do it like this, this, this. That’s when I noticed, okay, he does care about students’ education. I felt when [professors] showed gratitude towards me that I had a better sense of belonging on this campus because they notice I try to stay focused on what is being taught in class, so I try to show it off in the work I do.

Students who perceive they matter, are cared about, and important to faculty also believe in their abilities to complete academic tasks and reach their goals. For Superman his belief that he could

get through what he was stuck on was tied to his perception that his teacher's help was evidence of the instructor's caring about him and his success.

Accordingly, Strayhorn (2012) reaffirms that sense of belonging is manifested when a student perceives that they have social support on campus and when there is the feeling of connectedness. For the students quoted above, the experiences with their particular faculty seems to have contributed to their sense of belonging as it affected their self-efficacy. Superman noted that having a sense of belonging is related to his instructors noticing he is staying focused on his work. Similarly, Datone Jones identified that listening to the stories his faculty have shared about overcoming obstacles has directly encouraged him to finish school. Participants spoke about experiences that they could remember where they perceived that the instructor cared about their well-being. Throughout the interviews the students spoke about their interactions and experiences with faculty that contributed to their perceived sense of belonging.

Of the 13 research participants the concept of being cared about was referenced six times. Feeling cared for is a characteristic of Strayhorn's (2012) definition of belonging. When students expressed that they felt cared about they expressed this idea in conjunction with experiences where faculty had shared with them their own personal narratives or had encouraged students to persist in their academics. Thus, a student who perceives that they are cared for is likely to persist in their academics. Wirt and Jaeger (2014) note, "FSI has been connected to enriching students' academic experiences in college, as well as increasing student success" (p. 990). Research question one gave students an opportunity to identify which interactions are significant to their perception of being cared for, of mattering. Research question two gave students an opportunity to share with the primary investigator how the faculty-student interaction

has affected their sense of belonging and to understand to what degree, if any, students discussed academics, future careers, ways to be successful, and challenges.

Mattering emerged as a feature of self-efficacy. Students expressed how *I matter* synonymously identifying feelings of being important and significant which are characteristics of belonging as defined by Strayhorn. Respondents explained that there was a relationship between mattering and belonging that affected their self-efficacy.

Shane: I definitely feel like I matter, and that I have been respected and valued. I definitely feel that I'm important. Recently, an instructor was like, "I wish you could be my TA." That feels good, like I'm doing so well at this subject, that I am TA material. Definitely.

For Shane, the feeling of mattering was created when the instructor for the course identified her academic capacity and expressed a desire to have her serve as a teacher's assistant. Daniel Garcia expressed a perception of mattering when faculty encouraged him to visit office hours and to speak to faculty on a one-on-one basis.

Daniel Garcia: They (faculty) tell you to come to office hours. Speak to them one on one and tell you to interact with them so you could feel like they're there for you. To keep going in your career. It makes you feel connected to the campus in a way. I can feel as being wanted here.

When students feel that they matter, that they are supported in reaching their goals, at least to one faculty and/or staff member, their feeling of belonging is reinforced. The following participants expressed sentiments of mattering.

Dee: My psychology professor, she always asked me like so are you doing better? Like how is your family? She always finds time to like think about us, so that's really good. It's again, like a sense of belonging like oh, I do matter to her. It's not just she's doing it because it's her job, it's because she really does care. That's good to have professors that really care.

For Dee, her perception of belonging emerged when her instructor asked questions about her personal life. As Strayhorn has stated, feeling cared, by at least one individual on campus is a

factor to belonging. Similarly, Jasma Johnson expressed that what her instructor said in-class allowed for a feeling of belonging to the campus and that she was important to at least one faculty.

Jasma Johnson: It made me feel like I belong here on this campus and there are faculty members who want me to thrive and they're not looking out just for themselves. He didn't have the attitude that, "Oh, I'm a teacher. This is all I do. I just teach you guys, there's nothing else," but with him, it's like, "Yeah, I'm a teacher. I am your teacher, and I want you to thrive, and I want you to be successful, so any impact I have on you will be a good impact."

In-class experiences are those interactions that take place within the context of the classroom during instruction. These in-class interactions could be having a discussion on topics related to course materials, or they could be a time where instructors move about the classroom to check the work and progress of students. In-class interactions could also involve an instructor talking with students about how to be successful and to convey the sentiment that the instructor is focused on the student's success. The students who shared their positive experiences with faculty, had conversations and interactions in-class, expressed that their perception, that they were cared for and mattered to a faculty member, encouraged in them a sense of resiliency in persisting with their education.

Out-of-class experiences, those interactions outside of the instruction classroom can be diverse. First, out-of-class experiences as they related to the student visiting their faculty office hours is one opportunity students have to gauge just how helpful an instructor may be. Other examples of out-of-class experiences that influence a student's perception of belonging are field trips, meeting for coffee off campus or at the campus lounge. Attending campus events and having a chance encounter outside of the classroom are all moments that can facilitate a sense of belonging for first-generation students. These types of relationship building encounters

contribute to a first-generation student's developed sense of belonging that the instructor is approachable and that the student is cared for.

Oso shared that his instructor's helpfulness not only made him feel competent but also served as a foil to not finding help with another instructor.

Oso: I had a teacher that I did not really think I could do good in her class but when I went and talked to her she helped me out. That I could really do this, that I'm not dumb, that I'm pretty smart, everybody is smart, I felt that I was accepted and I could do it. For me, I like to go to their offices. Sometimes I go to their offices and still they don't help me out, I would like to be helped out.

Oso continued to share what happened when he went to his math instructor's office hours

I had to take a math class, and I went to his office and I wanted to get more help towards my math. He basically told me to study the book and when I did, I still didn't get it, so I went back. He was like, "Did you read the book?" I said, "Yes, I read my book to see how to do the formulas," and then he said, "Oh well just go to the student success center and they will help you out." I still didn't get the right help I need from him. The experience of getting help from the teacher is a lot better.

Oso's experience with not being helped seemed to be negated by the fact that another faculty member had helped him. Oso's math teacher was not supportive of his desire to improve and in directing him to the student success center communicated that he/she did not care about Oso's success.

Dee: I'm so used to every professor not only being understanding but being a little bit compassionate, especially because of the school we're in. We don't have the best resources, but I feel like we do have really good professors. [My instructor] constantly reminding us that we're minorities and that we're like in not the best school, it really make you not want to go to class.

As previously stated in Chapter 3, the research site is situated in an urban location within Los Angeles County. Dee's reference to her instructor reminding the class that they were not in "the best school" was perceived as the instructor being uncaring to the population the research site serves.

Positive faculty-student interactions in the classroom were reported by some of the research participants as having affected their perceived sense of an instructor's helpfulness.

Juan Martinez: The teachers are willing to have any question answered. Some teachers say there's no stupid questions in the class. Any question is welcome.

Superman: The way they teach, the way they interact with the students, with me, throughout the years I've been here, semesters. I have a sense of belonging on this campus because the way they show their gratitude to us.

Super Girl: In class, I remember one of my professors says, "I'm ready when you're ready. I want you guys to succeed. If you guys have any questions of anything, how I can help you succeed, and move onto a 4-year, you could ask me after class or just go on my hours.

Data from this study supported the concept that what is said, and done, in class (within the context of the instruction classroom), and out-of-class (interactions during office hour visits or field trips) affects the perceived sense of belonging of first-generation students and impacts their self-efficacy. In-class, faculty-student interaction, negative or positive, does not go unnoticed on the part of the student. As Tinto (1999) has argued, faculty relationships matter to students; the completion of their baccalaureate degree is dependent on the time faculty are willing to spend with students. Freeman et al. (2007) noted that a student's perceived sense of an instructor being warm and open positively influenced the student's opinion of faculty as well as their feelings of belonging. For the students in this study, their in-class experiences, have been sufficient to affect their perceived sense of belonging at the research site despite having had negative encounters with faculty.

For several of the research participants, the experiences they encountered when visiting faculty during office hours—a type of out-of-class experience—included discussions of academics, ways to be successful, and personal life matters. Responses to the interview questions considered the degree to which students experienced a sense of belonging as a result of their interactions with faculty outside of the classroom. During the coding process the primary

investigator identified trends where students spoke about the quality of office hour visits, if an instructor took an interest in student's academics, and an interest in student's personal life. When students talked about their out-of-class experiences with faculty, particularly during an office visit, the research participants shared the following experiences.

Daniel Garcia: They tell you to come to the office hours. Speak one on one and tell you to interact with them.

Several of the research participants, like Daniel, referenced the fact that faculty did not suggest that students could see them during office hours, but that faculty *directed* students to visit during office hours.

Super Girl: You have that one-on-one bond interaction with the instruction...I would recommend anybody, "Go to your professor's office hours." That's the gold right there.

For Super Girl, the faculty as a source of support and help echoes in her directive to other students that they should make the effort to visit faculty at their office.

Oso: If I'm out of class I just come to the office, visit them, talk to them, see how the days going, to see what could we do, to see what they're experiencing on. We talk about how we are doing, they'd ask me about how I'm doing in class, we talk about all of that, how is my life doing, how is their life doing, basically all that.

Superman: There was once where I struggled with this essay, so I went to his office hours asking for help. He had his doors open because he was willing to help me.

Whether the office visit is to discuss personal experiences or to discuss academics Oso and Superman remind faculty that the time spent in office hour visits is valuable. For Oso, he focused on his experience of *talking* to faculty about life, his and his faculty. Superman, specifically identifies his perception that his faculty were willing to help him, because when he arrived the instructor's office door was open.

July: Well I don't really talk to a lot of teachers only like a few teachers I keep in touch with and those that I do keep in touch with are really friendly. They kind of want to know how I've been and what am I up to. When am I going to graduate, how are my grades, you know trying to keep up with me. Some teachers I don't talk to. They're more like just go to class, do what you have to do, go out and do it again.

July saw some of his faculty members as allies to his education, making sure that he was doing well academically and asking about his grades, and noted that these faculty who he does maintain a relationship with he perceives to be *friendly*, as opposed to the faculty he does not keep in contact with because he perceives them as not inviting since he mentions these faculty members *just* want students to go to class and do the work, and repeat. Office hours can help to create positive faculty-student relationships.

At the time of the interviews, and as mentioned in the *student demographics*, the students who participated in this study were second year students preparing for transfer. While this research study cannot conclude that the faculty-student relationship is the only factor that has contributed to the students' persistence it is a significant component to belonging and retention as studies by Cejeda and Rhodes (2004) examine how FSI impacts student success.

Aside from having experiences with faculty during office hours several of the respondents also shared co-curricular experiences with faculty in more informal settings. A feature of the out-of-class interaction is off-campus experiences such as field trips where the instructor is also in attendance.

Jasma Johnson: I went to the art museum with her, and it was awesome, because it was a hands on experience. We got to see how knowledgeable she is in her area of expertise.

Datone Jones: It's great to be able to really connect with someone outside of school. Often times, people don't get the opportunity to connect with the faculty outside of school so the connection with them in the classroom and out of the classroom was a great experience.

For both Jasma Johnson and Datone Jones the out-of-class experience was an opportunity to connect with their faculty in a meaningful manner. Jasma was able to experience her instructor's expertise beyond the classroom and Datone felt he connected with his faculty.

Superman: When we go out to eat and stuff those experiences, pretty much student and professor bond about how we talk about life experiences and stuff. What challenges we

have in life and how do we improve them. It shows that a lot of people have different types of phase about how they're doing in life and how our growth is and how to improve in our life.

Superman believed that the time spent out of the classroom afforded him the opportunity to bond with his professor and not just talk about challenges that each face, but also an opportunity to learn how to navigate those challenges.

Super Girl: I feel like once they're out of campus they could just relax and just be themselves. I remember countless times I bump into professors in Starbucks and we'll just be talking outside academic stuff about life and everything. It's like a cool feeling. I feel like I'm talking to someone like me. I'm not talking to my instructor.

Students described spending time with faculty out of the classroom and off campus on an academic outing as both meaningful and supportive. Kim and Lundberg (2015) assert that "one way student-faculty interaction contributes to student learning is by indirectly motivating students to challenge themselves academically" (p. 290). For the students that shared positive, out-of-class experiences their perceived sense of belonging is related to those instances when they felt a connection to a faculty member and thus, it can be inferred that such a connection contributed to their academic persistence. The following students shared how their interactions with faculty affected them academically.

Daniel Garcia: Some instructors make you feel like they want to encourage you to move up. Keep going in college. Actually succeed at what you want to be. Really push forward. Pushing forward. That's one-on-one.

Datone Jones: One thing that I did talk to my teachers about was about their life experience with college because I feel that we all share common situations about being in college...That also helped me to encourage me to finish school.

For these first-generation students perceiving that their faculty wanted them to succeed, perceiving that their faculty was encouraging of their academic endeavors contributed to their persistence.

Shane: We can also talk about what I want to do with my life, and how what I'm doing right now, or what I could be doing right now, could affect that. Some professors will be

like, “I’m only caring right now, because you’re in my class right now,” but then there are the few that’s like, “I care about you succeeding in life, in more than just this moment in time.

For Shane, the perception that their faculty member *cared* beyond the *right now* she internalized as the instructor also caring about her success beyond her college experience.

Oso: The experiences for me, it feels great because now I know what to work on and I know what to improve on and the feedback that they give me they’re sometimes good. They probably put, “Excellent.” I feel really great about myself because no I feel I really did a good job. There are some that [say/write], “Oh, you gotta work better.” And I feel like it motivates me to do a lot more better, just getting feedback from them.

The feedback that Superman and Oso received from their instructors was a factor in their perception that they could be successful and that the faculty member cared about their success. Accordingly, Tauber (1997) asserts that it is possible to predict student learning based on interactions with faculty since faculty expectations inform a student’s perception of their own ability to succeed.

In summary, the students who reported having experienced positive faculty-student interactions during out-of-class meetings, whether during office hours and/or non-curricular activities indicated that their perceptions of themselves as academically capable were affected positively. This affect contributed to their perception that they were connected to a caring faculty member who was interested in the student’s academic well-being. As well, in-class experiences, the interactions that take place during the schedule course time meeting, have a positive effect on the first-generation student’s perceived sense of belonging.

Themes 2: Faculty-student relationships can take the place of parental support during college. The definition of a first-generation student is a student whose parent(s) does not possess a 4-year degree. The lack of parent experience with college means that the first-year student does not have guidance from someone at home. As Baker and Griffin (2010) observe,

the first-generation student, “while they may have adequate to ample social and emotional support [from home], academic support through faculty interaction may be particularly important to first generation students due to their limited experience with college” (pp. 2-3) and the fact that their parent’s lack of college experience leaves them unable to offer their child guidance as to how to navigate the post-secondary environment, particularly the importance of persisting through their academics. Thayer (2000) in comparison to non-first generations students, the retention rates of first-generation students are much lower, asserting the research previously discussed in the literature review, and mentions that the educational level of community college, first-generation students tends to be lower than traditional students enrolled in *traditional*, residential institutions. Thayer references Tinto’s student integration model (1975, 1993) and Bean’s (1980) student attrition model overlap in that both identify a parent’s educational attainment as factor at students bring to their college experience that affects their retention. Thayer (2000) suggests that the lack of parental experience with college limits the quantity and quality of information parents can offer about the college experience with their child. The theme discussed herein addresses the following research questions: (a) how do in-class interactions affect the first-generation student’s sense of belonging, (b) how do out-of-class interactions affect the first-generation student’s sense of belonging, and (c) what is the relationship between a first-generation student’s sense of belonging and persistence?

The following students reported that their need for faculty support was due to the fact that, as a first-generation student, their parents are not able to guide them through the college process. They discussed how the faculty-student interactions has affected their sense of belonging in their college experience as well as encouraged them to persist. Strayhorn (2012)

reminds us that students achieve a sense of belonging when they perceive that they have social support on campus.

Victoria Martinez: My parents don't have any type of college experience. They don't know how this whole thing works....Teachers who believe in you it's just like I'm doing this not only for teachers and for my parents, but I'm doing this for myself too, because if they believe in me, I believe in myself.

They [faculty] have encouraged me. My parents were always asking me, when are you transferring, when are you transferring? I feel like when I tell them one more year, I feel like they just feel like I'm never going to get out of here. I feel so pressured but then she [faculty] told me she went to community college for 3 years and I thought, "relax, you're on the right path. You're there."

For Victoria Martinez being reassured that the college process is time consuming offered her reassurance that she was on the track to achieving her goals. Victoria indicated that her parents seem to be unfamiliar with the time frame she would need to follow in order to transfer to a 4-year institution. The support she received from her instructor helped to mitigate some of her concerns as to whether or not she was "on the right path."

Oso: For me [faculty], I feel I have been respected by them, I have been accepted by the way they help me out, I feel important to them because they are keeping me up, about [what] I can do...I really appreciate that because at home I don't really have that...my parents don't tell me that, they would just tell me to come to school this and that, and then when a faculty is here, I feel they really care about me and I could go higher and higher and achieve.

Oso relates his interactions with faculty as have contributed to his feeling respected and important. While his parents are encouraging him to go to school, it is the faculty members he has met who encourage him to stay motivated.

Juan Martinez: The experience [with faculty] is pretty good since my parents don't really know the, how can I say...they don't know the curriculum that well since they haven't been to something like this. It's helpful because they [faculty] explain it more if you need more clarification. The teachers are willing to answer any question. Some teachers say there's no stupid question. Any question is welcome.

Jasma Johnson: I think it helps out a lot because I can't talk to my parents about it because they never went to college, so it's helpful being able to talk to someone who is in

the same, or went through the same experiences that I'm going through right now, and it relieves me because right now, I'm just like, I wish I could talk to my parents about it, but I can't, because they won't understand. It takes the burden off my shoulders.

Both Juan and Jasma attribute their parent's lack of college experience as a factor to their parent's inability to guide them through the college experience. For both students faculty have provided them with help and information about college.

Dee: Since I'm a first generation student, like you're lost. You have to figure everything on your own, even if there's like resources that could help you. Sometimes I have questions that you don't want to ask because they're so long or they're so like complicated to answer, so finding those certain professors, that's really helpful, because they'll guide you through that.

Dee's self-awareness about being defined as a first-generation student was evident in her recognition that she had questions and was responsible for finding answers to her questions at the institution as opposed to being able to ask her parents. Though the college provides her with resources she acknowledges that it is faculty that were the most helpful to her in guiding her through the college experience.

Elizabeth had similar experience to Victoria's in that Elizabeth felt instructors' assistance to the student is part of the faculty's effort to encourage students.

Elizabeth De Leon: The instructors I've had are also working towards their doctorates or they're trying to finish up something. In a way, it feels like we're kind of equals but not really. You're still my professor, but you're still working at something like I am, so you're still a student. They understand because they're still a student. They can continue to help you.

For Elizabeth the concept of an instructor "understanding" what the student experience is was created when faculty shared their own academic experiences wherein she interpreted this as an example of resiliency in academics.

Dee: A lot of the professors that I have, have similar background stories. Like they all come from either [this city] or the city that I'm from which is Lynwood....A lot of themselves are first generation, so when you talk to them about like certain home issues

that you're going through, they're like, "Don't worry, it's going to be fine." That really helps.

Juan Martinez: Some teachers they're still actually going to school for themselves too. They explain to us all the processes that they go through to go further in their education, like getting a master's degree or their PhD. They show us every step that we need to take to get close to getting our bachelors, masters, and PhD possibly.

For Dee and Juan Martinez the instructor as a model of resilience was created when faculty shared with them their own personal lives; whether it was a reference to where the faculty was reared or to the faculty's own experience in the academic pursuit. For Dee and Juan Martinez, these interactions seem to be a priority as they are opportunities for modeling persistence. The first-generation students in this study indicated that the positive faculty-student interaction encouraged them to persist in their academic endeavors.

Datone Jones: One thing that I did talk to my teachers about was about their life experiences with college because I feel that we all share common situations about being in college. We all get tired and we all go through things but we continue moving forward, and just listen to their stories on how they overcame obstacles. So many things that I've encountered. That also helped encourage me to finish school.

Thayer (2000) emphasizes that first-generation students are not afforded the opportunity to learn about the college experience through their parent's first-hand experiences which would be of benefit to their success. The parents of the first-generation student are unable to answer questions regarding time management, finances, and navigating the operations of the post-secondary institution. Tinto's student integration model (1975, 1993) identifies a parent's education attainment as a factor to student success. For the first-generation students who participated in this study they too were unable to find guidance and answers to questions regarding the college curriculum and college bureaucratic systems from their parents. It was because of their positive, faculty-student interactions and the relationships that they developed during their time at the research site that they persisted academically and found support for their

academic, and at times personal, goals. For first-generation students in-class and out-of-class interactions with faculty has an effect on their perceived sense of belonging. The students in this study shared narratives that revealed positive and negative faculty-student interactions.

This relationship could influence a student's sense of belonging, the students feeling of being respected, and their persistence. Lamport (1993) states a student's intellectual development and personal growth result in their satisfaction with college which can be linked, according to Lamport, to the student's positive faculty-student interactions where they describe faculty as friends, assistants, and helpers; which are perceptions they have developed through informal interactions.

These perceptions of mattering to a faculty are sufficient unto themselves to encourage first-generation students to persist in their academic endeavors. Datone Jones made it a point to say that as an African American male he always felt supported by his faculty. Considering that African American males have the highest attrition rates of all demographics Datone Jones statement is relevant to the current literature. As previously stated in the literature review, Uwah, McMahon, and Furlow (2008) African American males have lower achievement rates than African American women. Failure to increase the success rates of African American males in college has wider, societal, implications. The larger, societal impacts, is that this demographic of students are much less likely to attend college, thus leaving them less likely to have gainful employment. Particularly for students of color learning how to establish positive relationship with faculty, at the community college level, is a skill that they can carry with them as they transfer to a 4-year university. Hagenauer and Volet (2014) contend the retention of students is a result of the positive relationships a student forms with a faculty member.

Juan Martinez mentioned that he preferred to ask questions during class because he thought it was a good opportunity for other students to learn from his questions. He also mentioned that his professors encouraged the asking of questions reiterating that “there’s no such things as a dumb question” attitude. Thus, Juan said he felt encouraged to use the class time to get clarification. Such an interaction gives student’s validation, the sense that they belong.

The literature available identifies that “sense of belonging may also be particularly significant for students who are marginalized in college contexts such as women, racial and ethnic minorities, low-income students, first-generation students, and gay students, to name a few” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 17). During the interview Shane discussed an experience wherein she felt supported by her faculty member. As Shane admits, her first year of college was not a successful one and she found herself on academic probation. While she felt disappointed she mentioned that she was uplifted in her continuing in higher education by a former instructor who would check on her with some regularity. Either choosing to email Shane or to chat with her in the hallways when the opportunity came. During these conversations Shane shared that the instructor would say things like, “let me know how I can help,” “how are things going?.” Cox (2011) claims that:

When faculty members remember students’ names and acknowledge students in a friendly, informal way, students are likely to leave the encounter with a positive perception about the faculty member, thereby increasing the likelihood that the student would intentionally pursue future contact with the faculty member. (p. 51)

Positive faculty-student interactions are sufficient enough to contribute to a student’s sense of belonging and their success. Lastly, another example of how faculty can impact sense of belonging and student success is the example provided by Datone Jones. During the interview Datone Jones also mentioned that though at times college proved challenging he did not give up because he remembered the time that his English instructor shared with the class the fact that she

had dropped out of her first year of college with a 1.8 GPA. For Datone, the fact that now his professor was leading the class was telling of how he too could be successful.

The data in Table 2 reflects the frequency each of the terms listed were used by research participants. It should not be assumed that female students felt more belonging than the male participants. This research project had more female, than male, participants. In a more, in-depth study, it would be interesting for researchers to investigate how student gender identification affects their perceived sense of belonging as a result of faculty-student interactions.

Table 2

Coding by Gender

Code term	Female	Male
Helpfulness ($n = 24$)	19	5
Belonging ($n = 20$)	14	6
Caring ($n = 6$)	2	4
Important ($n = 6$)	4	2
Mattering ($n = 5$)	5	0

Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE)

In the spring of 2014 the research site administered the CCSSE survey to randomly selected classes to assess for student engagement. CCSSEE is “specifically designed to assess the extent to which students are engaged in empirically derived good educational practices and what they gain from their college experience” (Kuh, 2001, p. 2). Triangulating the data from the interviews was made possible by reviewing the results from the 2014 CCSSE survey. For the purpose of this study, only those questions which asked students about their interactions with

faculty were reviewed. Specifically, only the survey responses of first-generation, African American and Latino students were reviewed. The questions reviewed from CCSSE (2015)

- 4l. Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor
- 4m. Talked about career plans with an instructor or advisor
- 4n. Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with instructors outside of class
- 4p. Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations
- 4q. Worked with instructors on activities other than coursework

The following CCSSE special-focus item on promising practices for 2014 was also reported on the statement, "I have a faculty or staff member to whom I could go to for help with any questions or concerns I have as a student." According to enrollment information from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (2013) the research site enrolled 7, 216 students during the spring 2014 semester. The CCSSE was administered to 790 students (10.94% of the total population). The research site's Institutional Research and Planning published the results of the CCSSE (2014) survey and reported that:

In CCSSE sampling procedures, students are sampled at the classroom level. The survey was administered in classes randomly selected from all of the courses offered by the institution during the Spring 2014 academic term, excluding non-credit, dual-enrollment, distance learning, all but the highest level ESL courses, labs, individual instruction, and individual study or self-paced classes. Of those students sampled at the [research site], 776 respondents submitted usable surveys. The number of completed surveys produced an overall "percent of target" rate of 78%. (pp. 1-2)

Of the 776 students that submitted usable surveys "52% of student respondents [403] indicated that neither parent has earned a degree higher than a high school diploma nor has college experience; accordingly, these students are considered "first-generation." Of the 2014 CCSSE

cohort 44 students self-identified as both Black or African American and first-generation and 188 students self-identified as both Latino and first-generation.

Gray (2009) asserts that any attempt to comprehend the social world must be cemented in a person's experience of that reality. Thus far, the data presented has revealed the lived experiences of the 13, first-generation, African American and Latino community college students. In order to quantify the interview responses results from the CCSSE 2014 survey are presented in Figure 1.

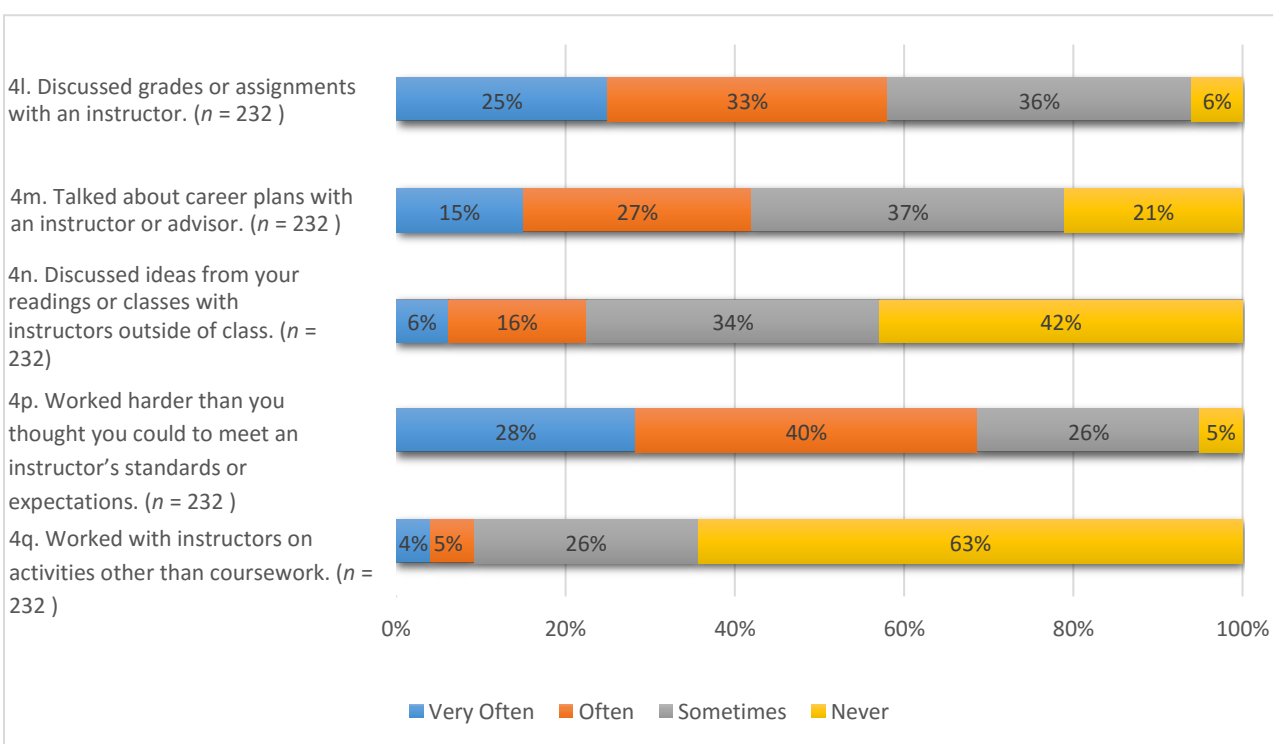


Figure 1. CCSSE 2014 survey results for Latino and African American first-generation college students.

In the Spring of 2014 the research site administered the Community College Survey on Student Engagement. Students were surveyed in randomly selected classes, excluding distance learning, dual-enrollment, non-credit, and the lowest level of ESL (English as a Second Language) courses. In total, the research site collected 776 usable surveys. Of the 776 surveys that were collected, 403 students (52%) stated that neither parent had earned a

degree higher than a high school diploma or had any college experience. Thus, these students are considered first-generation. Of the 403 first-generation students, 232 (57.5%) self-identified as African American (Black) or Hispanic (Latino). The primary job responsibility of faculty at the community college is instruction. Unlike their colleagues at research institutions, community college faculty members have no research responsibilities. In regards to a student's opportunities to work with faculty on non-coursework-related activities, there seems to be little opportunity to do so. Perhaps the nature of teaching is why the first-generation students in this survey responded that they never worked with an instructor on activities other than coursework. In all other questions, African American and Latino students who were also first-generation students responded to the survey questions in the positive (sometimes, often, or very often), having had interactions with faculty that potentially contributed to their sense of belonging.

The results of the study assisted the primary investigator in developing the Community College Sense of Belonging diagram, Figure 2. Tinto (1993) and Astin (1984) have long influenced the study of "belonging" as it related to the college student. Like the majority of the research that now exists on the subject their work is focused on the traditional college student who attends a 4-year, residential, institution. At residential institutions student services, clubs and organizations, and residential life work in conjunction to provide students with a sense of belonging. At community colleges, student services will vary, clubs and organizations may or may not be present, and certainly there is no residential life. Thus, community colleges, like the 4-year residential campuses, must also encourage its faculty to assist students in finding their sense of belonging. The community college sense of belonging examines how faculty-student interactions (in and out-of-class, during office hours, and in discussion of academics, career, and

success lead to a students developed sense of self. This contributes to a student's perception that they are cared about, that they matter, that their faculty is willing to help, and ultimately contributes to the student's persistence, resiliency, and success where the student gains confidence, becomes satisfied with the college experience, strengthens their social skills, and maintains a positive academic standing.

Faculty-student interactions

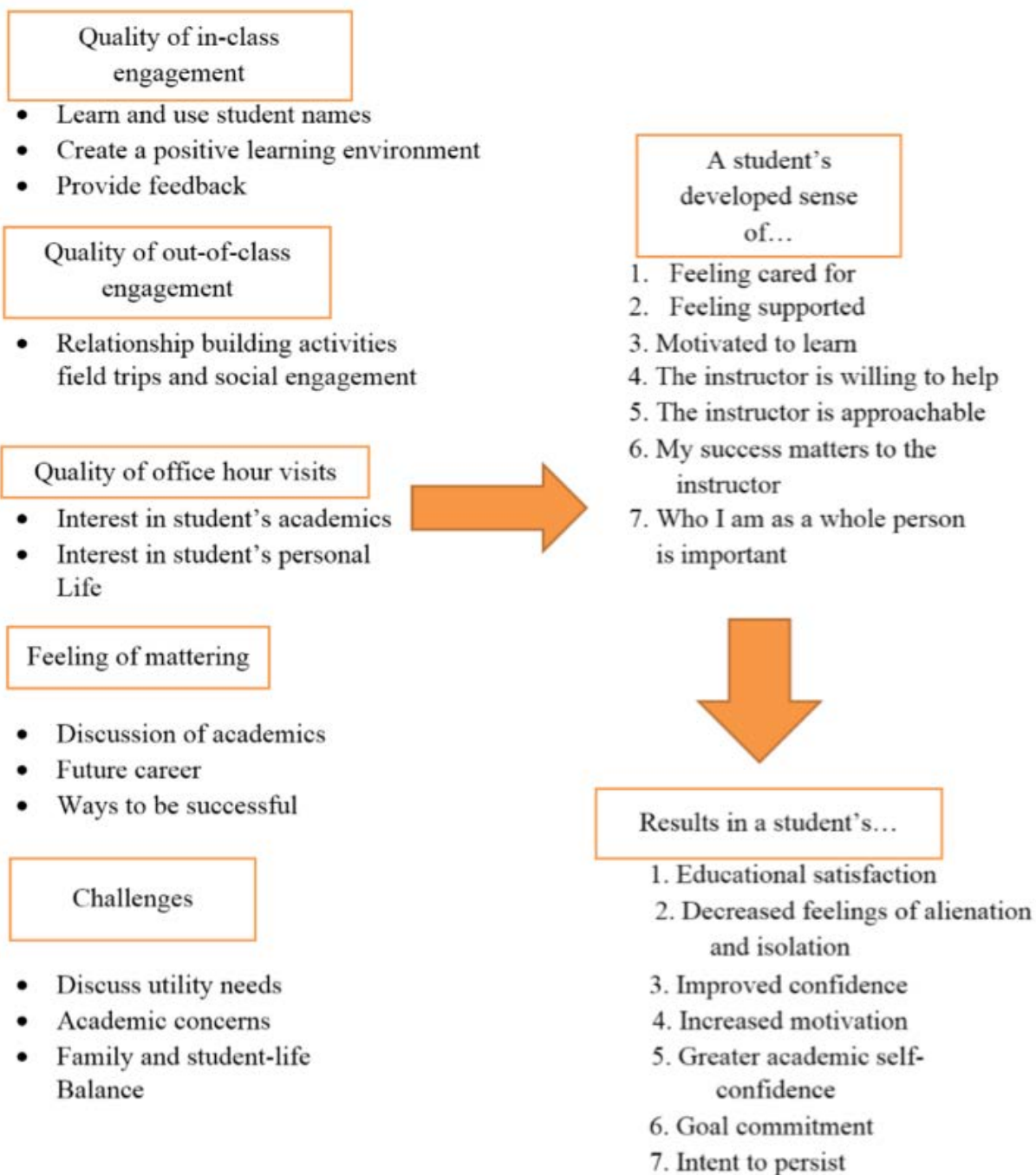


Figure 2. Faculty-student interactions contributing to the creation of a sense of belonging.

Summary

Chapter 4 provided results from 13 students who attended the community college that served as the research site. The interviews explored the lived experiences, perceptions, ideas, and beliefs of sense of belonging of first-generation African American and Latino community college students. Chapter 4 also detailed the data collection process, demographic information of the study sample, research questions, and process for data coding and analysis. Data was analyzed to investigate the lived experiences of first-generation students attending a community college.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendation

Overview of the Study

The chapter reflects on the findings of the phenomenological study wherein 13 first-generation, African American and Latino, community college students were interviewed. The students were interviewed as part of a study that aimed to identify the factors that contribute to a student's perceived sense of belonging as it relates to faculty-student interactions. A total of 2 themes were identified as a result of the coding process. The identification of these themes was the result of coding. The main purpose of this qualitative study was to explore what experiences, specifically as they relate to faculty-student interactions, contribute to a perceived sense of belonging on the part of first-generation African American and Latino students attending a community college in Southern California.

This study relied on Strayhorn's (2013) definition of sense of belonging. The research questions that guided this study are:

1. What are the experiences that contribute to a sense of belonging for first-generation students?
- 2a. How do in-class interactions, related to the faculty-student relationship, affect a first-generation student's sense of belonging?
- 2b. How do out-of-class interactions, related to the faculty-student relationship, affect a first-generation student's sense of belonging?
3. What is the relationship between first-generation students' sense of belonging and persistence?

Discussion

The following discussion focuses on the two themes that emerged as a result of one-on-one interviews conducted with 13 first-generation, African American and Latino students at the research site. The two themes that emerged from the data are: (a) faculty-student interactions affect the self-efficacy of first-generation students, and (b) faculty-student interactions take the place of parental support during college for first-generation students. As well, this section ends with a discussion of race and belonging as shared by an interview participant. See Appendix G for Nvivo Graphs of Nodes and Appendix H for a chart of the research questions with findings.

Self-efficacy in first-generation students. The findings in this study reveal significant predictors of success and retention for first-generation students. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2010) “15% of 2003-2004 beginning students whose parents’ highest educational attainment was high school or less received a bachelor’s degree in 6 years, compared to 49% of students whose parents had at least a bachelor’s degree.” These first-generation students often arrive at college disadvantaged in regards to academic preparation in terms of what to expect and also in regards to rigorous academic preparation (Reid and Moore, 2008). The first-generation students in this research study highlighted experiences with the faculty at the research site that, not only provided them with a sense of belonging, but also provided them with an opportunity to view themselves as academically competent: able to complete tasks and reach their goals. Teacher Student Relationships (TSR) serve as a precondition of successful learning for all students, but in particular are essential to the retention of first-generation students (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014, p. 379). The work of Parlmer, O’Cane, and Owens (2009) indicates that a student’s feeling of connectedness was a predictor of remaining enrolled at the institution. Particularly, for first-generation students, who typically

make the decision to drop out in their first year, belonging is of particular importance (Christie, Munro & Fisher, 2004). Students in this study reported that faculty members they perceived cared about them were instrumental in influencing the student's self-efficacy.

During the interview process there were different examples of interactions with faculty and how they had a lasting effect on student's perceptions of their own abilities. Several students spoke of faculty members who made them feel capable of completing assignments that initially seemed difficult. Some of the participants made references to their instructors. The participants in this study reported how in and out of class experiences matter in regards to developing their own self-efficacy and in regards to feeling supported by faculty because their non-college going parents are not well-equipped to guide them through the college experience.

The results of this study confirm that faculty members play a significant role in shaping the sense of belonging and students' desire to persist, of first-generation, African American and Latino students attending community college. Because first-generation students lack a parent who can serve as a model of the college experience first-generation students are in need of positive faculty-student interactions. These interactions help facilitate feeling of being cared about, mattering, belonging, supported, valued, and important to faculty.

Family support and college capital. The findings in this research indicated that the students who self-identified as first-generation recognized that their parent's lack of college experience and understanding limited their parent's ability to assist them in the college process. The parents of the research participants also had limited understanding of college curriculum, transfer process, and course rigor. The primary investigator noted that these potential deficits for the first-generation college students were countered with positive faculty-student interactions. The perception that faculty is supportive is a predictor to student retention (Morrow &

Ackerman). In addition to faculty, Tinto (1993) and Astin (1979) both identify that the student brings to the institution a number of characteristics that will affect their success. Both theorists identify parent educational attainment and aspirations for their children as a contributing factor to retention and success. The U.S. Department of Education (1998) identifies students as first-generation if their parent never enrolled in college. The first-generation student is less likely to have access to a family member with first-hand college experiences (Willet, 1989). Richardson and Skinner (1992) noted that this lack of college experience within the family means that the first-generation student is at a loss when it comes to having an understanding of the college culture, their understanding of college finances is not as complete, and they are limited in how to manage their time. These skills and the understanding of why such skills are important are akin to the social capital one gains interacting within certain environments and work cultures. For the first-generation student such skills are lacking because they do not have a college-experienced adult within their family to help navigate them through their college experience.

New Findings on Race, Faculty, and Belonging

A more, in-depth study it would be interesting for researcher to examine the extent to which a first-generation student's perceived sense of belonging is affected by their interactions with minority faculty. Much of the pre-existing literature regarding sense of belonging is focused on the experience of *traditional* college students; those who are enrolled in 4-year, residential institutions. Of this research there are some researchers: Hurtado and Carter (1997) who examine the degree to which minority students perceive they belong at institutions where faculty tend to be White and male.

Datone Jones: As an African American male, they treat everyone equal regardless of what race you was. Every time I come to class, they always invite me to the class whenever I needed help and they was always encouraging.

Datone Jones: It was great, especially me being a minority student. Often times, students, they use that as a way to bail out of college but being a minority student, being with faculty, they made me feel like I can do anything. They made sure not to baby me, they made sure to push me to my full potential. I believe I came out a great writer, a great student. I learned how to take constructive criticism. I learned how to have high standards for myself.

Datone Jones' narrative is an example of what Deil-Amen (2011) conceptualized as "socio-academic integrative moments," a moment when he was provided support, which enhanced his feelings of college belonging, college identity, and college competence. Lundberg and Schreiner (2004) report that, "working harder due to instructor's feedback" was impactful to a Black student's level of faculty engagement. Lundberg (2014) implies, "Perceiving faculty to be approachable, helpful, encouraging, and understanding is more important than the frequency with which students of color engage with faculty" (p. 61). Lundberg does not suggest that the faculty need be a person of color in order to foster a sense of belonging in a student.

Much of the pre-existing literature suggests that students of color are less likely to feel a sense of connectedness to White faculty. These studies are concentrated at the 4-year residential institution. At the research site, 79% of the faculty surveyed identified as White. While Datone Jones was the only research participant who mentioned race, he like the other 12 research participants did not discuss race as a factor to their perceived sense of belonging, neither in positive or negative terms.

Because much of the literature on belonging focuses on residential institutions a study of the perceived sense of belonging of first-generation community college students is necessary. A difference between the first-generation student and the student whose parent(s) has college experience is the opportunity for parents to share their own college experiences with their child, to help their child navigate the college environment, and to utilize their experience as college

students to prepare their child to build meaningful relationships with college members such as faculty, staff, administration, and peers.

Limitations of the Study

To some degree the participants of the study are a homogenous group. All 13 participants are first-generation, community college students. They self-identified as either African American or Latino. But even in their homogeneity these students do not represent all first-generation students. Nor is it possible that the students who attend this research site represent all first-generation community college students as the campus culture varies from one institution to the next and for this particular study it was not the intent of the primary investigator to study how sense of belonging is impacted by student's access to student support services. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) observed that much of the literature on belonging has been limited to the residential institution, thus a lack of research available made it difficult to find an appropriate body of literature and also limited other research studies that could have been used as to support findings. Since the research involved 13 first-generation, African American and Latino community college students in an urban area the information may not be generalized as applying to other first generation students at other community colleges. Another limitation is in regards to the narrative respondents provided. Perhaps some of the participants thought they knew what the primary investigator wanted to hear and thus painted a positive picture rather than sharing negative experiences. This is known as the similar-to-me effect wherein the interviewee perceives that they will receive a higher rating for their interview if the content seems favorable to the primary investigator (Sears & Rowe, 2003).

Recommendations

This research study began because the primary investigator had an interest in understanding why first-generation students continued to enroll at the research site. For the sake of transparency, the research site—in comparison to other community colleges within a 10-mile radius—is poorly funded and offers a limited number of services to students. As well, the research site has lacked a director for student life, which has affected the amount of, and variety of, extracurricular opportunities to students. Lastly, the research site has facilities that are in need of repair and modernization. What then affected students' sense of belonging? It was these questions that initially shaped the research presented here. The first conclusion is that faculty members need to have a better understanding of sense of belonging and how it's shaped through faculty-student interactions. By offering faculty an understanding of belonging and the small gestures that would facilitate a sense of belonging they too can begin to witness an increase in their course persistence rates. As well, college administration needs to support the type of activities that encourage engagement. This type of institution-supported engagement need not be complicated; it just needs to be consistent and non-political. Students and faculty alike need to have an opportunity to interact with one another outside of the classroom in an environment that is neutral.

The results of this study depict the perceived sense of belonging of first-generation African American and Latino community college students as influenced through faculty-student interactions. This study validates a need for campus faculty to develop practices that help establish a sense of belonging for their first-generation students. There is also a need for campus administration to support professional development opportunities that would support faculty in their establishing a sense of belonging. This study also reveals the need to conduct further

research regarding sense of belonging and community colleges and specifically regarding their first-generation population regardless of race and/or ethnicity. Lastly, sense of belonging is a derivative of non-cognitive skills and abilities, which are skill sets that can have a positive impact on a student's academic and lifelong success. What follows is a discussion on the findings of this research and the recommendations for faculty and administrators who work with first-generation African American and Latino community college students.

Faculty. Based on the interviews that were part of this study, faculty members have an effect in the perceived sense of belonging of first-generation, African American and Latino, community college students. Much of the literature that is available to faculty, in regards to their interactions with students, is pedagogical. Researchers have said that faculty should be encouraged to have a robust and dynamic approach to instruction; moving away from the *sage on the stage* approach. For faculty interested in moving away from the *sage on the stage* style they can utilize different instructional approaches like problem-based learning, the flipped classroom, differentiated instruction, and case study use. What is not often discussed during professional development opportunities is ways in which faculty can engage with their students. Some best practices for faculty is to consider the use of a simple survey at the start of the semester to learn about the demographics of the students (see Appendix C). The faculty members can tailor the simple survey so that they ask the questions they deem the most interesting. While a best practice may not be applicable to all class types, other researchers have identified the importance of faculty using different techniques to influence student success. At Berkeley, mathematician Uri Treisman (1992) attempting to understand the differences in student performance looked at the study habits of Black calculus students with those of Chinese students. He found that Chinese students tend to study together, working through problems, and

checking each other's homework, whereas Black students tended to study in isolation. Treisman "offered Black students an intensive workshop environment in addition to the regular class, emphasizing group learning and a community life focused on a shared interest in mathematics" (as cited in Felten, Gardner, Schroeder, Lambert, & Barefoot, 2016, p. 57). Thus, a sense of belonging can be established through faculty-student interactions in a different context, not through pedagogy, but through showing an interest in students and their success. As Yeager and Walton (2011) claim, "social psychological interventions in education...do not teach students academic content but instead target students' psychology; such as their beliefs that they have the potential to improve their intelligence or that they belong and are valued in school" (p. 267). Lastly, in regards to faculty practices, researchers and practitioners have emphasized that simple and uncomplicated interactions with first-generation students could yield the most positive results. McMurray and Sorrells (2009) offer the following suggestions for creating a sense of belonging in first-generation students:

1. Use illustrative examples. First-generation students enter the classroom with a lower self-efficacy, but can develop a great deal of success if their identity as a college student is developed early. Instructors can use the classroom to relate the course material to practical applications, personal examples from the instructor or a success stories of pass students can inform the first-generation student of their potential to succeed.
2. Provide redemptive opportunities. All college students make mistakes. But for the first-generation student failure may be a sign that they do not belong and thus may choose to depart from the institution. Each faculty, within reason could decide for themselves how the opportunity to recover from a poor grade will be dealt with.
3. See the human side, laugh. It is easy for the college instructor to get overwhelmed with committee responsibilities, research, and day-to-day responsibilities. But there is a scientific imperative to using laughter to help the first-generation student see him/herself as academically competent. Popular cultural references, the use of memes on assignments, or the use of student-favored technology to communicate with students can assist the faculty in staying current.
4. Provide an "open door." Instructors are encouraged to figure out how to be *visible* to their students outside of the classroom. Whether that may be attending campus events, taking a *pause* from work-related activities to walk around campus, or inviting students to meet and chat. First-generation students need to be reminded that the campus is a community and there is a campus life that can be enjoyed and taken advantage of.

The professional development office could also be used as a resource by faculty. A faculty member who would like to earn professional development credit and share some of their best practices regarding how they establish a sense of belonging through faculty-student interactions could offer faculty guidance in this process and thus serve as a mentor to others.

It is not enough to simply offer professional development opportunities for faculty, but it is necessary to offer professional development opportunities that offer long-term support and a safe space for the exchange of ideas. McConnell (2000) writes, “Institutions also should focus on faculty and staff development activities that will help to develop a deeper understanding of the difficulties first-generation students encounter in higher education” (p. 83). This understanding can then be used by the faculty in the classroom so that they can provide information that the first-generation student lacks due to being the first in their families to attend college. Some suggestions from researchers studying the success of first-generation students encourage faculty to share and discuss information related to financial aid, student support services, library services, and health services can fill in the gap of knowing for the first-generation student.

Administration. The persistence of the first-generation student should be of importance to the administration and policy makers that lead community colleges. “Retention is important for a variety of reasons. From the institution’s perspective, the retention of students is necessary for financial stability and to sustain academic programs” (Fike & Fike, 2008, p. 69). Tinto (2001) found that the majority of student departures (56%) happen at the end of a student’s first year. Tinto (1993) asserts that “the beginning of the sequence of events leading to student departure can be traced to students’ first formal contact with the institution, namely their recruitment and admission” (p. 154). He contends that, particularly at open-admission

institutions (community colleges), admissions staff have a responsibility to students to be clear about the expectations the institution has of its students but also to provide them with references to campus support: tutoring, enrolling in a Career and Life Planning course, referring students to student life activities, career and transfer centers. While Tinto's (1993) work does focus on the 4-year, residential institution his observation that the admissions division is significant to student retention does not mean that it is irrelevant to the community college. In fact, American Institutes for Research (2010) report that between 2003 and 2008 the U.S. Department of Education spent \$6.18 billion in subsidies to colleges and universities to fund the education of students who departed after their first year (p. 16). The report also noted that between state and federal grants, a total of \$2.9 billion was paid for students who did not return to an institution after the first year. At the core of institutions of higher education is student success. According to the California Community College Chancellor's office (2013),

The primary missions of the system are: preparing students to transfer to 4-year universities, workforce development and training, and basic skills and remedial education. These missions were established by legislation in 1967 and the chancellor's office is charged with providing leadership, advocacy, and support for the system. (para. 1)

Researchers emphasize the importance of Educational Leaders, particularly administrators of community colleges, to make a mindful effort to include faculty and other campus agents to cultivate relationships.

First year programs and sense of belonging. Thayer (2000) asserts that one common practice among high-performing Student Support Services programs is the provision of a structured freshman year program. Administrators need to support the retention goals. First year programs provide the first year student and first-generation students support for their persistence and a sense of belonging by enrolling in course, during their first year, in a cohort-model.

Typically, first year course will enroll students in two courses that are linked, wherein two faculty members, teaching two different courses, “share” the group of students. Not only do faculty teach the same body of students, but they also discuss student progress and share their concerns regarding student persistence with the first year program counselor. Those students who successfully pass their first semester courses then move together to two other courses in their spring semester. Another aspect of the first year program is that students see a counselor as part of their participation. The counselor helps the first year student navigate their course load, suggests strategies for success, and help the student create an education plan that focuses on the student’s transfer to a 4-year institution. The implementation and support of first-year programs could prove vital to student persistence. Researchers have observed that student-success focused programs can have a positive impact in a student’s decision to persist. Muraskin (1997) identifies seven features of such successful programs that guide students and remind them of their belonging to the campus culture:

1. Project participation in the college admissions process for at-risk students
2. Pre-freshman-year academic and social preparation
3. A major project role in participants’ initial course selection
4. An intrusive advising process throughout the freshman year
5. Provision of academic services that buttress the courses in which the participants are enrolled
6. Group services that extend service hours and build cohesion among participants
7. A powerful message of success through conscientious effort (pp. 8-9)
- 8.

Each institution should determine for itself what such a program would look like. In order to facilitate this decision it is important for the institution to have a clear understanding of *who* their students are. This information can be obtained through consultation with Student Support Services, Institutional Research, or the appropriate student service entity.

Student success is all too often measured by grade point average, units earned, persistence, and retention. While these components matter, unlike their 4-year counterparts,

community colleges are failing to assess how sense of belonging can be achieved outside of the classroom. And while this may seem like a daunting task to study, researchers have emphasized the importance of, creating an atmosphere of belonging in the least complicated manner. Felten et al. (2016) cite Elon University as an example of how administration can help cultivate practices and structures that foster relationships. The university offers College Coffee, “a 40-minute time every Tuesday morning when no classes are held so that everyone on campus is available to gather for coffee and conversation” (p. 60). Felten et al. (2016) note that the precise outcomes of such a practice is difficult to quantify, but many faculty, staff, and students enjoy the feeling of community established through College Coffee. Given an opportunity to engage with their faculty, outside of the classroom, can be for, first-generation community college students a time to establish a sense of belonging. Researchers emphasize the importance of a context-based approach to creating a sense of belonging on campus; clarifying, that no one program or approach is a recipe for success. “Social-psychological interventions hold significant promise for promoting broad and lasting change in education, but they are not silver bullets. They are powerful tools rooted in theory, but they are context dependent and reliant on the nature of the educational environment” (Yeager & Walton, 2011, p. 268). The suggestion to administrators here is not to develop and implement large, complicated reform practices or to do away with the processes already in place, but rather to consider what interventions could be adopted that would increase a student’s sense of belonging, motivation for success, and address barriers to success that are faced by first-generation students. Felten et al. (2016) identify the importance of *welcoming collegiate spaces*:

Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia has created casual outdoor gathering spaces near every campus residence. These highly visible spaces are frequent meeting places for faculty, staff, and students making apparent the relationships that often are hidden away in offices and conference rooms on many campuses. (p. 60)

Particularly at community colleges, which tend to have large adjunct populations these *collegiate spaces* could make a difference in both the adjunct faculty and the first-generation student feeling as if they belong.

Future Studies

There is a substantial need to continue to research how faculty-student interactions affect the perceived sense of belonging of first-generation African American and Latino community college students. According to the California Community College Chancellor's office (2013) California enrolled 1,555,927 students in the Spring of 2016. Of these students, 107,130 were first time students. African American first-time students accounted for 7,999 (7.47%) of enrollment totals, and Hispanics accounted for 47,704 students' (44.53%) enrollment. Thus, this particular research project can serve as a catalyst for other community colleges research regarding first-generation students and more specifically on minority groups. The present study is significant because this line of inquiry aims to understand the lived experience of first-generation African American and Latino students and their perceived sense of belonging as it relates to faculty-student interactions. Latino students are overrepresented in community colleges. Hispanic students make up 12% of community college enrollment nationally (Bragg, 2001). In their research, Townsend et al. (2004) reported that between 1990 and 2003 only 8% of the estimated 2,300 articles published in five major higher educational journals mentioned community college and community college students. It is because the research is so limited that there is a need to investigate how sense of belonging affects first-generation students in community colleges. And, as mentioned previously, in chapter 4, the primary investigator presented a chart describing how a first-generation, community college student can be effected by their perceived sense of belonging. The Community College Sense of Belonging theoretical

framework emanated from the research revealed in this study. Further research would give faculty and administrators of the community college an opportunity to begin to consider the extent to which student retention, persistence, and attrition can be measured and discussed. Currently the Community College Survey of Student Engagement asks 10 questions specific to the student interaction with faculty. Interviews would provide community colleges an opportunity to learn about the student lived experience. It would be wise for institutions to survey first-generation students in their first semester of enrollment. Research recommendations are suggested in the following subsections.

Longitudinal studies. How sense of belonging affects first-generation African American and Latino students attending community college is unknown. It would be to the benefit of scholars in higher education to follow a group of first-generation students from their initial enrollment in community college through their transferring (or attrition) to assess the extent to which faculty-student interactions affected their sense of belonging. This study could reveal certain patterns that can be found as to which particular actions, from faculty, have positive and/or negative influence in sense of belonging. Faculty could benefit greatly from having research-based data that reveals how their presence in the classroom, outside of the classroom, and how their interactions with students affect belonging.

A robust longitudinal study could involve student responses to questions regarding the quality of in-class engagement, quality of out-of-class engagement, quality of the first-generation student's interaction with faculty during office hours, the student's perception that they matter to faculty, and a longitudinal study could assess whether or not the first-generation student discussed challenges they were facing and how these interactions affected their perceived sense of belonging. Ultimately, an institution would have the opportunity to find out, from the first-

generation student, the extent to which their sense of belonging was a factor in their persistence and conversely, their attrition.

Addition of non-African American and Latino students. The purpose of this study was to specifically examine how faculty-student interactions affected the perceived sense of belonging of first-generation African American and Latino students; perhaps, including the experiences of belonging of first-generation students regardless of race and ethnicity might yield a spectrum of narratives that further support the importance of faculty-student interactions for first-generation students. As well, researchers can study the extent to which, if any, race and ethnicity plays a role in how a student perceives the faculty-student interaction. This would give faculty and administrators an opportunity to understand how culture plays a role in the interactions between someone in a position of power (the faculty) and students; thus, leading to a deeper, cultural understanding of the faculty-student interaction and its effect on sense of belonging.

And lastly, there needs to be more research regarding faculty-student interactions and sense of belonging at the community college level. One way this could be established is through the use of a longitudinal approach, which would regularly assess the extent to which sense of belonging is affecting the persistence, retention, or attrition rates of first-generation students. Students need to be given an opportunity to discuss their lived experiences, not just respond to survey questions. Together, the surveys, along with the phenomenological interviews, has the potential to yield very significant, and institution-specific, information that would guide faculty in creating stronger, more positive, experiences of belonging.

Conclusion

First-generation African American and Latino community college students are a vital part of our future's leadership and workforce. With so many first-generation students relying on community college as access to a "better future" it is imperative that community college leaders—administrators, faculty, and staff—identify how to keep students enrolled from one semester to the next as they look to transfer to 4-year colleges and universities. A first-generation student's persistence is key to the definition of *success* each community college defines for itself.

Determining strategies that will keep first-generation students enrolled from one academic year to the next first, starts with an understanding of the institution's context: who they serve and how to serve the college's population best. Faculty, and the sense of belonging they provide to their students is essential to the success of the community college student. Since community colleges draw first-generation students to their institutions it is the responsibility of student-focused faculty to engage in activities—both in and out of the classroom—that provide first-generation students with a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging positively impacts the first-generation student's self-efficacy as faculty serve the college-experienced parent the first-generation student lacks. Thus, these two factors contribute immensely to the first-generation student's persistence.

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APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Form

Title of Research: First-generation Students' Perceived Sense of Belonging as a Result of Faculty-Student Interaction

Researcher: Dalia R. Juarez, doctoral candidate, Pepperdine University

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important you read the following explanation of this study. This statement describes the purpose, procedures, benefits, risks, and precautions of the study. Also described are the procedures for data storage to protect confidentiality, and your right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Purpose: You are invited to participate in a research study that explores the perceived sense of belonging of first-generation students as it relates to faculty-student interaction. Your participation in this study requires a focus group interview wherein you will be asked about your perception of belonging at the research site.

Procedure: The focus group interview will last 60 minutes. With your permission, the interview will be recorded and transcribed in order to maintain an accurate record of the discussion. Your name will not be used at all.

Benefits and Risks: The information gathered through the interview will contribute to the study of belonging of first-generation students at community college. Thus, the benefit of this study is that it will inform best practices among faculty seeking to establish positive faculty-student interactions as a means of providing students with a sense of belonging. There is minimal risk to participants in this study. A \$10 gift card to Pizza Studio will be provided to all focus group participants.

Precautions of the Study: Under no circumstances will you be identified by name during the course of the research study, verbally or in print. Every effort will be made to keep your involvement in the study confidential. All data will be coded and securely stored. The research study is to be submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Pepperdine University, Malibu, California. The results of this study will be published as a dissertation. Information may be used for educational purposes in professional presentation(s) and/or educational publication(s).

Participant Rights:

- I have read and discussed the research description with the researcher. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the purposes and procedures of this study.
- My participation in this research is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw from participation at any time without any jeopardy.

- If at any time I have any questions regarding the research or my participation, I can contact the researcher, Dalia Juarez, who will answer my questions. The researcher can be reached at [number omitted]
- If at any time I have comments or concerns regarding the conduct of the research or questions about my rights as a research subject, I should contact the Graduate and Professional School IRB Office, Graduate School of Educational and Psychology, Institutional Review Board at (310) 568-5753 or gpsirb@perpperdine.edu
- I will receive a copy of the Participants Rights document.
- Audiotaping/digital recording is a part of this research. Only the principal researcher and the member will have access to the written and recorded materials.

Please verbally tell the researcher:

_____I consent to being recorded.

_____I do not consent to being recorded.

My verbal consent indicates my agreement to participate in this study.

Participant's signature—*not needed to protect participant confidentiality*—Date ___/___/___

Name (please print legibly)_____

Investigator's Verification or Explanation

I, Dalia R. Juarez, certify that I have carefully explained the purpose and the nature of this research to the participant listed above. He/she has had the opportunity to discuss the research with me in detail. I have answered all his/her questions and he/she provided the affirmative agreement to participate in this research.

Investigator's signature_____ Date ___/___/___

APPENDIX B

IRB Approval



Pepperdine University
24255 Pacific Coast Highway
Malibu, CA 90263
TEL: 310-506-4000

NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

Date: February 08, 2016

Protocol Investigator Name: Dalia Juarez

Protocol #: 15-12-147

Project Title: CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT OF SUCCESS: HOW COMMUNITY COLLEGE FACULTY, AND THEIR EFFORTS TO ENGAGE IN QUALITY FACULTY-STUDENT INTERACTIONS, CONTRIBUTES TO A FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT'S PERCEPTION OF BELONGING

School: Graduate School of Education and Psychology

Dear Dalia Juarez:

Thank you for submitting your application for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We appreciate the work you have done on your proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101 that govern the protections of human subjects.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit an amendment to the IRB. Since your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite the best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete written explanation of the event and your written response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the IRB and documenting the adverse event can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* at community.pepperdine.edu/irb.

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all communication or correspondence related to your application and this approval. Should you have additional questions or require clarification of the contents of this letter, please contact the IRB Office. On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,

Judy Ho, Ph.D., IRB Chairperson

APPENDIX C

Demographic Survey

Thank you for choosing to participate in this study. Please note that the information collected in this questionnaire is completely confidential and will only be used for the purposes of this research study. Please answer the following questions as accurately as possible. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

Pseudonym (to protect confidentiality) _____

Current Age _____

Gender _____

Race/Ethnicity _____

Enrollment Status _____ (full-time/part-time) Semesters of study at this college (please circle) 1st semester, 2nd semester, 3rd semester, 4th semester, 5th semester, 6th semester

Educational Goals—Primary reason for enrolling in college

APPENDIX D

Semi-structured Interview

The interview will last about an hour. During the interview we are going to discuss your experiences as a first-generation student and your perceived sense of belonging as you have experienced through faculty-student interactions. I'd like as much detail as possible to fully understand your experiences. To clarify, for this research sense of belonging is defined as, "A student's perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to faculty"

1. To what degree have you developed a sense of belonging while enrolled at this college?
2. What has impacted your development of sense of belonging?
3. How have faculty helped you develop your sense of belonging?
4. Can you tell me, what do you discuss with your instructor(s)?
5. Can you describe your communication with your instructor(s)? Email? In-class? Out of class?
6. Can you tell me, how have your instructor's expectations influenced you?
7. Can you tell me, what type of out-of-class experiences have you had with your instructor?
8. Tell me, do you discuss your career plans with your instructor(s)?
9. Faculty will give feedback to students, both in written form and orally, can you tell me about the type and quality of the feedback you've received from instructor(s)?
10. Can you tell me, have you had any out-of-class experience with an instructor(s)?
11. What can you tell me about your experiences with faculty and their availability?
12. Can you tell me, how have faculty shown empathy (ability to understand and share feelings of others) towards you?

APPENDIX E

Community College Survey of Student Engagement

“About the Survey” taken from www.ccsse.org

Extensive research has identified good educational practices that are directly related to retention and other desired student outcomes. The Community College Survey of Student Engagements (CCSSEE) builds on this research and asks students about their college experiences—how they spend their times; what they feel they have gained from their classes; how they assess their relationships and interactions with faculty, counselors, and peers; what kinds of work they are challenged to do; how the college supports their learning; and so on.

In 2006, CCSSE completed a major validation research study that examines the relationship between student engagement and community college student outcomes. While the connection between student engagement and student success has been emphasized in a number of major studies and reports on the undergraduate experience, the extant literature has focused on almost exclusively on students in 4-year colleges and universities—until now. This report on a three-pronged collection of studies validates the relationships between student engagement and a variety of student outcomes in community colleges—including academic performance, persistence, and attainment.

Student Engagement and Student Outcome: Key Findings from CCSSE Validation Research
<http://www.ccsse.org/aboutsurvey/docs/CCSSE%20Validation%20Summary.pdf>

Exploring Relationships Between Student Engagement and Student Outcomes in Community Colleges: Report on Validation Research
<http://www.ccsse.org/aboutsurvey/docs/CCSSE%20Working%20Paper%20on%20Validation%20Research%20December%202006.pdf>

APPENDIX F

Student Survey

Me

For this particular assignment I am being asked to provide a response to each of the questions listed below. The purpose of this assignment is two-fold: (a) I will practice submitting my work both in hard-copy and to turnitin.com and (b) to give my instructor some insight into who I am. My responses will be kept confidential and Ms. Juarez asks that I be as transparent as I am willing; so I need not worry about length. (25 points)

Student Survey Questions

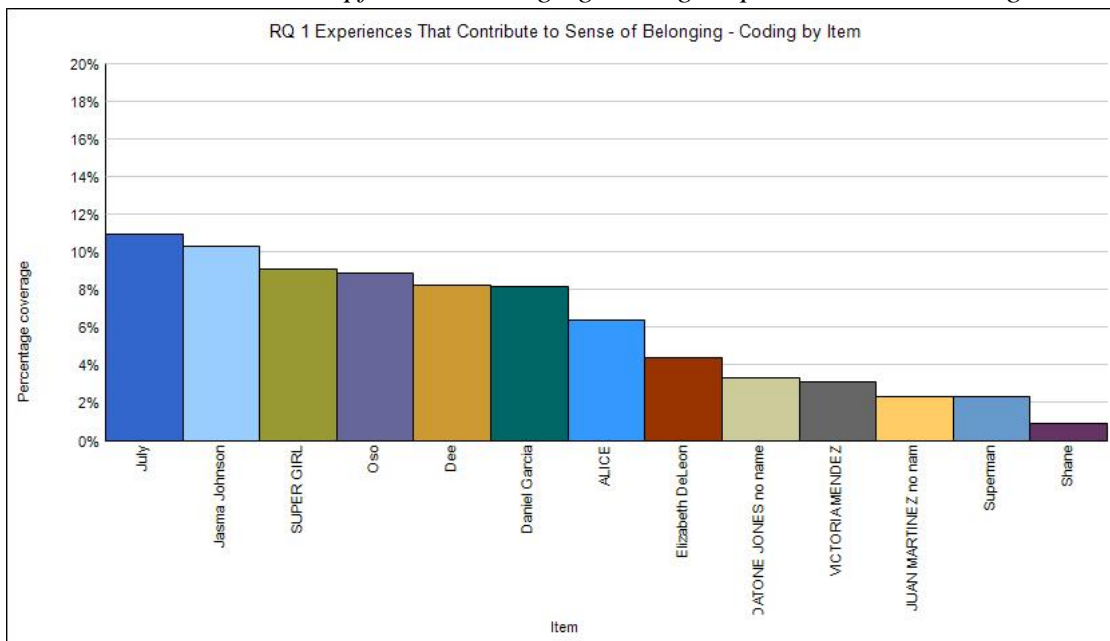
1. What is your long-term goal in attending The Compton Center? Transfer, earn an AA/AS, work/skill progress? Please explain.
2. Why did you choose to attend The Compton Center?
3. Are you a first-generation student? Meaning, neither of your parent(s) or guardians graduated from college with a bachelor's degree.
4. When you have questions or concerns about college and/or being a student, who do you talk to about such concerns?
5. Are you, or have you, participated in any of the student-success focused programs here on campus? If so, which ones? What was your experience like?
6. What is your current housing situation? Live at home? Live on your own? With family? Roommates? Other? Please explain

7. Are you currently working? If so, where? How many days/hours do you work? Are you looking for work? How will you balance work and school?
8. Other than English, do you speak and write in another language? If not, is there a language you do wish to learn? Please explain.
9. Do you have a compute and/or printer at home? Do you have internet access at home? If you have neither of these, will you be using the campus resources? Please explain.
10. In thinking about who you are as a student and all your various responsibilities, strengths, and weaknesses; what issues/concerns/hurdles are you most “worried” that might interfere with you “passing” the class? (caretaker, soul provider, procrastinator, etc.)
11. Besides passing the class (with an “A,” “B,” or “C”) what will success look like for you in this class? What do you plan, or want, to accomplish?

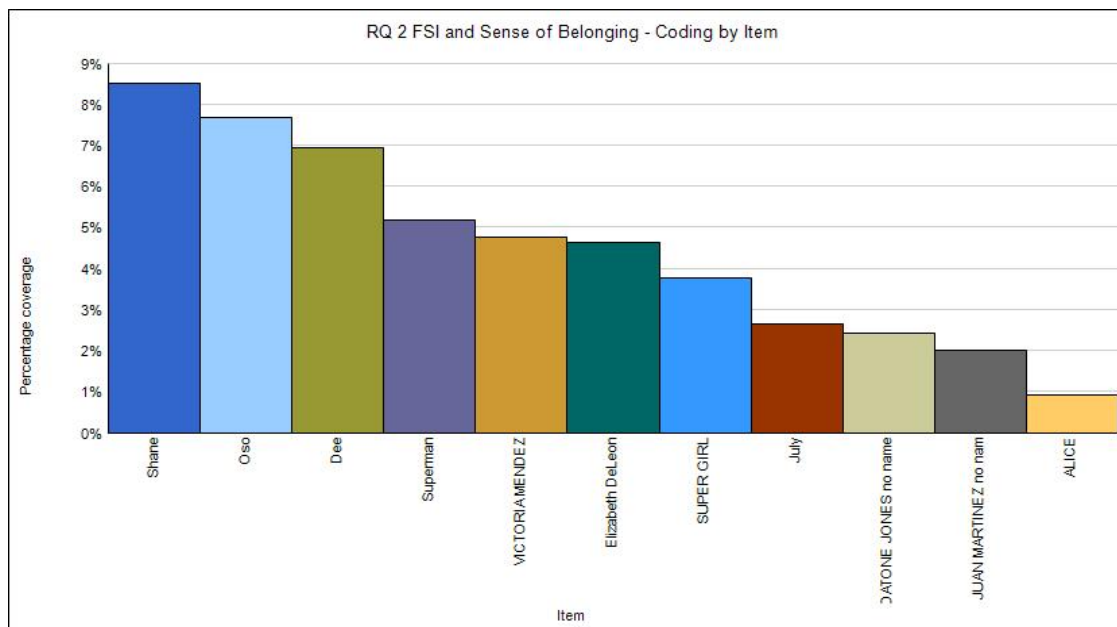
APPENDIX G

Nvivo Graphs

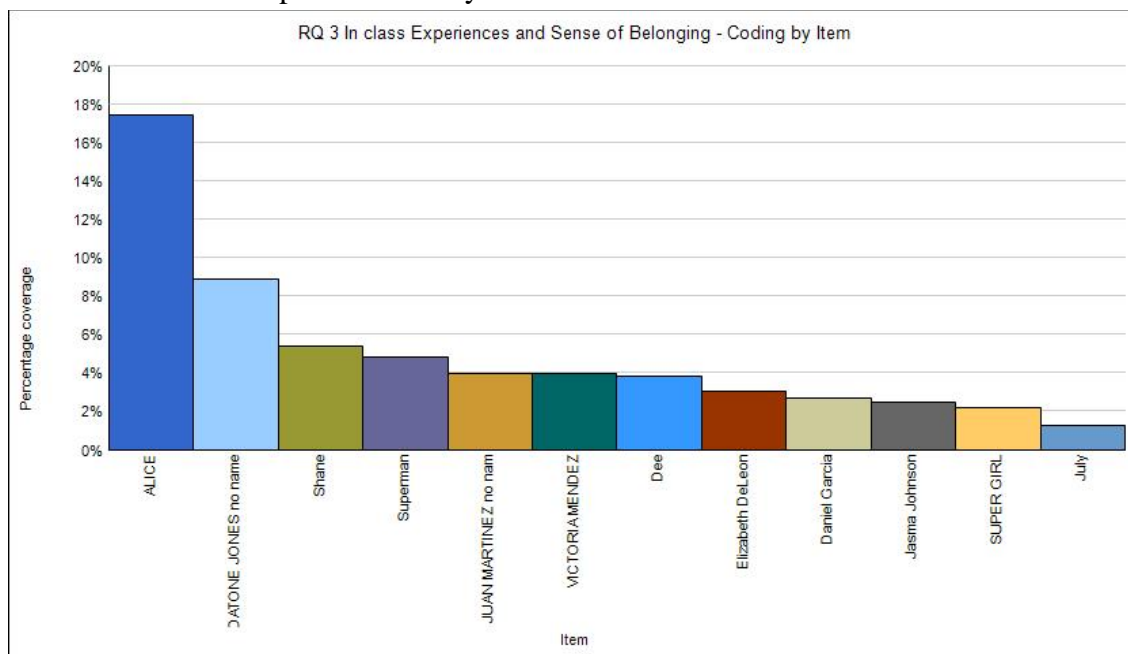
Visualization of the Nodes: *helpfulness*, *belonging*, *caring*, *important* and *mattering* from Nvivo



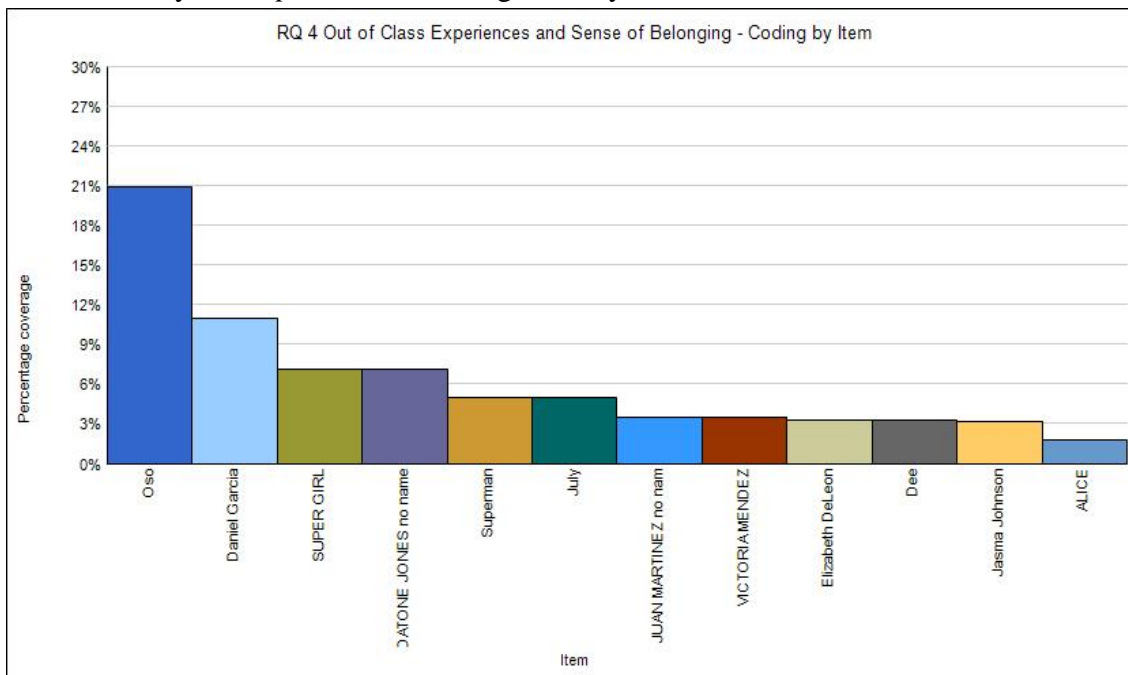
In regards to student's experiences the students reported having encounters with faculty where they experiences faculty as *helpful* and *caring* which served as examples of their *belonging*, being *important* and *mattering*.



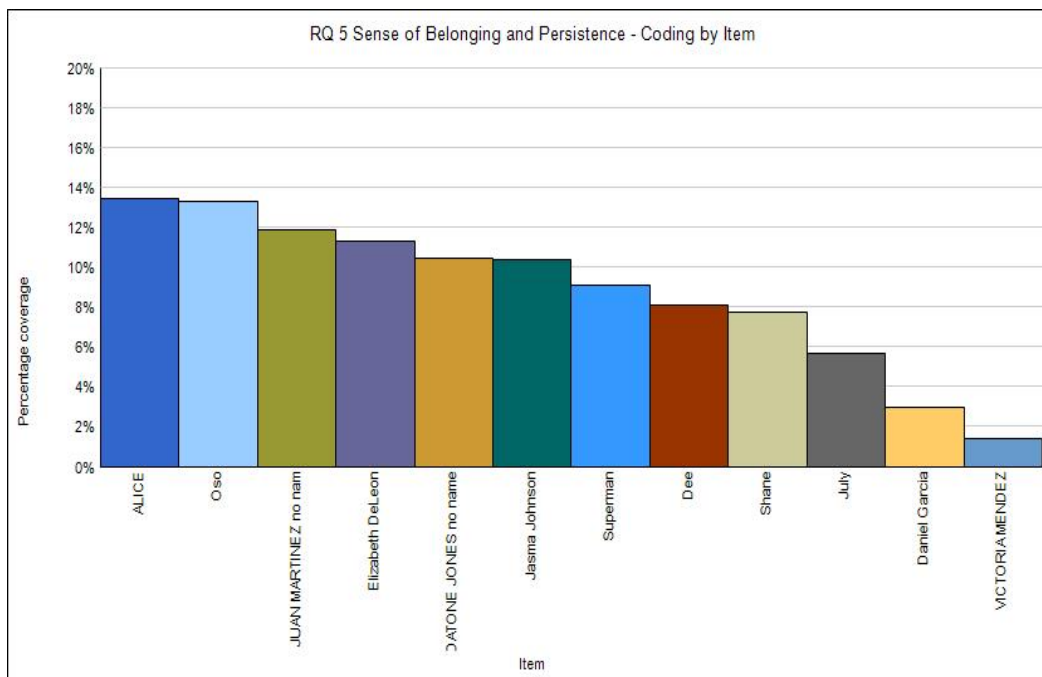
In the review of the student responses the participants discussed instances where faculty shared their own academic experiences and communicated to the student that they want the student to be successful. Students reported that they felt *cared* for.



The in-class experiences that student's reported helped to develop their sense of belonging. Students reported that they felt the instructor was "paying attention" to them in-class, not just instructing. Strayhorn affirms that the sense of belonging is manifested when the student perceives that they are *important* to a college faculty member.



In regards to out of class experiences the students shared instances where meeting with faculty during office-hours or socializing in off campus event contributed to their perceived sense of belonging. Students reported that visiting an instructor during office hours was an opportunity to discuss course material as well as challenges that the student was facing. These interactions contributed to student's perception that they *mattered* and that the faculty was willing to be *helpful*.



All students in this study indicated that their perceived sense of belonging contributed to their decisions and desire to persist in their academic endeavors. Because the first-generation student does not have a college-knowledgeable parent, the faculty serve as a guide and mentor to the first-generation student as they navigate their way through the college environment. The first-generation student who attributed their persistence to faculty-student interactions noted that faculty had been *caring*, student's reported that faculty had been *helpful*, and they reported that they felt as if they *mattered* to faculty.

APPENDIX H

Research Questions With Findings

Research question	Findings
1. What are the experiences that contribute to a sense of belonging for first-generation students?	Data collected around the concept of sense of belonging led to an explanation of how students felt that they mattered to faculty. Belonging resulted from their discussion with faculty regarding academics, future careers, ways to be successful, and/or challenges students have experienced.
2a. How do in-class interactions, related to the faculty-student relationship, affect a first-generation student's sense of belonging?	In-class experiences are those interactions that take place within the context of the classroom during instruction. These in-class interactions could be having a discussion on topics related to course materials. A time where instructors move about the classroom to check the work and progress of students. In-class interactions could also involve an instructor talking with students about how to be successful and to convey the sentiment that the instructor is focused on the student's success. The students who shared their positive experiences with faculty, had conversations and interactions in-class, expressed that their perception, that they were cared for and mattered to a faculty member, encouraged in them a sense of resiliency in persisting with their education.
2b. How do out-of-class interactions, related to the faculty-student relationship, affect a first-generation student's sense of belonging?	Out-of-class experiences, those interactions outside of the instruction classroom, can be diverse: office-hour visits, field trips, casual encounters on campus, or off-campus meetings. These type of relationship building encounters contributed to a first-generation student's developed sense of belonging; that the instructor is approachable and that the student is cared for.
3. What is the relationship between first-generation students' sense of belonging and persistence?	Students who perceive they matter, are cared about and important to faculty also believe in their abilities to complete academic tasks and reach their goals.

The interviews conducted with the 13 first-generation African American and Latino community college students revealed significant data that expressed their perceived sense of belonging in relation to their faculty-student interactions. Some key findings that resulted from the one-on-one interviews related to Strayhorn's (2012) use of key terms to define belonging: helpfulness, mattering, feeling cared about, feeling important to others, accepted, respected, valued by, and a perceived sense of social support on campus. These findings two themes emerged regarding the first-generation student's perceived sense of belonging:

- 1) Positive faculty-student interactions affect the self-efficacy of first-generation students
- 2) Faculty-student relationships can take the place of parental support during college