FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS:
A COMPARISON OF GRADUATES
AND DROP-OUTS

by

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ABSTRACT

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With an increase in the number of students who are considered at-risk, much research has been directed at understanding why these students fail to achieve at the same level of their White counterparts. To this end, this study will explore how the experiences of first-generation college graduates compare to first-generation college students who chose not to finish their degree. Three theoretical frameworks were employed as the basis of this examination: resiliency theory, Bourdieu's habitus differences, and Tinto's model of the drop-out process. Twenty first-generation college students were interviewed to obtain a description of their background and educational experiences from kindergarten through the end of their academic career. These personal histories were analyzed and coded, and the themes that emerged were largely in correspondence to existing theories. A more closely detailed accounting of what processes occurred during their educational experiences that led the respondents to either graduate or drop-out provides much-needed insight for K-12 educators

who are seeking ways to affect positive change in order to increase the number of at-risk students who graduate from high school and continue on to graduate from college.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

According to the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) 2009 study titled "Enrollment in Texas Public Schools," the number of students defined as "at-risk" is on the rise. Students who are considered at-risk include those who are economically disadvantaged, are members of a racial or ethnic minority, and/or are limited in their English proficiency. Although not an exhaustive list of the factors that put students at-risk of being academically unsuccessful, these umbrella categories encompass the majority of factors that have been historically shown to decrease a child's chances of academic success (Schoon, et al 2004).

Statistically speaking, students identified as at-risk historically do not achieve at the same level as those who are not labeled at-risk. In a review of the TEA's "TAKS Performance Report" for 2009, the performance of students categorized as economically disadvantaged, limited English proficient, African American, or Hispanic had a lower percentage of students meet the passing standard than Whites. For the purposes of this study, this differential will be referred to as the "achievement gap." As a result of this achievement gap, at-risk students are in greater jeopardy of not graduating from high school thereby reducing their chances of going on to college. As the TEA report titled "Secondary School Completion and Dropouts in Texas Public Schools 2008-2009" indicates, students identified as at-risk comprised almost half of all the drop-outs for grades 7-12.

Compounding this problem is the fact that employers offering jobs that pay a middle-class wage more and more often are expecting employees to have a bachelor's degree as the minimum requirement (National Center for Education Statistics 2007). As Sacker and Schoon (2007) note, "Industrialised countries rely upon a skilled labour force to maintain growth and sustain the economy. Changing labour markets and opportunities require young people to

develop new skills, in particular professional or academic qualifications" (p. 874). Consequently, without the proper skills, training, and education to compete in today's job market, those who currently experience at-risk conditions are more likely to continue experiencing them.

The simultaneous increase in the population of at-risk students and the increasing demand for employment requirements has stirred the sociological community, as well as those in other disciplines, to spend vast quantities of time and energy looking for solutions to the problems associated with educating this population of students. It is my hope that this research will contribute to those efforts.

Since those at-risk students who attend college will likely be among the first in their families, this study will focus on first-generation college students. Specifically, the experiences of first-generation college graduates will be compared to first-generation college students who did not finish their degree plan to determine if there are differences in their experiences that may explain why some at-risk students are educationally successful while others are not. This knowledge will be beneficial to K-12 schools who desire to better prepare their students to go on and succeed at the collegiate level.

On the basis of the literature review contained herein, I expect to find that first-generation college graduates will exhibit more internal protective factors and encounter more positive external factors than drop-outs. With the greater resiliency these factors are said to provide, graduates will be better able to mediate the habitus differences between their family of origin and the educational system. Therefore, as at-risk students become more resilient they are better able to accept and internalize the education system’s social capital, and the likelihood that they will graduate from college increases.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over thirty years ago when social researchers began to look for solutions to the achievement gap, they approached it as if they were diagnosing a health problem. This "hospital model involved identifying risk factors such as dysfunctional family, disease, illness, maladaption, incompetence, deviance – and focused on developing programs to work with populations that were experiencing those problems" (Krovetz 1999 p. 121). The result was programs that treated the symptoms but not the problem.

Subsequently, there was a paradigm shift as investigations in this area moved away from this deficit-driven format and toward an asset-focused model that could work on preventative measures. In other words, rather than working to determine what was wrong with at-risk children, they started looking at individuals who experienced risk factors yet succeeded despite their circumstances. This was beneficial in several ways. First, it lessened the negative connotation often associated with at-risk students. Second, it dealt with the problem rather than just the symptoms. And, finally, it shifted the mindset of the researcher from seeking out the negative to looking for the positive, i.e., what at-risk students are doing right (Mohaupt 2009). The result was the adoption and adaptation of resiliency theory.

Due in part to the popular and widespread use of the term, the literature reflects multiple definitions for resiliency. For example, Mohaupt (2009) states, "Resilience can be defined as the 'dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity' (Luthar et al. 2000), or, in the context of developmental psychology, 'Resilience...is a capacity for adaptation along appropriate developmental pathways, despite disruptions such as family breakdowns' (Edwards 2007)" (p. 384). Meanwhile, Schoon, et al. (2004) see it as "the dynamic process of positive adaptation despite the experience of

significant adversity or trauma" (p. 384). Still, in one form or fashion, they all include two main tenets: the presence of risk factors and an indication that success has been achieved in spite of those factors. Since this study is centered on resiliency in relation to students and their education, however, I will adopt the definition for research based on resiliency theory put forth by Waxman et al. (2008): "Research that focuses on why some students do well in school and why they are successful, while similar students from the same schools and classrooms and from similar disadvantaged circumstances are not successful in school" (p. 24).

2.1 Resiliency Theory

While nobody seems sure where resiliency theory originated, it began to be applied in the fields of social psychology and psychiatry as early as the 1940s. From the very beginning, the emphasis was on young people. "This early focus on children - especially in the psychology literature - is still visible today as childhood resilience is one of the most extensively researched areas in the field" (Mohaupt 2008 p. 64). However, it was not until the 1980s with the onset of nationwide standardized testing of public school children in conjunction with an increase in the number of students experiencing risk factors that it was applied to the field of education. And today, it is being put to use in a wide variety of disciplines including but not limited to ecological economics, social policy, and disaster studies (Mohaupt 2008).

Within the framework of education resilience research, certain factors have been shown to "contribute to the 'invulnerability' that these students demonstrate" (Cabrera & Padilla 2004 p. 152). These factors are commonly referred to in the literature as "protective factors" These protective factors can be divided into two main categories – internal and external. Mohaupt (2009) terms the personal characteristics or attributes of resilient individuals "internal" protective factors and the way that family, school, and community can influence individuals to encourage resilient behavior as "external" protective factors (p. 65).

2.1.1. Internal Protective Factors

Because there is such an immense variety of personal attributes that resilient individuals portray, for simplicity's sake, Benard (1991) has arranged the internal protective factors into four main groups: social competence, ability and desire to problem solve, sense of purpose, and autonomy. **Social competence**, more commonly referred to as interpersonal skills, is exhibited by positive peer interactions both in and out of school and displays of "emotional intelligence" which include knowledge of how to regulate one's emotions. **Problem solving** involves having the desire as well as the capacity to seek realistic solutions to challenges. This protective factor is demonstrated when individuals show they know how to plan and think critically, be flexible and resourceful, and interpret that others mistakes are not your own. An individual who has a sense of purpose, or **critical consciousness**, recognizes that his/her personal actions impact others. People who have a sense of purpose are involved in religious and civic activities, have hope for the future, and feel responsible for themselves and what happens around them. "This characteristic causes the individual to envision and act upon a belief that one's life has purpose and responsibilities that extend beyond the individual" (Abelev 2009 p. 116). **Autonomy** incorporates some aspects of the other attributes in that it involves setting reasonable goals and having the skills necessary to achieve them, but it also includes having the self-confidence to follow through on those goals. This self-confidence comes with their feeling that they will be successful and have a sense of control over their life and personal destiny. Additionally, resilient individuals seem to be able to resist the urge to conform to others expectations if they do not meet their own (Abelev 2009).

2.1.1.1 Impact of Race/Ethnicity

Beginning in the 1990s, the next wave of resilience research began to focus on whether or not differences would exist for ethnic and racial minorities such as African American and Hispanic students. This is a very important area of research as Alon (2007) learned that minority students are more likely to suffer from over-lapping disadvantages such as poverty and

limited English proficiency than Whites and Asians. In their study on high-achieving African American students, Griffin and Allen (2006) found these students were encouraged to continue working hard in school by positive peer influences but were rarely informed about preparations for college nor were they readily offered opportunities to enroll in AP classes. To resolve their dilemma, these high-achievers sought out other academically-inclined peers. Some even went so far as to create an environment where it was "cool" to be smart, and you were not admitted to the "club" if you didn't apply yourself to school work. As a result, Griffin & Allen recommended that schools find ways to encourage similar peer interactions and provide a caring atmosphere that supported high-achieving African Americans' college aspirations. In other words, schools should find what works for their students and implement those measures.

This is supported by the research completed by Howard, et al. (1999) which revealed that when designing programs to meet the needs of their students, schools should reflect their students' culture and values rather than only those of the school. Findings from Crosnoe, Cavanaugh, and Elder's (2003) study support those of Griffin and Allen (2006) regarding the positive influence that peers can have on participation in school, however, this was not necessarily the case in every school. Their data showed that White students depended on positive peer relations more when their school had an atmosphere that did not promote academic success whereas African American students valued them less in this kind of environment. Instead, African American students pursued relationships with peers who were academically inclined more often when they were in a large school with an atmosphere that supported learning and academic achievement. But, a different atmosphere or a different sized school would change the effectiveness of this type of peer support. The bottom line is one size does NOT fit all – at-risk students cannot be lumped together and treated the same because sometimes there are differences even within the same race or ethnicity.

2.1.2. External Protective Factors

In addition to internal protective factors, Benard (1991) identified three external protective factors that play a role in the resiliency of at-risk students: family, school, and community. All of these external protective factors must include the same three components, although they will be presented differently in each domain. These components are: providing caring and support, having high expectations, and encouraging children's participation. Each of the external protective factors can also serve as barriers to education for at-risk students. Therefore it is up to the members of each domain to do their part if resiliency is to be achieved because whether or not at-risk children are successful in adopting resilient behaviors is dependent on the symbiotic interaction of their internal protective factors and these external protective factors. It takes the combined efforts of the members of these three domains to build academic resilience by strengthening children's internal protective factors. "Successful educational outcomes are not merely features of personal attributes and school processes. Individual, parental, peer group, and environmental characteristics as well as socialization experiences all affect how well children perform in school" (Barrett 2010 p. 449). Thus, the achievement gap can be diminished when the domains of the external protective factors support and stimulate the growth of children's internal protective factors (Aronson 2000).

2.1.2.1 Family

It is vital for a child to have a stable, healthy relationship with at least one family member (not necessarily a parent) in order to develop normally. Without this, the child's resiliency is put at risk (Benard 1991). "This 'sense of basic trust,' (Erickson 1963) appears to be the critical foundation for human development and bonding, and, thus, human resiliency" (Benard 1991 p. 7). This connection is even more important during the difficult adolescent years when children are becoming more independent. Without this good foundation to depend on as they explore the social world beyond their family, adolescents can get lost (Crosnoe & Elder 2004). In addition, families that incorporate the children in their basic functioning through

such activities as chores and contributing to the family income via part-time employment, build resiliency in their children by facilitating their children's internal protective factors of autonomy and sense of purpose (Benard 1991).

The primary means that the family can serve to help or hinder children's resiliency has been found to be related to parenting style, parental involvement, and expectations for the child's education (Schoon, Parsons, & Sacker 2004). If parents employ a more authoritarian mode of parenting they are likely to decrease their children's sense of autonomy. This is the most common parenting style employed by the undereducated (Hobbs 2004). The reason for this, according to Neblett and Cortina (2006), is the difference in the parents' work environment. The jobs of those parents who are more educated often times require them to be more self-directed whereas those parents with less education are constantly monitored and have limited opportunities to direct themselves. It is recommended that an authoritative approach be used instead because when parents expect their children to conform and obey without questioning authority figures, their level of autonomy is reduced (Hobbs 2004).

When parents communicate to their children that they believe in their ability to accomplish anything they set their mind to do, it stimulates growth in both their problem-solving and autonomy protective factors (Benard 1991). It is also of paramount importance that the family conveys the value of getting an education. This occurs not only through conversation but also through parental involvement in the school or school-related activities such as homework or extra-curricular activities (Cabrera & La Nasa 2001).

Peck et al. (2008) recommended that parents make every effort to involve their children in extracurricular activities because they found that participating in extracurricular activities generally served to offset students' existing risk factors. However, the quality and quantity of the activity determines it effectiveness. For example, activities such as working to earn spending money as opposed to working in order to contribute to the family's income or just hanging out with friends had a negative impact on students' educational resilience. On the

other hand, when students engaged in school clubs, organized sports, and/or volunteering they were more likely to go on to college. These activities showed a positive result because they promoted educational persistence and healthy development of internal protective factors such as social competence and critical consciousness. Through these experiences, the effect of any retention that may have occurred in the elementary or middle school years is diminished (Randolph et al. 2004). In addition, they accrue the institutional social capital necessary to successfully navigate the education system. Within this context, Fukuyama's definition of social capital is employed: "a certain set of informal values or norms shared among members of a group that permit cooperation among them" (Claridge 2004).

In 2004, Hobbs conducted a study in which he discovered that parents should also "expose [their children] to the college environment, monitor their children's grades, enroll them in college preparatory coursework, and help them in college" (p. 124). Because college educated parents are more likely to possess knowledge of educational institutions' social capital and they see the long-term benefits of having an education, they are more likely and better equipped to pass on this knowledge to their children (Cabrera & La Nasa 2001). However, through partnerships with schools and other members of the community, those parents who are not college educated can still provide a similar modicum of support in this area.

2.1.2.2 School (K-12)

Schools that educate the families as well as the children about the importance of obtaining a higher education and how to make that happen will enhance the resiliency of at-risk students by providing them with more educational social capital. This would include relaying information about what classes should be taken to prepare the students for college as well as how to apply for and finance a college education. Furthermore, these partnerships between home and school related to college should not wait until high school to be forged. Instead, they should be initiated in elementary school so that the necessary skills and knowledge can be

accumulated thereby reducing the chance for gaps that can decrease student resiliency (Cabrera & La Nasa 2001).

Within schools, teachers play one of the most important roles in developing students' internal protective factors. "For the resilient youngster, a special teacher [is] not just an instructor for academic skills, but also a confidant and positive model for personal identification" (Benard 1991 p. 10). When Sosa (2008) studied the effect teachers had on building resiliency in Mexican-American students, she noticed this same pattern. She found that teachers innately took on more responsibility than just teaching the expected academic material. Instead, they felt it was their responsibility to educate the whole child – mentally, emotionally, and socially. Some of the ways they felt they accomplished this included "presenting a challenging curriculum, providing support and guidance, and allowing for student success" (p. 184). Teachers also cited the importance of applying effective instructional practices yet remaining flexible to the needs of each student. In addition, they were committed to supporting their students as they built their sense of self. Through these efforts, teachers can strengthen the students' social competence, problem solving ability, critical consciousness, and sense of autonomy. Of course, for any of this to be possible, a caring relationship based on trust must first be established between the teacher and student. This is especially important in the lives of children who do not have this element in their home life (Benard 1991). The findings of Waxman, et al. (2008) are in agreement with Sosa's (2008) as they note that teachers who struggle to connect with their students also have trouble figuring out how to build their resiliency.

Further, Benard (1991) states when an entire school has high expectations for *all* its students in every parameter - from their behavior to their academic achievement – the students' resiliency will grow. In order for a school-wide ethic such as this to be in place, schools must work on promoting knowledge of the resiliency framework to its teachers so they are able to understand their students better (Waxman et al. 2008). Some of the teachers Waxman, et al. (2008) encountered only knew basic demographic information about their students. This

creates a barrier to promoting internal protective factors because teachers must begin with an understanding and acceptance of the fact that “whatever issues a student might be facing has an impact on their educational trajectory” (Sosa 2008 p. 189). Obviously, then, teachers need to be aware of those issues. Additionally, teachers have to recognize that their deeply held personal beliefs affect how they interact with their students. This is an important first step toward making changes in those beliefs that will then be reflected to the students thereby enabling them to better foster their students' resilience. Creating an atmosphere of high expectations also promotes resiliency because it communicates to the students that faculty, staff, and volunteers believe they can be successful. Knowing that others believe in them and in their abilities, has been repeatedly shown to motivate at-risk students (Krismer 2005; Sosa 2008) while simultaneously building their autonomy (Benard 1991).

Unfortunately, in their review of the literature, Schoon, et al. (2004) found evidence that teachers do not always treat students equally. In fact, they may even be averse to those students who are classically identified as at-risk while treating those who indicate conformity to the school’s social norms preferentially. The most harmful effect of this treatment is the internalization of the teachers’ feelings because just as a teacher’s beliefs about a student can be affirming, they can also be damaging if the teachers are relaying the message they do not have faith in the students’ abilities. As a result, rather than the student's autonomy being increased, it will be diminished.

Even when partnerships are formed between home and school and quality instructional strategies are being implemented in a caring, supportive environment of high expectations, the final element that must be present is student participation and involvement in the school. This participation is similar to that of doing chores in the home in that it provides a feeling of responsibility, purpose, and being an important part of something bigger than yourself. Just as in the family, when students are given the opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions,

and they are taken seriously, their autonomy and problem solving protective factors will be enhanced.

The final way schools can enhance students' resilience is by encouraging peer relations that promote academic achievement. While students interact with peers during the school day, these peers do not always represent a positive influence. However, research shows that when students engage with peers who embody pro-school behaviors and high educational aspirations, they can play an important role in the student's support network (Benard 1991). Krismer (2005) confirmed that at-risk students could benefit from depending on others who were similar to themselves in age, social class, and/or race when they share the same ambitions. In her study she found that peers helped each other adapt as they shifted from their culture of origin to the culture of college. For example, "the students all discussed having to disassociate themselves with former friendships that were no longer supportive" (p. 80). Having a peer who can relate to the emotions they experience during this transition would help ease their distress more than if they were only surrounded by students who did not have similar experiences and therefore, could not empathize with their situation.

2.1.2.3 Community

Communities that ensure all their members have their most basic needs met provide a good foundation for resiliency. In order for this to be accomplished, a network of services and individuals should be organized. This network should include opportunities for children to be involved in their community through service and/or presenting their point of view on issues pertinent to them. It is also essential for their community to find relevant ways to serve its youth such as mentoring, homework help, and child care (Benard 1991). In so doing, the internal protective factors of critical consciousness and problem solving will be improved. Of great importance, here is creating a populace that will be willing and able to give back to the community as they reach adulthood.

In Byrd and Chavous' (2009) investigation about how neighborhoods can contribute to positive academic outcomes, they found that children who lived in better organized neighborhoods had higher GPAs, spent more time on homework, and had less absences from school. To be defined as well-organized, the neighborhood had to have positive role models and social networks that reinforced the school's norms, and thus increased the students' knowledge of educational social capital. Additionally, they found the presence of "institutional resources" such as YMCAs, recreation centers or youth centers, and scout troops can instill an ethos about the importance of getting an education.

If the neighborhood is not well organized and exhibits the signs and symptoms of social inequality, however, it can be difficult for children to see value in education especially when their view of the world and the opportunities it has to offer them is limited to what they experience in that neighborhood. Diemer, et al. (2006) suggests that children who grow up in this type of neighborhood could increase their resiliency by developing their critical consciousness. This "critical consciousness may serve as an internal resource that assists adolescents in analyzing and acting to achieve desired outcomes within an environment of inequitable access to resources" (pp. 228-229). With this insight, they may be more effective at seeing how they can work within the system rather than be oppressed by it. This will also help develop their internal factor of autonomy.

Similarly, students who are religiously active are shown to be more resilient because the socialization events they experience in church reinforce the school's social norms by emphasizing the importance of getting a good education. So, it is not surprising, then, that religiosity is a protective factor shown to increase standardized test scores and participation in extracurricular activities while decreasing drop-out rates. In fact, religious involvement is shown to be a more significant protective factor for at-risk students than their advantaged counterparts as it fosters their knowledge of educational social capital which advantaged students already possess (Barrett 2010).

2.1.3. Critiques of Resiliency Theory

In spite of the widespread application of resiliency theory, it is not without its critics. As evidence of their position, these critics cite the ambiguous and value-laden terminology that the theory invites as well as the determination of what success is since the notion of success is subjective in nature. Consequently, this may be a topic that is best suited for qualitative rather than quantitative study. In fact, many of the studies in the existing body of knowledge have been conducted qualitatively. Critics also claim the paradigm shift from treating the problem to instilling preventative measures may overlook the needs of a number of individuals. And, it may be tempting for some to focus solely on the internal protective factors meanwhile ignoring the need to address structural level forces such as the education system and the community. (Mohaupt 2008) Therefore, this study will make certain to investigate the impact of both internal and external protective factors on respondents' experiences.

2.2 Bourdieu's Habitus Theory

Although education is generally thought to improve one's life chances by providing financial security, schools instead seem to play a role in reinforcing social inequality by acting as a filter whose function is to separate out those students who have the requisite social capital from those that do not. "The result is a quasi caste-like social system in which the children of advantaged families are given the best opportunities to succeed and the best positions in the social stratum, while the others lag behind, thus reproducing patterns of social inequality" (Aronson 2000 p. 9). Accordingly, Abelev (2009) contends that Bordieu's theory of differing habitus explains how schools serve to tow the line on social stratification: By "employing an interactional style that favors middle- and higher-income families [and] expecting all families to use the same interaction patterns, with no adjustments for differing perspectives… schools largely disregard those who do not fit their model, with the result being that lower-status children and parents miss opportunities and are further isolated within their social class" (p. 120).

Pierre Bourdieu is credited for theorizing about how what he termed *habitus* would affect an individual's life chances. Habitus is "a person's worldview, and it is a function of the fields of which she is a part" (Abelev 2009 p. 118). In other words, habitus reflects a person's idea of what is the reasonable or sensible way to mingle with people in their social world. An individual's habitus is inherently formed as they experience life, therefore, cultural norms that reveal social class, race or ethnicity, religious and political beliefs, parenting style and so on are incorporated (Abelev 2009).

In the context of the educational system, Lareau (2003) finds that different classes have different habitus, and, it is this variation in habitus between schools and at-risk students that Abelev (2009) believes is the cause of the achievement gap. "The schools expect an interactional pattern based on middle-class habitus, however, the children of the lower and working classes are at a disadvantage because they do not learn how to operate within that social milieu. As a result, they do not gain access to the same resources, information, and opportunities" as their middle-class counterparts (p. 119). In other words, at-risk students are lacking the necessary social capital to operate effectively within the school's social milieu thereby reducing their ability to achieve academic success.

2.2.1 The Importance of Social Capital

The interviews Cabrera and Padilla (2004) conducted with two Stanford University graduates of Mexican descent illustrate the importance of at-risk students garnering the social capital necessary to survive in the culture of college. By the social capital necessary to survive in the culture of college, they mean "the knowledge that many middle-class parents possess and use to guide their children toward a college education" (p. 154). Both interviewees stated that they struggled with social and institutional barriers because of their social capital deficit. In addition, they shared some of the methods they employed to try and fill the gap such as engaging in social networks. In the end, say Cabrera and Padilla, it was their efforts to learn the college habitus that made the difference.

Trujillo's (2001) research on Mexican and Mexican-American college graduates also supported the need for sufficient social capital related to the education system because all of her respondents were, what she termed, "acculturated." Specifically, she found her respondents were proficient in English and socially involved in activities such as college clubs, music, and sports. They also took advantage of tutoring programs despite the fact that other research indicated that this student population was usually averse to seeking out help with their studies. Thus, Trujillo described her respondents as having "the characteristics of traditional college students." In other words, they had adopted the college habitus.

And, when Hobbs (2004) studied middle class African American college graduates, he discovered that the parents of those who were not first-generation college graduates (because their parents had college degrees) spent time talking to their children about education, the college experience, and made sure they were ready for college level work by involving them in advanced classes, i.e., Advanced Placement (AP) and SAT courses. These "children used what they learned from parents, teachers, and other significant people to prepare for and succeed in college" (p. 120). Therefore, it could be said these children had more educational social capital than first-generation college graduates. This social capital not only helped non-first-generation college graduates get to and through college, it also helped them graduate faster. In fact, Hobbs found that when first-generation college graduates sought and received more help from teachers and parents during college they were able to complete college at rates similar to those of non-first-generation college graduates. The conclusion that could be drawn from these results is that as first-generation college graduates obtained the more educational social capital, they were able to achieve at the same level as those who came from an advantaged background.

2.2.2. The Significance of Schools

It follows, then, that in order to increase the likelihood of at-risk students graduating from college these students' educational social capital must be enhanced in addition to their

internal protective factors. Of the three external protective factors, schools seem the most likely candidate to facilitate this process for two reasons. First, because of the role schools currently play in replicating social inequality, and second, because schools connect the other two external protective factors – family and community. According to Benard (1991), the connection of these three domains is vital: "To ensure that all children have the opportunities to build resiliency, we must work to build linkages between families and schools and between schools and communities" (pp. 19-20). Second, the literature shows time and again the positive impact that meaningful teacher-student relationships can have on students. And more importantly, without a quality education, at-risk students will be unable to compete in a job market such as ours that requires a college degree. As a result, the greatest emphasis in this investigation will be placed on the role schools played in the respondents' experiences.

2.3 The Challenge of College

Changes made in order to increase students' resiliency and knowledge of educational social capital in the K-12 schools will increase the number of at-risk students who apply to college, however, that does not guarantee they will obtain a degree. The reason for this is most first-generation college graduates have to overcome multiple roadblocks during their college journey. These roadblocks are generally the result of a deficiency in one or more of these areas: financial support, family support, academic preparedness for college-level work, and social support. In addition, these college students are short on supply of the social capital required to negotiate the boundaries of college as represented by a "lack of experience with or knowledge of time-management, the economic realities of college life, and the impersonal, bureaucratic nature of institutions of higher education" (Nolan 2005 p. 4).

2.3.1. First-Generation College Graduates Experience

Despite these barriers, many first-generation college students are successful in obtaining their bachelor's degree. According to the results from Nolan's (2005) study this success was facilitated by external protective factors, for instance, participation in academic

support programs such as mentoring, tutoring, and campus outreach, building relationships with faculty members and being involved with campus activities. Additionally, several, but not all, respondents credited a religious or spiritual belief in a higher power as part of their formula for success. But, ultimately, they felt it was their personal perseverance, motivation, and self-determination that led to their degree attainment.

Similarly, Krismer's (2005) respondents cited two external protective factors that contributed to their success: personal support systems based on caring relationships with peers, boyfriends, and teachers and community-based support systems. "Each of [the] subjects was able to identify at least one and often more individuals who unconditionally cared about them and promoted their success" (p. 79). Unfortunately, immediate family members were rarely part of these support systems. In addition, Krismer's (2005) respondents identified all the internal protective factors put forth by resilience theorists as part of their formula for success. She also found that her respondents had the desire to prove to others they could succeed, they developed a self-belief that was fueled each time they accomplished a new feat, and they were adaptive which allowed them to mediate the habitus differences between home and college.

This ability to adjust to the differences in habitus between their family of origin culture and the culture of college has repeatedly been shown to be an important component in first-generation college graduates' academic success. The feeling experienced by them has been described as "feeling an uncomfortable separation from the culture in which they grew up" (Nolan 2005 p.3) and "a sense of alienation from families and friends" (Aronson 2000 p. 206). The result, while they attempt to figure out how to deal with this feeling, is an awareness of "belonging to two different worlds" (Aronson 2000 p. 206) as if they are straddling two cultures. Nolan (2005) maintains this is actually "one of the greatest challenges facing first-generation students in their pursuit of a college education" (p. 3). The key to overcoming this phenomenon as shown by Cabrera and Padilla's (2004) two respondents is taking advantage of the social networks made available through the college while remaining grounded in the values they

learned from their family. Of course, it is only beneficial to stay grounded in those features that are uplifting and advance efforts to obtain a college degree. When viewed together, the findings from all the various studies demonstrate that the more protective factors first-generation college students' experience and the greater their knowledge of educational social capital, the more likely they will finish college and obtain a bachelor's degree.

What's more, the strategies that have shown to be effective for these students generally work well for minority students, too (Nolan 2005). For instance, when Karp (2008) studied Mexican-American first-generation college graduates, she found that despite the burden of additional risk factors such as language difficulties, exposure to gangs and messages contradicting the value of getting an education (i.e., "acting white" is bad), and experiencing discrimination, these respondents experienced many of the same protective factors as other first-generation college graduates. In particular, they felt supported by family members and teachers, took advantage of college preparatory programs and positive peer group interactions including religious involvement, and were determined to work hard and blaze their own trail.

2.3.2. Why Students Drop Out of College

As the number of people entering colleges and universities began to rise in the 1950s, the number of drop–outs increased as well. Was this phenomenon simply a numbers game - more people in so more people out? Or, was there another explanation? When researchers began to seek the answer to this question, they found that students left college for a variety of reasons. The most common of these were economic problems, social or personal conflicts, and mismatched academic expectations (Johnson, 1954; Yoshino, 1958). The goal of this research had been to devise a predictive formula that could be used to determine the percentage of freshman who would graduate. One of the limitations of this perspective was that it did not take into account differences among drop-outs. For example, some students voluntarily withdrew while others were dismissed due to academic failure. Furthermore, some students were only

temporarily leaving college, some transferred to another institution, and others dropped out permanently.

As the research in this area evolved and the diversity of student populations began to rise, studies began to focus on risk factors such as minority status, socioeconomic status, and abuse. They also began to shift away from a freshman-only approach to longitudinal studies that looked at undergraduate levels beyond the first year. When Hurtado, et al. (2007) studied minority students who enrolled in the fields of biomedical and behavioral sciences, they found that concerns about college financing and negotiating family support and responsibilities as well as campus racial dynamics impacted their adjustment and integration into the culture of college. Before that, Renae D. Duncan (2000) investigated victims of child abuse to determine if their experiences would affect their college attrition rate. What she discovered was that students who were victims of sexual assault or who had suffered more than form of child abuse – whether physical, sexual, or emotional – were significantly more likely to drop-out of college during their freshman year. And, Kohen, et al. (1978) employed the use of longitudinal data from male college students in the 1960s to conclude that educational persistence was influenced by the type of secondary educational institution students began their college career in and how much progress they had made toward their degree. In addition, they found that a student's academic ability had less bearing on attrition as the student came closer to finishing their degree. So, the longer they stayed in college, the less likely they were to drop out even if their grades were not very good.

Because of studies like the one conducted by Kohen and his colleagues, researchers also began to investigate the impact on college attrition of factors such as students' enrollment status (full-time or part-time), the type of institution they chose to attend (two-year vs. four-year), and how students felt about the degree/program they were working towards. In 1981, Kristine L. Anderson wanted to know if the social contexts and experiences of students played a role in their educational persistence. She uncovered three influential variables: kind of institution

entered as a freshman, employment type, and location of residence. At greatest risk of attrition, according to her findings, were students who entered a two-year college, worked outside the work-study program, and lived away from their parents but not on campus. Similarly, Stratton, et al. (2007) studied full-time and part-time college students to see if different factors shaped their decision to drop-out. They learned that race and ethnicity had a more significant impact on part-time students. On the other hand, full-time students had a great many factors that affected their attrition such as timing of initial enrollment, academic performance, parental education, household characteristics, and economic circumstances. When Suhre, et al. (2006) wondered if students' satisfaction with their degree plan would make any difference in their decision to continue their educational career, they examined a group of Dutch college students during their first two years in college. Their findings showed that both academic ability and degree program satisfaction were important determinants of drop-out behavior. As students' satisfaction with their degree program decreased so did their motivation to study with the result being a harmful cycle that promoted college withdrawal.

2.3.3. Tinto's Model of the Drop-Out Process

A crucial stage in the evolution of this research involved the development of a theoretical model that would describe and explain the process that students go through when they decide to leave secondary education. Vincent Tinto (1975) provided just such a theory. Dissatisfied with the limited scope of previous research, he sought to uncover what "processes of interaction between the individual and the institution" resulted in students' decision to drop-out and he also wanted to differentiate between the types of drop-out behavior (p. 90).

Tinto's theoretical model of the drop-out process is based on Durkheim's theory of suicide as it relates to "insufficient moral (value) integration and insufficient collective affiliation" (p. 91). In more simple terms, Tinto surmises that college students choose to drop-out when their values do not match those of the college or university they are attending and there is not enough interaction between the student and his/her peers and professors to bridge that gap in

values thereby leaving them, in a sense, isolated from the college's social system, known in this study as the culture of college. The result of this isolation is a decreased commitment to the culture of college and an increased likelihood that the student will drop-out. But this alone does not suffice as a complete explanation of the drop-out process. So, Tinto states that the individual's personal traits (motivation levels, educational commitment, future career aspirations) and background (socioeconomic status, family, prior academic experiences) must be taken into account, too.

According to Tinto, the level of educational goal commitment is an essential attribute among college graduates as is an individual's commitment to the institution they are attending. That is to say, the more committed a student is to obtaining their degree, the greater their persistence to this end even in the face of adverse conditions. Likewise, the more committed students are to a particular institution, the more likely they are to persist in their educational endeavors. As previously mentioned, findings of the Kohen et al. (1978) study reinforced this notion as they showed that the longer a student attends college and progresses in their degree program, the more committed they become to both their educational goal and their institution.

This is just one of the longitudinal aspects of Tinto's theory of the drop-out process. As noted earlier, he also recognized the longitudinal nature of the interactions that occur prior to the time students enter college – background characteristics and individual attributes that are the result of previous life experiences. These produce the expectations, goals, and level of commitment that students arrive at college with which are further shaped by the academic and social interactions they experience that constitutes the culture of college. The outcome of this combination, Tinto proposes, "determines whether or not the individual decides to drop out from college and the forms of dropout behavior the individual adopts" (p. 96). Therefore, low commitment to their educational goal can cause low commitment to their institution, thereby increasing the probability that the student will drop-out while high educational commitment increases institutional commitment and persistence to the educational goal of obtaining a

college degree. On the other hand, a student can still be strongly committed to their educational goal while not having a strong institutional commitment and still persist. Similarly, a student can have such a great institutional commitment that they persist despite a lack of educational commitment unless or until withdrawn due to academic failure.

In attempting to fully describe the drop out process, Tinto's theory leans on the economic concept of cost-benefit analysis as it relates to education and future earnings. Tinto argues that a person will be more likely to withdraw from college when they feel that their time, energy, and money would be better spent doing something else, and that the reward they will gain from this other endeavor outweighs that which a college degree will convey. Consequently, those students who see more value in earning money or feel more validated by working will be more inclined to drop out of college. The value of this perspective is that it takes into account external forces such as changes in the supply and demand of quality employment and familial demands as well as sheds light on the fact that perceptions of reality vary from one individual to another such that, what one person sees as valuable, another may find worthless.

Given the significant contribution Tinto's theory to our understanding of the drop-out process, many social scientists have subsequently either tested its validity or applied it to their research. When Munro (1981) tested Tinto's theory, he found that academic integration was a more vital component in students persisting in college than social integration. Fox (1986) had the same results when he applied Tinto's theory to a group of students who were admitted to a special program at The City University of New York. And, when Pescarella and Chapman (1983) tested Tinto's model in relation to different types of secondary education institutions, their data showed the importance of academic integration superseded social integration but only in two-year colleges and four-year commuter colleges. This could be due to the fact there are fewer opportunities for social integration in these institutional settings.

As Getzalf, et al. (1984) went about testing Tinto's theoretical model of the drop-out process, they determined that students who "dropped out had a significantly lower academic

ability, lower academic integration, lower goal commitment, and lower social integration" (p. 257). Additionally, their findings revealed that Tinto's theory was able to explain the characteristics of students who completely dropped out of secondary education when compared to those who chose to transfer to a different college. Then Elkins, et al. (2000) employed the revised versions of Tinto's drop-out model which combined his original theory with the work of a Dutch anthropologist named Arnold Van Gennep. Van Gennep proposed that individuals go through three stages as they transition from one group to another. Students who successfully pass through the first stage which Van Gennep calls separation, increase the likelihood that they will return to college for their second year. The separation stage is marked by "the disassociation from one's previous communities" (p. 252). According to their study, the two major factors that determine whether or not an individual will navigate this stage well are support from family, friends, teachers, and/or peers and rejection of prior attitudes and values. Lee (1999) found that this is especially vital to the persistence of minority students such as African Americans. The reason for this, she says, is that adjusting to the culture of college prepares them for the reality they will encounter in their future workplace where the dominant culture will prevail just as it does in secondary education.

Similarly, this investigation will also serve to assess the legitimacy of Tinto's theory as well as Abelev's application of Bourdieu's habitus differences as an explanation for the achievement gap. Additionally, respondents' histories will be reviewed for the presence of the resiliency theory tenets. Even though Tinto's theory and resiliency theory has been tested or applied repeatedly, it has not been done as a qualitative comparison between first-generation college graduates and first-generation college drop-outs. What's more, Abelev's explanation has not been examined yet based on my review of the existing literature, so this study will provide that opportunity.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected from ten first-generation college graduates and ten first-generation college students who began college but dropped out. A qualitative interview style was utilized. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide devised to encourage respondents to share the story of their educational experience. Interviews were digitally recorded on a hand-held device to assure the accuracy of respondents' descriptions. These recordings were later transcribed. Due to time constraints, five of the interviews were transcribed by a third party. The transcripts were analyzed and coded according to common themes that were revealed by the data. These themes were then compared to those found in the existing literature on first-generation college graduates, resiliency theory, and college drop-outs. In so doing, the respondents' experiences revealed why some individuals succeed in becoming a first-generation college graduate, while others do not.

Two interview guides were used that only slightly differ in their format – one for each category of participants (see Appendices A and B). Separate recruitment materials and face sheets were also designed, and they too closely resemble each other. The reason there were two different sets of materials is related to fact that graduates had successfully completed their education while drop-outs had not, and I wanted to explore what graduates would attribute to their success in obtaining a degree while also learning the reasons drop-outs chose for discontinuing their education. The sampling method for recruiting participants was the same for both groups of participants as was the consent form. All the required materials were submitted to the Institutional Review Board and approval was received before data collection began.

3.1 Advantages of the Method

The purpose of using the qualitative interview format is to gather descriptions of first-generation college graduates and first-generation college drop-outs experiences in the most accurate and complete manner possible. This goal is most likely to be accomplished when respondents are given the opportunity to tell the story of their unique educational experience and the effect their background had on that experience in their own words. Also, because of the varied ways in which resiliency can be portrayed, it was important to hear a description of their experience rather than ask them a list of questions in a survey-like fashion. There is no way to be certain that all the criteria could be included in a questionnaire, and, in fact, it is highly unlikely that they could all be present. Furthermore, the questionnaire would be excessively long given the somewhat limited parameters of this study. To facilitate their descriptive accounts, the questions in the interview guides were organized in a chronological format so respondents were logically led from the beginning to the end of their educational history. Also, the interview guide includes a list of questions that are to be used to prompt respondents in the event they do not include the information naturally as they share their story. Therefore, the respondents may not be specifically asked all of the questions on the guide.

Abelev, Kanevsky, Corke, and Frangkiser, and others agree that much of the research done thus far has emphasized the features of resiliency without much exploration about the processes which they operate (Abelev 2009). This invites the use of qualitative interview methodology. Through the use of rich, descriptive interviews that allow participants to share their story in their own words, the processes through which first-generation college graduates were able to obtain their degree and first-generation college drop-outs made their decision to leave will more likely be revealed. And, while other research found in this area has implemented both quantitative and qualitative methods, a review of the literature did not uncover any studies that compared these two classes of respondents as was done for this study.

3.2 Sampling and the Selection Process

Respondents met the following criteria in order to be included in the study:

1. adults
2. parents do not have a college degree
3. earned a bachelor's degree in 1995 or later OR began college in 1995 or later but did not finish/dropped out.

The reason participants were limited to those who obtained, or would have obtained, their college degree later than 1995 is to ensure that a picture of more recent educational experiences is gathered. This will not only keep the data relevant to the needs of today, but it also provides an opportunity to determine if any of the strategies Benard's study called for thirty years ago have been implemented and to what degree they have been effective.

The sample of respondents was largely collected from my immediate circle of influence – friends and colleagues – or their family members, friends, or colleagues. I also contacted a counselor I know to see if I could gain some respondents from her. She works at an alternative school, so I was hopeful she might know some previous students who would meet the criteria listed above.

My first contact with most of the respondents was via email. I sent an email request to everyone I could think of that might possibly meet my research criteria. In the email, I also requested the recipients to forward the message to anyone else they knew that may be qualified and interested in participating in this research. And, I implemented the snowball sampling method in an attempt to garner more respondents.

3.3 Limitations

One of the limitations of the sampling method employed in this study was the limited scope from which the pool of respondents was selected. By utilizing my personal contacts as a starting point for finding respondents, the homogeneity of the first-generation college graduates was a concern. The majority of the first-generation college graduates that were interviewed, for

example, were either teachers, wanted to be teachers, or were related to a teacher in some way. To mediate this potential bias I considered altering my recruiting methods to include university students who were currently enrolled in a graduate program. Initially, I thought if I found respondents from a variety of programs that my sample would be more heterogeneous, but while I would have solved the problem of having too great a concentration of educators, I would have had a new form of homogeneity – individuals who had the desire to pursue a graduate degree and the ability to be admitted to a graduate program. On the other hand, while the respondents included in the drop-out category were also acquired from my immediate circle of influence, I had a lot more difficulty recruiting them. There seemed to be quite a bit more apprehension about participating on the part of these respondents than the college graduates. It is my guess that members of the drop-out group may have been more hesitant to meet with me because they feel ashamed or like a failure for having dropped out. For that reason, I was forced to cast a wider net which included posting a recruitment statement on my Facebook account. In the end, I found respondents that were employed in a greater variety of fields, so the potential for a similar problem of bias was limited more.

Another potential limitation occurred when I chose to get assistance recruiting respondents from a counselor at an alternative school because the sample could have been biased toward respondents with a significantly greater number of risk factors than the other respondents. However, as it turned out, the counselor did not refer any of her students. Instead, she put me in touch with colleagues and friends who met the criteria of this study. Also, only three respondents I interviewed were referred by her, so the effect of any possible influence from this source was likely minimized.

When conducting a qualitative study, generalizability of findings is a common limitation, and so it is with this study, too. Having a non-random sample consisting of only twenty respondents that was selected on the basis of convenience means the findings contained herein will not be generalizable. However, the examination of two contrasting groups of

individuals will contribute to the existing body of knowledge by laying a foundation for continued and possibly more focused research in the future.

And, finally, as is always the case when working with human subjects, there is the possibility that respondents were not completely forthright in their accounts. I did sense on a few occasions that respondents may not have disclosed full details about their personal histories, but this was always in relation to family background information as opposed to their educational experiences. Moreover, when asking individuals to recall events from ten or more years in the past, there is always the chance that information may be omitted due to memory lapse. However, I believe that the truly significant and meaningful events leave such an indelible mark that those will be recounted unless, as mentioned previously, they are a source of great embarrassment or shame to the respondent.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

There were few ethical concerns in this study as respondents were adults who were not part of a protected class. Still, when I first met with each respondent, full details of the study were outlined for them in the informed consent document. Before the interview began, each respondent was required to sign a consent form which explained how their confidentiality would be preserved, how the recording of the interview would be handled, and indicated their participation was voluntary. In addition, I reiterated at the beginning of each interview that the respondent could choose to discontinue the interview at any time. Plus, I made it abundantly clear that if I asked any questions the respondent did not want to answer, they had permission to skip them. Ultimately, however, none of the respondents took advantage of this option. Furthermore, although none of the questions on the interview guide were particularly invasive, a mental health services hotline number was made available to all respondents in the event they experienced any psychological repercussions due to their participation in the interview. Finally, steps were taken to maintain the respondents' confidentiality. These included assigning each respondent a code number and labeling their transcripts and face sheets with this code number.

Therefore, the only document with the respondent's name was the informed consent which was kept in a locked file cabinet for the duration of the study. Additionally, all respondents were given a pseudonym for the purpose of reporting research findings disseminated from the interview transcripts. At the completion of the study, all documents that could potentially identify respondents (consent forms, transcriptions, and face sheets) will be kept in a locked file cabinet located in room #430 of University Hall at the University of Texas at Arlington, and all the recordings will be deleted.

3.5 Data Collection

Interviews were intended to be primarily conducted in public places with quiet meeting areas such as libraries and recreation centers. For about half of the first-generation college graduate respondents, that goal was realized. The rest of the interviews for this group were conducted either at the respondent's work place, their home, or my house. Conversely, the most common meeting place for drop-out respondents, on their other hand, was their home. I think this could be attributed to the fact that I experienced so much difficulty in recruiting members of this group that I wanted to make it as convenient as possible for these respondents to meet with me. This minor difference between the groups was one of many that came to my attention as I continued to meet with more respondents.

Another notable difference was the length of the interview. The interviews were expected to last approximately one hour. Most of the interviews with the college graduates are longer and more detailed than those with the drop-outs. There were four college graduate interviews that were over an hour and half, only one that was significantly less than an hour and the rest were all right around an hour in length. On the other hand, there were not any interviews with drop-outs that were over an hour and half, although there were two that lasted about that long, and the rest were an hour or less in length. The total time spent with each respondent was much longer, however, as our conversations either began before the interview and/or continued afterward.

I also noticed the quality of the respondents' answers were dissimilar. On the whole, the drop-outs were not as forthcoming as the graduates, so their responses were more likely to be short and lacking detail in comparison to those provided by the graduates. As a result, I found myself prompting these respondents more and working harder to build rapport with them with the hope that they would feel more comfortable and thus provide more description. I think the fact that their responses were more stilted may be attributed to the difference in the make-up of a drop-out vs. a graduate that also explains why the drop-outs do not finish, or it could be because the drop-outs feel badly about their inability to finish and so they are more closed off.

One more feature I observed between the two groups of respondents was the drop-outs did not seem to comprehend the seriousness of what I was doing. This was demonstrated by the fact that I had more unusual interviewing circumstances with the drop-outs. Namely, there are far more distractions during the interviews and a lot more background noise and activity or interruptions. Of course, this could be attributed to the fact that I met more of these respondents at their homes, but even when graduates' children or family members were in the room, they did not interrupt us as often and background noises were kept to a minimum. In addition, at least two graduates were aware enough of the potential for distractions at their home that they intentionally chose to meet at times and places in which they knew they would be able to give me their full attention.

After each interview, I made a recording of field notes in which I described the location of our meeting, the respondent's appearance, and any notable observations about the respondent's behavior during the interview. I recorded observations about similarities and differences between the two classes of respondents as well as commonalities within each group that I began to notice, too. These observations would comprise the memos I later utilized when I began the data analysis. These field notes and memos were also transcribed.

3.6 Data Analysis and The Coding Process

Once the interviews were transcribed, they were read in-depth and recurring codes began to emerge from the data which were written in list form on a separate sheet of paper. The list was examined to see if similar codes could be combined, and a final list of codes was devised. The transcriptions were read again, and the codes were written in the margins where applicable. At this time, quotes that seemed meaningful or poignant were highlighted. The transcripts were reviewed again and the coded portions were analyzed for similarities that would reveal common themes. These common themes were recorded on a separate sheet of paper along with the corresponding respondents' code number. Next, a coding cover sheet was devised to systematically collect data from each interview based on the themes (See Appendices C & D). These coding sheets made it easier for me to compare each respondent's responses. The same process was repeated for each group of respondents.

With coding cover sheets in hand, the transcripts were reviewed a final time. This time more detailed information was gathered about the respondents' background features such as parents' level of education and the respondents' birth order and about their educational experience including information like feelings about school, involvement in extracurricular activities, grades earned, and whether or not they displayed an understanding of educational habitus. Also, components of family and community involvement as external protective factors and the number of times each internal protective factor was demonstrated in the respondents' retelling of their educational history were recorded on the coding cover sheet. Next, information like why respondents wanted to go to college, where they went and how they felt about the experience was written down. And finally, a description of their college experience in terms of academic and social integration and commitment to the educational goal of obtaining a degree was noted on the coding cover sheet.

After that, the data from the coding cover sheets was culminated into a common themes chart for each group. This allowed for an easy comparison of respondents within the

same group and between groups. From this, the overall themes of each group became apparent as did the similarities and differences between them.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

A total of twenty face-to-face interviews were completed with individuals who met the study criteria previously outlined. Ten of the participants identified themselves as first-generation college graduates (FGCGs). Three of the members of this group were male and seven were female. Their ages ranged from 23 to 57 years and their annual salaries ranged from $0 to $63,000. The majority of the graduates were White and the rest were Hispanic or African American. Half of the graduates had earned a masters degree, two more expressed a desire or plans to pursue a master's degree, and a third has begun a doctoral program. The other ten participants stated they had attended college, would have been first-generation college graduates if they had finished, but chose not to finish their degree for a variety of reasons. This group will be referred to as drop-outs. There were four males and 6 females interviewed for this group. Their ages ranged between 18 and 45 years and their annual salaries ranged from $12,000 to $80,000. Again, the majority of the drop-outs were White but this time the rest were Hispanic or Asian. Details by respondent are found in the tables on the following page.

Table 4.1 Self-reported Data Collected from Drop-outs' Face Sheets

Drop-outs	Age	Gender	Occupation	Annual Salary	Race or Ethnicity
Chad	22	M	Personal Banker	$35,000	White
Veronica	23	F	Bank Teller	$22,000	White
Israel	45	M	Police Detective	$70,000	Hispanic
Kathleen	18	F	Retail	$12,000	White
Greg	23	M	Accountant	$30,000	Hispanic
Rachel	40	F	Patient Account Representative	$37,000	White
Ariel	30	F	Aftermarket Sales	$80,000	Asian
Tommy	31	M	Truck Driver	$60,000	Hispanic
Sarah	38	F	Medical Tech	$30,000	White
Kim	38	F	Technical Support Representative II	$35,000	White

Table 4.2 Self-reported Data Collected from Graduates' Face Sheets

FGCGs	Age	Gender	Occupation	Annual Salary	Race or Ethnicity	Year Degree was Earned
Marcia	48	F	Stay-at-Home Mom	$0	White	2001
Alex	24	M	Self-employed	not disclosed	White	2010
Bart	32	M	Environmental Scientist	$60,000	White	2000
Christina	23	F	Substitute/Tutor	$15,000	Hispanic	2010
Jonathan	37	M	Transitional Specialist	$48,000	African American	1997
Alicia	39	F	Teacher	$50,000	White	2000
Kandis	39	F	Teacher	$54,000	Hispanic	1999
Jocelyn	57	F	Teacher	$54,000	White	2000
Nina	43	F	AVID District Coordinator	$54,000	Hispanic	1996
Cindy	39	F	Strategic Planning Analyst	$63,000	White	2005

Among the graduates, there are a large number of females, teachers or people who plan to become teachers, and there is a majority of White participants overall. This is attributed to the fact that when non-random, convenience, and snowball sampling methods are employed the sample tends to be similar to the researcher since people tend to associate with others who are like themselves (Abelev 2009).

Although I did not control for background variables such as socioeconomic status or parents' level of education, the respondents from both groups were very similar with respect to these characteristics. Namely, most of them were raised in a working class or lower middle-class family with a few growing up in poverty and a few on the cusp of middle class. The parents' level of education was also comparable across the groups with the majority being either high school graduates or GED recipients, a few with less than a ninth grade education, and a few who went to college but did not finish. The living conditions for nearly everyone were also similar. For the most part, the respondents grew up with two parents in a house located in a close-knit neighborhood where they were given the freedom to roam and play independently. And, only a few had learning disabilities or had to deal with problems related to illegal drug use or gang activity.

When the stories of these respondents were analyzed, the data strongly supported the existing literature on resiliency theory and Tinto's theoretical model of the drop-out process as explanations for why some at-risk students succeed in bridging the achievement gap while others get stuck in it. The graduates' stories exhibited all the internal protective factors more often than the drop-outs with autonomy and problem solving skills appearing most frequently. Graduates also had more positive influences from the three domains of external protective factors than drop-outs, especially from the school domain.

Drop-outs were more likely to follow Tinto's model of the drop-out process: they were not academically or socially integrated into the college culture, were not committed to the educational goal of earning a bachelor's degree, and the majority processed cost-benefit

analyses that ultimately resulted in their decision to quit college. Although half of all the graduates were stop-outs, meaning they had stopped attending college at least once before obtaining their bachelor's degree, they did not provide a detailed description of their drop-out process. What they did say was how they always thought about going back and finishing whenever they were not taking classes. Marcia, a teacher and mother of three, took fourteen years to earn her bachelor's degree. The first time she stopped going to college was after she decided to divorce her first husband, "I went and lived near my mom and dad and supported my children. It took me about five, six years to get back into college, and all the time I thought about it."

Abelev's application of Bourdieu's theory of habitus differences was not really supported by these data. Perhaps this is because the interview guide utilized for this study did not delve heavily into the interactions that occurred between school and family. However, it was apparent that the drop-out respondents were more deficient in the educational social capital required to mediate the differences between their family of origin culture and the culture of college, and they did not receive the same level of support from their K-12 schools as the graduate respondents.

There was no evidence to indicate any significant differences in the experiences of minority respondents from either of the two groups. This could be attributed to the fact that the majority of all respondents classified themselves as White. Also, there were no indications that gender played a role in affecting the experiences of respondents in each group. Neither the males nor the females blamed themselves or stated it was their personal misgivings that led them to quit college. Instead, the predominant reason the drop-outs gave was they valued work and the money it provided more than earning their degree. The second most common reason cited was they were not motivated enough to continue, but this was reported in almost equal proportions between male and female respondents. This is contrary to what would be expected as existing studies indicate females are more likely to take personal responsibility for their

perceived failures while males blame a source external to themselves (Bar-Tal & Darom 1979; Cooper, et al 1981).

4.1 Experiences in K-12 Schools

When asked how they felt about school, drop-outs typically expressed negative opinions. Four of the respondents said they liked school, and three said they hated school. Israel, a middle-aged police detective and father of five, told me, “I was just glad when school was over with.” And Veronica, who was held back in kindergarten, said, “I still feel I’ve always been behind and never liked school – ever.” In expressing her feelings about school, Veronica added, “Nothing excited me. Nothing there interested me for some reason. I felt like I had to be there.” Then Greg, a hulking young man who was paralyzed in an accident at the age of 19, shared his unique way of dealing with his negative feelings about school:

> I didn't like school at all, so once I figured out I could become an athlete and really lean back and not have to worry about schoolwork, that was kind of one of the main reasons why I stayed in athletics. I didn't like school, so I knew if I stayed in athletics that I would have passing grades.

And Sarah, who repeatedly told me she felt that her parents did not pay attention to her or really care about her, described her feelings about school as: “It didn’t matter to me. I mean, my parents didn’t care, I didn’t care; just got through it. You just went to school. I didn’t care.”

The graduate respondents had a strikingly different response when asked the same question. The vast majority of them said they liked or loved school. Jocelyn, a fourth grade teacher, was born and raised in the mountains of a rural southern state where she lived with her mother who scratched out a meager existence as a farm laborer. As a result, she grew up in utter poverty eating beans for dinner every night, owning one pair of socks which she hand-washed each evening, and lining her sweater with newspaper in the winter to stay warm when

she walked down the mountain to meet the school bus. Despite her difficult circumstances and the fact that she dropped out of high school at the age of 14, she still declared:

> I couldn't wait to get there. I'd cry if I had to miss school. I loved school. Even with, you know, not having what I needed to go. It was like I never wanted to miss, and it killed me when I had to quit.

Although Christina had a vastly different experience from Jocelyn in that she grew up in a comfortable, working-class family with a lot of stability, participated in band, AP classes, and started a debate team in high school, her feelings about school mirrored Jocelyn's:

> I like enjoyed every second of school. I'm sure there were bad days, you know, everybody has those, but for the most part, like I really always wanted to go. In fact, I remember sophomore year I had strep throat, and they told me that I was contagious and could not go to school for two days. I was devastated 'cause I was like, 'No! I never miss!'

4.1.1. Teacher Relationships

I attribute drop-outs' decidedly more negative feelings about school to their lack of healthy, meaningful relationships with teachers. Although all the respondents shared at least one memorable anecdote about a teacher they had known at some point during their educational history, only one experienced a deeply caring relationship with a teacher who mentored her. Worse than that, two drop-out respondents actually had no positive memorable connection with any teacher during their entire educational career while Sarah, a beautiful, tall blonde, had to fend off several teachers' sexual advances:

> Having some looks that obviously can play a part in certain things with different teachers…that happened twice to me. They called you out…when they locked that door – I hear it still – but they locked the door – could've done whatever he wanted to do. I'm just SO naïve. I was just like, 'Locking the door, oh.' I still didn't get it at that time until he came up to me and started rubbing my shoulder, and I was like, 'Eh, I gotta go back to class. I gotta go back to class now!' It was weird – some grown man touching an eighth grader. Weird.

Another possible reason for drop-outs' negative feelings about school was their lack of sustained involvement in the extracurricular activities Peck, et al (2008) found to promote positive school values. Basically, all of the respondents engaged in at least one of these activities during their K-12 school years, but seven out of ten drop-outs quit participating in them during high school or sooner whereas only two of the graduates did the same. And, while only three of the graduates worked for spending money while they were in high school, all of the drop-outs did which Peck and his colleagues found to be detrimental to academic success.

Graduates often experienced more meaningful relationships with teachers than drop-outs. For example, most graduates could remember at least one teacher that they felt truly cared about them. Jonathan grew up in an urban, inner-city neighborhood in the northeast where the quality of education received in his neighborhood schools was not very good. So, his mother transferred him to another school for sixth through eighth grades where he had a much different experience:

> I learned a lot, and I also ran into a few teachers that actually showed that they cared – black and white teachers. These are teachers that would come way down to my neighborhood and knock on the front of my door and want to speak to my mother about my behavior or about my progress in school. During that

> time, I didn't like it, but I knew right then and there that that teacher cared about me.

Alex, who chose to be very active in athletics throughout all of high school because he felt it kept him out of trouble, recounted how he was mentored by a teacher, “I had a coach; he was kind of that father that I never had, and he kinda encouraged me to stay on the path I was going which was the right path it turned, you know.” And, Bart, having become determined to excel in school after giving up on his dream to play high school baseball in his sophomore year, shared how several teachers supported him as he worked toward his goal of attending a premiere university, “I did have teachers who would take me up [to the office] and help me with the counselors and make sure that I was getting my stuff done to get ready for college.”

4.1.2. Isolation from School Community

Overall, it seems K-12 schools did not seem to provide as much caring and support for drop-outs as they did for graduates because they also did not do a very good job of encouraging drop-outs' participation in the school community as evidenced by the fact that almost half claimed they felt unaccepted at school or like they did not fit into the school culture. Rachel, a high school drop-out and teen mother, explained:

> In high school, I just felt so lost. If you were just a straight-old American class kid, you just kind of got lost because you didn’t quite have a place that you belonged. I mean if I didn’t go to school, like who’s going to miss me.

Sarah’s description of how she felt at school echoes Rachel’s:

> When I got into high school,…I still felt the sense of something was missing. I felt more of a problem, I guess, or just a burden or,…again nobody ever came

> to the school to check on my work or when this teacher wanted to meet, they didn't come. You feel a sense of insecurity and maybe not being worthy.

Consequently, drop-outs came to feel isolated from the learning culture within school and did not internalize the importance of working hard in school, taking more challenging courses such as AP or Honors, and making good grades as Israel's comment reflects:

> I was making like Cs and Bs. It wasn't for lack of trying. I mean, I did try to do better. I tried to get As and stuff, but I figured if I was passing, I didn't see any point in me pushing myself, I guess.

I believe this is because they were lacking the social capital necessary to negotiate the boundaries of educational institutions known here as educational social capital. Since none of their parents had college degrees, they did not have that knowledge either, and therefore were not able to transfer it to their children. Moreover, their lack of connection with teachers in the classroom and coaches or other school representatives in extracurricular activities resulted in missed opportunities for drop-outs to develop that knowledge. It has been shown by Benard (1991), Krismer (2005), and Sosa (2008) when students have significant relationships with teachers or coaches either because the student has been mentored by them or because the teacher or coach has exhibited great concern for the welfare of the student, educational social capital is more likely to be transferred. In addition, Peck, et al (2008) found that when students engage in extracurricular activities such as sports, cheerleading, and band, their knowledge of educational social capital is developed.

On the contrary, all but one of the graduate respondents took pride in their school work and/or in making good grades. Therefore, it was quite common to hear statements from them such as these: "[I remember] just being devastated if I got a B. And I'm still that way," and "I

feel like a little bit of a failure if I don't make good grades." I think this could be attributed to graduates' greater connection to teachers and the culture of school as a whole and their more sustained participation in pro-school extracurriculars which resulted in an increased development of educational social capital. Hard-working, conscientious Alicia's comments about school and her grades reflect the transfer of this knowledge:

> School was very important to me. It's always been very important to me. I'm very competitive about myself – not necessarily to beat someone else but to do the best that I can do. It's part of my nature. It's who I am. If I made a B it was like the end of the world to me even on a paper because that Spelling test meant that my grade would be lower for that six weeks which meant my semester grade would be lower which meant my whole year grade would be lower which means AAAHHHH!

4.1.3. College Triggers

Not only did drop-outs not comprehend the importance of making good grades, they also did not understand the role these played in preparing them for their future. For instance, Chad wanted to go to college to get a job in radiology or crime scene investigation, but he did not seem to grasp the absurdity of such a plan when the two subjects he needed to be strongest in for these jobs – Math and Science - are the two he was weakest in:

> Math was always a tough one for me, but History classes, I've always been a big history nut and so I love learning about that kinda stuff. I was **really** indulged in that, so I always did good in history. As far as like Science and stuff goes, it's kinda tough for me. But, [Biology II] was a fun class. I mean, it was

> still interesting. Very tough, but I don't even know if I passed that one to be honest with you.

Ironically, when asked why they wanted to go to college, most of the drop-outs said they wanted to go to college because it was the next natural step after high school and they knew they needed to have a degree to get a good paying job. Even though she never liked school, Veronica, who always strove to be the "good daughter" because her sister was a rebel who caused her parents a lot of heartache, told me the reason she wanted to go to college:

> I don't know, kind of always wanted to just cause it's expected, I guess. I mean, that's what you're supposed to do is after high school go to college. So, mainly cause it's what I was supposed to do is why I wanted to go. And cause my sister never did, and I always try to do everything opposite of my sister

Then she later added:

> Mainly to have a good job. It's what I've always wanted – to have a good job with good pay and be able to have a good house and all that and I just…it'd be easier to do that by going to college.

On the other hand, graduates were more likely to say they wanted to attend college in order to have a better life. For example, when Alex finally got to live with his mom again after being shuffled from one relative's house to another while she got off drugs, he saw the quality of life a high school diploma could provide and did not want any part of it:

> I didn't want to be like them 'cause goin' through my childhood, we lived paycheck to paycheck, and it was always tension in the house when bills were due and stuff like that. And I always told myself I didn't want to live like that, and so I was like, 'I'm gonna go to school, get my degree.'

Jocelyn did not want to live with her mother anymore because she had remarried and Jocelyn did not like the man. So, before she left home at 14 years old and moved out of state, she lived with one of her older sisters and got a glimpse of what life would be like for her if she did not make a change:

> I'd seen my sister - my sister had five kids; her husband left her and married another woman. I had another sister who had four kids whose husband beat her all the time. I just didn't want to live like that.

And, twice as many graduates than drop-outs stated they had always wanted to go to college. When Cindy returned to college she had been working a full-time job but felt unfulfilled. Subsequently, after having a child and divorcing her husband, she decided to return to college because, "It was just something I always wanted." Then Marcia, although she grew up in a small, rural town in the south where, in her opinion, kids went to school until they got ready to do something their own thing – no matter how old they were at the time. And yet, in spite of these circumstances and having never been encouraged to go to college, she said, "I wanted to go to college from a very young age...I don't remember how old, but I <u>really</u> wanted to go to college. I thought about it A LOT. And, I knew that's what I wanted to do."

Further, almost half of the graduates had more numerous and varied motivations to go to college including: "My family always saw me as the person who was supposed to, like, go to college and do what I was supposed to do," and "My parents didn't get the opportunity, and I

wanted to prove to them that I could and then, at the same time, to be different than my brother and my sister." And Nina, whose parents were both first-generation Mexican immigrants, was inspired to apply for college by people she thought were just like her:

> I heard that some other people were going, other people who were minorities. And I thought that only Anglo people went to college … So, I heard there was some minorities going to college, and I thought, 'Well, if they're going to college, I can get into college.'

4.1.4. Drop-outs' Focus is on Socializing

Drop-outs' sense of alienation also resulted in their view of school as primarily a social outlet rather than a place to learn and prepare for their future, i.e., college and work. Almost all of the drop-outs expressed that socialization with peers was of greatest importance to them especially during high school. In fact, their main motivation to go to school stemmed from their desire to see their friends as Israel illustrates:

> Overall I enjoyed the friends at school. I enjoyed talking to 'em, socializing, jokin' around with 'em, hanging out with 'em, partyin' with 'em. That's what I enjoyed most – the friends that I made – the socialization. As far as the education, I just learned enough just to get by…"

Furthermore, Chad's desire to be the class clown and entertain his friends overshadowed any desire he may have had to make the most of his educational opportunities in school:

> I think I was more focused on making sure people were laughing in class. You know what I mean? I was the funny kid and everybody was laughing at things I

> was doing in class and stuff like that. I was more worried about people laughing and making sure that they thought I was funny.

Conversely, when graduates mentioned their socialization experiences in school, their descriptions were mainly comprised of positive peer interactions such as when Alicia, once a self-described awkward, greasy-haired, pimply-faced adolescent, told me how her group of friends helped her feel safe when she was bullied by a "gang" of older African American girls, "I hung out with good kids, and so I was safe because I was in a good group. And we were a group, not just, you know, so much singles, and so we were safe." Jonathan also chose friends who supported him which was especially important considering the dangerous elements that were present in the neighborhood he grew up in:

> I think I picked a good cast of friends to help me, keep me away. I didn't mess with guys who smoked weed, I didn't mess with guys who drink, I didn't hang out with people who would be doing bad stuff. I didn't know at the time I was picking those types of good friends but sure enough, I did.

And, Christina was kept so busy with her demanding class load and extensive involvement in band that most of her socializing time was spent in the company of peers who were also participating in the same pro-school activities:

> I didn’t really hang out with too many people aside from like people in class just because I didn’t have time because you did marching band and so we had practice until like 6:30 or 7:00 most nights, got home, ate dinner, and then did homework until like 2:00 AM or whatever.

4.1.5. Drop-outs Participation in Work Co-op Programs

This sense of alienation and not belonging to the school culture could explain some of the other findings for this group, too, such as why about one third of them opted to participate in a work co-op program. Kim, whose focus her senior year in high school was getting married to a Mormon boy she had fallen in love with, chose to take advantage of this opportunity:

> I did the…it was called Co-op. It's whenever you go and learn about work and you learn about jobs, and if you get a job, you can get out of school early to go get ready…prepare for your job. Cause you actually have to have a job to take that class. I was only there for two classes each day. I had so much free time in the mornings. And, I wouldn't have to be at work until three or whatever. But because I was in that Co-op it allowed me to get out earlier. So senior year, yeah, I didn't even have that many classes.

It seems sensible that students who do not feel connected to school would look for ways to spend less time there. Similarly, it could also be one of the reasons why Rachel dropped out of high school and got her GED:

> I just didn't feel like I fit in because all of my friends were gone and [my boyfriend] wasn't there. I don't know how to describe it. I just felt so lonely. I just didn't have any teachers, I guess, who put forth an effort to give a shit about me, maybe. I don't know.

One of the negative repercussions of these choices, however, is that these drop-outs were less prepared to do college-level coursework than they might have been if they had spent more time in school.

4.2 The Challenge of College

The college experiences of both group of respondents were examined for similarities and differences in relation to Tinto's (1975) theoretical model of the drop-out process. Their interviews indicate that his model is still applicable to college students today and to first-generation college students in particular. The drop-outs' experiences closely mirrored his model while the graduates' experiences did not – even if they were stop-outs.

4.2.1. Academic Integration

Because the drop-outs interviewed for this study began college unprepared for the rigor of college-level coursework, they did not academically integrate into the college culture. In fact, a third of them expressed a sense of "culture shock" when they began college because of the demands of personal time management and study skills they had not developed previously. Being raised by parents who were drug addicts and dealers and all the related chaos that type of lifestyle creates, Kathleen had to learn from a young age to take care of herself. As a result, she worked several jobs from a young age, and struggled to transition from being constantly busy to having a much less hectic pace of life:

> Whenever I moved up there I went from having three jobs since I was thirteen to no jobs. So I guess just having all that free time I guess you would say was weird. I'm not used to it. It was like from busy, busy to stop and just school. So, it was kinda hard at first, and then like AVID teaches you to study and how to, but I mean I had to teach myself then how to apply it. So, I failed three out of five of the classes.

But, even Tommy, another drop-out who participated in a program similar to AVID, grew up in a healthy family, and whose only job prior to college had been going to school, was not able to

successfully adjust to the cultural differences between his family of origin and the college social system:

> Man, it was a culture shock. Coming from [my home town] – "Oh, there's white people over here." You know in high school, it was all Mexicans. Just being naïve, I didn't know what the real world was like. I never left [my home town]. I never left these small, rural areas, so I didn't know like, 'Oh, there's other people that aren't brown out there,' you know.

Another one third of drop-outs demonstrated their lack of academic integration into the culture of college when they displayed a lack of motivation to continue their education: "I dropped more classes than I passed in college," and "I went to [the county college] for two semesters, but I dropped like half my courses."

And, lacking a sufficient amount of educational social capital, they did not think to seek out help from professors or other student services in order to acquire help with their struggles. This is unfortunate considering the results from Nolan's (2005) study in which he found that first-generation college graduates' success was facilitated by participation in academic support programs such as mentoring, tutoring, and campus outreach as well as by building relationships with faculty members.

Quite the opposite was true for the graduates who were three times more likely to be academically integrated into the culture of college because the majority of these respondents received more support from teachers – both at the K-12 level and the college level - and entered college better prepared academically as many of them had participated in advanced or honors classes that are more similar to college coursework and thus demand better time management and study skills.

4.2.2. Social Integration

In further accord with Tinto's theory, the drop-outs did not experience positive social integration into the college culture. While respondents from both groups were equal in their level of social integration, the type of social integration they experienced was different. The drop-outs' social practices at college did not support their learning and ultimately served as a deterrent to obtaining a degree. As Tommy's story illustrates:

> I had a lot of friends that did the Engineering Society. I never did. So, I was in this engineering building all day, and then I would go back to the dorms. Girls walking around, 'Hey, what's up?' Start drinking and socializing and no time for extracurricular activities that were associated with school.

Nolan's (2005) research also showed that being involved with campus activities contributed to first-generation college students' ability to earn their bachelor's degree. However, none of these respondents chose to participate in any college-based extracurricular activities such as fraternities or sororities, intramural sports, or clubs related to their major or personal interests. Thus, they did not socially integrate into the culture of college either.

In contrast, those graduates who did participate in college-sponsored activities engaged in more positive social practices that bound them to their educational institution. Alicia, who had participated in church activities and a peer counseling program in high school, decided to continue pursuing her love of serving others in need:

> In college I was in this service sorority – Gamma Sigma Sigma. So we did community service projects. I held every office they had except President. And I did that through college and loved it, loved it, loved it, loved it.

Similarly, Christina's love of band led her to keep participating in her college band and more, "I decided to do band, I got involved with my sorority which was the band sorority. And I did that for four years as well." It follows that the only respondents who expressed any commitment to their educational institutions then were graduates. Bart displayed his commitment to the small, private college he attended for his undergraduate work when he encountered the ever-so common dilemma of which major to choose:

> I really teeter-tottered back and forth about leaving that school and actually goin' to a bigger school. Because once I'd gotten there I felt like I'd gotten a little bit more of that healing that I needed, that I could transfer and go somewhere else and finish what I should've done to begin with, but that school had a lot of good people there, a lot of nurturing professors and people that just really made me feel accepted. And I stayed there and got my degree because I had professors that believed in me and pushed me to be the best that I could be.

And, Cindy was so committed to her university that she returned there for her master's degree:

> As far as what I learned in the classroom, what I learned from the professors, what I learned even from the negative experiences I had with just a few professors, I think [it] is a very good school. I had very good experiences there.

4.2.3. Cost-Benefit Analysis

Drop-outs lack of academic and social integration in conjunction with their idea that college was just the place you go after high school if you want to get a good job could explain why most of them decided to quit college after performing a cost-benefit analysis of their

situation. Essentially, this analysis is accomplished by students when they compare the efforts of continuing their education to the rewards, i.e., earning a college degree. A little more than half of the drop-out respondents conducted this evaluation, and it led them to drop-out.

Chad participated in the work co-op program in high school through which he was able to obtain a job at a local bank. After graduating from high school, he was hired on full-time and began attending college in the evening. It was a challenge for him to balance it all:

> You know, I'm working a full time job. What – eight to six? Get off at six, leave work, drive, stop and grab me something to eat, and go straight to class and be there at 7:15, 7:30, get done at 10:30, get home, eat dinner, you know 11:30, 11, study, go to sleep, wake up and do it again. Over time, you know, that just beats you up.

Then by the end of his first semester, he received a promotion and a significant pay raise. He continued to work full-time and go to school for a couple more semesters before the effort got to him and he found himself performing a cost-benefit analysis:

> It kinda made it to where I didn't feel like I had to go to college because I felt like, 'Oh, this is enough money. I'm making good money here. I can do anything I want to do. I can buy anything I want to buy.' I didn't think [college] was worth the money and the time at the time.

Ariel had become pregnant during her senior year in high school, so she felt compelled to get a full-time job after graduation. But, with her parents help and support she was able to attend classes at a community college at night. She did this for a few semesters before her sister helped her get a job at a car dealership where she was able to earn a lot more money.

Unfortunately, the hours were long and erratic which made it extremely difficult for her to continue taking classes. However, it was when Ariel considered that she was earning more than everyone she knew that she decided to drop out:

> I just chose to stop because I was able to make money and not have any college degree. I was making a lot more money than my friends that were still going to school.

4.2.4. Commitment to Educational Goal

When the majority of the drop-out respondents weighed the effort they realized they would have to expend in order to obtain their degree versus the reward – having a good paying job - they felt they had already achieved that reward and therefore did not see the point in exerting the effort to continue their education. This proves that these drop-out respondents also exhibited the last tenet of Tinto's theoretical model – lack of commitment to the educational goal.

Drop-outs also demonstrated their lack of commitment to the educational goal when they specifically stated they were not motivated or had lost motivation to continue their college education. Veronica's account was indicative of this trait:

> I'd say it was a struggle. I never wanted to do my homework. I'd say I struggled with the work 'cause I just wasn't that into it. I've always been into Math and all that. I passed Algebra. Just anything else that I didn't really get into, I struggled with it; didn't want to do it, didn't want to participate.

In comparison, while nearly the same number of graduates reflected on the costs and benefits of continuing their education, it motivated them to persist rather than quit. For instance,

Jonathan had been expecting to attend college on a basketball scholarship, when the coach that recruited him got fired. So, he lost the opportunity and decided to get a job instead. As it turned out, this was probably one of the best things that could have happened because it motivated him to keep searching for another scholarship opportunity:

> I was doing some kind of cleaning job. Well, I would come home and my hands would be so - like I never did that kind of work before - my feet are tired, they're killing me, and from there I was like, 'Yo, I'm calling my coaches and saying hey man, you heard anything back? You heard anything back? Literally I can't do this.' [So,] I kept on asking [my coaches], 'Is any word back from any schools? Anybody?'

Eventually, he was successful in finding another scholarship offer and moved to southern California where he earned his bachelor's degree.

One reason for the difference between the two groups of respondents could be that more than three-fourths of the graduates benefited from external protective factors that boosted their resiliency when they received support from the friends they met while participating in college-sponsored activities and/or teachers. Or, this could exemplify again how much less educational social capital drop-outs possessed because they did not recognize the long-term value of having a college degree. And yet another explanation is that drop-outs valued money and what it could provide more than getting a college degree. More than half the drop-out respondents agreed with Chad who said, "I'd buy expensive shoes or clothes or whatever I wanted, you know, TV, surround sound, car. I was just buying anything I wanted and there was no problem with it 'cause I had that disposable income." On a similar note, Ariel said, "I was driving the nice cars and [my friends] were still going to school. It was nice having the money."

Perhaps those respondents who processed the cost-to-benefit analysis were like Chad and Ariel who were simply fortunate enough to find jobs that paid what they considered to be a good salary without having a college degree. After all, as Tables 4.1 and 4.2 indicate, the two highest annual salaries were earned by drop-outs, and they exceed the highest graduates' salary by a minimum of $10,000 a year.

Whatever the reason, it seems clear that graduates were more committed to achieving their educational goal of obtaining a college degree because, although both groups of respondents had members who struggled to figure out how to balance demands for their time and energy between family/friends, school, and work, six of the graduates' stories exhibited their persistence despite this challenge.

Kandis, who suffered a horrendous childhood rife with poverty, sexual abuse, and neglect, was finally able to settle into a more traditional lifestyle when she married her husband and had her first child. After her daughter was born, she got a job as a cashier at a grocery store where she was surrounded by young high school and college students. She would listen to their conversations then she would compare them to the conversations of the full-time employees, and she felt a longing for what the students expressed – a sense of purpose and direction in life. Having already attempted college once as a new high school graduate, she decided to figure out how to make it work:

> Having [my daughter] and going to school and working at [the grocery store] that wasn't working because I didn't have a sitter and so I found a job working in daycare. I would be able to have her there with me and go to school when they worked around my school schedule. I made sure I only went on Tuesdays and Thursdays. So I went from eight in the morning until one on Tuesdays and Thursdays. And then on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, I went in the evening when [my husband] could take care of [my daughter].

And, Nina showed her desire to persevere, too, as she worked full-time before she was married, when she got married and had her son, and then continued to do so after she got divorced – all the while, going to college part-time:

> It took me, to get my bachelor's degree, ten years. I went to [a community college] part-time. But, with raising a little baby, it was still difficult to balance my home life with my new husband and my new baby, and still trying to go part-time was difficult. But I kept doing it. And once my son was like a year old, I was still going part-time, ended up divorcing; once I got through the divorce I kept going. In fact, I didn't have anybody to watch my child so I had to depend on a neighbor, a friend of ours, to watch my baby so I could continue going part-time.

4.2.5. Stop-outs

Graduates' higher level of commitment to their educational goal is further established by the fact that a vast majority of them would have been defined as stop-outs at least once before obtaining their degree. This means "they did not complete their plan of study within the normal time schedule" and/or they were "students who began a plan of study, left college for a period of time, and then reenrolled to complete their plan of study" (Hoyt and Winn 2004 pp. 397-398). According to Hoyt and Winn this is quite common among students who are trying to balance the demands of full-time work and school.

Jocelyn was one of these types of graduates. In fact, she stopped several times before attaining her master's degree in 2005, but kept returning each time her job required her, or, as was the case when she finally earned her bachelor's degree in her late forties, because she really wanted to be a teacher:

> I wanted to go back to school and get the administrator's license so I had to have the equivalent to an associate's degree in order to get the license. So that's when I went to [the community college] and started taking my basics and did my college hours out there to do my equivalent of an associate's.

Cindy's commitment to her educational goal was evidenced by her burning desire to earn a degree that was sustained in spite of her decision to take almost a ten year hiatus from college:

> I went for like a semester or two after high school, and then I got married. I was very young so I was 19. I didn't go again for like almost ten years…it was eight years when I went back. But I knew that whole time that I wanted to go back. It never left me.

4.3 Educational Expectations

The parents of both groups of respondents' expected their children to go to college to a similar degree, were similarly involved in the respondents' education process, and provided financial assistance along the same lines. Still, half of the drop-outs expressed a wish that they had been pushed harder in school by their parents, teachers, or even themselves. "I wish I dove a little bit more into studying and keeping up with the schoolwork as opposed to making sure everybody liked me and thought I was funny and all that," Chad stated. Israel agreed:

> As far as the education, I just learned enough just to get by, I think, which I wish now that I would've applied myself a little bit more and tried a little bit harder and done a little bit better. I don't think I took a lot out. I don't think I made the best of what I should've out of it. I think…I did learn what I needed to learn to

> get by to graduate, but as far as being a student that excelled in it, like I said, I was average.

And, Rachel said, "High school, I don't know. I wish maybe I had had a few more teachers push me harder possibly," while Sarah commented, "There's so many things that I didn't do cause they didn't make me do it in school."

Sarah went on to describe how being involved in athletics actually seemed to lower educational expectations. She was very athletic and chose to be involved in all the sports her school offered. According to the findings of Peck, et al, it would seem she should have reaped the benefits of her participation in these positive extracurricular activities. However, she was placed in remedial classes to ensure she would pass and be eligible to play sports which resulted in her being unprepared to complete college-level coursework:

> The only reason I passed was because I was in sports. And that has really affected me. They passed me and they shoulda never passed me. I didn't do Math problems. I can remember people saying, 'Have you ever done this?' 'No.' It's ridiculous. Matter of fact, I was in all the classes of lower to where it would be more one-on-one so I could make it look like the grades were there more. I didn't need to be in there. I just needed to learn, and I mean in these classes, you weren't taught what they were being taught in regular classes. But, I didn't need to be in those classes. There was nothing wrong with me

Sarah was not the only drop-out who believed their participation in sports negatively impacted their learning experiences in school. Greg also felt that teachers gave him passing grades so he could play football:

> When I went to school and you were in athletics and teachers knew it, you were guaranteed at least a pass. Which I know is wrong, but having that mentality kind of…I don't know it just made me lean back a little bit on my schooling.

Interestingly, however, drop-outs received twice as much help applying for college either from family members or school staff members than graduates. Chad told me, "My mom had me set up to go to college, I mean right out of the gates. I started taking online classes and going to [the community college] so…They definitely kick started it." And, Veronica said:

> I'd probably say junior year, whenever the professors from college they come in and talk to the people in high school, and they give you all those packets to fill out. And I'm pretty sure I took all that to [my parents] and started to talking to them. They helped me fill it out and everything.

Both Tommy and Kathleen received above average support in this regard due to their participation in programs designed to help at-risk students get to college. While AVID, the program Kathleen was in, required her to apply to at least three colleges, the program Tommy was in provided even more assistance:

> I was in Upward Bound for three or four years in high school. They had a program where you would go to a university for a summer, and if you did well there – taking courses and doing community stuff, educational stuff with 'em – they would offer you a scholarship if you were still interested in going back to that school.

This could be attributed to the age difference between the two groups as eight of the graduates who were interviewed were over 30 years of age while half of the drop-outs were 30 or younger. It is possible that more efforts are being made by members of the three domains of external protective factors in recent times than in the past because all but one of the drop-outs who received help applying were 23 years old or younger. However, I wonder if these respondents would have attended college at all if they had not been helped. I also wonder if receiving help served to decrease their desire to go as most people would agree that you appreciate the things you have to earn more than the things you are given without having expended any effort to gain them.

4.4 Traumatic Events

Another noteworthy theme that was revealed by the data was the effect traumatic events have on an individual's resiliency. While the same number of graduates and drop-outs experienced at least one traumatic event, respondents in the graduate group experienced a greater degree of trauma both in quantity and quality. It was common for graduates to have experienced two or more significantly traumatic events while growing up as the previous descriptions of Marcia, Kandis, and Alex's stories depict. Jonathan's story also is representative of how much difficulty many of the graduates were subjected to as it is full of shocking experiences like the day he watched another basketball player get shot while standing right next to him on the court:

> I remember vividly because I'm dribbling the basketball, and I'm on my way up the court, and he walked onto the court - he had like a little sawed-off shotgun - and shoots this man; kills him dead right in front of the court.

Or, the Sunday afternoon when he was enjoying the use of his uncle's transit pass so he could explore the city, but instead watched a man get run over by a subway train:

> We went down into the subway to wait for the train, and it was this man, he was real drunk. He was passed out drunk. Well these two other guys they walked by... All of a sudden all we hear was this big old noise – BOOM! Well, everybody ran to the edge of the tracks to see what happened. Those two guys pushed him in there. And during that time it was like, 'Yo, get up, get up.' He wouldn't get up at all. He wound up getting back into a fetal position as if he going back to sleep... Well, the train was coming, you could hear the train go – bing, bing – and we hitting the button, and I ran upstairs to tell the lady, 'Hey, can you in some kind of way stop the train? Can you make sure to stop the train?' I ran back downstairs and I'm still hitting that button, and my buddy was looking at me like, 'I can't believe this!' I said, 'No, this ain't going to happen, this is not going to happen.' All you could hear was – bing, bing – you could hear the train; he's just coming around the corner. We just was looking and the train just ran that man over literally; we just watched it. It was about maybe 10 or 15 people that just watched the train run over him.

And then there was the time when, on his way home from basketball practice, none of the neighborhood drug dealers would let him go down his street because there was a shoot out taking place. Jonathan was very concerned about his grandmother's safety, so as soon as the shooting stopped, he went as fast as he could to check on her:

> So I'm running down the street to my house to see what's going on. But what I saw was the guy pretty much falling down the steps and his body, you could see his body jerking up and down and I was sitting on my step, I'm looking at my house to make sure there ain't no bullets kind of hitting my window. I went

> in the house, checked my grandmother, make sure she was fine. She says she was laying down on the ground. So I go back outside to sit on the step and there's some of the news people coming, I see bullets literally close, you could see them hit our brick walls.

In contrast to Duncan's (2000) research which indicated that the more abuse an individual suffers the more likely they are not to finish college, in this study, those respondents who experienced more significant trauma in a multitude of ways, whether as abuse or as a result of their background variables, seemed *more* resilient as represented by their greater motivation and ability to overcome barriers than the drop-outs who only had one respondent – Kathleen – who experienced as many and as disturbing events in her life.

4.5 Resiliency Theory

This notion is supported by the fact when graduates shared their experiences – both school-related and personal – the presence of more internal protective factors of resiliency existed than the drop-outs' descriptions. Autonomy and problem-solving were most commonly displayed for both groups of respondents, but drop-outs exhibited these protective factors to a much lesser degree. Neither the family nor the community domains of the external protective factors had a significant impact on the experiences of first-generation college graduates and first-generation college drop-outs. On the other hand, the school domain had a huge effect on both groups of respondents – a positive one for graduates and a negative one for drop-outs.

4.5.1. Internal Protective Factor: Autonomy

The graduates exhibited autonomy when they made goals and followed through on them. Respondents from this group also specifically stated their goals then explained how they achieved them. For example, Christina, a recent graduate of a private university with a degree in teaching Physical Science to high school students, shared how she hoped to be Valedictorian

of her high school graduating class. When she realized that it probably would not be possible, she did not give up. Instead, she revised her goal to make it more reasonable:

> I remember getting that first rank and there was 839 people, and I was ranked number 10, and I remember telling my mom, 'I really want to be Valedictorian.' And so that kind of became a goal. Towards my junior and senior year, I realized that it wasn't going to happen but I was so set on being in the top because at [my high school] they did top 12 people got to sit on stage and like have this special thing and do all this special stuff. And I did; I was number 12 exactly, so I got what I wanted, basically.

After suffering years of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse at the hands of her father and first two husbands, Marcia began seeing a counselor. In addition to getting the help she needed to heal from her abuse, she also learned how to make goals and reach them:

> I'd say, 'OK. I have this dream, and how can I reach this dream? And what goals do I have to set to reach this dream?' And so, once I learned how to make a plan and set the plan into action that would keep me focused because there was times when I wanted to quit.

Graduates' sense of autonomy was also clear when their stories indicated a sense of personal destiny. Alicia decided early on in her education that school was her way of gaining the financial independence she craved as a result of watching her mother struggle to make ends meet on a church secretary's salary after her father became disabled by a work-related injury:

> I'm working on things because this is what I want to do, my studies are important because they're important to me because I have places to go. I'm going to college, and I'm gonna be successful.

And it was displayed when they chose not conform to others' expectations that did not match their own. Kandis told about how she loved to learn but was not encouraged to do well in school and was actually taunted for appearing smart:

> [My mom] really didn't value education. I was often made fun of because I used words that were too big. I loved to read. I often got in trouble for reading in bed after I was supposed to be asleep.

But that did not stop her from continuing to excel in school, and eventually, in high school, she participated in AP courses.

Respondents from the graduate group repeatedly made statements such as these that reflected a greater sense of their ability and desire to set goals and achieve them than was demonstrated by the drop-outs' stories. With that success came an awareness of personal destiny and an increased capacity to resist the urge to conform to others expectations when they did not meet their own.

By comparison, drop-outs were less autonomous as they did not show the same ability to make goals and follow through with them. They also were more likely to be concerned about what others thought of them and therefore were more willing to conform to others' expectations like when Veronica allowed her intimidating sister to convince her not to continue participating in band once she got to high school:

> In junior high, I was in orchestra, and I was always first chair, and I was so good. But my sister was always mean to me and scared me of stuff. She's like, 'You know, if you go into high school being an 'orch dork' you're gonna be made fun of, blah, blah.' And so, of course I dropped that before going into ninth grade cause I was like, 'I don't want to be a nerd. No!'

Or, when Tommy would allow his buddies to talk him into skipping school because he was afraid they might find out he was a "nerd" even though the whole time he would wonder what they were doing in class while he was gone:

> I felt bad when I ditched. When I would play hooky with my friends like, 'Oh man! What's Mr. Heatherington gonna do today in class?' – my government teacher. But I was like, 'Ehh, I'll catch up tomorrow.' I kind of missed the social aspects of it and the fun part of learning from it, you know? I always liked learning things, but here we are.

4.5.2. Internal Protective Factor: Problem-solving

While drop-outs clearly had problem-solving skills as evidenced by the pieces of their stories that have been revealed thus far, graduates still showed they had a greater aptitude for problem-solving by sharing more incidences of time they sought solutions to challenges they encountered. For instance, due to the partying lifestyle that Kandis' mother chose to adopt, she was forced on a regular basis to think quickly on her feet:

> One of [my mother's] boyfriends tried to get me to use drugs. I pretended to be like stoned or drunk because I was afraid to take that – not so much that I didn't want to - more than anything I was afraid.

Graduates also proved they knew how to plan and think critically like Cindy:

> Even though I didn't like [those classes], when I got to college, I had to figure out how to do them anyway. I had to figure out…'OK, so, you don't like it. OK. That's fine. But what are you going to do to get through this class? What are you going to do to make the grade you want to make.'

And, they knew how to be flexible and resourceful as Marcia's determination forced her to be:

> I learned how to go to financial aid. I learned how to go to admissions. I learned how to, you know, budget myself, and how to apply for a student loan when I needed it. And, I taught myself how to do that. If I had a question, I learned to ask.

The graduates' stories revealed many ways that their problem solving skills were employed in dealing with the difficulties they confronted in their lives. Drop-outs definitely exhibited problem-solving skills, too, such as when Greg discovered if he participated in football he could avoid having to work so hard in school and when Sarah figured out how to get away from the teacher who tried to molest her in eighth grade. But, they simply did not employ critical thinking, flexibility, and resourcefulness to the same degree as graduates. In fact, four drop-out respondents did not share any examples of using problem-solving skills when describing their experiences.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Data from this study correspond to previous research on the importance of internal protective factors in promoting educational resiliency since graduates exhibited these to a greater extent than drop-outs. The school domain was the external protective factor that appeared to impact these respondents the most. For graduates, school was a positive influence that boosted their academic preparedness as well as their knowledge of educational social capital. Drop-outs were not as fortunate. Instead, K-12 schools seemed to decrease their desire to do well in school and did not result in much development of their educational social capital.

The data also reflect the persistent applicability of Tinto's model of the drop-out process as the drop-out respondents interviewed were not fully committed to their educational goal, had low levels of academic and social integration into the college culture, and/or they processed the cost-to-benefit analysis which led them to decide to leave college. But, none of the respondents' stories indicated that race, gender, or habitus differences played an important role in the success or failure of the first-generation college students. Still, the first-generation college graduates did demonstrate a greater understanding and adoption of the social capital of educational institutions. This knowledge made it easier for them to transition to college and the majority of them were better prepared academically for the both the rigor of college coursework and the need to manage their time appropriately. Despite being better prepared, half of the graduate respondents stopped going to college at least once before they finally obtained their degree. However, because of their greater resiliency as well as their greater internalization of educational social capital, they were able to remain motivated and push through struggles like balancing a full-time job, school, and more.

By comparing the experiences of first-generation college graduates to first-generation college students who chose not to complete their degree plan, this research contributes a detailed account of the differences graduates and drop-outs experience as they progress through the education system. Members of the three domains of external protective factors need to find ways to build all the internal protective factors of at-risk children, but the greatest emphasis should be placed on developing their problem solving skills and autonomy. Of these three domains, schools at the K-12 level should bear the greatest responsibility on this matter as they are the link that connects the other two domains of family and community. Further, the school seemed to play the largest role in influencing either the respondents' success or failure. Drop-outs' tendency to feel isolated, make socialization their primary interest in school, and enroll in programs such as work co-op so they can spend less time at school, can all be attributed to how well the respondents were made to feel like a valued member of the school community.

Schools (K-12) can start by taking steps to minimize students' sense of alienation from the school community. By encouraging students' participation, their feelings of being disconnected will be diminished while their internal protective factors will be enhanced. Schools can work on strengthening the students' four internal protective factors in other ways, too. They can facilitate resiliency in their students by encouraging the faculty, staff, and volunteers to develop caring relationships with students, implementing a challenging curriculum and improved instructional quality, creating opportunities for students to serve the school as well as the larger community, and coordinating with social service providers to make sure that the whole child is cared for since Maslow's hierarchy of needs implies if the students' basic needs are not met, making any headway in the other areas will be an uphill battle (Krovetz 1999).

Schools should also work to improve the students' and their parents' knowledge of educational social capital. With an increase in their understanding of educational social capital, at-risk students would be better prepared to plot their course within the boundaries of schools,

colleges, and universities, and thereby avoid suffering the "culture shock" respondents reported experiencing when they started college. Therefore, efforts intended to encourage more at-risk students to graduate from college should include instruction on the features of educational social capital. Specifically, they can provide opportunities for students "and their parents to learn more about possible routes through the educational system and about the associated costs and returns" (Sacker and Schoon 2007 p. 893). By educating parents about the processes and avenues of educational attainment, they will be better able to guide their children to ensure they are adequately prepared for the rigor of college-level coursework. And, the literature shows time and again how parent's educational aspirations for their children is a strong indicator of resiliency, so it seems this would have the potential to reap significant rewards.

Colleges can also work toward improving the academic and social integration of its students, and first-generation college students in particular. This should decrease the number of students who drop-out while simultaneously strengthening their commitment to the educational institution.

Having uncovered the specific features that made a significant difference in these respondents' educational experience, for future research I would design an investigation that would allow for a focus on just a few of the most relevant aspects of these respondents' experiences such as what specifically caused respondents' to have a greater command of the internal protective factors of resiliency, why graduates succeeded despite suffering more trauma, or why they had more complaints about their educational experiences. Or, future research could dig more deeply to uncover the causes of student isolation from the learning community within school that was so prevalent among the drop-outs who participated in this study. This would also present an opportunity to test my hypotheses about the effects of this alienation to determine if any are correct. I might explore what motivated all the stop-outs to come back and finish college, too. And finally, if the resources were available, I would like to

conduct a longitudinal study where Abelev's (2009) idea of designing a customized education plan to meet the needs of each at-risk student was implemented in order to test its effectiveness as this could be extremely valuable for educators.

APPENDIX A

COLLEGE GRADUATES INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW GUIDE

"Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. Before we begin, I want to remind you that if you want to skip a question or stop the interview entirely at any time, just let me know. It isn't a problem. Ok? Also, as we're progressing through the interview, if you have any questions for me, I would be happy to answer them, but I really want to hear about you so get ready to talk a lot, ok? :) Do you have any questions that you'd like to ask me now?"

"Well, as you know I'm trying to get an idea of what characteristics first generation college graduates attribute to their success in obtaining a bachelor's degree so I'd like to begin by getting a better understanding of where you come from...kind of build the backdrop of your story, so to speak."

"I'm wondering about your family life or experiences growing up. Can you tell me a little bit about that? (Alternative in case that makes them uncomfortable: Can you tell me about your family life or experiences that motivated or helped you to obtain a college degree? Can you tell me about family life or experiences that may have hindered your education?"

EXAMPLES of descriptive info related to childhood experience/background:

# of siblings

your birth order

parents' marital status

parents' highest level of education

parents' occupations

immigrant status of parents/self/other family members

family of origin SES

describe your living conditions (lodging) ->

urban/suburban/rural?

home/apartment/mobile home/homeless?

have your own room? did you sleep on the floor/couch?

did you move a lot?

history of drug use ->

parents/siblings/extended family

personal

history of gang activity ->

parents/siblings/extended family

personal

"Thank you for sharing that part of your story with me. Now, I'd like to get a picture of what school was like for you from when you were a child through high school. Let's start at the beginning. Tell me what school was like for you during the elementary years." (Subject will be prompted as needed to draw out a description of middle school and high school experiences.)

EXAMPLES of descriptive info related to school experience:

# of schools attended K-12

what kinds of grades did you make?

involvement in extracurricular activities

did you take any advanced/honors classes?

how did you feel about school?

how did you feel when you were at school?

how did you feel about your teachers?

did you have any negative experiences at school?

did you experience any prejudice at school?

"Now that I've got an understanding of what your life as a young student was like, I'm wondering about your college experience. For starters,...

- when did you first know you wanted to go to college?
- Why did you want to go to college?
- What was college like for you?
- To what do you attribute your success in obtaining a bachelor's degree?
- If you could change anything about your educational experience, would you? If so, what would you change and why?"

"Thank you again for taking the time to meet with me and discuss your experiences with the education process. Is there anything that I may not have asked you about specifically that you would like to add at this time?"

APPENDIX B

COLLEGE DROP-OUTS INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW GUIDE

"Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. Before we begin, I want to remind you that if you want to skip a question or stop the interview entirely at any time, just let me know. It isn't a problem. Ok? Also, as we're progressing through the interview, if you have any questions for me, I would be happy to answer them, but I really want to hear about you so get ready to talk a lot, ok? :) Do you have any questions that you'd like to ask me now?"

"Well, as you know I'm trying to get an idea of what characteristics first-generation college graduates attribute to their success in obtaining a bachelor's degree. I'm interviewing people like yourself who started college and didn't finish but would have been a first-generation college graduate so I can compare your experience with that of first-generation college graduates. In order to do so, I'd like to begin by getting a better understanding of where you come from...kind of build the backdrop of your story, so to speak."

"I'm wondering about your family life or experiences growing up. Can you tell me a little bit about that? (Alternative in case that makes them uncomfortable: Can you tell me about your family life or experiences that motivated you to go to college? Can you tell me about family life or experiences that may have hindered your education?)"

EXAMPLES of descriptive info related to childhood experience/background:

# of siblings

your birth order

parents' marital status

parents' highest level of education

parents' occupations

immigrant status of parents/self/other family members

family of origin SES

describe your living conditions (lodging) ->

urban/suburban/rural?

home/apartment/mobile home/homeless?

have your own room? did you sleep on the floor/couch?

did you move a lot?

history of drug use ->

parents/siblings/extended family/personal

history of gang activity ->

parents/siblings/extended family/personal

"Thank you for sharing that part of your story with me. Now, I'd like to get a picture of what school was like for you from when you were a child through high school. Let's start at the beginning. Tell me what school was like for you during the elementary years." (Subject will be prompted as needed to draw out a description of middle school and high school experiences.)

EXAMPLES of descriptive info related to school experience:

# of schools attended K-12

what kinds of grades did you make?

involvement in extracurricular activities

did you take any advanced/honors classes?

how did you feel about school?

how did you feel when you were at school?

how did you feel about your teachers?

did you have any negative experiences at school?

did you experience any prejudice at school?

"Now that I've got an understanding of what your life as a younger student was like, I'm wondering about your college experience. For starters,...

- When did you first know you wanted to go to college?
- Why did you want to go to college?
- What was college like for you?
- What would you say was the reason(s) you chose to quit attending college?
- If you could change anything about your educational experience, would you? If so, what would you change and why?"

"Thank you again for taking the time to meet with me and discuss your experiences with the education process. Is there anything that I may not have asked you about specifically that you would like to add at this time?"

APPENDIX C

CODING COVER SHEET FOR
COLLEGE GRADUATES

Code_____

Background	Birth Order: First-born?	Y	N				
	Ed Level of Parents	less than MS	less than HS	HS graduate	GED	some college	
	Parent(s) Aspired to Go to College	Y	N	not mentioned			
	Parents' Employment	unskilled labor	skilled labor	professional	Dad:	Mom:	
	Parents' Marital Status	single - never married	divorced	divorced & remarried	married		
	Family of Origin SES	poverty-level	lower class	working class/lower middle	middle	upper middle	
	Living Conditions	rural	suburban	urban			
		house	apartment	mobile home	homeless		
	Illegal Drugs	none	in neighborhood	parental use	personal use		
	Gang Activity	Y	N				
		in neighborhood	parental involvement	personal involvement			
	Learning Disability	Y	N	Describe:			
	Traumatic Event(s)	Y	N	Describe:			

Code_____

External Factors of Reiliency

Family						
Educational Expectations	never discussed	very infrequently discussed	mentioned often	rec'd help to apply, etc...		
Elements of Consistency	Y	N	Describe:			
Supported Education	Y	N	Describe:			
School						
Teacher Support	none	"good teacher" OR special memory	caring relationship	mentor	negative experience	
Qualities of memorable teachers						
Grades	Cs	Bs & Cs	Bs	As & Bs	As	
Coursework Prior to College	remedial	average	pre-AP/AP/Honors			
Extracurricular Activities	none	sports/band	dance/cheer	school clubs	church	work
	Age/ School Level					
Feelings about/at School	hated it	it was OK	liked it	loved it		
Negative Ed Experience	Y	N	Describe:			
Community						
Neighborhood						
Church Attendance	none	very infrequently	frequently	beyond Sunday commitment	cites importance of religion in their life: Y or N	
Civic Involvement	scouting					
Peer Influence	positive	negative	Describe:			

Internal Factors of Reiliency	R expresses a love of learning	Y	N				
	R expresses having a strong work ethic	Y	N				
	Social Competence						
	Problem Solving						
	Critical Consciousness						
	Autonomy						
College Experience	Ed Level Prior to College	GED	HS diploma				
	College Trigger						
	Why Go to College?	get a good job	the job I want requires a college degree	the next natural step after HS	desire to have a better life	Other:	
	Type of Institution R Started at	two-year	four-year commuter	four year traditional (public)	four year traditional (private)		
	Stop-out?	Y	N (went straight through college with no breaks)	Reason(s):			
	Feelings about College	hated it	it was OK	liked it	loved it		
	Involved in Extracurriculars?	Y	N	Describe:			
	What R attributes to their success	support from family/friends	personal determination	support from teachers/school	Other:		

Habitus Differences	Displays of middle-class habitus present?	expectation of equality	sense of entitlement	questioning & debate encouraged	language patterns,behaviors, & attitudes of educational institutions		concerted cultivation
	Displays working-class habitus	respect authority figures, i.e., do not question them		defer to authority figures & trust their expertise		natural growth	
	Displays understanding of educational/institutional habitus?	Y	N	Describe:			
	Participated in program to mediate risk factors	N	AVID	Upward Bound	McNair Scholars		
Tinto's Model	Social Integration	Y	N				
	If yes, describe type of social integration.	Positive	Negative	Describe:			
	Academic Integration	Y	N	Indicators:			
	R exhibits commitment to educational goal	Y	N				
	R exhibits commitment to educational institution	Y	N				
	R processes cost-to-benefit analysis	Y	N				
	If yes, describe external factors that caused this to happen.						
What R would change about their educational experience:							
Questions to call R and ask:							

APPENDIX D

CODING COVER SHEET FOR
COLLEGE DROP-OUTS

Code_____

Background	Birth Order: First-born?	Y	N				
	Ed Level of Parents	less than MS	less than HS	HS graduate	GED	some college	
	Parent(s) Aspired to Go to College	Y	N	not mentioned			
	Parents' Employment	unskilled labor	skilled labor	professional	Dad:	Mom:	
	Parents' Marital Status	single - never married	divorced	divorced & remarried	married		
	Family of Origin SES	poverty-level	lower class	working class/lower middle	middle	upper middle	
	Living Conditions	rural	suburban	urban			
		house	apartment	mobile home	homeless		
	Illegal Drugs	none	in neighborhood	parental use	personal use		
	Gang Activity	Y	N				
		in neighborhood	parental involvement	personal involvement			
	Learning Disability	Y	N	Describe:			
	Traumatic Event(s)	Y	N	Describe:			

Code_____

External Factors of Reiliency

Family						
Educational Expectations	never discussed	very infrequently discussed	mentioned often	rec'd help to apply, etc...		
Elements of Consistency	Y	N	Describe:			
Supported Education	Y	N	Describe:			
School						
Teacher Support	none	"good teacher" OR special memory	caring relationship	mentor	negative experience	
Qualities of memorable teachers						
Grades	Cs	Bs & Cs	Bs	As & Bs	As	
Coursework Prior to College	remedial	average	pre-AP/AP/Honors			
Extracurricular Activities	none	sports/band	dance/cheer	school clubs	church	work
	Age/ School Level					
Feelings about/at School	hated it	it was OK	liked it	loved it		
Negative Ed Experience	Y	N	Describe:			
Community						
Neighborhood						
Church Attendance	none	very infrequently	frequently	beyond Sunday commitment	cites importance of religion in their life: Y or N	
Civic Involvement	scouting					
Peer Influence	positive	negative	Describe:			

Internal Factors of Reiliency	R expresses a love of learning	Y	N				
	R expresses having a strong work ethic	Y	N				
	Social Competence						
	Problem Solving						
	Critical Consciousness						
	Autonomy						
College Experience	Ed Level Prior to College	GED	HS diploma				
	College Trigger						
	Why Go to College?	get a good job	the job I want requires a college degree	the next natural step after HS	desire to have a better life	Other:	
	Type of Institution R Started at	two-year	four-year commuter	four year traditional (public)	four year traditional (private)		
	Feelings about College	hated it	it was OK	liked it	loved it		
	Involved in Extracurriculars?	Y	N	Describe:			
	Stop-out or Drop-out?	Stop-out	Drop-out	Reason(s):			

Habitus Differences	Displays middle-class habitus	expectation of equality	sense of entitlement	questioning & debate encouraged	language patterns,behaviors, & attitudes of educational institutions		concerted cultivation
	Displays working-class habitus	respect authority figures, i.e., do not question them		defer to authority figures & trust their expertise		natural growth	
	Displays understanding of educational/institutional habitus?	Y	N	Describe:			
	Participated in program to mediate risk factors	N	AVID	Upward Bound	McNair Scholars		
Tinto's Model	Social Integration	Y	N				
	If yes, describe type of social integration.	Positive	Negative	Describe:			
	Academic Integration	Y	N	Indicators:			
	R exhibits commitment to educational goal	Y	N				
	R exhibits commitment to educational institution	Y	N				
	R processes cost-to-benefit analysis	Y	N				
	If yes, describe external factors that caused this to happen.						
What R would change about their educational experience:							
Questions to call R and ask:							

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Lisa Hoyer earned her bachelor's degree in Sociology from the University of Texas at Arlington in 2003. After graduating with honors, she began teaching disadvantaged fourth and fifth grade students. This work fueled her desire to further her education in the hope that she might be better able to help these children achieve their best possible future. As a result, the majority of her graduate studies focused on the role that K-12 schools play in perpetuating social inequality in the lives of at-risk children. Mrs. Hoyer has a passion for making changes that will serve disadvantaged students, and therefore plans to return to the classroom to utilize what she has learned in order to increase the likelihood that more disadvantaged students will attend and graduate from college. In the future, she may also pursue a doctorate degree in Education to further her efforts to this end.