

2015

Bridging the Support Gap for First Generation College Students with Community Mentor Programs

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BRIDGING THE SUPPORT GAP FOR FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH
COMMUNITY MENTOR PROGRAMS

A Dissertation

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

in

Educational Leadership and Research

by

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December 2015

This work is dedicated to my family for their love and support throughout my educational career.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This major accomplishment would not be possible without my family. Working full time, going to school, and being a mommy and a wife all at the same time is a difficult task that could not be accomplished without them. Specifically, thanks to my parents, Herbert Sr. and Brenda Jefferson, for pushing me to go as far as I could in school. Thanks to my grandmother Lela and Aunt Helen for babysitting Cam and C.C. while I was at work or in class. Very special thanks to my mom for coming over and babysitting for me while I was in the house doing work even when she did not feel good and never complained. I appreciate and love you all more than you know.

I also want to thank my children Cameron and Carsyn for not giving up on me these past few years. There were so many times that Mommy just did not have the energy at home and Daddy stepped in to save the day. You sacrificed your time with me so that I could achieve my dream and I love you all so much! Finally, to my husband of six years, Geoffrey. Thank you for your patience and love. This degree is for all of us!

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research study was to determine the support and resources needed by first generation college students and how community mentor programs could bridge the gaps in existing support. A purposeful sampling method was used to select three first generation college student participants who had personal experiences in community mentor programs. All three of the first generation college student participants are now college graduates. Two of the three participants currently work with a local community mentor program. Demographic data was collected prior to the semi-structured interview. After each interview was transcribed, each participant performed member checking for accuracy of the transcribed interview data. Thick description, data auditing, and reflexivity were also used as forms of data validation. Analysis revealed several common themes from the first generation college students on the supports needed in college, the impact of community mentor programs on meeting those needs, and the role community mentor programs can play in bridging the support gap for first generation college students.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“What do I do? What is next?” These questions plague many first generation college students as they pioneer a path that no one in their family has taken before. For me, and perhaps other second generation and beyond college graduates, the answers to these questions are simple: take all of your college pre-requisite courses in high school, maintain a decent grade point average, go on college visits, choose an institution that has a degree in your interest area, apply for college, apply for scholarships, apply for federal aid, and then you are set. Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) noted, however, that first generation college students lack first-hand knowledge of college experience and also lack the social support and personal skills necessary for college success. What should they do and to whom should they turn?

Background of the Study

In the fall of 2014, several speakers visited a Louisiana State University Foundations of Higher Education course. Two of the visitors were of particular interest as they were directors of area community mentor programs that were in need of undergraduate and graduate volunteers and mentors for their students. Both visitors’ impressions were positive and several volunteers from the class began working with the first visitor’s organization. The first visitor discussed his passion for helping students achieve their goals. Though a self-professed privileged male, his agenda during the class was to gain volunteers and mentors to help the student participants of his organization. I was eager to learn more and wondered what could I do to help reach the students in this community, students who were mostly African American and poor. Crenshaw (1991) posited the term “intersectionality” to denote the multiple identities that a person may have. I am African American and female, two minority identities, however my middle class background did not configure with the identities and lived experiences of these students who were all first generation college students. How could I help them? Which one to choose?

The second visitor led his presentation with a discussion of his personal experiences as a first generation college student. He described growing up in an urban area amongst gangs and crime, but being pushed by a family member to leave the area and earn an education, which he did, from an Ivy League institution. His intersectional identity was what led him to his position of helping students who virtually live his past life. I thought, “Here we have two gentleman of local community mentor organizations fighting for the same good cause: mentoring academically capable first generation college students.” Research shows involvement in extracurricular programs has positive effects on critical thinking, degree plans, and sense of control of the academic success of first generation college students (Pascarella et al., 2004), thus their cause was noble. I was in a conundrum as I respected both organizations, but which would be the better choice for me? I chose to work with the second organization for two reasons: first, most of my classmates started volunteering with the first organization, and second, I was drawn to the second organization’s international outreach and the fact that it provided residences for the students who needed it most. Inkelas et al. (2006) noted data that living learning mentoring programs significantly help first generation college students with academic and social transitions to college compared to those without residential components. Given the existing data, could mentor programs be the bridge that helps first generation college students realize their goals? There was only one way to find out and I did.

Contact with the second mentoring program’s executive director resulted in a dinner meeting in which I was able to meet the student participants. I was fascinated with the well-mannered, well spoken, and success driven students; they were a pleasure with whom to work. They were clearly motivated to learn and to attain the highest level of education. The only thing standing between them and their future goals was the need for positive guidance through the

process from others who had accomplished what they were striving for- earning a college degree. McCarron & Inkelas (2006) asserted that college degrees grant students automatic social status, more opportunities for upward mobility, and access to the American dream. Torche (2011) added that the acquisition of a college degree adds to a person's life time earnings. Who could say no to something as simple as helping them attain access to the American dream? Reflecting on my high school years, my mom guided me and she always noted that she wished she had the support that I have now when she was a first generation college student attending Baton Rouge's Southern University and A&M College. I was supported when I needed it and it was time to pay it forward to the next generation.

After two weeks in the program only three people, including me, had signed in at the house to mentor students. I asked the executive director why there were not more mentors and volunteers, especially since I knew of the many volunteers at the first organization. He said that he was addressing this concern by reaching out to the area universities for college students to help mentor these aspiring students. Though I understood his determination, it was not clear to me why it was not the other way around and why the universities were not reaching out to him. Perhaps even more importantly, I wondered what was needed to help first generation students succeed in their transition to college.

A few weeks later a larger issue surfaced when one of the students completed her college applications. During a conversation she was asked to which colleges she had applied. In addition to two out of state schools, she mentioned two four year institutions in Louisiana and Baton Rouge Community College (BRCC). She did not mention LSU or SU, the four year universities essentially in her back yard. When asked why, she responded that she knew people who went to BRCC and she went to some campus activities with them and liked it. She had not gone to any

LSU or SU activities and did not know much about them. I wondered how she could not know anything about Louisiana's Flagship University and the largest Historically Black College in the country. The issue for her decision in applying for college was knowing something about the schools. Irlbeck et al. (2014) found in a case study of nine first generation college students that three factors contribute to their enrollment at a particular college: family/parental support, teacher encouragement, and self-motivation. Maybe if she had access to more information about the institutions through mentoring or recruitment activities through community mentor programs, like the one in which she participated, she would have had knowledge about LSU and Southern that she was missing. Through interacting with her, it was clear that she was intelligent and capable of excelling at anything she chose and, if her mentoring organization had access to more support and resources to give to its scholars, bright and motivated students such as her would enroll in college and earn a degree while also maintaining ties to the mentoring organization that supported their transition.

Problem

The research problem that was explored in this study was first generation college students' need for support and resources to prepare for and be successful in college and the role community mentor programs play in that process. I obtained information about the experiences of past and present first generation college students to inform future practice on the subject. First generation college students have specific needs to help them successfully transition to and to matriculate through college. Can community mentor programs meet these specific needs? Research shows community mentor programs can be a bridge to help these students who often struggle through the college process as they provide information, resources, and support that

students may not have access to at home and/or school (Pascarella et al., 2004; Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Inkelas et al., 2006; Irlbeck et al., 2014).

The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) published “A Nation at Risk” to highlight the educational problems of the time plaguing society. In the report they wrote of the “rising tide of mediocrity” (para 1) that was upon the nation due to the decrease in gains in student achievement. In fact, the report explicitly stated that America had squandered student achievement gains, dismantled essential support systems that helped to make these gains, and committed educational disarmament (NCEE, 1983). The dismantling of essential support systems is where community mentor programs can be an impetus for change as their purpose is to provide support, particularly for those students who are “at risk” based on the report. According to the report, 13% of 17 years olds are functionally illiterate with the percentage for minorities as high as 40% illiterate; the average achievement of high schools students on standardized tests is lower than 26 years ago (today 58 years ago), SAT scores demonstrate a decline from 1963-1980, and many 17 year olds do not possess “higher order” intellectual skills that we expect (NCEE, 1983). It should be noted that these dismal statistics were from 32 years ago, but today in Louisiana, the educational statistics for public school students in the urban, East Baton Rouge Parish are as troubling if not worse.

The 2014 East Baton Rouge Parish District Performance score was C with a percentage of 81.3 (Louisiana Department of Education Data Center, 2015). The five-year trend of the district performance score shown in Table 1.1 has been virtually the same since 2010. East Baton Rouge Parish School system has toggled back and forth between a “D” and “C” letter grade (Louisiana Department of Education Data Center, 2015). Similar results were found in the examination of graduation results; the most recent graduation rate data available was the 2012-

2013 school year when East Baton Rouge Parish students' rate was 68.6%, up 2.5% from the previous year of 66.1%, but still low compared to surrounding parishes; East Baton Rouge Parish graduation rates are shown in Table 1.2 below. Dropout rate data examined for East Baton Rouge Parish shows a decrease, but like the graduation rate, was high in comparison to surrounding parishes. The latest data available for the 2010-2011 school year showed East Baton Rouge Parish had a dropout rate of 20.4%, data that is represented in Table 1.3. The overall data trends show low scores all around for East Baton Rouge Parish students.

Table 1.1 2010-2014 E.B.R. District Performance Score Comparison

2010 (200 pt. scale)		2011 (200 pt. scale)		2012 (200 pt. scale)		2013 (Scale Change to 150pts.)		2014 (Scale Change to 150pts.)	
Letter Grade	%	Letter Grade	%	Letter Grade	%	Letter Grade	% Points	Letter Grade	% Points
D	82 %	D	86 %	C	92 %	C	80 %	C	81 %

Table 1.2 Percentage of Graduation Rates by Year

Parish	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
East Baton Rouge	59.5%	63.5%	66.1%	68.6%

Table 1.3 Percent of Dropouts by Year

Parish	2010	2011
East Baton Rouge	25.3%	20.4%

The data shows the school system is not meeting the need. Essentially, a quarter of students drop out before graduating from high school. With support, perhaps these students would have remained in school and also attended college. Additional support in college might

also have an impact on their success trajectory. These students need more help and particularly the aspiring first generation college students who may not have the same access to resources and support as students who have parents who attended college. Mentor programs may be able to address this need in providing free access to support and information for these at risk students. The Nation at Risk report does provide some clues on how to reform the educational system that specifically relates to the work community mentor programs. Nine tools were offered with four of particular interest:

1. The natural abilities of the young that cry out to be developed and undiminished concern of parents for the well-being of their children,
2. the commitment of the nation to high retention rates in schools and colleges and to full access to education for all,
3. the persistent and authentic American dream that superior performance can raise one's state in life and shape one's own future,
4. and the voluntary efforts of individuals, businesses, and parent and civic groups to cooperate in strengthening educational programs (NCEE, 1983).

Community mentor programs can offer much needed academic assistance to students that the overall East Baton Rouge Parish performance, graduation rate, and drop out data prove need a stronger academic foundation. In essence, community mentor programs can intervene by helping to grant access to aspiring first generation college students with the drive and determination necessary to succeed in college through providing free support and resources. Intervention programs have the potential to reverse the current trend of low graduation rates and to increase the number of students who enroll in college.

An increase in the graduation rates and the number of first generation students to enter college could have a great impact on the larger community. In their study that researched home values of school district boundaries, Dhar and Ross (2012) found that housing values were connected to school district performance; home values were higher in schools with higher performance scores and lower for schools in districts that have low performance. Pandey and Goyal's (2009) study examined the impact of community-based involvement on students' school performance and found that it did have an impact on learning. These studies imply that mentor programs have the potential for a significant impact on aspiring first generation college students. Though the community stands to gain from the overall success of the school system, the larger question is what do aspiring and first generation college students specifically think about community mentor programs? Which of their experiences might inform this study? What stories can they share that might inform future practice of these programs and how they mentor first generation college students?

Research Questions

In addressing the problem, the study was guided by the following questions:

1. What supports and resources do first generation college students need to be successful?
2. What impact have community mentor programs had or could have had on the life experiences of first generation college students?
3. What role do community mentor programs play in bridging the support gap of first generation college students?

Problem Significance

This study is significant because it sought to determine how community mentor programs can help bridge the gap of college access for aspiring first generation college students. First generation college students receive less encouragement from parents to attend college (Choy 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996). Further, these students enter college with limited knowledge of jargon, traditions, and expected behaviors, and are usually less prepared to make informed decisions about institutions and involvement that could maximize their educational development (Irlbeck et al., 2014; Pascarella et al., 2004). Community mentor programs are resources that provide support and information, but what do the aspiring, current, and past first generation college students think?

While helpful directly for local students and mentor programs, this study's significance extends beyond East Baton Rouge Parish's borders. It is my hope and intent that groups of the same mission and similar struggles use this information to examine their operational framework and how they support aspiring first generation college students through their college preparation process.

Theoretical Framework

“All theories have implied understandings about the world that are crucial to their formulation and use” (Slife & Williams, 1995, p. 2) and must lead to somewhere (Slife & Williams, 1995). Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a lens that educational researchers have used to understand the impact of schooling inequities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Pyne & Means, 2013). Ladson-Billings (1998) asserted that CRT argues against the slow pace of racial reform in the United States as normal in the American society and culture. Though legislation aimed at

fighting against racism in favor of civil rights has been enacted, Whites have been the primary beneficiaries of its benefits (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

I was interested particularly in the study in how CRT interacted within education. Pyne and Means (2013) posited that “CRT deconstructs the apparent neutrality of social institutions by focusing discussions on the history and continued prevalence of racial oppressions (p. 2), oppressions mostly due to the act of the “taken for granted” White supremacy privileging of White interests that goes unremarked (Gillborn, 2005). CRT emphasizes the qualitative experiences of the historically disadvantaged to refocus conversation on the margins and add critical perspectives from those who experience injustice (Ladson-Billings, 2005; Pyne & Means, 2013). Gillborn (2005) posited race inequity may not be a planned and deliberate goal of educational policy, but it is not accidental.

In educational leadership, the discourse on diversity has failed to penetrate the silence of racism in schooling (Lopez, 2003). CRT allows those who have been traditionally silenced a chance to tell their stories, which may be in staunch contrast to the majoritarian stories routinely told from deficit perspectives that Connor and White (2006) noted emphasize problems and pathology. Bell (1995) noted Critical Race Theory recognizes that to revolutionize a culture, a radical assessment of it must be made. It is for this reason that I chose to use Critical Race Theory as a framework and its specific tenet, interest convergence, as the lens through which to conduct this study.

Bell (1990) coined the term interest convergence to describe the favorable judicial decisions Blacks receive when their interests aligned with Whites. He was particularly concerned with the political aftermath of the decision in *Brown vs Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. Bell (1990) noted that the interest of the court system in the case of *Brown vs. Board of*

Education was more about proving a positive image of America to the international community amidst the Cold War than it was about helping Blacks plagued by Jim Crow laws in the U.S. South. Carter (2011) suggested civil rights gains are seldom made unless they are perceived as advancing or not hindering the interests of the dominant group. The roots of interest convergence are in race and race relations, but in recent years its definition has expanded.

Driver (2011) noted the influence of Interest Convergence Theory beyond simple race law into other areas. Lee (2007) coined the term cultural convergence to describe when cultural interest convergence plays out in the case of immigrant defendants; Lee argued that minority immigrant defendants receive accommodations when there is convergence between their cultural norms and American cultural norms. Jackson (2011) posited interest must be rendered more complex to fully understand the effects of racism, and surmised that the current system of racial dominance has considerably advantaged Whites and their interests. Interest convergence has many implications and according to Driver (2011), flaws are also deeply embedded within the theory itself. Driver (2011) outlined four specific flaws of Interest Convergence Theory. First, the use of the terms “Black” and “White” ignores deep intra-racial disagreements regarding progress and a narrow understanding of the term interest. Second, the theory suggests severely limited instances of Black progress and demonstrates that the racial status of Whites and Blacks has remained unchanged since the end of slavery. Third, it accounts for an almost total absence of agency to Black and White citizens alike. Fourth, it ignores racially egalitarian decisions altogether.

How does the Interest Convergence Theory function in this study? Race cannot be ignored since interest convergence is a tenet of CRT. The majority of the first generation college

students are minority races and genders and one wonders if their minority statuses led to their status as first generation college students.

Economics played a key role in this study as the donors of the resources of both Boys Hope Girls Hope of Greater Baton Rouge and Baton Rouge Youth Coalition were from privileged backgrounds. McIntosh (1990) discussed the invisible knapsack of privilege of which many are unaware. Fortunately, the donors of community mentor programs such as Boys Hope Girls Hope of Greater Baton Rouge and Baton Rouge Youth Coalition, though privileged, cared about ensuring first generation college students receiving the support and resources they need to succeed, but interest convergence is also clear; the more successful the organizations, the better the situation for the donors and participants. The donors picked a great organization to sponsor and to gain positive notoriety, while the participants received the resources and supports they needed to achieve their goals of becoming college graduates. In essence, this was a win for all parties. McIntosh (1990) noted that being unaware of your privilege does not make you any less responsible for how you use it. These organizations' donors were serious about their responsibilities of helping mostly minority first generation college students achieve their educational goals.

The theory of interest convergence provided a solid framework from which to launch this study, but it also carried with it baggage. Slife and Williams (1995) asserted that we cannot escape theory and that all theories have embedded assumptions and hidden influences with important consequences. The available literature on interest convergence indicated its flexibility and its use in collecting and analyzing data. Conversely, Slife and Williams (1995) noted the hidden assumptions and meanings in theories can also be problematic and cause one to skew the data or stereotype a particular study based on the framework from which the study is evolving. It

is with this knowledge that I used Interest Convergence Theory as an overall guide, but also left the research open to the possibility of additional theories arising during the course of the study that might offer a different lens through which to view the data.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are germane to this research and must be defined in the context of this study:

1. First generation college student- A student who was the first in the family to attend college.
2. Community mentoring programs- Programs within a particular locale with a mission of providing mentoring to public school students in their pre-college preparation and enrollment, matriculation, and graduation from a four year university.
3. School district- The public school education granting authority recognized by the Louisiana State Department of Education located within a particular parish. This list included the City of Baker Schools, Central Community Schools, and Zachary Community Schools. For this study independent city school districts in East Baton Rouge parish were not counted.
4. College/University- A four-year institution of higher education that grants undergraduate and graduate degrees.

Organization of the Study

The next few chapters of the document introduce pertinent literature and background on the issue, explore a methodology, describe the findings, and discuss the conclusions, recommendations, and implications of the research work. The final chapter is a brief reflection of the study and future directions for the topic.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of qualitative literature reviews is to understand the issues underlying the research problem and its relation to the theoretical framework of research study (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). There is a multitude of information on first generation college students, information that ranges from their trends in success and failures to how they may be better served. It was in my intent to review what was done previously, as it related to first generation college students and mentoring programs, and to determine how to address the research questions for the study. A review of the available literature was necessary to gain a better understanding of the problem background and its theoretical framework.

First Generation College Students

Everett (2015) noted that the first generation college student label first started in the 1960s and determined student eligibility for federally funded programs to assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Since the 1960s until today, the definition of factors that constitute to first generation college student status has varied from one whose parents attended a post-secondary institution but did not obtain a post-secondary degree, to a student whose parent or parents never went to a post-secondary institution. Everett (2015) noted that, regardless of the parent's graduation status of a post-secondary institution, they would still "mentor the child, provide advice concerning cultural and academic experiences related to college, and provide guidance through necessities such the application process or time management" (p. 53) to alleviate impending challenges. First generation college students experience various challenges in their quest to obtain post secondary schooling, leaving them behind many of their second and beyond generation college student counterparts (Pascarella et al., 2004; Atherton, 2014).

College Access

Access can be defined as the condition and factors that facilitate/encourage or prohibit/discourage a person from attending college (Bragg, Kim, & Barnett, 2006). Costs, discrimination, and academic preparation limit college access for first generation students. Heller (2001) divided access into five categories: financial, geographic, programmatic, academic, and cultural/social/physical. Each of these barriers to college access has the potential to impact a first generation college student's attempt at college. The majority of first generation college students are from low income families and lack the financial resources needed for college (Heller, 2001); these range from tuition funds to money in hand to daily survival. In addition to financial barriers, first generation college students have geographic barriers to accessing college. A student's geographic proximity is the most influential aspect of access (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). Many first generation college students prefer to attend post secondary institutions that are in close proximity to their home/family for support reasons (Everett, 2015). Distance education and online programs have removed some geographic barriers (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014).

Programmatic accessibility or whether a program of the student's choice is available is also important (Heller, 2001). Students typically do not choose institutions that lack a program of study of interest to them. Additionally, academic preparation of first generation college students can also be a barrier as they are typically less academically prepared than their counterparts (Terenzini et al., 1996). Finally, cultural, social, and physical accessibility refer to the support students might receive from family, friends, and instructors which some report is less than second generation and beyond college students' accessibility (Ware & Ramos, 2013).

Colleges have researched and implemented strategies to increase college access for students. Ghazzawi & Jagannathan (2011) asserted increasing access to resource outreach programs can help with college access. Kever (2010) added that study skills classes and regular advisement help first generation college students access the resources they need to be successful in college. Terenzini et al. (1996) suggested tutoring as a possibility to help first generation students access resources, while Hodgman (2013) noted affirmative action legislation as a key tool in opening access to colleges, particularly for minorities. Hodgman (2013) posited that more attention should be given to students' social class than their race in the changing legal climate of the country. Regardless of the method, strategies to increase college access for first generation college students continue to be at the forefront of the debate, but are those strategies enough?

Pyne and Means (2013) noted that “despite improvements in the rates of college admission over the past few decades, college persistence, retention, and graduation rates continue to be problematic for underrepresented students: students of color, students from low income, and/or first generation families” (p.1). The larger narrative indicates that many marginalized students' stories are often “omitted from the research or hidden within the broader statistics of success and failure” (Pyne & Means, 2013, p. 1). In other words, there is not a specific focus on the successes or failures of first generation college students and what those successes and failures mean. Typically, colleges concentrate on generalizable samples that may or may not include first generation college students. Colleges are more accessible to many previously underrepresented groups, but what happens when students arrive?

Second generation and beyond college students have better access to resources through familial relationships. Pascarella et al. (2004) noted that, when compared to their peers, first generation college students are at a distinct disadvantage in basic knowledge of post-secondary

education, level of family income and support, educational degree expectations and plans, and academic preparation in high school. The transition from high school to post-secondary education for first generation college students is extremely difficult as, in addition to experiencing substantial cultural, social, and academic transitions, they must confront the same anxiety, dislocation, and challenges of other college students. “Students with higher educated parents may have a distinct advantage over first generation students in understanding the culture of higher education and its role in personal development and socioeconomic attainment” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 252). Overwhelmingly, research shows that first generation college students struggle in college and colleges allot numerous resources to helping these students overcome their obstacles, but, what are colleges getting out of the deal?

Interest Convergence in College

Bell (1980) defined interest convergence as the point at which the needs of those in power coincide with the needs of those with no power. Research into the struggles of first generation college students has become more important recently, but why? In 2009, the Obama administration signed Race to the Top legislation worth billions of dollars to improve the education system (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). In addition to making schooling more accessible, Race to the Top also required increased innovation in retention, achievement, and graduation rates for students. This extra funding allowed more students to have access to college and therefore increased the number of students enrolling in college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003), but it also required increased attention to retention and graduation rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Gibbons and Woodside (2014) argued that this was fortunate for struggling first generation college students because their success determined the financial futures of their universities. This convergence of colleges’ interest in obtaining more

funding with the goal of first generation college students successfully completing college supported Ishitani (2003) notion that these students were the group identified as struggling the most with retention and graduation.

Specifically in Louisiana, interest convergence was seen with the passage of the Louisiana GRAD Act signed into law by Governor Jindal in 2010. The Louisiana GRAD Act is an agreement between state and local institutions in which institutions receive increased tuition authority and eligibility to participate in certain autonomies if they meet four specific performance objectives based on quantitative and narrative measures (The Louisiana GRAD Act, 2015); the four objectives, student success, articulation and transfer, workforce and economic development, and institutional efficiency and accountability, are assigned quantitative and narrative measures by the Board of Regents each year. To receive a “Green” or passing score, institutions must receive at least an 80% passage rate in an area, but some areas are weighed more heavily than others.

Though all four objectives are important, they are weighted differently by the Board of Regents. The most heavily weighted objective is student success and it must be achieved for institutions to pass the GRAD Act. Student success includes retention rate, same institution graduation rate, graduation productivity, award productivity, percent change in program completers, and passage rate on licensure exam in education. The remaining three objectives include only one specific area under each objective. Articulation and transfer refers to the first to second year retention rates of transfer students, workforce and economic development refers to the number of programs offered through 100% distance education courses, and institutional efficiency and accountability refers to the percent of eligible programs that are discipline

accredited. Tables 2.1 – 2.4 below illustrate the 2014-2015 Board of Regents annual designation of each institution’s performance on the GRAD Act objectives.

Table 2.1 2014-2015 Louisiana Community and Technical College System Designation

Institution	Board of Regents Determination				
	Student Success	Articulation and Transfer	Workforce & Economic Development	Institutional Efficiency and Accountability	Annual Evaluation Designation
Baton Rouge CC	89%	100%	79%	100%	Green
Bossier Parish CC	100%	100%	100%	100%	Green
Central Louisiana CC	87%	100%	100%	100%	Green
Delgado CC	83%	100%	79%	100%	Green
Louisiana Delta CC	84%	100%	100%	100%	Green
Fletcher TCC	100%	100%	100%	100%	Green
Northshore TCC	100%	100%	100%	100%	Green
Nunez CC	100%	100%	90%	100%	Green
River Parishes CC	100%	100%	100%	44%	Green
South Louisiana CC	90%	100%	100%	100%	Green
Sowela TCC	100%	100%	100%	100%	Green
Northwest LA TC	100%	100%	79%	100%	Green
South Central LA TC	86%	100%	100%	100%	Green

Table 2.2 2014-2015 Southern University System Designation

Institution	Board of Regents Determination				
	Student Success	Articulation and Transfer	Workforce & Economic Development	Institutional Efficiency and Accountability	Annual Evaluation Designation
S.U. A&M	91%	100%	100%	100%	Green
S.U. Law Center	86%	N/A	100%	100%	Green
S.U. New Orleans	100%	100%	100%	100%	Green
S.U. Shreveport	78%	100%	100%	100%	Red

Table 2.3 2014-2015 Louisiana State University System Designation

Institution	Board of Regents Determination				
	Student Success	Articulation and Transfer	Workforce & Economic Development	Institutional Efficiency and Accountability	Annual Evaluation Designation
LSU A&M	90%	100%	100%	100%	Green
LSU Alexandria	100%	100%	100%	100%	Green
LSU Eunice	91%	100%	100%	100%	Green
LSU Shreveport	82%	100%	100%	100%	Green
LSU HSC New Orleans	93%	N/A	87%	100%	Green
LSU HSC Shreveport	95%	N/A	93%	100%	Green
LSU Paul M. Hebert Law Center	83%	N/A	100%	100%	Green

Table 2.4 2014-2015 University of Louisiana System Designation

Institution	Board of Regents Determination				
	Student Success	Articulation and Transfer	Workforce & Economic Development	Institutional Efficiency and Accountability	Annual Evaluation Designation
Grambling State	100%	100%	100%	100%	Green
Louisiana Tech	100%	100%	100%	100%	Green
McNeese State	91%	100%	100%	100%	Green
Nicholls State	100%	100%	100%	100%	Green
Northwestern State	100%	100%	100%	100%	Green
Southeastern LA	82%	100%	100%	100%	Green
Univ. LA Lafayette	92%	100%	100%	100%	Green
Univ. LA Monroe	84%	100%	100%	100%	Green
Univ. New Orleans	100%	100%	100%	100%	Green

The preceding tables show that the majority of the participating institutions are reaching annual performance objective targets; in fact, only Southern University Shreveport received a designation of red and its score of 78% in Student Success was only two percentage points under the target. The Louisiana GRAD Act’s emphasis on student success aligned the interests of colleges and universities with the struggling student population that is overwhelmingly first generation college students (The Louisiana GRAD Act).

The GRAD Act aside, why do students struggle through school? First generation college students want to honor the family or break the downward spiral in favor of future financial success, but that success does not come without struggles. Gibbons et al. (2006) noted that these students often rate themselves low academically, perceive more barriers to go to college, and have less academic experience than their peers. As a result, once students get to college they feel

less prepared, earn lower grades, and eventually drop out at a higher rate (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). If these students drop out, what happens to colleges? The short answer is they do not receive their share of the billions of dollars in Race to the Top funding. However, colleges lose not only financial capital when these students fail, but they also lose standing in their academic rank, a major recruitment tool reported yearly (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). A decrease in rank and/or reputation may affect enrollment and thereby the sustainability of the university. In short, it is in the university's interest to provide the necessary supports for first generation college students (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014).

Universities have conducted studies to determine how to adequately address the support needs of first generation college students. Folger, Carter, & Chase (2004) posited that colleges should establish programs to assist first generation college students in their adjustment. Laden (2004) offered specific recommendations for colleges to aid in the success of struggling populations including: acknowledging and integrating diversity; creative comprehensive, inclusive instructional techniques; direction in academic, tutoring, and financial support services through counseling; cultivating an early detection system for concerning trends; hiring staff who are representative of the population; and exploring ways to include these students in the conversation. Lundberg et al. (2007) posited that in addition to these programs, the faculty should also be enlightened on how to assist these students in class participation and with peer collaboration.

Macias (2013) conducted a brainstorming activity with college faculty in which they called out words that they associated with first generation college students. Negative words such as clueless, poor, uneducated, and minority were used more often than positive words. Macias (2013) posited that this deficit approach to addressing the needs of first generation college

students was confining and ineffective. Many “retention-focused approaches and strategies that are overly preoccupied with deficiencies stretch well beyond the confines of a single classroom or particular department” (Macias, 2013, p. 18). To remedy first generation concerns colleges use a prescribed set of strategies. To address the perception that first generation college students are less academically prepared, colleges offer tutoring; to combat their dissatisfaction with a chosen major, they offer career planning, and the prescriptions go on (Macias, 2013). Strategies to assist first generation college students are reactionary, predictable, safe, and lack the creativity and inspiration these students need to realize their full potential (Macias, 2013; Atherton, 2014).

It is well documented that first generation college students struggle through college or do not finish at all (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Merritt, 2008). Colleges have sought to help these students and with great reason, though not without criticism (Macias, 2013; Atherton, 2014). Prescriptive though they may be, the success of first generation college students is important. In addition to ties to their financial future, these students’ lack of success leaves a lasting impression on the colleges’ reputations and therefore may impact future enrollment. Recently, this knowledge has led to the inception of many intervention programs to help these struggling students succeed (Lundberg et al., 2007; Laden 2004). But what if we helped the students before they struggled in college? Hodgman (2013) raised the possibility of helping first generation students with college access challenges prior to college through mentoring programs.

Mentoring

The mentoring concept came from Homer’s *The Odyssey* in which the Greek character Mentor served as a guide to Odysseus’ son (Allen, 2002; Andrews & Wallis, 1999). Mentor has become the term used to describe a person who takes on the responsibility for guiding the

development of another person (Stewart, 2006). “Mentoring is the process that awakens our confidence in our abilities” (Allen, 2002, p. 440).

Why is mentoring necessary? The overall goal of mentoring is to intervene in a mentee’s life by having a relationship that will have a positive impact (Zand et al., 2009). Rhodes et al. (2006) added that mentoring can play a significant role in development by promoting social and emotional well-being as well as reshaping negative self-images of mentees and their perspective relationships with mentors. A positive mentoring relationship can contribute to a more positive self-identity. Further, Cooley (1902) asserted mentors act as social mirrors that can potentially be reimaged as the mentee. In addition to the social benefits of an effective mentoring relationship, the length of time the relationship exists is also of great importance. Rhodes et al. (2006) concluded mentoring programs of longer duration were more successful as the trust between mentor and mentee increased as time passed. How can mentoring help first generation college students?

Irlbeck et al. (2014) posited that the number of first generation college students enrolling at universities is increasing and with these students comes a lack of knowledge about college life. Some students do not have the support systems in place to help them be successful as, to be successful, one depends on friends and advisors or teachers (Irlbeck et al., 2014). Macias (2013) further asserted that to breed success in these students, the problem must be looked at through a different lens. “Instead of cultivating a fear of failure, we must choose to emphasize a capacity for and expectation of success” (Macias, 2013, p. 19). The commonality between these two views is the need for strong mentorship for first generation students that involves academic and social benefits and increases learning gains for students (Pyne et al., 2014).

The mentoring relationship is cyclical: Mentors learn more when their mentees challenge them with new misunderstandings or innovative and unexpected ideas (Pyne et al., 2006). Vandermaas-Peeler et al. (2011) asserted mentoring is an educational negotiation, blending expertise and interpersonal relations and teaching self-confidence, openness, and the ability to cope with unexpected personal and academic developments. Mentors facilitate understanding and make connections between the scholars' experience and their own by drawing upon their previous experiences as a theoretical and practical framework for building understanding (Pyne et al., 2014). Stewart (2006) noted mentoring relationships are hybrids that carry expertise and authority while requiring concern and compassion for the mentees' struggles. In essence, effective mentoring requires different things at different times: respect, shared life advice, supportive critique, a smile, and sometimes a shoulder to cry on (Pyne et al., 2014). No shortage of mentoring programs exists, but how they help first generation college students successfully transition and matriculate through college is of interest.

Links to Mentoring and Student Success

Tice (1996) noted mentoring arises when the surrounding community is functioning poorly, thus mentoring exists only because there is a need for its existence. Shields (2012) wrote, "As a first generation college student I had learned to 'do college'" (p. 33). The East Baton Rouge Parish drop out and graduation rate data in chapter one showed the need in the parish for more mentoring as both impact the community. Though this study focused mainly on high school to college mentoring, research suggests that it can also be effective during the earlier school years. Shepard (2009) noted significance for mentoring at risk students in elementary schools. "Consistent, reliable, and caring mentors create supportive relationships and therefore promising academic and social emotional results for students" (p. 40). Though Shepard's

research was concentrated on at risk students in elementary schools, the same need for mentorship can be found in all levels of schooling. In their qualitative study of 1000 students at 71 schools across the country, Bayer, Grossman, and Dubois (2013) found that when a significant relationship is formed between a mentor and mentee at schools, there is a positive impact on student achievement. What can this mean for universities? Partnering with local schools or mentoring programs can be beneficial for many reasons, but most importantly for the future students of the schools. Additionally, students or school officials who conduct the mentoring could also see an internal benefit. Hughes et al. (2009) found in their qualitative study that college students who participated in a community service learning project through mentoring high school students “developed trust and friendships, guidance and emotional support, and modeling appropriate behaviors and attitudes” (p.76). The trend of mentoring leading to student success is more and more prevalent.

Thompson (2012) researched Pathways to Persistence at Santa Fe College, a program that helps GED students to and through college with positive results. The program mentors focused on academic and emotional success and in the first group the results were outstanding as all of the students earned a 3.0 G.P.A. or higher in their first year of college. Similarly, Crisp (2010) noted research that found community college students were 10-18% more likely to drop out of college than those who attended four year institutions. However, the research indicated that when paired with a mentor, those students increased their grade point averages and stayed in college. Another program that targeted at risk eighth grade girls with mentors from Northern Kentucky University found that the mentoring made measureable differences in the girls’ lives including their self-esteem, school attendance, and discipline (Ryan & Olasov, 2000).

The Herrera et al. (2011) study of the impact of a Big Brothers Big Sisters School-Based mentoring program involved 1,139 students from the ages of 9-16 in ten cities across the country. The students were randomly assigned to treatment or control groups and were followed for 1.5 school years. The results showed that the mentored youth performed better academically and had more positive views of their own academic ability than those who did not have a mentor, and reported feelings towards a “special adult” in their lives. Ware and Ramos’ (2013) study also found positive mentor-student results in their one year study of online mentoring support relationships; the relationships examined were those of potential first generation Latino college students their senior year of high school and during their transitions to two or four year post-secondary institution. The results showed that students used the online tools for information and support, but their success was contingent upon tangible, conventional, in person, mentoring structures of counselors, peers, and family.

Research studies consistently show links between mentoring and student success, but who are the best mentors? Ballard (2013) noted that anyone with knowledge, competency, and a willingness to serve can mentor students at any age level. The willingness to mentor is key to the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship. Brondyk and Searby (2013) conducted investigations into best practices of mentoring and found that the term “best practices” varies from person to person and for an effective mentoring relationship, the terms of goals and objectives must be defined. Without a clear picture of the end goal, the process runs the risk of becoming dysfunctional. Dysfunctional mentoring relationships are fragile and distressing to all parties involved (Scandura, 1998). Conversely, effective mentoring is a positive process that results in better socialized, more committed, and more productive individuals (Scandura, 1998). In that spirit, willing individuals who have been through high school and have transitioned to post-

secondary education are good mentors for potential first generation college students. We now know the how, but why do community mentor programs do what they do?

Mentoring Counter Examples

An abundance of research shows the positive effects of mentoring, but negative mentoring relationships also exist and can also have an impact. Some believe mentoring programs profit from reform. If students do participate but fail, these programs will not thrive (Garan, 2004). In a conversation with the executive director of Boys Hope Girls Hope of Greater Baton Rouge, he insisted that they want to be put out of business one day as their goal is to help students excel (J. Daniel, personal communication, June 16, 2015). This principled goal allays concerns about mentoring profiteering, but literature shows additional issues exist around mentoring. Scandura (1998) noted that “despite hundreds of books and articles published on mentoring, little is written about relational dysfunction that may occur within mentoring relationships” (p. 450). One in eighteen mentoring relationships is destructive and the results of negative interactions can be detrimental (Kram, 1985). Kissau and King (2015) noted a clear understanding of the role of a mentor is key to a successful relationship. If there is poor communication about the roles, an imbalanced relationship can occur and in an imbalanced mentoring relationship, there is a lack of trust, open communication, and development (Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002). Delaney (2012) posited that unidirectional mentoring relationships can be viewed as little value to mentors. When mentors do not see the value in the relationship, they may be less invested and less willing to devote the necessary time. Barker (2006) noted unsuccessful mentoring relationship can result in anger, isolation, and frustration.

There are ways to fix poor mentoring relationships. To fix negative mentoring relationships: identify the problem, look at the circumstances that contributed to the problem,

work hard to rebuild the relationship, and consider alternatives to the present mentoring relationship (Barker, 2006; Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002). When a poor mentoring relationship exist, one must not be afraid to restructure it or cut it completely as the goal of mentoring is bridging the gap between the educational process and the real world experience.

Interest Convergence in Community Mentor Programs

The dismal academic records of schools in high poverty areas contribute to the necessity of mentor programs (Dennison, 2000). Because of increasing school dropouts, many schools and community agencies have formed collaborative programs to intervene with high risk students (Dupper, 1993; Carr, 1988). Dupper (1993) noted in some cases these programs start as early as elementary school as research shows early detection and intervention is most effective. There is no doubt that mentoring is effective in meeting this increasing need and students benefit from the resources gained from participating in mentoring programs with targeted interventions. What benefits do mentoring programs reap?

The act of mentoring is necessarily reciprocal (Stewart, 2006; Pyne et al., 2014) and there is a mutual benefit or convergence of interest. Pryor (1992) noted mentoring programs have made a positive impact since they began being studied in the 1960s. Research has shown the impact to include “self-esteem, academics, and reduction in problem school behavior” for students who need it most (Dennison, 2000, p.163). However, mentor programs also benefit mentors, which was not an originally anticipated benefit in the 1960s (Dennison, 2000).

Allen, Lentz, and Day (2006) noted mentors gain from a well-constructed mentoring program. Minnick et al. (2014) posited that knowing someone depended on the mentor increased motivation to approach tasks with a positive attitude. Research has shown that peer mentors have enhanced self-esteem and improved academic performance (Dennison, 2000; Carr, 1988).

Mentors felt rewarded and satisfied through helping others and became more interested in others' needs and more willing to help (Mastroianni & Kinkmyer, 1980; Minnick et al., 2014) Garrigan & Pearce (1996) reported that mentors benefited from sharing in mentee's success and in creating a more cohesive environment for the mentee.

The intrinsic and extrinsic rewards of community mentor programs can be motivating factors. Mentoring can boost one's reputation. Minnick et al. (2014) asserted mentors stand to gain significant rewards through mentoring. These rewards can be intrinsic in the form of the mentee's new outlook or it can be in the form of recognition or a monetary donation.

Successful programs are attractive. Mentoring programs that are effective gain notoriety and with that comes more participation (Sachs, Fisher, & Cannon, 2011). In community mentor programs, success drives future enrollment. Without enrollment of students there are no sponsors and without sponsors, there is no money to run the program. Not for profit programs rely on sponsorship to keep their doors open and a way to ensure that is to prove the worth of the organization's product. In addition to financial accountability, community mentor programs have stakeholder interest and buy in. Guetzloe (1997) discussed the necessity for a partnership between schools and community mentor programs in order to make a difference. In local programs in particular this is vital as the program is founded upon a triangulated relationship among the local schools that the participants attend, the parents, and the program faculty. Much of the program components occur on the school campuses and therefore it is more visible to the principal, community members, and other potential participants. With such visibility, community mentor programs must maintain a successful relationship and reputation in the area they serve to continue operating (Guetzloe, 1997).

Baton Rouge has numerous community mentoring programs that provide the services necessary for the success of first generation college students, however some are more popular than others. Four programs in particular have the positive characteristics that research describes as necessary for effective community mentor programs. Table 2.5 describes the mission and specific traits of those four community mentoring programs.

The four programs described in the table have similar missions of assisting the academic achievement of first generation college in high school and college, but the programs differ from each another. Boys Hope Girls Hope and Baton Rouge Youth Coalition focus specifically on high achieving students, meaning students who do not have certain academic performances prior to joining the program will not be able to be a part of the program (Boys Hope Girls Hope of Greater Baton Rouge, 2015; Baton Rouge Youth Coalition, 2015). Further, Boys Hope Girls Hope of Greater Baton Rouge offers a residential program for students, while Baton Rouge Youth Coalition does not. Of the two remaining community mentoring programs, both are based on college campuses. LSYOU is on the campus of LSU, but does not make students' academic performance a pre-requisite for participation (LSYOU, 2014). Upward Bound is a federal program on the campus of Southern University and also does not require students to have certain academic rankings (Upward Bound, 2015). An interesting similarity among all four programs is that they do not specifically discuss providing the support and resources to students throughout their college matriculation.

Table 2.5 Local Community Mentor Program Traits

Program	Mission	Population	Support Offered
Boys Hope Girls Hope of GBR	To help academically capable and motivated children-in-need to meet their full potential and become men and women for others by providing value-centered, family-like homes, opportunities, and education through college.	High achieving first generation college students	Home living, tutoring, mentoring, and resource connections
Baton Rouge Youth Coalition	To prepare high-achieving, under-resourced high school students to enter, excel in, and graduate from college.	High achieving first generation college students	Tutoring, mentoring, and resource connections
LSYOU	To provide a long term, case managed, relationship and data driven intervention into the lives of high need students to enable them to successfully graduate from high school and enter post-secondary education.	High need first generation college students	Skills for high school and beyond success, community outreach, and service learning for LSU faculty and students
Upward Bound	Providing opportunities for participants to succeed in their precollege performance and in their higher education pursuits. Increasing the rate of completion of secondary education and college enrollment.	Low income, first generation college students	Instruction in mathematics, laboratory sciences, composition, literature, and foreign languages; tutoring, counseling, mentoring, cultural enrichment, work-study programs, and counseling services to improve the financial and economic literacy of students

Conclusion

The literature review revealed that there is a wealth of information available on first generation college students and mentoring. Several overarching themes reoccurred throughout the literature review. The first theme was the struggle of first generation college students and the lack of support and resources available from their families. The literature viewed first generation college students from a deficit perspective of what they were doing wrong and how poorly they performed when compared to their peers (Anzul et al., 2001, Macias, 2013). A second theme was how many resources colleges and universities had invested into “helping” first generation college students once they show signs of failure or struggle. Colleges spared no expense in creating career centers, academic counseling centers, and tutoring programs to help the failing first generation students (Macias, 2013). However, many of those interventions were after the fact prescriptions that, in many cases, did little to alleviate the problems of many first generation college students (Anzul et al., 2001). The last theme was the rising popularity in mentoring since the 1960s and the positive and negative significance a mentoring relationship can have. Delving into these themes, I found a noticeable gap in the existing literature.

Though much research attests to the college struggles of first generation college students and the effectiveness of mentoring in general, there is a noticeable absence of literature that connects community mentoring with first generation college students, and what impact that relationship can have during college; the four aforementioned Baton Rouge programs miss that specific connection. Is it possible that more information on the support and resources that these students need throughout their pre-college and matriculation process will alleviate their struggle? How can community mentor programs fit into this puzzle? The methods section provides details on how I conducted my study to find answers to these questions.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

This chapter discusses three types of research designs and explores the background, strengths, and weaknesses of each. This chapter also describes the reason for the research methodology chosen to conduct this study rather than another method and design. I explain the epistemological approach to this research study and the study design including and elaborating on the following aspects: sampling, participant selection, data collection, data analysis, subjectivity, limits, and realities. This chapter concludes with discussion of practical and pragmatic concerns and the challenges to note when conducting this study.

Research Methodologies

Creswell (2002) asserted researchers use three research methods to conduct a research study: (a) quantitative, (b) qualitative, and (c) mixed. Each methodology is explored through a discussion of its defining characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses. The methodology chosen for a particular research study depends on the research problem and questions.

Quantitative Research Methodologies

Slife and Williams (1995) asserted quantitative research is useful in describing trends and the relationship among variables. Quantitative research is favored amongst researchers for its objectivity in that there is not a need for deep interaction between the researcher and data. In fact, Yin (2003a) posited quantitative research is regarded by researchers as being “hard-nosed, data-driven, outcome-oriented, and truly scientific” (p. 33). There are different quantitative research designs, but it is the researcher’s responsibility to choose the appropriate design to address the research problem.

Quantitative research methodologies “collect some type of numerical data to answer a research question” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2011, p. 29).

Observation studies, correlational research, developmental designs, and survey research are types

of quantitative research designs, and though similar in their reliance on numerical data, there are notable differences among the designs. A discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the four quantitative research designs follows.

The first quantitative research methodology is the observational study. Observation deals with actions and behavior. In observational studies, the focus is on behavior that is quantified in some way and yields significant data that “portray much of the richness and complexity of human behavior” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 183). The weakness of observation studies is reliability and time. Reliability requires the belief of the experience of the participant observer as truly objective (Taylor & Bogden, 1998). Leedy and Ormrod (2010) added that observation studies require a lot of advance planning, attention to detail, time, and in some cases, the help of research assistants.

A second quantitative research design is the correlational study that gathers data about two or more characteristics for a particular group of people or other appropriate units of study. Correlational studies are used to determine relationships between variables and are less timely to perform than observational studies. One drawback of correlational studies is faulty logic that can happen when researchers incorrectly conclude that one study variable influences the other (Benzce, 1996). This overarching “cause and effect relationship of variables cannot be inferred based on correlation alone” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 185).

Developmental designs are also quantitative methodologies. There are two developmental designs: cross sectional and longitudinal studies. Leedy & Ormrod (2010) defined cross sectional research as comparing people from several different age groups. The weakness of this design is that it is hard to eliminate other possible explanations for observed results and correlations cannot be computed between different age groups. Conversely, longitudinal designs

follow a single group of people over the course of months or years. The weaknesses of this design include the possibility of the losing participants over the period of time and the familiarity of participants with the measurement tools which may affect accurate measurability (Machin & Campbell, 2007; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

A final quantitative research methodology is survey research, which acquires information from people by asking them questions and tabulating their answers (Kotrlík & Higgins, 2001; Fowler, 2008; Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2011). One strength of survey research is its simple design, however a weakness is its basis in extrapolation and conjecture that could threaten validity. Additionally, in survey research data is self-reported and can result in participants telling the researcher what they think the researcher wants to hear (Fowler, 2008; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Despite its weaknesses, survey research allows researchers the ability to collect much data quickly from participants.

Overall, quantitative research is useful in measuring variables but it does have weaknesses. Amaratunga et al. (2002) assessed some of its weaknesses as poorly understood theories and categories, missing out on naturally occurring phenomenon because of its narrow focus on specific theories and hypotheses, and resulting knowledge does not always reflect practical understanding. Christensen, Johnson, and Turner (2011) added, “quantitative research does not test the effects of non-manipulated variables; it seems artificial in nature because of its laboratory component, and is an inadequate method of scientific inquiry” (p. 40-41). Though obvious weaknesses can be found with quantitative research data collection, it is the most widely used and respected research methodology across the sciences.

Qualitative Research Methodologies

Unlike quantitative research designs, qualitative research designs do not identify causal relationships (Berg & Lune, 2004). The qualitative research approach “is an inquiry approach useful for exploring and understanding a central phenomenon” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 58). Despite specific design differences, qualitative research approaches have two common threads: focusing on phenomenon in natural settings and studying the complexities in those phenomenon (Seale, 1999). Researchers should choose qualitative research when their studies are to “describe, interpret, verify, or evaluate phenomenon” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 136-137).

Christensen, Johnson, and Turner (2011) noted qualitative research studies “collect some type of non-numerical data to answer a research question” (p. 29). There are six qualitative research designs: case study, ethnography, phenomenological, grounded theory, narrative, and content analysis. Like quantitative research, each qualitative research design has strengths and weaknesses.

The case study research design involves studying a particular individual, program, or event for a defined period of time (Creswell, 2002; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Christensen, Johnson & Turner, 2011; Yin, 2003a; Yin, 2003b). Case studies are useful when the purpose of the research is to learn more about a little known or poorly understood situation. A strength of the case study research design is that it allows the researchers to focus on a single or multiple cases that are “unique or exceptional at promoting understanding of informing practice for similar situations” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p.137). A weakness of case study research is the findings may not always be generalizable, especially when only one case is involved (Creswell, 2002; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

Ethnography allows the researcher an in-depth look at an entire group to gain an understanding of the complexities of the socio-cultural group (Myerhoff, 1980). Ethnography can be confused with case study to a novice researcher, but it is different in that it identifies shared patterns of behavior exhibited by the group observed by the researcher (Myerhoff, 1980; Creswell, 2002). Its strengths and weaknesses lie in its flexibility that can be a good tool for an advanced researcher, but not for an inexperienced researcher who can be overwhelmed with all of the data.

Phenomenological studies are also qualitative in nature as they attempt to understand people's perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of a particular situation (Moran, 2001). The strength of phenomenological studies is their ability to gain multiple perspective insights. The weakness of phenomenological studies is the researcher's subjectivity; the researcher must suspend preconceived notions and personal experiences, which can be extremely difficult (Husserl, 2012; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

Grounded theory studies use a prescribed set of procedures for analyzing data and constructing a theoretical model (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). This design is helpful when there are inadequate or non-existent theories about a phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1997; Charmaz, 2014). Like other designs, the grounded theory strength can also be a weakness if not carried out systematically and structured; however, "too much structure can be seen as limiting a researcher's flexibility" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p.143).

Narrative inquiry requires the researcher to understand one's story (Daly, 2007), the belief being that stories organize human experience and make meaning. Ellis and Bochner (2003) asserted "narrative inquiries create the effect of reality, showing characters embedded in the lived moments of struggle, resisting the intrusions of chaos, disconnection, fragmentation,

marginalization, and incoherence in life's unity in the face of fate that calls one's meanings and values into question" (p. 217). Though the narrative's strength in getting the "real, true" story is substantial, the main weaknesses are subjectivity and validity (Elliot, 2005; Light & Pilleman, 1982).

Finally, content analysis is a qualitative research design that is a detailed and systematic exam of contents of a particular body of material to identify patterns, themes, or biases (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Downe-Wamboldt (1992) noted content analysis offers practical applicability, promise, and relevance. The strength of content analysis includes that it is easily understood, inexpensive, and unobtrusive, whereas its weaknesses are that it may not reveal underlying motives of an observed pattern, its analysis is limited to material availability, and observed trends in the media may not be an accurate reflection of reality (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

Quantitative vs. Qualitative Research Methodologies

Shweder (1996) added that qualitative and quantitative approaches to inquiry are inherently different because of their differing ontological assumptions. Quantitative research studies use numerical data and variables to describe and explain data trends, while qualitative studies seek to determine why a phenomenon occurred through participants' thoughts and feelings (Slife & Williams, 1995; Daly, 2007). Quantitative data are measureable quantities, whereas qualitative data is reliant upon the experiences of the participants. Quantitative data uses variables to examine a situation as it is while qualitative research is "based on textual data rather than quantitative data, on stories rather than numbers" (Auerbach, & Silverstein, 2003, p. 24). Essentially, quantitative and qualitative research methods have strengths and weaknesses

that the researcher must consider when determining the best methods to address the research problem.

Mixed Research Methodology

A researcher can choose to use a mixed method study when it is not in the best interest of the research study to choose between quantitative and qualitative research. A researcher skilled in both methods can combine the approaches into a mixed methods study (Patton 1990; Cook & Reichardt, 1979). Mixed methods allow researchers to “build on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative data” (Creswell, 2002, p. 568) and requires competency in both research methodologies. Conversely, Lincoln & Guba (1985) and Schwandt (2000) argued that quantitative and qualitative research are antonymic and therefore mixed methods research is impossible, citing the inability to reconcile the basic ontological assumptions of quantitative and qualitative research (Daly, 2007).

Research Study Design

A research design is a “logical plan for getting from here to there, where here may be defined as the initial set of questions to be answered, and there is some set of questions to be answered, and there is some set of conclusions or answers about these questions” (Yin, 2003b, p. 20). The design chosen is determined by the research questions to be answered, and requires foundation knowledge into the epistemology and its foundations in research.

Greer (1969) posited social science research rests on three assumptions: there is a world that exists beyond our senses that we do not fully control, this world beyond our senses is knowable through a process of communication, and we value knowing the results of our interactions with that world. It is with this in mind that a researcher can address his/her epistemology, where the research cascade begins. Epistemology is concerned with how we know

what we know or our ways of knowing (Slife & Williams, 1995). From epistemological beliefs, researchers determine the paradigms, theories, and methodology to be used to answer a particular research question. Daly (2007) noted “epistemology raises the fundamental question of science, which is how do we, as inquirers, come to know the realities that we are trying to apprehend” (p. 24). Objectivist and subjectivist are the two epistemological positions. Objectivists hold that there is a knowable reality and science’s task is to explain it, while subjectivists hold that all knowledge is constructed in the mind of the knower (Daly, 2007). The objectivist belief about knowledge is associated with the quantitative research design, whereas subjectivists are viewed as qualitative researchers.

Davis’ (2004) epistemology or ways of knowing can be traced to the very nature of the universe. Figure 3.1 shows the bifurcation between the metaphysical and physical realms of research in which the metaphysical is the belief of universal truths and the physical realm is the belief that there are no universal truths and that knowledge is constantly changing.

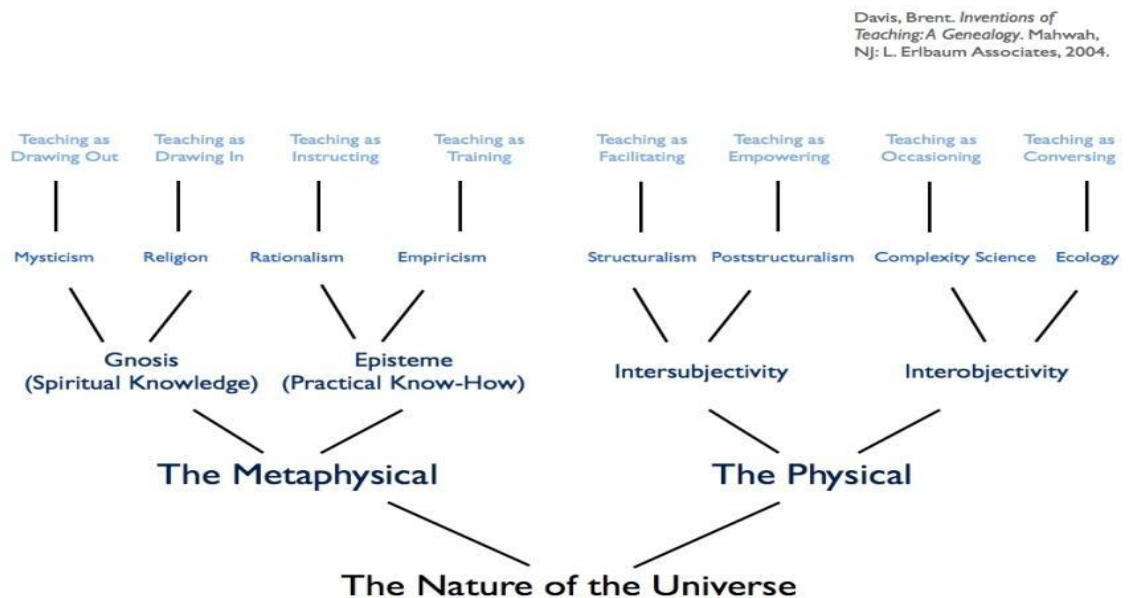


Figure 3.1 The Nature of the Universe

I draw from the epistemology of qualitative research in my belief in the evolution of knowledge. The requirements of constants and variables of quantitative research design would not allow the flexibility necessary to answer the research questions and mixed methods would decrease the study's practicality. Therefore, to address the research problem, I chose the qualitative methodological approach.

Design Selection

The second section of the cascade of knowing is paradigms, which Kuhn (1970) defined as the beliefs, habits, and tools a researcher uses. In this case, beliefs refer to what is appropriate scientific procedure, standards of achievement, and a way of seeing based on shared principles, while habits refer to the way scientists operate within a common, frame of reference with theories, concepts, and references; tools refers to what scientists use to solve their problems or specialized language concepts, conventions about analysis and interpretation, and books about theory and methods that offer concrete guidelines on how to proceed (Kuhn, 1962; Masterman, 1970; Daly, 2007). Simply put, "paradigms allow scientists a way to easily relate to each other's work and theories, and to establish standards of acceptability for methods and theories" (Slife & Williams, 1995, p.127).

The critical or social activist paradigm is foremost in my paradigm examination. Daly (2007) noted that the critical paradigm is the belief that the world is structured on the basis of unequal relations and consists of competing interests. This research study used CRT's interest convergence tenet to examine the lack of support through community mentor programs for aspiring and first generation college students. Daly (2007) noted the habits of the critical paradigm focus on the themes of race, class, and gender. Further, in the critical paradigm, scientific activity "is seen as a power-based discourse that also reflects a set of interests that has

the capacity to bring privilege to certain kinds of positions” (Daly, 2007, p. 35). Based on its social change focus, reflexive practices are the tools of the critical paradigm and bring values issues to the foreground. Qualitative research from the critical paradigm focuses on the political nature of research with an articulation of injustice and inequality being the catalysts for research; perspectives, interpretations, and strategies for change are solicited; and the researcher brings forth data as a way to foreground experiences and the possibilities for change (Daly, 2007). Though research from the critical paradigm takes a range of shapes, the use of narrative inquiry to elicit the voices of participants best fulfills the purpose of this study by describing participants’ experiences and analyzing their stories for themes (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). Further, some elements of autoethnography, a genre of writing and research that connects the personal through multiple layers of consciousness, were employed to incorporate some of my reflexive thoughts throughout the interview and analysis process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Narrative Inquiry

To address the research questions from the researcher’s epistemological, paradigmatic, theoretical, and methodological standpoint, I used narrative inquiry. Specifically I used critical narrative that Sarbin (2004) argued leads readers to action. Narrative inquiry has five key characteristics. The first characteristic of constructing reality deals with the way the story is told. Bruner (1990) noted its “indifference to extralinguistic reality” (p. 44) and Riessman (1993) added that they are “constructed, creatively authored, rhetorically replete with assumptions, and interpretive” (p. 5). For this reason, Daly (2007) argued that it is important to thoroughly examine what the storyteller accomplishes by telling the story.

The second characteristic of inherent sequentiality focuses on how the sequence of events tells the story, noting that there must be a logical beginning, middle, and end. Therefore,

narrative inquiry is also concerned with how the story is put together and involves the third characteristic, a “re-constitutive process” that involves the interweaving of the events in the past, the past’s effect of the present, and the symbolic reconstruction of the past and present (Daly, 2007; Ezzy, 1998). The fourth is the cast of characters or how the teller of the story is presented to readers. The tellers, or protagonist, play a critical role in the interpretation of the story within the large narrative context (Bruner, 1990; Daly, 2007). Finally, the function of the story in the social context is important as Ellis and Bochner (2003) argued, that stories come with questions about their consequences, how it makes them appear to the audience, and new possibilities for their life as a result of telling the story.

The narrative inquiry methodology offered a “window on culture, for it is through the process of storytelling that we can understand how culture is constituted” (Daly, 2007, p. 112). Knowles et al (2005) noted voice is critical to understanding the need of a person. My voice also was shown throughout autoethnography, which also describes personal narratives, narratives of the self, personal experience narratives, self-stories, first person accounts (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The research questions that drove the inquiry were:

1. What supports and resources do first generation college students need to be successful?
2. What impact have community mentor programs had or could have had on the life experiences of first generation college students?
3. What role do community mentor programs play in bridging the support gap of aspiring first generation college students?

Population

A population is a group of people who have a characteristic that differentiate them from other groups (Patton, 2002; Neuman, 2011). The target population for this qualitative research study was first generation college students and the personnel of Boys Hope Girls Hope of Greater Baton Rouge, who have intersectional identities as first generation college students and community mentor program staff. Participation was voluntary.

Sampling

The sample size in qualitative studies is small and left up to the researcher (Robson, 2002; Blum & Muirhead, 2005; Cottrell, 2005; Patton, 2002). Further, it is suggested that in qualitative studies 2 to 10 participants are adequate to reach a saturation point (Groenwald, 2004; Mertens, 2005; Munhall & Boyd, 2011). Patton (2002) noted sample size should be dependent on purpose of inquiry, what could be useful, what heightens credibility, and what could be accomplished in a given timeframe. Marks (2015) argued that instead of concerns of central tendencies, qualitative researchers should instead consider which participants will give the deepest and most meaningful data on the research topic. Johnson (2002) posited the right number of interviews depends on whether the researcher feels she has learned all there is to be learned. For this study, the researcher chose a sample of three participants who had personal experiences as first generation college students and the impact that had on their lives.

Generalizability is the goal in quantitative research and therefore guidelines are set for achieving the correct mean sample size. These guidelines typically leave out the statistical outliers at the outer edge of the bell curve (Neuman, 1997), yet Marks (2015) noted that generalizability is not the goal of qualitative research and is not attainable with small samples.

“The promise of potential gems does not glitter in the center but in the remarkable and unmistakable expressions on the edges” (Marks, 2015, p.12).

The researcher selected the purposive sampling method to obtain a sample of the outliers. Purposive sampling is a non-probability technique in which “the researcher solicits participation from prospective participants based on the perception that they have relevant experience with an event or base” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 206). Purposive sampling is the most appropriate way to learn about a phenomenon as well as it is an effective technique to gain the perspective of an overlooked population (Trochim, 2002; Patton, 2002). Additionally, a variation of purposive sampling called prototypical sampling was applied to the study that is “the intentional selection of ideal and richly promising cases for the phenomenon in question” (Silva, Marks, & Cherry, 2009; Marks, 2015, p. 12). The small sample size allowed by the purposive, prototypical sample allowed for rich in-depth interviews, a richly textured understanding of experience, and deep analysis (Sandelowski, 2005).

The purposive, prototypical sampling for this study included three participants who were best suited to provide rich, deep, and meaningful experiences that addressed the research problem (Sandelowski, 2005; Marks, 2015). All three of the participants were first generation college students who completed their degrees. Two of the three participants were employed with a local community mentor program, Boys Hope Girls Hope of Greater Baton Rouge, whose mission is to help first generation college students receive the support and resources required to be successful in school and to attain a terminal degree. Though two of the participants were from the same organization, my goal was not to do a case study on Boys Hope Girls Hope of Greater Baton Rouge; I sought rather to use these three people and this organization to

contextualize the larger issue of supporting first generation college students through college as Boys Hope Girls Hope is one of many community mentor programs with this mission.

Volunteering with Boys Hope Girls Hope of Greater Baton Rouge and working with two employed participants, Meagan and John, allowed me a window into a group about which I was trying to understand- first generation college students. *As a second generation student myself, I needed more insight.* John was selected not only because he was a first generation college student, but also because a community mentor program in which he participated as a youth impacted him greatly. Additionally, he was the executive director of Boys Hope Girls Hope. It was my hope that he would share his experiences as a first generation college student who had the support of a community mentor program and how those experiences and his converging identities or perspectives impacted his life (Crenshaw, 1991).

Meagan was chosen because she was also a first generation college student and the resident house manager/social worker of Boys Hope Girls Hope and interacted daily with the residential and non-residential students in the program. Students' parents gave her permission to contact their schools directly, have conferences with teachers, have copies of their school records, and to regular contact with administration. She tracked their academic progress as well as addressed their social and emotional needs and then she and the executive director made decisions about what resources and supports the students needed to achieve academic, social, and emotional success. I hoped that she would discuss not only her story and those of the program scholars with whom she had developed relationships, but also an accurate account of the support and resources needed by students currently in the program.

The final participant was my mom, Brenda. Using my mom completed the triangulation of the first generation college student perspective with those whom I had personal connection,

but as one who did not have affiliation with Boys Hope Girls Hope of Greater Baton Rouge. Her inclusion also underscored the characterization of Boys Hope Girls Hope of Greater Baton Rouge as a part of the larger community mentor programs with missions to help first generation college students, and not as a single case to be studied within this research document.

This sample of participants allowed me to delve deeper into understanding the experiences of first generation college students over a 42-year span, from 1973 to 2015. This past, present, and future approach to the research study intended to address the research problem and inform future practice.

Data Collection

Data collection is an “extensive drawing on multiple sources of information” (Creswell, 2002, p.75). Data collection methods for narrative research revolve around interviewing. Marks (2004) noted that interviewers need to be honest, authentic, and trustworthy to elicit truth and depth from the participants. I was mindful of this when conducting the face-to-face, in-depth interviews with each participant. In-depth interviews seek to understand meanings, perspectives, and life experiences (Daly, 2007). Daly (2007) identified three types of in-depth interviews: unstructured, semi-structured, and structured. The semi-structured interview was used for this study as its format includes a general list of guiding questions to which more can be added as the interview progresses. Semi-structured interviews “help maintain focus on the key research questions, serve as a resource or reference point for interviewers, and facilitate data analysis by generating data within some general domains” (Daly, 2007, p. 144). The interviews were held at a location comfortable and acceptable to both the participant and me. To further promote accuracy, the interview was conducted in an atmosphere free of public noise and other distractions (Robson, 2002). The environment created an atmosphere that allowed the

participant to engage in deep reflections to seek out the intrinsic value of their thoughts and personal ethics. To collect the data for this study, I developed the interview questions, developed the interview schedule, obtained informed consent, obtained demographic data (optional), conducted the interviews, transcribed the interviews verbatim, and analyzed them.

Data Analysis

Some critics claim qualitative data analysis is soft and relativistic (Creswell, 2013). In qualitative research, “the process of data collection, analysis, and reporting are not distinct, but instead are interrelated” (Creswell, 2013, p. 182). Marks (2015) acknowledged overlap in some steps of the process, but outlined a pragmatic approach to the data analysis process that is proven to maintain validity and reliability of data. The steps in this data analysis process followed this chronology: open coding, axial coding, numeric content analysis, developing the inter-interview coding tool, using the coding tool to narrow down concepts, using the combining/eliminating method to find 3-6 “top” core themes from the data, revisiting interviews to cut and paste narratives or comments that captured/illustrated/represented each theme into a new file (include counter-narratives), and using data audit to maintain validity. I consistently followed these steps for the data analysis of the study.

Research Validity

The goal of any research is validity or “the correctness or truthfulness of the inferences that are or can be made in a research study” (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2011, p. 362). Quantitative researchers’ validity resides in the reliability of the tools and instruments used to conduct the study. Conversely, qualitative research uses the researcher as the instrument and, for this reason, many question the rigor and validity of qualitative research studies (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2011). However, strong qualitative research is produced when the researcher is upfront about his/her subjectivity throughout the research process.

Subjectivity

Malterud (2001) asserted “a researcher’s background and position will effect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions” (p. 483-484). As such, the perspective of the researcher shapes all research, making bias unavoidable; however, the reduction of research bias makes data findings more reliable and accurate (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 2003b; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Lincoln and Guba (1985) posited that trustworthiness of a qualitative research study is important in establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

There are specific ways by which researchers can establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility, or the confidence in the truth of the findings, (Lincoln & Guba, 1995) can be upheld through any of the following: prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case sampling, referential adequacy, and member checking. For this study, I used member checking and allowed the respondents to check the accuracy of the transcribed interview data and interpretations (Angen, 2000; Morse, 1994; & Sandelowski, 1993). To uphold transferability, the showing of applicability of the findings in other contexts, (Lincoln & Guba, 1995) the researcher used thick description, a term first used by Ryle (1949) and later by Geertz (1973), to describe a detailed account of field experiences in which a researcher makes clear the patterns and contexts of social and cultural relationships (Holloway, 1997). Dependability, the consistency of findings, (Lincoln & Guba, 1995) can be established through data auditing which improves accuracy and evaluates whether the findings, interpretations, and conclusions are supported by data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Marks, 2015). Finally, data auditing, triangulation, and reflexivity can establish confirmability, the extent to

which the findings are shaped by participants than researcher's bias, motivation and interest. I used data auditing as it is required to achieve dependability and reflexivity.

Reflexivity

The assumption among the overwhelming research body is that bias or skewedness in a research study is undesirable, but Multerud (2001) asserted, "preconceptions are not the same as bias, unless the researcher fails to mention them" (p.484). Because different researchers approach a situation from different perspectives, different understandings of the study might occur (Barry et al., 1999). Some may see different ways of knowing as a problem, while others feel it offers a richer understanding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Koch and Harrington (1998) posited that understanding the position, perspective, beliefs, and values is always an issue in research but particularly in qualitative research where the researcher is the instrument. In keeping with reflexivity, I reported how my preconceptions, beliefs, values, assumptions, and positions came into play during the research process (Koch & Harrington, 1998; Barry et al., 1999).

I am an African American female who had close personal and professional ties to all of the interviewees. One of the participants was my mother and I had prior knowledge of her background and sensitivity to her circumstances, however, this perceived bias is also a strength of the research; her unique situation and challenges in college were what I addressed in the research problem. I worked with the other two participants in a voluntary capacity at Boys Hope Girls Hope of Greater Baton Rouge and was therefore closely linked to the success of the organization. This bias was also a strength of the research as the program's future success also guaranteed aspiring first generation college students college success. Daly (2007) noted expressing researcher bias limits its negative effect on the study.

Limits and Realities

There were limits to and realities of this research study. Limitations are threats to internal validity that reflect weaknesses in the study (Price & Murnan, 2004). The major limitation of this study was that many hard questions about this research topic arose during the course of this study. While they were important, they did not fall within the confines of the study's research questions. Therefore, the focus was on the stated research questions with the knowledge that further study of the topic is needed. Additionally, the use of only three first generation college students and one community mentor program as an example of the entire body of community mentor programs for the sample minimally addressed the subject. The intent of this research was to find ways to alleviate the struggle of first generation college students through the support of community mentor programs; the ripple effect of the impact of the findings could still be helpful to countless students and community mentor programs. The reality of this research was that I was on a limited timeline and budget and therefore my familiarity with the three first generation college students and Boys Hope Girls Hope of Greater Baton Rouge made them the best choices to address the research problem. Limitations and realities notwithstanding, it was the goal of this research study, as with most qualitative studies, to achieve transferability in context that others in similar situations will find useful.

Practical and Pragmatic Concerns and Challenges

There were practical concerns and challenges associated with conducting this research study. One major practical challenge was the time constraints. I was not a full time doctoral student, but instead a full time employee of the East Baton Rouge Parish school system, which restricted the amount of time I could devote to the research. Marks (2015) noted that it takes at least six hours per interview to adequately address the data. As the researcher and a full time

school system employee, I missed days of work to complete the study, thus my financial resources were limited.

Merriam-Webster (2015) defined pragmatism as “a reasonable and logical way of doing things or of thinking about problems that is based on dealing with specific situations instead of on ideas and theories” (“Pragmatism”). My pragmatic concerns were those of interviewing my mother and of my capacity as a volunteer at Boys Hope Girls Hope; both situations could have affected the interview process and my objectivity, and therefore impacted the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the entire study. To address pragmatic concerns, one must be specific and systematic in carrying out tasks (Peirce, 1905). To alleviate both pragmatic concerns in this research study, I re-examined the steps outlined in the data collection and data analysis process and followed them explicitly to maintain the objectivity and validity of the research study.

Louisiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Exempted Status for this study was requested and was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Louisiana State University. The approved application may be found in Appendix A.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This study was conducted to determine what supports and resources first generation college students need to be successful and how community mentor programs can help bridge the support gap for them through college. The three first generation college students in the sample participated in a dual phased interview process. The first phase was completing an optional demographic data form that all of the participants opted to complete. The second phase included the semi-structured interview of the participants that began with participants sharing their personal stories about growing up as a first generation college student.

Phase I

The demographic survey in the first phase allowed the collection of information to determine what relationship, if any, the participants' demographic information had on their stories and circumstances. The short answer format of the demographic survey allowed the participants the freedom to describe their personal histories. The information obtained included gender, ethnicity, race, birth year, high school graduation year, college major, college minor, year awarded bachelor's degree, graduate major/minor if applicable and the year graduate degree was awarded, and current occupation.

Participant Demographics

All participants were Black, but only one was a male. They described their ethnicity as African American or not Hispanic. The first interviewee, Meagan, was 30 years old while the second interviewee, Brenda, was 60 years old. The third interviewee, John, was 58 years old. Brenda and John both graduated from high school in the 1970s and Meagan graduated in 2003. Their undergraduate majors varied; Meagan's was general studies major with minors in psychology, sociology, and communication studies while Brenda's major was social work, and John double majored in psychology and government. At the time of the interview, none of the

participants had a graduate degree although Meagan's tentative graduation date for a Master in Social Work was December 11, 2015. Meagan worked as the resident educator for a local community mentor program where John was the executive director. Brenda was a retired social worker.

Demographic Analysis

The participants were interconnected by their college majors and minors and chosen occupations. They all worked in service fields and with mostly Black and other minority students. Social work and mentoring was the commonality in their service professions which raised the question if their past experiences as a first generation college student prompted them to work with first generation college students as a form of paying forward to the next generation.

Phase II

As the purpose of this study was to determine if first generation college students' lack of support can be addressed through participation in community mentor programs, I prepared semi-structured interview questions for the second phase of the interview process. Following the narrative tradition of inquiry, I first allowed the participants to tell their personal stories of growing up as a first generation college student. After the participants shared their stories, the semi-structured interview questions were asked to understand the impact of each participant's story and life experiences as a first generation student.

Meagan's Story

Meagan grew up as the child of a single mother. Meagan shared that attending college was not a choice for her as her family always verbalized that going to college was not an option. She shared that the only choice she had was where she was going to attend college. She knew that she wanted to be an engineer because engineers made a lot of money, and she wanted to

make a lot of money but she didn't really like math and science. Meagan was a scholar athlete in high school and therefore had to maintain at least at 2.5 to continue to participate in sports. She also participated in several mentoring programs growing up including Louisiana Leadership Institute, Church groups, NESBE, and REHAMS. She said she enjoyed participating in several programs because she was able to make "multiple connections" and find the best mentor for her. Though Meagan was a first generation college student, her sister attended and graduated from college her. She mentioned visiting her sister in California while in high school and deciding that if graduating from college afforded her sister the comfortable life style she had, then she would also go to college. She received emotional and financial support from her mom, sister, and aunt to get through high school and to college, but once she arrived on campus her circumstances changed and not for the better.

Though Meagan was a scholar athlete and was very popular in high school as a result of her participation in several activities and good grades, she noted feeling alone in college. She said that if you are not a student athlete in college then you are just one of the 33,000 students attending LSU. She also noted that being Black added more weight. The researcher wondered what her race had to do with the pressure that she felt. As I went to an Historically Black College and University, my race did not play a part in my identity on campus...or did it? Meagan noted that as a first generation college student she did not have a lot of information on specifically what she wanted to do. Her sister had a degree, but lived in California and so was only able to provide emotional support. Her aunt bought her laptop and her mom also supported her emotionally and financially, but that was where the support stopped. She struggled and lost her academic scholarships because she did not have the resources and support to be successful and had nowhere to turn until she met with her academic advisors at the Center for Academic

Support after she had lost her scholarships. They helped her realize that her engineering major did not fit and that she should follow her passion, which was evident in her high grades in all of her sociology and psychology courses. She changed her major to general studies with three minors and graduated. She was in school to earn her Master in Social Work, her true passion.

Meagan made all the right decisions and was involved in several mentoring programs while in high school, but once she arrived at college those programs stopped and she struggled to and lost her scholarships, which then led to her having to work her way through school. Her academic advisors helped her through her struggles and eventually to earn a bachelor's degree, but she had to struggle before she received their help.

Brenda's Story

Brenda grew up the oldest of six girls and noted that she was pushed by her mom to go as far as she could in school so she attended college after graduating from Baton Rouge High. Consequently, as the researcher's mother, Brenda also pushed the researcher to go as far as she could, even past the bachelor's degree. Brenda was a non-traditional first generation college student as her grandmother had gone to college and was a teacher, but since neither parent graduated from college, she had no academic support or access to information and resources. In high school she was a good student and graduated 11th in a class of 263 in 1973. She participated in the YWCA and met a social worker, Ms. Jones, whom Brenda thought went above and beyond her job description to help the student participants. She provided extra resources, had a library at the center, and answered any questions that they had. This support from the YWCA that she received in high school was critical to her success. Fortunately, as a second generation college student, this support was given to the researcher by Brenda throughout life. Brenda noted that Ms. Jones became her role model and she decided to go to college and major in social

work even though her grandmother had been a teacher and expressed a desire for Brenda to follow in her footsteps.

Brenda attended Southern University and majored in social work. However, once she arrived at college, the academic support and access to resources that she had received from Ms. Jones and the YWCA stopped. She was on her own and she felt like the college advisors treated all of the students like they were in a factory. They were not genuinely concerned about them and their well-being like Ms. Jones and the YWCA had been; they were just doing their jobs. She received some support from her family; she received financial support from her father the first year, and emotional and financial support from her mom, who was also raising her five younger sisters the entire time. Even though her mom didn't go to college she preached to Brenda about the importance of her attending and becoming successful so she would not have to struggle. Brenda noted having to work her way through college and receiving a Basic Opportunity Grant from the government. As the researcher had resources and information through scholarships, the researcher did not have to worry about finances. Interestingly enough, it was my mom who stressed the importance of my earning a full scholarship to college, which the researcher did. When she was about to graduate, she was offered a graduate assistantship at the LSU Social Work department to teach a course and receive free tuition to earn her Master in Social Work at the same time. However, she opted to go straight into her career field, thinking she needed to hurry and begin earning a salary. She noted that this was a big mistake and had someone been available to talk to her while she was contemplating this decision, she would have probably gone on to get her master's degree. When the researcher was completing her degree in education, the researcher told her mom she would take some time off from school and go straight to work. She was vehemently against this decision and persistently voiced her opposition to the

researcher's decision until the researcher finally went back to graduate school a year later. The researcher now understands her persistence. Brenda eventually went back to get her master's degree, but did not finish.

John's Story

John grew up in urban Philadelphia. His parents did not finish grade school, but emphasized a college education. He always knew that he would go to college and among his siblings and him there was an executive director, a PhD, and a lawyer. Though his sisters opted to not go to college, they worked for the city and federal government and did well financially. He noted he was nurtured to be successful and had good grades throughout school and college; he was a "B" student in college when he attended Cornell University, a challenging college. He had social and emotional support from his family and academic support through a mentoring program with which he was involved. A Better Chance was a residential program that mentored academically capable first generation college students. He lived in rural Wisconsin and attended one of the most prestigious high schools in the country where only the very rich attended; he noted that a Supreme Court justice attended his high school. A professional Black couple who served as role models and mentors ran his mentoring program. They helped the students to learn discipline and internal motivation to succeed against the odds expected of them. He noted that the program taught them the skills they needed to be successful in high school, but did not focus beyond high school.

Most of the students in A Better Chance went on to Ivy League schools but not all of them succeeded because, while A Better Chance taught them great high school survival, it did not teach them how to navigate college. The researcher thought this was very interesting, given John's own revelation about Supreme Court justices having attended his high school, though the

future justices of course were not in his mentor program. However, it makes the researcher question why the mentoring program did not also teach the students about success in college. John did well and graduated but he noted a decrease of support and resources available to him upon entering college.

Analyzing their Stories

All three participants had similar feelings of a decrease in support between high school and college. Their mentoring programs provided them with intense support, resources, and information throughout high school, but they did not help them understand how to navigate college. Though all three expressed feelings of isolation and bewilderment at some point during their college careers, only Meagan discussed having an actual academic struggle. The interview questions were developed to get a more comprehensive picture of first generation college students' struggle for support and resources through college.

Semi Structured Interview Questions

To understand the supports and resources first generation college students need to be successful, I asked the following questions of all three participants:

1. What is your story and why did you decide to go to college?
2. Was this decision hard to make?
3. What kind of family support did you have?
4. What kind of grades did you make in school?
5. What supports and resources do you think first generation college students need?
6. Where do you think they can get these supports and resources?
7. Were you involved in some type of mentoring program growing up?

8. What impact, if any, did your involvement with the program have on your life? If you were not involve with a mentoring program, what impact could participating in a mentoring program have had on your life?
9. What are potential negative impacts community mentor programs can have on first generation college students?
10. Overall, what role do you think community mentor programs play in bridging the support gap for first generation college students?

The next three questions were asked only of Meagan who currently worked as the resident educator at a local community mentor program and developed a relationship with the students, their parents, and teachers, and therefore could attest to what supports and resources current first generation college students need.

11. Is your organization providing the support that you described was needed for first generation college students? How do you measure this?
12. How are the students in your program performing in middle/high school? College?
13. What overall impact has this program had on the program participants?

The Research Questions

Each of the survey questions related to one of three research study questions. Each research question gave rise to three themes after completing the coding and analysis processes. The resulting themes are discussed separately in the next three chapters.

CHAPTER 5: WHAT SUPPORTS DO FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS NEED?

First generation college students need support to succeed. Pyne and Means (2013) noted that though there have been many improvements in college access for underrepresented populations of students like first generation college students, the retention and graduation rates are still obstacles to their success. The first research question addressed Pyne and Means' concerns by asking, "What supports and resources do first generation college students need?" and examining what those supports look like. The participants' interviews led to the emergence of several themes of needed systematic support including systems of emotional and financial support, systems of information and trustworthy advisement, and systems of motivation.

Systems of Emotional and Financial Support

Meagan, Brenda, and John expressed the need for systematic emotional and financial support and all three reported receiving these supports from family and outside agencies. Emotional support was the first type of support described by all three interviewees. Meagan noted, "It was always verbalized in my family, which was single parent household, that college was a requirement." Brenda added, "...my mother pushed us in school as far as we could so I went to college in order to get kind of job I wanted." John asserted college was a family value and his parents "emphasized having a college education." Meagan specifically reported receiving emotional support from family, namely her mom, sister, and aunt.

My mom told me the outcomes, the benefits, and importance of having an education and my sister also has a college degree... She just pounded it in my mind that education was important and that she expected me to not only go to college, but to graduate from college so that I could have a good job, so that I could basically make money for things I wanted.

Meagan's family equated success with a college degree, but what was most important was what she said next. Her mom wanted her to "...also give back to the community. So education and

community involvement was weighed heavily in our household. The support I received from her was that constant verbalization of expectations.” In Meagan’s family, the reciprocity of getting an education was to give back to others following in her footsteps. As they shared the same mom and values, that push to give back to others drove her sister to help her so much. Megan also described the emotional support from her sister and guidance counselor and teachers.

My sister supported me with encouragement because we lived in separate states...And I always stayed connected to the guidance counselor and my teachers always reinforced the importance of education so I just had this circle of emotional support always expecting me to do well in college.

Brenda also described the emotional support she received from her family. “As I said earlier my mother pushed her daughters to go as far as they could so in order to do that I had to go to college. In order to get the kind of job that I wanted.” Brenda further described the “peace of mind” first generation college students need:

Wherever your living situation is you need to make sure all of that is good and working for you so that you can have peace of mind because you need peace of mind to study. Because being a first generation college student is difficult because your parents don’t have all of those other resources you need. They don’t know things to tell you to look for and ask for or do.

John also discussed the emotional support her received from his family. He noted,

Ultimately one of the biggest reasons I went to college has to do with the fact that my parents had four years of education between them. They emphasized having a college education. First generation students need social and emotional competence.

John underscored the word competence in his response. As competency is possession of required skill and knowledge, he highlighted the necessity of emotional and social support for first generation college students to be able to survive in the world. He added, “Social, emotional, academic, economic, ethical, spiritual, leadership, entrepreneurship, and physical fitness are the gumbo that makes it work.” This quote affirmed that John placed much emphasis on emotional and social competence.

Each participant received emotional support from different sources, but particularly from their families. This is important because although their families did not earn higher education degrees, they deemed it important for their children to earn those degrees so that they could be successful. The three participants talked about the decision to go to college as being natural and expected from their families. Their families were unable to attain that goal, but required their children do what they could not do. The words “expected and pushed” were used numerous times in each interview and, in all three cases, the families directly linked success with a college education; this implied that their parents thought that their lack of education prohibited them from being successful. When talking about their parents, the participants spoke with pride at the support they received from their parents. They noted that their parents didn’t want them to be like them, but wanted something better for them, which could only happen with a college education. The narrative regarding systems of emotional support in the three participants’ families was “Education equals success”.

The three participants also described systems of financial support. Meagan mentioned the unexpected financial support received from her sister and aunt:

When I was ready to move on campus, she [my sister] also supported me financially through investments that I had no idea she made for me. My aunt bought me my first laptop that I still use today. When I got accepted into LSU she bought my laptop for me, but I also had to do research on my laptop so...definitely had to work for it.

Meagan elaborated on the need for financial stability adding:

Typically we [first generation college students] don’t apply for scholarships and if you don’t have the grades to maintain those scholarships but you want to graduate, you’re gonna need something to pay for all this...these expenses. And I try not to promote student loans because I’ve just worked my way through college. If that, if push comes to shove of course apply, but you’re definitely gonna need some financial resources so any teenager I meet with a job I always encourage them to save now.

Meagan's valuable financial lesson is one that she passes on to current first generation college students.

Brenda noted how combined help from her parents and a grant secured her financially.

Well, my first semester only my father paid that, but after that my mother made sure I had gas money along with I worked full time jobs while I was a full time student. So, I did receive a Basic Educational Opportunity grant...is what they were called back then. I received that \$400 a semester along with working and my mother pitching in her little pennies to buy my gas back and forth to school so I was able to make it.

Brenda described the importance of important financial stability. "Well, you need the peace of mind knowing that your tuition is going to be paid. You're going to be able to get there so your transportation needs to be taken care of." To Brenda, peace of mind was not worrying about basic life needs and focusing on learning, the purpose of college.

John discussed financial competence through entrepreneurship noting that first generation college students need active and passive income to understand entrepreneurship and wealth. He described making money through karate instruction and having a friend who bought a Pac Man machine and earned \$25.00 a day by placing it at a fraternity house, both passive money-making ventures. He said,

Active, passive, portfolio, inherited, and entrepreneurial income are wealth. When one is up the other may be down, but you ensure yourself a safety net. I became an entrepreneur at age 13 and this thing called karate helped me save enough money to pay for college.

Financial support came in various forms for the three participants. Meagan and Brenda received support from family, but in different ways. Meagan was the youngest participant and was a first generation college student, but her sister attended college before her and had enough financial stability to help her, as did her mom and aunt. Brenda's case was different because she was the oldest of six girls and her description of her mom's "pennies" illustrated how tight money was in their household. In Brenda's case, the financial sacrifice was felt more deeply

because as the oldest, her sisters looked up to her, and her parents put all of their faith in her. Brenda's situation was similar to Meagan's older sister, the trailblazer in Meagan's family and thereby a source of support to Meagan; as the oldest Brenda did not have that support. John did not mention his parents sacrificing money for his education, but he was similar to Meagan in that they both were the last siblings in the first generation of college students in their families, so there was someone there to support them.

The three participants discussed the need to work and support themselves through college despite the other financial support that they received. This implied that although they had levels of support, they were still financially insecure and were unable to focus only on their studies. Brenda's mention of needing "peace of mind" illustrated this point. How does one attain that peace of mind if money sources are a constant concern?

According to the participants, emotional and financial supports were high priorities, but the opportunities to receive them decreased upon entrance to college. Meagan noted,

In high school I was a scholar athlete and I had to make the grade or I would be benched, but in college it was different because if you're not an athlete, you are just another one of the 33,000 students attending LSU.

Meagan keyed in on a plague of numerous college students each year; many people have the perception that athletes get the most attention and everyone else fades into the abyss. Is this the reality? I think yes. Athletics make money for colleges, first generation college students do not. Budget priorities impact the support available and given.

Meagan said something troubling regarding race:

And then I'm Black so that added weight on there... and the only person I had to talk about college was my sister because I am first generation college student. So it was very difficult as far as academics because I didn't get a lot of exposure into what I really wanted to do. I went into the major of engineering and struggled academically to the point of losing my scholarships and financial aid.

Why did Meagan's race add pressure? Many institutions have diversity centers that are meant to ease the burden of students who have feelings of cultural isolation. First generation college students may not know that these centers exist and the question becomes where was Meagan's advisor, assigned to her at registration, and where was that advisor when Meagan began to struggle? What are the advisors doing and whom are they advising if not students like Meagan?

Brenda did not struggle academically, but reported feeling alone in college. She noted, The advisors treated us like a factory. They were just doing their jobs and pushing us through the system. They weren't available to answer questions and things like that that Ms. Jones did in Y Teens.

Again, the question of college advisor absenteeism arose. Where was Brenda's advisor in her times of need?

John was frank in discussing that his organization did not mentally prepare him for college. He noted,

My mentoring organization, A Better Chance, did a great job of helping us succeed in high school, but I didn't even know what a college major was until I got there and then I had to figure it out on my own.

These narratives show the lack of continuous support for first generation college students. Rather than walk them to the college door and drop them off, they must be guided as they were guided through high school. Meagan recounted that her membership in numerous organizations in high school and her scholarships did not stop her from failing academically. Brenda felt like she was a part of a large factory and in essence on an assembly line of thousands of students who were pushed through the system. John admitted to not even knowing what a college major was upon his entrance. What does this all mean? It means these students need to receive continuous support through this important transition so that dropping out is not an option. Good advisors rescued Meagan but according to statistics (Hodgman, 2013; Macias, 2013), her case is the exception and not the rule.

Systems of Information and Trustworthy Advisement

Meagan's near failure in college was prevented by good advisement. But, is this advisement always available? When asked where these students found information and trustworthy advisement other than their family members, they all mentioned the community mentor programs in which they were involved. They reported having a mentor or being a part of an organization during high school and/or college that provided information and trustworthy advisement. Meagan participated in numerous community mentor programs throughout school and was a scholar athlete, but college was drastically different. She explained:

I was in a lot of academic and scholastic programs in high school and LSU, but because of my grades, I lost my scholarships until one of my academic advisors told me to go see Dr. McGuire in the Center for Academic Success.

My question was answered; someone did have access to Meagan's case but did that person choose not to address it sooner or must one be failing to get help? I hear about Beacon at LSU, which is a program in which any person can with contact with the student can anonymously recommend them for counseling services, but the question arises, "Were programs like this around 10 years ago?"

Meagan described her experience with the staff at the CAS.

Dr. McGuire introduced me to Ms. Ball and Ms. Guillot who all surrounded me into a circle of support and told me about meta-cognition and effective studying strategies. They also talked to me about Bloom's taxonomy and gave me a lot of resources. And then, Dr. McGuire sent me to her sister as my college advisor, Ms. Yancy, which changed my perception.

Meagan's information and trustworthy advisement came from the Center for Academic Success, but not until after she failed academically and lost all of her scholarships. Nevertheless, their advisement and the particular mentorship of Ms. Yancy proved successful for Meagan.

Ms. Yancy said, "Meagan you're failing all of your math and science courses, but you're acing all of your courses that end in 'ology', why is that?" I explained to her that it was

because it's not like I'm studying in those classes. I'm genuinely interested and I don't have to put an extra 3-4 hours into studying when I take exams in those classes versus when I take exams in my core classes. She said, "Why don't you major in something with an 'ology'?" I was like, "because I want to be an engineer and engineers make money." So she told me this one statement: "If you don't make the grades and graduate you're not being an engineer making any money." That was my defining moment.

A simple conversation between a mentor and mentee can make a difference. Together Meagan and Ms. Yancy figured out her life's passion.

She put together a plan and I took a lot of 'ologies' including psychology, sociology, and anything dealing with children and the mind. I then took a few communications studies classes and graduated in general studies with three 'ology' minors. Her advisement led me to my dream career of being a social worker and I'm graduating with my Master in Social Work this December.

Meagan did receive the information and trustworthy advisement that she needed from college in time, but is that always the case? Meagan noted, "You need a strong support system that will be brutally honest with you. You need people that you can trust around you, people who have failed before so they can tell you." People who have failed before. Do we know if her advisors failed before working with Meagan? No, but their knowledge helped Meagan to succeed.

Brenda's narrative was different from Meagan's because she did not have any advisement or access to information in college. She had no one to talk to at college.

I didn't have someone that I could go to that could give me suggestions and answers because there was some things that once I was in college I said I didn't know this if somebody had told me maybe I wouldn't have done this or done that. For instance, when I was getting ready to graduate from Southern University's Social Work Department, some students were asked to join the LSU staff to teach undergraduate social workers and get our master's degree paid for. I was like, "No, I got to work and make money."

Most first generation college students desire, and their parents prepare them, for one thing ...making money, but how do they to know there are different ways to make money if not told by some trustworthy source? Brenda further explained,

They didn't explain to me that I would be getting paid to teach and earning my master's degree at the same time. Now that I look back I made a mistake, but I didn't have anyone to bridge that gap with me. Mentor programs can... I think they can help with that with students.

Brenda seemed to regret that she never went back to get her master's degree. Brenda is my mom and it's important that I mention that when I went to college, she made me promise to at least get my master's degree, which I did three years after I received my undergraduate degree. I learned from her college experience and she advised me. I trusted her and did as she advised, but what about my mom's college experience? Why was there no trustworthy advisor to provide her with the advice and information that she needed? There are thousands of first generation college students with similar experiences to Brenda who rush to get into the workforce and make money, which sometimes prevents them from furthering their education. Who helps these students?

Meagan and Brenda exposed an interesting dynamic: the inconsistency of society in providing first generation students with the accurate information and the trustworthy advisement that they need while in college. Strong and consistent systems of information and trustworthy advisement are integral to the success of first generation college students.

Systems of Motivation

Meagan, Brenda, and John frequently discussed motivation. Meagan's talked about how her mom motivated her by talking about the importance of college when Meagan was in high school. Her mom told her to "graduate from college so you can get a good job and basically make the money for things you want." Her mom motivated her by describing the success she would find with a college degree and her sister motivated her by exposing her to what success physically looked like when Meagan visited her in California. Motivation inspired Meagan even in high school when she was required to keep a certain grade point average to run track and play volleyball.

My motivational factor was participating in track meets and participating in volleyball games. Academics were very important to my coaches so even though the Louisiana High School Athletic Association set the minimum grade point average for participation at 2.0, my coaches set it at 2.5. So that was my motivational factor. I wanted to play in games. I didn't want to be benched. I had to make state for the track team and in order to be on the track team I had to make the grades.

Meagan applied this motivational principle to her college studies.

You need a strong support system...not only people who have failed, but people who are comfortable in exposing their failures in a way that motivates you and not to deter you from your passion because it may not be their passion or discourage you, but in a way that encourages that person so you need a strong...a very strong motivating system.

Meagan did not want to be benched so she worked hard to stay in the game. Ms. Yancy's advisement propelled Meagan to success, while Brenda's motivation came from her mother's advice to get an education so that she could get a good job. "I watched how hard my mom worked at the washateria to help support me and my sisters and decided that I wanted something different, something better. Mostly, I wanted to be an example for her little sisters." Fear motivated her- the fear of failure with the will to succeed for her little sisters to whom she was a role model.

John's motivation was a result of his participation in a mentoring program for inner city youth.

The program was tough and some people couldn't make it out. An African American couple ran the house and both had college degrees. One was a pharmaceutical sales rep and the other was a teacher. Both were articulate, dressed a certain way, and spoke a certain way; they were role models. Prior to the program I had seen similar things from my brothers and sisters who had gone on to college and so they were all my role models. They motivated me towards success. Many didn't make it through that program because they didn't have the drive. It helped me see that yes, I'm going to fall, but what to do when I got up.

Regardless of the source of their motivation, something or someone motivated all three towards their goals of graduating from college. Motivation allowed them to see what they wanted and to go after it, and they all graduated. How can we guarantee that all first generation

college students will meet with the same success as these participants? How can first generation college students be inspired to push towards their goals?

Discussion: Connecting it All

The literature available on the support and resources needed by first generation college students aligns with the participants' interview data. Literature of the past ten years points to a cyclical gap in necessary supports for first generation college students and also points out that the gap is widening. As recently as ten years ago, a lack of support and resources was felt amongst first generation college students (Terenzini et al., 1996), and now decades later, the same gap exists (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). Although colleges have increased efforts to provide support and resources to positively impact retention and graduation rates of all of their students (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), first generation college students' receipt of these supports and resources, if received at all, lags behind those of other students. These students simply do not receive enough of the emotional and financial support, trustworthy advisement, and motivational supports to be successful (Ware & Ramos, 2013).

Emotional and financial support are foundational. The lack of available emotional and financial support can cause first generation college students to struggle (Pascarella et al., 2004), which was true in Meagan's case. She did not have the same level of encouragement in college that she had received in high school, failed her courses and eventually lost her financial aid and scholarships, and had to work her way through school. Atherton (2014) affirmed that the common struggles of first generation college students are both emotional and financial.

Brenda also experienced a lack of emotional and financial support in college and described feeling like being in a factory of students that advisors just pushed through, whereas her high school mentor Ms. Jones was always there for her. Financially, she was dependent on

her parents, a government grant, and her own full time job to make ends meet. John “figured out college on his own.”

According to the data, the experience of most first generation college students (Atherton, 2014; Heller, 2001) is like being lost in a foreign country. The students do not know which way to go and to whom they can turn. The less tenacious students give up all together and drop out (Laden, 2004). Sometimes the pressures are too great for them to handle on their own (Bragg, Kim, & Barnett, 2006; Heller, 2001; Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Terenzini et al., 1996). The participants’ responses overwhelmingly aligned with the body of literature, so what is the next step in bridging the emotional and financial gap for first generation college students?

Meagan and Brenda expressed a greater need than John for more information about the college process from trustworthy sources. Meagan noted she received a lot of information about college in her mentor programs, but once she got there she was lost. She noted, “...In college, if you’re not an athlete, you’re just another one of the 33,000 students.” Meagan also indicated that her race also played a role in her feelings of loneliness. Because she felt alone and had no information about the support and resources available, she struggled and lost her scholarships. When she met with her college advisors, they helped her change her major and graduate in a field that she loved. Brenda noted that she received information about college during high school from her mentor Ms. Jones. She noted, “Ms. Jones answered any questions we had and if she didn’t know the answers, she would go and find them for us.” Ms. Jones also set up a resource library for the students at the YWCA office. Though Ms. Jones was a trusted source of information and resources during high school, Brenda felt confused in college. Though she graduated from college, she noted that she did not have good advice on whether she should attend graduate school on an assistantship or become employed to make money. She noted, “Had

someone been there to advise me, I probably would have chosen to go straight through graduate school.” John received information from the mentors in A Better Chance and noted that the couple who ran the residential program was a great source of information for him and the other participants. They gave them the support and resources they needed to do well in high school, but were not taught how to “do college”. Ghazzawi & Jagannathan (2011) noted increased access to information can help first generation college students successfully matriculate. Like John, Shields (2012) wrote, “As a first generation college student, I had to learn how to do college” (p. 33). Even researchers admit that being a first generation student almost guarantees a lack of information. Alleviating this lack is possible; Terenzini et al. (1996) posited that tutoring programs are another source of support for first generation college students. Meagan was the only study participant who sought information and advisement after her struggles and she found life-altering advisement. Brenda and John were not as fortunate, which begs the question, “What should determine the quality of information and advisement first generation college students receive?”

Finally, motivation played a significant role in the success of first generation college students. Someone or something motivated the participants’ decisions to attempt college. Whether it was to make money, help support the family, provide a good example, or save the world, the three participants had motivating factors in their lives. Meagan was motivated by intrinsic and extrinsic factors throughout high school and college, while Brenda and John’s motivators were mostly intrinsic. Supporting data shows that motivators are supports that first generation students genuinely need (Macias, 2013; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014) and this was true in the participants’ cases.

What does all of this mean for first generation college students? First generation college students have basic support and resource needs that must be met for them to be successful. Although the participants' sources of support and resources varied, they were available at some point in their lives. Although from different decades, the participants named common supports and resources that were affirmed by the body of literature. Emotional and financial support, trustworthy information and advisement, and motivation were the three most common themes from the three narratives on what supports and resources first generation students need to be successful.

CHAPTER 6: WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF PARTICIPATING IN COMMUNITY MENTOR PROGRAMS?

The three participants were involved in high school mentoring programs that provided various supports and resources. They gave rich descriptions of their programs and swelled with pride when discussing them. Meagan noted,

I know I received a lot of support from my family, but most of my support came from community volunteerism. It started with Cleo Fields Congressional Classroom that's now Louisiana Leadership Institute. I was involved in that. I was also a part of the high school athletes that provided a lot of support. My religious organization did too. I participated in REHAMS, the engineering program at LSU, and I was in NESBE as well as HHMI which is the Howard Hughes Medical Institute with the office of strategic initiatives at LSU, High School Beta and Magnet programs. Many of the programs weren't necessarily the programs that society believes are mentoring programs, but I just wasn't connected with one person.

For Meagan, it was not so much the mission of the program to prepare students for any particular field as much as it was the participation with a group, groups in which all pushed towards a goal of getting an education.

Brenda also recalled participation with community mentors with an equally positive outlook, but first noted the change in times and availability of organizations. I asked her where first generation college students could get the support they needed.

Well, today there are a lot of outside programs that are beneficial to adding to a child's education...I don't know the word I want to use but, the resources are there whereas they weren't as prevalent in my day [1970s]. There were a lot of agencies that have after school programs and things like that. We didn't have that as much, but there was Y Teen with the YWCA available and I joined and enjoyed it.

Joining Y Teens marked a turning point in Brenda's life and she enjoyed what it offered.

John was even more excited about his program. When I asked him about participation, he started with stating the organization's history and mission.

A Better Chance was established in 1963 as an outreach to academically inclined young Black males and females from impoverished areas. I came out of Philadelphia under very dangerous circumstances...violence and gangs. The program was similar to this [his

current organization] but they shipped me to Wisconsin and we lived in a house. They supplied us with a tutor in the house and role models. We went to an affluent school like St. Joseph's Academy and Catholic High. Many of us went to Ivy League Colleges from there.

When describing their high school mentoring programs, the participants practically lit up. They smiled and talked as if they remembered each positive experience that they had as if it had happened recently when, in fact, the youngest participant's experience happened more than a decade ago, and the older experiences happened more than four decades ago. I wondered, "If they can remember their programs with such fondness, could they also pinpoint exactly what those programs provided?" I probed more deeply into the impact of their participation in the programs on their lives and two themes emerged: exposure to a positive environment and exposure to the college experience.

Exposure to a Positive Environment

The participants noted the exposure to a positive environment as the most memorable piece of their participation. Meagan, Brenda, and John discussed how the examples set forth by their mentors deeply affected them. Megan noted her ability to effectively connect with people through communication helped her secure a variety of mentors. Meagan discussed the fun in "picking out my own role models" and described situations in which she simply walked up to someone whom she thought was doing a great job in her various mentoring programs and asked that person to be her mentor.

It was an ability that was passed down from my mom to actually form a connection with people that have the qualities that you like. Just as simple as that and literally telling them [potential mentors], I like these qualities about you and I would love to have those qualities too...would you be my mentor? And that's literally what I still do to this day.

Brenda admitted choosing her profession based on the overwhelming impact of her mentor. She switched from a majoring in education to become a teacher like her grandmother to majoring

in social work like Ms. Jones, her mentor. She noted Ms. Jones also made the environment “warm and inviting.” She also noted that there were a lot of movies during the 1970s that popularized the social work profession and how social workers made a big difference in the world.

Ms. Jones, the social worker, went above and beyond her responsibilities to help the students that were enrolled in that program. And that’s really when I decided that I wanted to go into social work because of what she did. She provided extra resources and set up a library. If we had questions, she would answer right away or find the answer for us.

Brenda’s mentor made their environment better for them to function as first generation college students.

John expounded upon his current work at a local mentoring program to describe the ideal environment for first generation college students.

All of the resources needed for a positive environment are being offered here. We just went to Old Navy for a job presentation. As simplistic as it was, it enabled them to share who they are and begin to understand that they are going to have to sell themselves... When they apply for this program we show them that we care, who we are, and what we are going to do to help.

In John’s program, building the relationship comes first and then they expose the students to what could come to them if they put forth the effort. He discussed the team-like atmosphere needed.

This is a team effort and they have to be present too. They are being taught the value of team in the application process and we share this with their parents too. Even the non-residential kids are given a nurturing meal, not just food but how are you going to reach these goals: career, life skills, preparing for college? I call this kitchen table talk. There are lessons learned all the time. Even as basic as for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. We help them learn what they need to do to also help themselves.

After describing the environment that his program provided for first generation college students, he described how his teachers and role models supported him and the others in the program with a positive environment that he could not get at home.

The Black couple who ran the home always looked professional and they created a family like atmosphere for us. I had professors of physics and chemistry who would show up to games and yell for me in the stands. They were encouraging and inspiring and didn't put limitation on powers of thinking. The environment that I came from you couldn't go a day without being shot or stabbed...teachers or students.

The exposure to a positive environment was a leading factor in Meagan, Brenda, and John's participation in mentoring programs and aligns with the research which notes mentors carry expertise while requiring care for the situations from which their mentees come (Stewart, 2006). This care for the mentees' well-being necessitates mentoring programs exposing first generation college students to a positive environment.

Exposure to the College Experience

Exposure to college experience was a result of participation in a mentoring program.

Meagan was exposed to college life through her mentor programs and prior to attending college.

She enjoyed the exposure and knew what she wanted to major in once she got there.

Participating in several programs takes you out of your comfort zone; it forces you to communicate with others. It forces you to have experience and exposure and you get the opportunity to watch other [affluent] people give back to their community and communicate with one another. I knew I wanted to be an engineer so I found engineers to mentor me and from there it's just a lot of observation and application.

Meagan's exposure to the college experience built her confidence in her abilities and she knew what she wanted to become. Brenda similarly gained exposure to what she wanted to be through her mentor Ms. Jones.

A lot of movies in the 1970s showed positive images of Black social workers or mother figures. I felt like that's what I had to do to change the world. I spoke to my grandmother who had been a teacher and told her that I wanted to be a social worker so that I could help people. She asked me, "Wouldn't you be helping people as a teacher?" I was too idealistic to understand what she meant then, but I knew that I wanted to be like Ms. Jones. She exposed me to changing the world through helping kids in social work.

Conversely, John did not gain experience and exposure to college life while in his mentoring program as it focused more on their transition to a positive environment after high school

graduation. However, he noted that such exposure is important to mentoring programs and wished there had been more such involvement in his program in the 1970s. I met John in a foundations course and he described his program and the need for more connection to college life for his students through building mentoring relationships with local universities and their students. He thought fulfilling this need would give the students exposure to the success of which they dreamed.

The three participants believed that exposure to the college experience was an integral piece of mentoring programs of first generation college students. Such students are doing something that no one in their families has done before so it is crucial that they are informed of the processes, procedures, and pitfalls. Although the three did not have those experiences in their programs, they did have an overall positive view of the programs in which they participated. Although their programs were not perfect, the participants noted that they did have an impact, whether at high school or college level. Ultimately, the impact of community mentor programs is positive, however I strove for a more holistic viewpoint.

Counter Examples of Mentoring Program Participation

To gain a balanced perspective of the impact of Meagan, Brenda, and John's participation in mentoring programs, I asked them what might be a negative impact of being involved with a program. Meagan noted labeling as a negative factor.

The labeling of just coming from a single parent household and the people over at the program thinking that our family may not have financial resources. I don't believe that my mom struggled financially. If we did, she had a very good way of hiding it for me. But just that labeling.

Meagan felt oppressed by labeling. She listed the labels by which she was identified, and I, too, felt oppressed as I have been identified with many of the same labels and I am a first generation college student. Meagan named the labels. "The label of being an athlete, of being a

female...very vocal female. And then the label of coming from a single parent household and them just not understanding it because they themselves didn't experience those types of things."

Meagan's experience is similar to many first generation college students. Often the people who are helping them have no idea how dire their circumstances may be, but they have the knowledge and resources to help. John had a similar experience with labeling.

I think the theme of first generation college students is economic disparity equaling behavioral problems. When I went to Wisconsin, most of the kids I went to school with were very affluent. Though we had a stable life at the mentor program, I had never seen as many drugs and alcohol before, even in my own environment. We may have had six packs back in Philly, but they had kegs at parties that their parents had bought for them.

John also experienced mis-labeling. To many, John's background automatically associated him as an academic and behavioral deviant, however, he shared that at his school in Wisconsin, the wealthy students actually behaved and performed worse academically than the students in the mentoring program. He described particularly problematic behaviors. "They would run a Mercedes Benz into the wall and their parents would buy them another one the next day. That kind of affluence can make a kid think that there are not consequences." The couple who ran John's mentoring program taught values. He noted the responsibility of also doing the same for today's first generation college students. "We have to teach our young people that wealth isn't just your money. Getting an education, developing consciousness, learning how to learn is wealth. If we weren't careful, we might not have learned that in our program."

Meagan and John experienced labeling and, in both situations, people on the outside automatically assumed Meagan and John were "less than". In Meagan's case, she had less money. In John's case, he was assumed to have less morals than his affluent peers. In both cases, the outsiders were wrong, but impressions endure.

Brenda's had a different angle of a negative impact of mentoring programs. She noted,

What could be negative is what the programs are teaching or suggesting that you do if it's contrary to what your parents are saying that you should or shouldn't do. Then it creates a situation where you have to decide what's best.

I probed further and she gave an example of a situation in which this could happen.

You know you say my parents don't know this cause they've never been to college but this person doesn't really know me so it creates a situation...sometimes it can be negative and you just...I don't know....you just keep trotting along and hope it all works out and it usually does.

Point to ponder: How can a program ensure that it will not offer advice contrary to that of their participants' parents? This is the point where relationships are examined...trusting relationships. With the communication in place, there should never be a situation where the first generation college student has to choose who is right. The focus should assure that they have the support they need to graduate. These counterexamples add interesting dimensions to the question of the impact of mentoring programs

Discussion: Connecting it All

Bell (1980) coined the term interest convergence to denote when the powerful help the powerless. In this case, the powerful are mentoring programs with access to resources and support needed by first generation college students. They give to help them graduate, but they also are recipients. Being successful is their mission and successful mentoring programs gain increased funding and access to resources, good reputations, and more participants (Carr, 1988; Pryor, 1992; Dupper, 1993; Dennison, 2000). With the security of support and resources they can expose students to positive environments and the college experiences that they need. A deeper discussion of the overall impact of community mentor in the context of the literature is needed.

The first description that the three participants mentioned when discussing their mentoring programs was a positive environment; this aligns with the research that emphasizes the importance of a positive environment. Shepard (2009) noted consistent, reliable, and caring mentors create positive relationships. Allen (2002) added mentoring awakens confidence. John spoke fondly of his program's impact on its participants in re-shaping their lives. Rhodes et al. (2006) posited that mentoring contributed to positive self-identity. Macias (2013) further explained that mentoring emphasizes the expectation for success. Meagan's programs immersed her in multiple environments with role models who showed her the look of success. It was her choice to emulate what they modeled. In Brenda's case, Ms. Jones' example of social work, and the theatrical portrayals in the movies of her era inspired her to help people too. For John, the family like atmosphere and the very essence of the Black couple who ran the program were motivating factors. The participants' narratives support the research conclusion that environment plays a key role in the mentoring of first generation college students.

Exposure to the college experience was the second most important factor that community mentor programs provided, according to the participants. Meagan noted exposure to professionals in her desired field was significant in her career decisions. Research showed that college students mentoring high school student developed trust friendships and modeled appropriate behavior and attitude (Hughes et al., 2009). Brenda and John's mentoring programs exposed them to people like whom they wanted to be in their future. Ryan & Olasov (2000) reported positive differences in the self-esteem, school attendance, and discipline of female, middle school students mentored by Northern Kentucky University students. Overall the exposure provided by community mentor programs was positive although there were some counter examples.

The participants mentioned counter examples of mentoring. Meagan and John noted labeling as a negative for a first generation college student who participates in a mentoring program, while Brenda reported receiving contrary advice as a negative associated with mentoring. Overall the literature does not align with the participants' comments. Scandura (1998) discussed relational dysfunction that could be applied loosely to Brenda's discussion of having to choose whose advice to take, although that was not the main idea of her comment. Noe, Greenberger, & Wang (2002) noted lack of trust, open communication, and development as having negative impacts on a mentoring relationship. This is a warranted viewpoint, although the participants did not mention it. Additionally the feelings of anger, isolation, frustration described by Barker (2006) were not mentioned in relation to negative relationships. The contrasting views of the participants and the research body elicited questions. With such differences of opinion of the negative impact of mentoring, how can we prevent it from occurring? Whose opinion is more important?

Zand et al. (2009) asserted the overall goal of mentoring is having a positive impact. If we adhere to the body of research and the participants' accounts, overall mentoring programs have a positive impact. So how do we promote these programs and involve more first generation students in these programs? Potentially, what role can they play in bridging the gap for first generation college students?

CHAPTER 7: WHAT ROLE DOES COMMUNITY MENTOR PROGRAMS PLAY IN BRIDGING THE SUPPORT GAP?

The participants openly discussed the support they think first generation college students need and the impact their participation in a mentoring program had in their lives. Given the current research on the struggle of first generation college students (Atherton, 2014; Laden, 2004), could mentoring programs be the solution to these struggles? The next research question asked, “What role do community mentor programs play in bridging the support gap of aspiring first generation college students?” The participants’ responses yielded three themes: sources of guidance, sources of individualized support, and sources of goal visualization and execution.

Sources of Guidance

Meagan, Brenda, and John noted that mentoring programs provided first generation college students with guidance. Meagan believed that the guidance from mentoring programs comes in various forms, but mostly as a “concentric circle of support”. Meagan discussed how her program supported students where they needed it. Any information or resources that they needed were found at what her program named “the lighthouse”. The lighthouse was the meeting spot for all of the students and services several schools and some collegian members.

They can be that level within the support group. They can be that...when I think of a support group, I think of a round table and in each chair there are different people that can give you that type of support. When you add community mentor programs to that part, it’s just another chair at the table and that table presents that child. So they can offer experience and exposure and a lot of things outside of what that child is already receiving in a different perspective to communicate with other support systems around that child.

In Meagan’s view, community mentor programs can provide the “real” truth to the student and can advocate and add to the support system some first generation students already have, but also can guide them to where they want to be. For Brenda, this guidance from a community mentor

program would have been helpful to her in college when she was trying to decide between going on to graduate school and beginning working.

Ok, one of the things that I can talk about in this area is that when I was in college, I didn't have anyone to go to that could give me suggestions and answers because there were some things that once I was in college, if someone had told me I wouldn't have done this or done that. For instance, I didn't have anyone to tell me to go to graduate school and still work as a teacher of social work. I said now that I look back it was a huge mistake. But, I didn't have anyone to give me guidance. Mentor programs can...I think they can help with that with students.

The guidance offered by community mentor programs can possibly prevent other first generation students from making similar mistakes. Applying Meagan's comment to Brenda's case would have "leveled" at the table and given her an honest answer to her question.

John discussed the role of community mentor programs at large.

Philosophically, I think they have to be education movements. Programs come and go. Specifically, these programs have to empower those who are interested in going to college with the skillsets and vision that they need to create an outcome, the activities that lead to that outcome and measurements to get there.

John's believed mentoring programs should be movements that provide activities that lead to the expected outcomes students set for their lives. He noted, "Mentoring programs can give guidance to students who need it most, but they have to work for it too."

The guidance offered by mentoring programs is helpful to first generation college students as the resources provided to them in college are limited. Mentoring programs with access to an abundance of resources and deep relationships with students can provide support when important decisions have to be made.

Sources of Individualized Support

Mentoring programs can also provide individualized support for students. Though first generation students have one main connection, that they are the first person in their families to attempt to graduate from college, sometimes the similarities end there. For this reason, according

to our participants, mentoring programs should provide support on an individualized basis.

Meagan needed academic and financial support. She received emotional support from her family, but she needed help so she did not struggle in her classes and, more specifically, lose her scholarships. She swelled with pride when she discussed the individualized support offered at her current organization.

Our mission is to help academically capable and motivated children to meet their full potential and to also become men and women. And in meeting their full potential, it's not just academically; it's socially and emotionally too. And we're able to look at scholars from different levels and assess their specific needs and then link them with community resources, mentors, and if possible with people outside of the lighthouse and there's a thoughtful process with that too.

Meagan's program looks at students individually and assesses how to help each of them. She described the process they use to determine the students' needs.

We ask if that person is accessible and available to effectively mentor that scholar. Is the program right for this particular scholar's attention span? We never put them in a box. With providing resources and providing that mentorship for each of our scholars is very, very crucial because it's individualized and it meets their needs so that they can be successful and hopefully help others.

Brenda needed individualized social and financial assistance to help her make the right decision and not have to work full time through school to support herself.

In Y Teens, I was getting individual attention and I knew what I needed to do to be successful, but in college it fell off. I was on my own. They gave us advisors but those advisors were treating us like it was a factory. They didn't have my best interests at heart: they just did what they had to do. I was on my own.

Brenda's story is like so many first generation college students. They go to college, get lost in the shuffle and are treated like everyone else. Equality? No. Equity is what first generation college students need. They need to be met where they are because they simply do not know what they do not know, and whom to ask. I asked Brenda if a community mentor program could have offered support and advice that her advisors did not and she said simply, "Yes, I think it

could.” When Brenda became a social worker, she was also a youth director for Y teens and, although she did not have that support needed in high school, she still remembered the impact of Ms. Jones; she reached her goal of also helping students, at the same organization and in the same position that Ms. Jones held, indicating that the support she received continued to impact her life.

John’s individualized support need was social. His program put him in a better social position in high school, but he struggled in college. To improve upon the program he directs, he strives to give the students everything they need to be successful.

Meagan worked at John’s program and I asked her how they knew they were meeting the needs of their students. She impressed me with her extensive response about their measurement systems and how they were meeting success with students.

We measure it by...first of all observing our scholars. We also have a computer program called ‘Armor’ where we input daily observations. We have service learning plans that are conducted every 90 days that has long and short-term goals of each scholar in areas of academics and social and emotional needs.

Their targeted support systems were able to pinpoint students’ academic needs, but also their social and emotional needs. Many programs are lopsided, but theirs seemed to have a balanced approach. They also communicated well with the students’ other supporters.

And then, not only on a monthly basis or a quarterly basis, but on a daily basis we speak to the scholars and then of course looking at school performance, speaking with their instructors, speaking with their parents...Just speaking with everyone in their concentric circle of support about their observations and also watching the scholars accomplish that we know in the past was difficult for them. So, this individualized interaction is everything.

All three participants ranked individualized support high amongst the characteristics of an effective mentoring program. Meagan and John’s organization seemed to do better than others at servicing the needs of the whole student, however those services are not all that they provide.

Sources of Goal Visualization and Execution

Meagan and John posited that individualized support leads to goal visualization and execution. Their organization also supported their students with goal visualization and execution and Megan reported that it worked well for them.

The majority of our scholars have a 3.0 to a 3.8 grade point average. Particularly with the residential scholars within the last three months of school year their grade point average increased from .5 to .8 so almost a letter grade increase in their final grade point average. They had to do an amazing job in the 2nd semester versus the first semester because the grades are averaged. That's a way that we help them visualize and execute academically.

Meagan and John's program teaches the first generation students not only to set goals but also teaches them how to tackle their goals. Meagan talked about their scholars with pride and amazement when she reflected on their hard work.

Of course there are some areas of improvement, but now the scholars are aware of their specific needs because of their individualized programs in which we implement different types of interventions and therapy that can help the scholars when a challenging area presents itself.

They supply the students with the tools to work through their problems, which help them gain independence. Meagan described additional services their program provides to address student needs.

For example, we have scholars with a short attention span, and they have challenges staying focused. In those cases we have talks with them and let them know how much potential we see in them. Some scholars may tap or become a distraction. But us pointing out "we've observed this", and asking them where it comes from gets very honest answers as simple as "I'm bored or I have a lot going on". We then take the information they provided to us and set a plan of action.

Community mentor programs can also help students set goals and to achieve them.

Setting goals is a commonality among first generation college students as they set a goal to be the first in their family to obtain a college degree. According to the participants, mentor programs help first generation college students not only to set goals, but also to work on a plan

of action to achieve those goals. Through building relationships with the students, community mentor programs invest the necessary support and resources for students to execute their plans of action. John added information about how they help students set and go after their goals in the program.

It's hard to become what you don't see. If you can believe it you can achieve it but you first have to see it. Envision, invest, and execute or plan, deliver, evaluate. In other words, see what the rules of the game are and visualize and recognize how to get to the end goals. What are you prepared to do? Some of this stuff is not easy. You have to be willing to sacrifice going out to the party and doing 'xyz' because this is your goal. It has to become crystal clear to the students.

Mentoring programs, especially those like Meagan and John's, seem to be what first generation college students need. I asked Meagan how their program's high school graduates performed.

We've noticed a trend that when the scholars actually leave the program they won't contact us for a while because they are trying to do it all on their own. Our collegians are doing ok, but they can do a little bit better.

Meagan and John are reflective about their scholars' work and they are also honest about internal improvements they need to make. Meagan looked to the future with hope and optimism. "The scholars that we're prepping now for college....we do expect better because now we have better resources that are more individualized. We just have more effective things to offer them versus in the past. That's pretty exciting." Meagan was excited but I needed clarification of her previous response. I asked why the collegians of the past were not contacting them and if she thought their current high school scholars would keep in better contact than their collegians of the past.

Yeah, I think they will keep in more contact. I'm not saying that they will come by the house every day or call us, but I think they will keep in better contact because of the rapport that we're building with them now; it wasn't always like this. So, in the past I believe that completion of the program was looked at like "I'm free, I'm free to do my own thing and I'm not caged". Now, we are involving scholars in the decisions about their own life.

Involving the scholars seemed that it would not only would they be helping them excel currently, but also prepare them for some independence in college. Meagan noted that she learned from experience and that she shared that experience with the scholars of the program. She noted,

We also discuss our personal failures in college and life in general. Getting to be a witness to their own success that they accomplish. We don't apply for college for them. We allow them to choose a college, apply, and we're just in the background if needed. So when a scholar receives that acceptance letter, they have that motivation because they did that. But they still know, if needed, we are always here in a non-judgmental way.

Their program empowers participants to set their goals and work towards them, and has the components of a viable plan for all first generation college students. I asked Meagan about the overall impact of their program on their participants. She said,

It has just increased the likelihood of their success. Like overall...We can talk about specifically, but overall it just...I mean this summer alone the laboratory that we conducted I have learned so much about they scholars because they weren't in this rigorous academic focus. They were able to let loose and still learn. Then we made the learning fun and it was more individualized and I was able to see the scholars more individually for who they are versus having that strict schedule to keep up with their academics. So overall, I've seen improvement with the scholars that participate with the program more.

From what the participants shared through their own personal experiences and those of the students they currently mentor, building relationships is key to success. Meagan's overall assessment of participation in her program is reasonable for any mentoring program to follow.

So there's that trend of you get out of it what you put into it. The scholars that come by the lighthouse on the daily basis and those parents who are involved and take full advantages of the resources and opportunities that we make them aware of get the biggest advantage.

The participants made it clear that mentoring programs afford first generation college students some of the help that they need but it is missing in many cases. Meagan and John's program could be a model from which to build future mentoring opportunities for first generation college students.

Discussion: Connecting it All

Community mentor programs provide guidance, individualized support, and help with establishing and achieving goals. These supports can address the feelings of loneliness and confusion upon entrance to college as described by the three study participants. Linking first generation college students with community mentor programs seems easy as Ballard (2013) noted that anyone with knowledge, competency, and willingness can be a good mentor and provide the support needed.

Guidance through the college process is important for first generation college students. Meagan, Brenda, and John discussed the absence of such guidance in their experiences, and that first generation college students often feel lost in the system. Similarly, Herrera et al. (2011) found mentored youth performed better academically and had more positive views of their own academic ability. Simply guiding students towards an answer may seem small, but Meagan, Brenda, and John's narratives prove that it can be significant for first generation college students.

Individualized support is equally as important. First generation college students have a commonality; they are the first in their respective families to attempt a college education, but often that is where their similarity ends. They need individualized support to address their specific needs as there is no one size fits all solution to their problems. As in the case of the study participants, needs vary. Meagan needed academic support and help with choosing the best major for her; the Center for Academic Success provided this support, but only after she failed and lost her scholarships. Brenda needed help with a major career decision, never received that help, and still today regrets that lack of support. John did not know what he needed, including his lack of awareness of what a major was. The literature supports mentor programs focusing on meeting students where they are. Crisp (2010) noted that when paired with a mentor, college

students' grade point averages increased and they stayed in college. This illustrates the notable impact community mentor programs can have on first generation college students.

Finally, goal setting and achievement were discussed as vital characteristics of effective mentoring programs. Meagan and John's program used the individualized data on each student that they translated into attainable goals. They helped the students, but most importantly they empowered them to help themselves, which is important for first generation students who, based on the participants' narratives, sometimes feel helpless and out of control of their own destiny. Effective mentoring results in committed and productive individuals (Scandura, 1998).

Tice (1996) noted mentoring arises when the surrounding community is functioning poorly; it only exists because there is a need for it. The data and the participants reported that there is a gap in support and resources for first generation college students, which can result in their dropping out of school; therefore mentoring is definitely needed. The questions become what would an effective program look like for first generation college students? Who are the players and what are the pieces? Meagan, Brenda, and John's narratives are representative of these issues, and lay forth implications and recommendations.

CHAPTER 8: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The purpose of this research study was to determine the needs of first generation college students and how community mentor programs can address those needs. The participant interviews proved to be informative about the needs for support and resources of first generation college students and the impact that community mentors played in their lives. The participants also described the role local community mentor programs currently play in the lives of first generation college students and what they see as future goals for involvement. The wealth of information necessitates separating the findings of the research questions into three separate chapters to address the primary topic of bridging the support gap for first generation college students with community mentor programs. In the preceding chapters, I documented each theme and the participants' views on those themes based on their life experiences as first generation college students. I discussed the themes in relation to the current body of research and how they upheld or refuted the current data. This concluding chapter summarizes the research and combines its data, and suggests the next steps of this issue.

This research study explored how community mentor programs, which have been proven to have a positive impact on student achievement, can be used to bridge the support gap for first generation college students. Currently, there is a multitude of mentoring programs available for first generation college students in high school, but the number of programs available to help post-secondary students is low; therefore, many first generation college students who participate in these programs do well in high school, but not as well in college.

This research study examined how support from community mentor programs can also increase the success of first generation college students before and during their college matriculation. Specifically, the study sought to answer three research questions:

1. What supports and resources do first generation college students need to be successful?
2. What impact have community mentor programs had or could have had on the life experiences of first generation college students?
3. What role do community mentor programs play in bridging the support gap of first generation college students?

The theoretical framework of this research study was interest convergence, developed by Bell (1980) and meaning that the needs of the subordinate group will be met only if they align with the needs of the majority or group holding the most power. As first generation college students impact college retention rates and graduation rates, increased efforts to support these students occur through mentoring and advising. The rising popularity of community mentor programs for first generation college students have been positively linked to student achievement (Zand et al., 2009; Bayer, Grossman, & Dubois, 2013), however, in some colleges advisement only happens after the students begin to struggle (Macias, 2013). What if there were programs in place so that students never had to struggle? In this research, I sought to determine how community mentor programs could answer this question. I found that the interests of community mentor programs converged with those of students since the successful mentorship of first generation college students potentially grows their membership numbers and increases donors'

giving (Minnick et al., 2014). The interests of colleges and mentoring programs converge and work together to benefit first generation college students.

Procedures

The target population for this study was first generation college students who had participated in community mentor programs at some point during their lives. A purposeful sampling method was employed to select three participants, all of whom participated in community mentor programs in high school but not in college; two of the participants worked with a local community mentor program at the time of the interviews. After giving informed consent, the three participants completed a voluntary demographic survey before participating in the semi-structured interview. The interview data was transcribed and was member checked to ensure accuracy of transcription. The transcribed interviews went through open and axial coding before numeric content analysis. After the coding and analysis steps, a coding tool was used to narrow the concepts using the combining/eliminating method to find the top nine core themes from the data. In discussing the themes, I revisited interviews and created a new file into which I cut and pasted narratives and comments that best represented each theme. I also included counter narratives in the discussion of the findings.

Summary of Findings

The study provided insight into and enlightenment of the first generation college students' discussions. Overwhelmingly, research showed that first generation college students require specific supports and resources to be successful (Pyne & Means, 2013). According to the participants' narratives, these supports include systems of emotional and financial support, systems of information and trustworthy advisement, and systems of motivation. The participants' stories, however, exposed a troubling situation that today's first generation college

students still experience, namely a lack in these systems of supports. In Meagan's case, this lack almost cost her education, while in Brenda's case it prevented her from pursuing her master's degree. John was forced to figure out the college maze on his own. Though all were successful in obtaining their degrees, it was not without much hard work and self-sacrifice. The literature shows many first generation students have similar problems and they drop out before they receive the needed support. New federal guidelines for colleges to increase retention and graduation rates have prompted colleges to re-examine the support they offer to first generation students as those students have an impact on those retention and graduation rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). But is it too little too late? Meagan's narrative is testament to her almost flunking out before the college offered support.

To understand how first generation college students used those supports, I asked where the supports were available if not from colleges. All of the participants described community mentor programs and how their mostly positive impact on first generation college students. Meagan, Brenda, and John mentioned that the community mentor programs in which they participated during high school helped them gain exposure to a positive environment and the college experience. Meagan participated in a variety of mentoring programs and really enjoyed the exposure it gave her to a positive environment and what the college experience could be, however that high school exposure did not transfer to college with her. For Brenda, Y Teens and her mentor Ms. Jones provided her with a safe haven and answers to her questions, however, that information source was not available to her in college and she made what she described a "mistake" in an integral decision. John liked the positive environment provided by his mentoring program, but admitted that it did not teach him anything about college which was something that

he addressed in the local mentoring program that he runs in Baton Rouge. The literature supported the participants' statements about the mentoring programs' positive impact as they were exposed to a positive environment and the college experience. Additionally, all three noted that participation in mentoring programs could be detrimental to a first generation college student. Meagan and John noted that first generation students may be labeled negatively and be considered "less than" their peers, while Brenda noted receiving advice in the program that was contrary to parental advice and norms, and thus was a potential problem. The literature did not align with the participants' negative associations with community mentor programs but rather pointed to negative mentoring relationships being those with a lack of trust, open communication, and development. Other negative associations discussed in the literature were feelings of isolation, anger, and frustration. The participants did feel isolated and frustrated, but attributed that to a lack of support by mentoring programs in college rather than the research implication of negative mentoring relationships. Such variables on negative associations with mentoring warrant a deeper look into the subject.

The final research question connected the first two questions in that it sought to determine how community mentor programs, reported by research data and the participants to be successful in helping students, could also provide the necessary support needed by first generation college students. In particular, I sought the role they could play in bridging the support gap for first generation students in college. Such programs have proven to successfully provide support to high school students, but are not so successful once students go to college. Meagan and John's program is an example of how community mentor programs can provide

guidance, individualized support, goal visualization, and execution help. They also noted that they kept in contact with their collegians, although not as much as they would like to.

Research has shown that good mentoring programs excel at providing guidance to students of all ages, so what about college? What if community mentor programs had a more direct connection to first generation college students? What would that look like? Meagan, Brenda, and John noted that one of the bonuses of participating in mentoring programs was the relationship that developed between the organization and the student, and researchers agree. A well-developed relationship between community mentor programs and first generation college students could be the missing component that provided the needed support and resources for the students to become college graduates.

Conclusions

Community mentor programs are capable of bridging the support and resource gap for first generation college students. This conclusion is based on the finding that the study participants had positive experiences with community mentor programs and recommended them as a source of support for current students. Also, the participants noted that community mentor programs provided the experience and exposure to college life that students might not have without participation in such programs. Finally, this conclusion is based on the participants' endorsement of community mentor programs' ability to provide guidance, individualized support, resources, and skills to help students envision and execute their goals.

Community mentor programs can be effective at bridging the support and resource gap for first generation college students because they build and maintain positive relationships with their participants and can provide support to them through secondary school and college. Often colleges attempt provide the support for their first generation students when they see signs of

struggling, but too often these signs are recognized too late and the students drop out before they can receive the available support, the existence of which they may have been unaware. Although the study participants were involved in great mentoring programs in high school, they all felt alone once they went to college. Though only one struggled academically, they all would have benefited from continuous support throughout college. Community mentor programs can help prevent the struggles and can assist students with the individualized support that they need.

Implications and Recommendations

Several implications worth exploring arose from this study. The first implication is that first generation college students have the same basic needs of all other students, but lack the support and resources to meet those needs. A second implication is that community mentor programs have been proven to be helpful to their participants and successful in meeting the academic, social, emotional, and financial needs of first generation college students. A third implication is that community mentor programs can bridge the current support and resource gap for first generation students on college campuses by building lasting relationships in which secondary school and college students' individual needs are addressed efficiently and effectively.

Recommendations

Based on the implications of this study, the following recommendations are suggested for local school districts, colleges, and community mentor programs:

1. Community mentor programs should be available for students from Kindergarten through college, and especially should be available for first generation college students to contact for answers to questions, support, and resources. This would include support and resources for students who attend an out of state college.
2. School districts should work with local community mentor programs to create a pipeline for first generation students once they have made the decision to go to

college. This pipeline would link them with local mentor programs that provide the individualized support and resources needed throughout their secondary and college matriculation.

3. Local school districts should create a department, separate from guidance counselors, to link students with local community mentor programs that fit their needs. A secondary task of this department would be to collect, analyze, and report to the community the data of the local students who participate in these programs and their success rate in college.
4. Local community mentor programs should open lines of communication with each other and build a coordinated enrollment or referral system for first generation college students to join.
5. Colleges should develop an active relationship with all local community mentor programs that would allow first generation college students to attend events and programs that would help them gain experience and exposure to college. Ideally, this relationship would be a bridge between an existing college advisement department, or a newly created department, whose main objectives would be to identify first generation college students, work with their home mentoring programs to build a support team that would address the individual needs of students throughout college, and therefore decrease the likelihood of their feelings of loneliness and inadequacy that often lead them to struggle and, in some cases, drop out of school.

These recommendations require that school districts, colleges, and community mentor programs dispose of their “island” or “operating in a vacuum” mentality and work together to

meet the needs of first generation college students. Consideration of and implementation of all of the recommendations would have a positive effect on first generation college students, however, as a practitioner and researcher, I realize that what is ideal is not always realistic. An alternative plan to address the first generation college students' needs for support and resources through community mentor programs is revamping the existing community mentor programs' current strategies and looking at a three year expansion plan whereby they would give more support to their college students. Year one could begin with tutoring/advisement services and phone advisement as needed; year two could add on monthly/weekly in-person/Skype advisement and college counselor triangulation, and year 3 could add on career counseling. This three year transition plan for adding college support to community mentor programs would be a way to immediately bridging the support gap; realistically, waiting for the implementation of all five recommendations from the study would take much time to build trust and collaborative relationships among all entities.

The overwhelming body of research and this study show that first generation college students have individualized needs that are often overlooked and unmet. If all entities work together on the proposed recommendations and strategically use community mentor programs, everyone will be benefit. Most importantly, first generation college students will no longer have a gap in the support and resources they require to successfully obtain their college degree.

CHAPTER 9: AFTERWORD

Reflections

The lessons of this study extended beyond the conclusions and recommendations and into the defense day. The committee brought up many interesting topics concerning first generation college students that were beyond the scope of this research study, but that are worth further discussion. In this afterward, I reflect on those topics and the need for their development in the future.

The Capacity of the Community for Support

The phrase “think global, act local” surfaced and I was asked what I thought it meant. As I searched the literature, I found many contexts but essentially it means to think about a global problem and then work locally to solve it. In this case, how do we get first generation college students through college successfully without struggling? This is indeed a global problem. Locally I think we should use the recommendations of this study as starting points. Creating systems of support here within our school systems and community mentor programs is foundational, but is only starting point, as our own communities also must play a part in this global issue.

The reality is that there are more people who do not go to college than there are those who do, although the research is clear that a college degree can add more financial security over time. How can the community band together to ensure that its children are receiving the support they need to succeed in college? Community mentor programs are helpful, but they are not the only solution. How can the community build capacity within itself to help first generation college students? We can learn from the political system; the party that puts the most support behind a candidate and that does the best job of getting its message across usually wins. What if my recommendations, those of community mentor programs with similar missions working

together, actually happened? Their collective voice in the community, explaining their needs for more support and resources to help the community's children receive an education, could start a grassroots movement, and possibly enough to grab the attention of the people with the power—the politicians. How could they reject a community grassroots campaign aimed at providing support and resources to a local community of students, especially considering data that shows how desperately it is needed in Baton Rouge?

The Myth of a Post-Racial Society

Another point brought up during the defense is the myth that race is no longer an issue in America. Critical Race Theory argued otherwise and provided evidence to the contrary (Ladson-Billings, 2005). In one of my interviews, the participant discussed how being Black at her university added pressure. Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) noted racial micro-aggressions or, the subtle insults directed toward people of color automatically or unconsciously, are the culprit in this case as they negatively impact campus racial climate, and that is only one case. There is a societal myth that all racial barriers have been pushed away, to the point that we no longer need affirmative action. But is this really true? If so, why do most community mentor programs that service first generation college students have mostly minority participants? In a country that is a melting pot of races and cultures, it took 43 presidential elections before we elected an African American president and even his Americanism has been questioned. Louisiana has never had an African American governor and the election a few years ago of a Black Mayor-President was considered historic. The parish school desegregation suit has lasted more than five decades and we are now more segregated than ever racially, culturally, and most of all financially (Dixon & Rousseau, 2005). Unfortunately, first generation college students are at the end of the resource line. These harsh realities deserve further study.

Conclusion

A researcher must work within research studies' parameters to reach a conclusion to a problem. For this particular study, the ending seems to only be the beginning. I was unable to address every hard question, but was able to offer suggestions and recommendations to help local community mentor programs and school systems reorganize and to be more supportive of first generation college students. This study allowed me to get closer to a problem of which I was aware on some level, but I was unaware of the depth of the issue. Now, I am encouraged that I have contributed to the literature that addresses solutions to the lack of support and resource problem facing many first generation college students, and I remain hopeful for more studies on the subject.

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD EXEMPTION



ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST

TO: Leigh Griffin
Higher Education Administration

FROM: Dennis Landin
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: July 16, 2015

RE: IRB# E9423

TITLE: Bridging the Support Gap of First Generation College Students with Community Mentor Programs

Institutional Review Board
Dr. Dennis Landin, Chair
130 David Boyd Hall
Baton Rouge, LA 70803
P: 225.578.8692
F: 225.578.5983
irb@lsu.edu | lsu.edu/irb

New Protocol/Modification/Continuation: New Protocol

Review Date: 7/16/2015

Approved X Disapproved

Approval Date: 7/16/2015 Approval Expiration Date: 7/15/2018

Exemption Category/Paragraph: 2b

Signed Consent Waived?: No

Re-review frequency: (three years unless otherwise stated)

LSU Proposal Number (if applicable):

Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal: (if applicable)

By: Dennis Landin, Chairman 

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –

Continuing approval is **CONDITIONAL** on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of Informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. **SPECIAL NOTE:**

*All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/irb>

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Participant Consent Form

Study Title: Bridging the Support Gap for First Generation College Students with Community Mentor Programs

Performance Site: Local Community Mentor Program

Investigator: Leigh Jefferson Griffin is the primary investigator. She can be contacted for questions regarding the study at (225) 776-4446 or legriff25@tiger.lsu.edu. The co-investigator is Dr. Kenneth J. Fasching-Varnar, Shirley B. Barton Endowed Associate Professor. He can be contacted at 225-578-2918 or varnar@lsu.edu.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to determine if first generation college students' lack of support can be addressed through participation in community mentor programs.

Subject Inclusion: For this investigation, a purposeful sampling will take place including both setting and participants. The researcher has chosen the community mentor program based on its unique mission to provide support and resources for first generation college students beginning in middle school and through college. Two of the participants are the personnel of the community mentor program who are also first generation college students. One of the participants graduated college more than 20 years ago, while the other is a more recent college graduate. The third participant is a first generation college student who did not participate in a community mentor program pre-college and currently does not work with a community mentor program.

Number of Subjects: 3

Study Procedures: This study will be conducted in two phases. The first phase will be completing an optional demographic data form. The second phase of the study will include an interview with the researcher.

Benefits: The study may yield valuable information regarding the impact of community mentor programs on supporting first generation college students.

Risks: There are no foreseeable risks in the involvement of this study.

Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might be otherwise entitled.

Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

This study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Dennis Landin, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Subject Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

APPENDIX C: RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

Demographic Survey

Please fill out the demographic data below. This is optional.

Gender: _____

Ethnicity: _____

Race: _____

Year of Birth: _____

Year of High School Graduation: _____

College Major: _____

College Minor: _____

Year Bachelor's Degree Awarded: _____

Graduate Major: _____

Graduate Minor: _____

Year Graduate Degree Awarded: _____

Occupation: _____

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Tell me your story... why decided to go to college?
2. Was this decision hard to make?
3. What kind of family support did you have?
4. What kind of grades did you make in school?
5. What support and resources do you think first generation college students need?
6. Where do you think they can get these supports and resources?
7. Were you involved in some type of mentoring program growing up?
8. What impact, if any, did your involvement with the program? If you were not involved with a mentoring program, what impact could participating in a mentoring program have had on your life?
9. What are potential negative impacts community mentor programs can have on first generation college students?
10. Overall, what role do you think community mentor programs can play in bridging the support gap for first generation college students?

***The following questions are for the personnel of the community mentor program only. ***
11. Is your organization successfully providing the support that you described was needed for first generation students? How do you measure this?
12. How are the students in your program performing in middle/high school? College?
13. What overall impact has this program had on the program participants?

VITA

Leigh Jefferson Griffin was born in Plaquemine, Louisiana. After completing her work at Southern University Laboratory School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, as valedictorian in 2003, she entered Southern University and A&M College Honors College in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She received a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education with Summa Cum Laude Honors as the Student Marshall for the college of education and Honor College of Southern University in the spring of 2007. She was employed as a 2nd grade teacher at Zachary Elementary School in Zachary, Louisiana, for one year before entering the Graduate School at Southern University and A&M College in the fall of 2008. Leigh worked as a 2nd grade teacher while completing the requirements for the Masters of Education Degree in Educational Leadership that she earned Fall 2010 from Southern University. After working as a 2nd grade teacher for six years in Zachary, Leigh moved out of the classroom to work as an instructional coach at a local Charter school for one year. At that time Leigh also began her doctoral studies at Louisiana State University in Higher Education Administration. After a year as an instructional coach, Leigh moved into administration at the East Baton Rouge Parish School System as Project Manager of the East Baton Rouge Parish Early Childhood Community Network, one of the four largest networks in the State of Louisiana. Leigh is in her second year as Project Manager of the Early Childhood Community Network and completing the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Higher Education Administration.