**MAKING CONNECTIONS:**
**CULTIVATING SOCIAL CAPITAL AMONG LOW-INCOME FIRST-GENERATION**
**COLLEGE STUDENTS**

BY

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A dissertation submitted to
The Graduate School of Education
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree
Doctor of Education
Graduate Program in Social and Philosophical Foundations in Education

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New Brunswick, New Jersey
May 2015

# ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

## MAKING CONNECTIONS: CULTIVATING SOCIAL CAPITAL AMONG LOW-INCOME FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

By

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This study examines characteristics of students and university environments as factors leading to cultivation of abundant social capital.   Twenty-two student stories illustrate how varying identities as low-income and first-generation play key roles in cultivating social capital while at a university.  It is hypothesized that in order to facilitate successful student engagement, a "two-way street" needs to be established in which both the student and the university seek to intentionally develop connections.  Universities need to offer ample resources and support that is compassionate and understanding, while at the same time considering attributes students bring to the relationship and how those attributes will affect them accessing support.  This requires an intimate understanding of the characteristics, attitudes and tendencies that seem to be most associated with success of low-income first-generation (LIFG) college students.

Students' experiences are interpreted through the lens of student engagement (Kuh, et al, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), resiliency (Morales, 2008; Masten, 2001) and Bourdieu's (1987, 1984, 1977) social reproduction. This study expands on literature that demonstrates engagement in educationally purposeful experiences aids in a student's academic success; by focusing on the role and characteristics of those relationships as well as how those relationships are established particularly by LIFG college students. This study was guided by the following questions:  (1) What is the role of campus connections in a LIFG student's academic success? (2) How are campus connections established for LIFG students? (3) What are characteristics of connections that LIFG students establish at a university?,  (4)  What are the characteristics of LIFG students who are making the most of their connections at university?

Findings suggest there must be a "two-way street" when it comes to the role of student participation in fostering academic success of LIFG students.  Students must take initiative to seek out purposeful connections, which are impacted by their own passion, independence, and resiliency while the university needs to provide access to ample opportunities which are caring and understanding of LIFG college students' needs.   This paper contributes to the conversation about how universities must respond to the needs of increasingly diverse student populations which include LIFG students.

Key Words:  Low-income, First-generation, engagement, resiliency, independence, passion, compassion, understanding, caring, social capital, student success

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is a success that is shared by many people. Without their support, encouragement, and willingness to care about my writing, especially during times of doubt, it would never have been written. I would like to thank them for all their love, support, pushing, and often pulling when getting the words on paper did not seem possible or make a lot of sense.

Study Participants: Thank you to the students who were willing to share their stories with me and trust that I accurately tell their experiences; both struggles and successes. Their voices are important to understanding how to better support low-income first-generation college students on their journey to success.

Chris: Thank you for all the sacrifices you made in order to help me accomplish this dream. You believed in me always and I am thankful for all your love and encouragement through this process.

My mom: Thanks for being the strongest woman I know. You always stressed the importance of education and made great sacrifices to provide a world of opportunities to me. This could not have been done without everything you have done for me.

My children: Thanks for your patience when I was with you but distracted by thoughts of this paper or for all the times I could not be with you because of classes or writing. Timothy, Matthew, and Zachary: You mean the world to me and I hope this experience sheds light into the struggles that others face to accomplish their dreams.

Tanja Sargent Ph.D.: Thank you for your patience and understanding. Your willingness to push me farther than I believed I could go helped me achieve something I did not believe was possible. Thank you for all your time, advice, and encouragement through this process.

My committee, Patrick Love and Ebelia Hernandez: Thanks for helping this practitioner understand the importance of research in this field. You both inspire me in the work you do both as researchers and practitioners.

Supervisors, Susan Boyd, Sean Stallings, & Angela Lauer-Chong: Thanks for all the support in my attempts to balance work, writing, and life. Your encouragement was endless both in the job, and as I worked my way through this dissertation.

Staff, Past & Present: Your daily reminders, words of encouragement, or questions about my process gave me energy that was necessary to get through this "little paper". Thanks for regularly inspiring me to be a stronger professional for our students.

Teachers, Tedd VanDuyne & Dave Paddock: Thanks for your love of education and how deeply you cared about me as a student and person. I have taken those values into my every life with

my children and my own students.  After all these years, thank you remaining important figures in my life.

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**Introduction**

Only four out of ten low-income (families earning less than $20,000) high school graduates will attend college immediately after graduation, compared to eight out of ten graduates from families earning more than $100,000 (Engberg & Allen, 2011).  For students who are first-generation, only 42% will attend college immediately after graduation (Bozick, Lauff, & Wirt, 2007).  Additionally, significantly fewer low-income first-generation (LIFG) students complete four year college degrees than their wealthier peers (Fitzgerald & Delaney, 2002; Gladieux, 2004; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).  Even for students who do well on achievement tests, socioeconomic inequalities still remain.  For example, 74 percent of high-scorers who grew up in high-income families complete college, compared to only 29 percent of those who grew up in low-income families (College Board, 2005).   LIFG students who do attend college often come academically unprepared and often lag behind wealthier peers (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). All too often research focuses on the failures of LIFG students: those who do not attend or graduate, and what does not work (Engberg & Allen, 2011; Fitzgerald & Delany, 2002).  My research focused on those who do make it to college, persist, and the connections they make during their college experience.

With so few LIFG students attending and graduating college, it is important to gain a richer understanding of the factors that aid those who both aspire to and achieve a four-year college degree.  Many factors related to the university campus environment have been found to affect the success of LIFG college students.  These factors include living on campus, engagement in academic work, having an on-campus job, the teaching experience and content knowledge of

the faculty, and support services like advising, orientation, and courses that focus on academic

survival skills (Kuh, 2001; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2010; Pascarella &

Terenzini, 2005).  Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that participation in campus-sponsored

activities, faculty-student interaction, positive peer relationships, and family relationships

influence a student's academic experience. Kuh's (2001) research suggested that engaging in

educationally purposeful activities aids in student persistence and retention.  My study explored

the characteristics of the connections students made by participating in educationally purposeful

campus experiences-- such as learning communities, co-curricular activities, living on campus,

research opportunities, internships, and employment—as well, as the role these connections play

in the academic success of college students from LIFG backgrounds.  These relationships

establish a "two-way street" where not only was it important for the university to provide ample

resources, but the resources needed to be compassionate and have an understanding of distinct

traits that LIFG students have, such as independence, passion, and resiliency.  Gaining a richer

and more contextualized understanding of LIFG students' connections, the characteristics of

LIFG students who are most connected, and the roles these connections play will provide

educators with knowledge of how other LIFG students can beat the odds and be successful in a

college setting.

## Research Problem & Question

Financial, cultural and social capitals are all valuable resources that contribute to college

students' success (Lareau, 2003; MacLeod, 2003; Sacks, 2007).  For LIFG college students who

have a lack of both financial and cultural capital, intentional cultivation of educationally

purposeful connections may help to compensate for this gap by increasing the store of social

capital available to these students.  Research consistently finds a link between socioeconomic

status and educational achievement (Coleman, 1990; Friedman, 2005; Lareau, 2003 & 1987; MacLeod, 2003; Rothstein, 2004; Sacks, 2007), and thus, financial aid is seen as one solution to aiding in LIFG students' success.  By offering LIFG students money, the argument goes, they will be able to focus on their academics and be successful.  While financial aid (e.g., stipends, waivers, jobs) can aid in a student's success by increasing rates of persistence (Butler & Carter, 2009; Stampen & Cabrera, 1988; Tinto, 1993), it alone does not ensure student academic success.  Cultural capital, as defined by French sociologist Bourdieu as, "accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated,' or embodied, form) which when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor" (1986, p.241), plays a significant role in student success.  Cultural capital is the set of knowledge, experience, and skills that have value in a certain setting and can be learned and passed from one individual to the next which, in that setting, hold value and give benefits (Bourdieu, 1986; Lewis, 2006).  It is important to note that the value of cultural capital is context specific.  For example, mastering the Black English Vernacular is highly valued on the streets and in the ghetto, but holds a negative value in academia (Wacquant, 1998).  Colleges and universities have their own cultures and reward those who learn to successfully navigate and embody these cultures.  Without knowledge of a college's culture, LIFG students often struggle to navigate the educational system.  The cultural capital that students bring with them to college can be important to their success by giving them the knowledge of roles and environmental needs (Bourdieu, 1986); however, mastering a university's culture is not the sole explanation of how LIFG students can overcome barriers. Students who lack financial and cultural capital can create and utilize another form of capital called social capital.  Social capital is the network of connections and relationships formed

between individuals which produces economic or non-economic benefits for one or both

participants (Coleman, 1988) which in the higher education setting are the connections students

effectively establish to achieve academic success.  This use of social capital, the need for

students to properly make and utilize connections with their resources while at college, can assist

those students who lack financial support or cultural capital upon entrance to the university and

underscores the need for students to properly make and utilize connections with their resources

while at college.

Not only does research indicate that educationally purposeful connections can strengthen

one's network, of both formal and informal connections, but it has also shown that the strength

of the connections can play a role (Wacquant, 1998; Granovetter, 1974).  Connections, a form of

social capital, can be either strong or weak.  Both types of social capital can clearly impact a

student's opportunities.  Students establish strong ties with individuals like close friends and

family and weak ties with acquaintances and classmates in large lecture halls.  Strong ties could

include relationships with roommates, supervisors, and faculty that a student has spent

significant time with.  While strong ties allow for a more intimate transmission of valuable

capital, weak ties can still be beneficial in helping to bring groups of acquaintances or

individuals from different social circles together through a common link. Social class dynamics

can impact the value of social capital.  Granovetter (1983) argued that social class has limitation

to only promote interactions with "homogeneous contacts" (p.205) which tends to limit their

social networks.  Thus, students from low-income backgrounds often have fewer weak ties

outside of their network prior to coming to college due to the disconnections between their social

class and neighborhood, and the university.  Therefore, students from low-income backgrounds

have more limited social networks.  Weak ties play a significant role in a student's aptitude for

social mobility: the more acquaintances an individual has, the more access to opportunities

become available, "The significance of weak ties is that they are far more likely to be bridges

than are strong ties" (p.208).   There is a need for college students to establish and utilize both

strong and weak ties as they build their college connections.  These campus connections, made

up of both strong and weak ties, have the ability to connect students to educationally purposeful

activities which are shown to positively impact their academic experience (Kuh, 2010).

Research currently demonstrates that access to educationally purposeful resources is important to

students' success, even LIFG college students, but additional research is needed to gain

understanding of the characteristics and attributes that are present in successful relationships for

LIFG college students.

　　　　While the strength of ties that a student makes to an institution aid in their academic

success, when a connection is not established students need to rely on their internal strength to

help them bounce back or adapt when one door closes for them.  This attribute is called

resilience, what Masten defines as "a class phenomena characterized by good outcomes in spite

of serious threats to adaptation or development" (2001, p.228).  More recent literature on

resilience has a direct focus on the role of resilience in an academic setting.  Morales (2008)

refers to resilience as "the process and results that are part of the life story of an individual who

has been academically successful, despite obstacles that prevent the majority of others with the

same background from succeeding" (p.198).  When connections fail, or bonds are broken

students need to be resilient, while in a college setting, in order to find other options, resources,

and new connections that a university has to offer and aid in their success.  Students make

internal decisions to continue with their education, find new connections, and understand which

connections to establish when faced with academic challenges.  My study explores the "two-way

street" of the role the university plays in establishing connections, as well as the attributes students are bringing to their connections and what the role is of these connections in a student's success.

## Research Questions

The purpose of my study is to gain a strong and in-depth understanding of the nature and role of campus connections for low-income first-generation college students. My study is guided by the following research questions: (1) What is the role of campus connections in a LIFG college student's academic success? (2) How are these campus connections established for LIFG college students? (3) What are the characteristics of these connections? and (4) What are the characteristics of LIFG college students who are making the most of their connections at a university?

Students from low-income first-generation backgrounds tend to be disadvantaged when it comes to having basic knowledge about postsecondary education due to inadequate academic preparation and a lack of experience and exposure; thus, they often begin their college experience under-prepared for academic challenges (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al. 2004). One approach taken to mitigate these factors is to get students involved on campus, as research shows that student engagement is a predictor of student success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, lack of knowledge and lack of cultural capital can impact how and what resources they seek and utilize and connect with. Students with parents who have baccalaureate degrees tend to have an advantage over students with parents who do not have baccalaureate degrees in understanding the culture of institutions of higher education, that is, because they have cultural and social capital that is valued in a university setting (Pascarella et al., 2004). These advantages can manifest in the form of connections with individuals in universities and outside

through internships and jobs but also in the form of even recognizing that a university culture exists.  Not only are there a low number of LIFG students in college, but they have less knowledge about the collegiate experience, and are often an invisible group on campus. There are no clear visual identifiers that a student is from a lower socioeconomic status (SES) background or is first-generation; hence, faculty and staff may struggle in their outreach efforts to provide resources and help students be successful.

Socioeconomic status is not the only influence on the role campus connections play in a college students' academic success.  Both the way LIFG college students engage and what they engage in is influenced by a variety of factors, including and not limited to their race and ethnicity.  Researchers have developed a large body of research that considers the role a students' cultural background has on the way that they engage with the campus community, academic success, and persistence (Kim & Sax, 2009; Kwon, 2008; Lewis, 2006, Rankin & Reason 2005; Yosso, 2005).  In Yosso's (2005) research, "whose culture has capital?" uses critical race theory (CRT) to conclude that there are many "marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged" (p.69).  For students in these groups it shapes what connections they develop, who they connect with, and how they react to the connections established or not established. Specific examples of this are demonstrated in Kwon's research (2008) which finds that ethnic minority college students' participation in smaller ethnic oriented organizations is critical for providing a comfortable academic and social environment.  Another example is that research indicates that students of color perceive a less welcoming campus climate compared to their white peers (Rankin & Reason, 2008), thus playing a role in the connections they establish and depth of those connections. Additionally, Kim and Sax (2009) found a positive impact on African American's grade point averages when those students worked

with faculty on research.  The depth of this research indicates that choices to participate or build

a connection are influenced not only by their socioeconomic status, but by all the identities a

student brings to college.  Socioeconomic status cannot be completely separated from the other

cultural perspectives and experiences that a student has.  Current research acknowledges that

students' cultural backgrounds do, in fact, play a role in the way they engage with a campus and

the role connections play in their experiences.  Understanding the role a student's culture and

race has on their college is important, especially since current literature indicates that there is

correlation with students that are low-income and from a minority ethnic or racial group (Lareau,

2003; Leondar-Wright, 2005; Lewis, 2006).  Students have multiple identities that influence their

experiences, how they view college, and the challenges they face.  So although it is difficult to

separate out the experiences of a student who is both LIFG and a student of color, this paper

focuses in on LIFG students' experience, the invisible group, in order to add research to an area

that lacks depth.  Without discounting the importance of race, gender, sexual orientation or other

important identity factors, this study focused on the experience of students from low-income

backgrounds whose parents never attended college.  The study identifies some of the attributes

and characteristics of the LIFG students that were most helpful for the forging of strong and

fruitful connections.

On January 16, 2014 President Obama's administration moved forward with its recent

pledge to helping more low-income students attend and graduate from college by getting

commitments and donations from colleges, universities, and philanthropic donors to support this

administrative focus (Inside Higher Education, 2014.)  If the institutional and societal goals are

to increase the number of students from lower SES backgrounds who enter and persist in higher

education, institutions must provide appropriate encouragement, guidance, motivation, and an

understanding of how to balance their academic and personal lives and mitigate their fear of

failure (Adams & Scott, 1996).  Gaining an understanding of the relationship between a student's

network and their academic success will give valuable insight into ways to support LIFG college

students in order to move closer to reaching these visions.  Achieving a comprehensive

framework of social capital's role in academic success will help educators understand how to

structure opportunities for purposeful educational connections for LIFG students during their

pursuit of the baccalaureate degree.  The purpose of this research is to contribute to our

knowledge of how LIFG college students understand, utilize, and establish campus connections

and the attributes of these connections, both strong and weak ties, contribute to their successful

persistence and completion.  My study's findings can provide a roadmap to how LIFG students

can utilize campus connections and the characteristics of successful connections to help

overcome barriers and obstacles to their success, as well as ways that faculty and staff can be

more supportive of their college experience.

## Major Findings

Participation in educationally purposeful campus connections-- such as learning

communities, co-curricular activities, living on campus, research opportunities, internships, and

employment--plays an important role in student retention, persistence, and academic success

(Kuh, et. al, 2008; Pascarella, 2005; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) and this is particularly the case

for LIFG students.  My study's findings suggest that there is a "two-way street" when it comes to

the important role of establishing relationships that foster academic success of LIFG students.

Universities need to provide compassionate environments with access to ample opportunities for

students to connect in meaningful ways.  These supports need to create caring connections which

have an understanding of the background and attributes that serve as both a strength and barrier

to LIFG college students' success.  Additionally, students must take initiative to seek out

purposeful connections that foster both social and academic engagement, as well as be resilient

and have an understanding of their passions.  The students in my study discussed many

opportunities to establish connections either through academic or social engagement.  For the

purpose of my study *academic engagement* is defined as the connecting in meaningful ways that

were directly related to grades, course work, and major completion such as interactions with

faculty and course/major selection. In addition to academic engagement my study found that

*social engagement*, or the connections that help students learn about campus, feel part of the

educational community, develop relationships around academic material to job opportunities,

and presented outside the classroom learning opportunities had a major impact on their

experiences.  Whether it was an academic or social opportunity, students who established caring

connections that were supportive of the student's academic success typically felt more connected

over all.  Students took responsibility for their education and felt that they are participants in the

experience.  The students also discussed a form of resiliency.  If they were struggling they had to

climb over their obstacle and continue taking steps forward.

## Organization of the Dissertation

The engagement literature suggests that educationally purposeful connections provide

academic benefits to students (Kuh, 2010). My study sought to build off Kuh's engagement

research to provide attributes and characteristics of what helps build those connections for LIFG

backgrounds and how these connections are being established.

There are seven chapters to my dissertation. This chapter (Chapter I) has provided an

introduction to the dissertation, outlines the research problem and purpose of my study.

Chapter II introduces the framework used to organize my study and reviews the literature on student engagement, as well as focusing on both specific connections and what the literature says about how these connections impact a student's college experience. This chapter also provides an overview of theories that discuss the role engagement plays in a student's academic experience, as well as directly focusing on relationships developed with faculty, staff, and peers. This study specifically focuses on connections LIFG students establish while participating in educationally purposeful experiences, such as learning communities, co-curricular activities, living on-campus, research opportunities, internships, and employment.

Chapter III outlines the research methods used. This chapter explains the rationale for each method chosen, provides an overview of the research setting, and presents a biography of each of the study's participants.  This chapter outlines the data collection process, strategies utilized to analyze the data, and discusses steps taken to ensure study validity and the potential limitations of the study.

Chapter IV, V, and VI highlight the main findings of my study.  The findings include the roles connections play for *Deeply-connected*, *Connected*, and *Under-connected* students. Connections that the students made include those through participation in academic experiences such as learning communities, co-curricular activities, research opportunities, or social experiences such as living on-campus, internships, and on-campus employment, play in their academic experience. Additionally, they explore the phenomenon of the "two-way street": the extent to which the college offers rich and engaging experiences for both academic and social engagement, and the extent to which the student takes an active role establishing these connections with resilience and capacity. *Deeply-connected* students were active in seeking out numerous connections both academically and socially.  The connections they established

continued to provide new opportunities and connections.  *Deeply-connected* students also tended

to perform strong academically.  Furthermore, the *Deeply-connected* students in the sample

demonstrated resilience so when one door closed, they went and sought other doors to open.

Additionally, these students were independent and found things that they were passionate about.

Compared to their *Deeply-connected* peers, students that were *Under-connected* often struggled

establishing and maintaining connections with faculty and peers, or only established a few

connections.  Additionally, all students this group tended to not look for another option when one

door closed.  Chapters IV, V, and VI show how LIFG college students in this study established

their connections and discussed the roles that the connections played in the academic experiences

of the students.

Chapter VII discusses the findings and where they are supported by current research or

when they might differ.  This section also discusses areas for future research and implications for

higher education practice.

# CHAPTER II-LITERATURE REVIEW: CAMPUS CONNECTIONS

Students on a college campus establish and build relationships with faculty, staff, and other students. Campus connections include those made through participation in academic experiences such as learning communities, co-curricular activities, research opportunities, or social experiences such as living on-campus, internships, and on-campus employment, play in their academic experience. The relationships made through connections, whether strong or weak, create a network which provides students with access to information, opportunities, and support needed to be successful. Inherent in a student's relationship to others is a very important resource—social capital. Social capital is the network of connections and relationships that are formed between individuals which can open doors to educationally purposeful activities and more connections. Social capital relies on trustworthiness; that if someone asks something of another person, that person will complete the favor. In this relationship there is an exchange that happens which is not tangible but can produce economic or noneconomic outcomes based on "relations among people" (Coleman, 1988, p.100). Similar to financial and cultural capital, social capital and connections can be a major factor in student success. However, these relationships, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue, are not valued equally by schools. Schools favor capital that students from wealthier upbringings are already familiar with and have access to, potentially due to the capital that their parents have accrued by attending a college. While educational systems are set up to reward students who have capital valued in a university system, they can also marginalize groups who do not have access to this capital (Yosso, 2005). Due to this problem it is important to understand the experience of low-income first-generation (LIFG) students and how they are utilizing the capital they have access to. Like cultural and financial capital, which is likely to have been received from one's family and/or community (Lareau,

1987), social capital relies on the connections a student makes, the knowledge transferred, and how a student utilizes the connections to their benefit. It is also influenced by past experiences. This research proposes to study the social capital, both academic and social engagement connections, that LIFG students access during on-campus relationships with faculty, staff and peers during a variety of activities and how this social capital contributes to academic success. Students interact academically with a university through connections with faculty, participating in learning communities, research opportunities, and socially with staff and peers in various ways on campus including co-curricular activities, living on campus, research opportunities, internships, and employment. Academic engagement are connections where students are interacting around topics that have more focus on course work, grades, and majors. Social engagement does not indicate that learning is not occurring during these connections, but that students are interacting around campus areas that are more focused on developing a connection to resources, people, and participating in activities that enhance the academic experience. Students who establish connections with individuals and their campus community through activities, organizations, and community involvement build a network which can impact their academic experience.

Not only is the type of engagement important to a student's experience, but research indicates that the strength of those connections also plays a key role. Granovetter's (1983) research on "The Strength of Weak Ties" indicates that connections between individuals and groups have differing strengths. Some connections can be considered strong ties, which are connections with family and close friends. These are individuals that Granovetter considers "a densely knit clump of social structure" (p.202), which one would interact with on a regular basis. Strong ties for college students could be their roommate, some close friends, and for some

students a few close faculty and staff members.  Individuals also have connections that are

considered weak ties, which are acquaintances "few of whom know one another" (p.202).  These

individuals are friends of friends, friends of family, people who individuals work with.  For

college students this would be floormates in a residence hall, peers in the classroom, and most of

their faculty and staff.  Granovetter's research states that weak ties are more than "just trivial

acquaintance tie(s) but rather a crucial bridge between the two densely knit clumps of close

friends" (p.202). Social structure often makes it more difficult for individuals from lower

socioeconomic backgrounds to develop a large group of weak ties, but research shows that those

from low socioeconomic backgrounds who do develop these networks will reap benefits

(Wacquant, 1998; Granovetter, 1983).  These benefits may help to move these individuals out of

their social network and up the social ladder.  College students who engage in establishing both

strong and weak networks, will have more opportunities for social mobility.  "Weak ties provide

people with access to information and resources beyond those available in their own social

circle; but strong ties have greater motivation to be of assistance and are typically more easily

available" (p.209).  Both strong and weak ties are valuable resources for a student to develop

their network and social capital.

Establishing connections on a college campus, through strong or weak ties, provides

opportunities for students to enhance their college experience.  Current literature on the

connections that are established fall into three main research areas.  Research on student on-

campus participation can be classified according to the concepts of involvement, integration, and

engagement.  Wolf-Wendel, Ward, and Kinzie (2009) untangled the key terms and shed light on

key themes between the terms.  Wolfe-Wendel et al. interviewed Alexander Astin about

"involvement", George Kuh about "engagement" and Vincent Tinto about "integration."

Additionally, Wolfe-Wendel, et al. interviewed key researchers associated with each framework, which included Larry Braskamp, John Braxton, Shaun Harper, Sylvia Hurtado, Ernest Pascarella, Linda Sax, and Frances Stage. Astin's "involvement" was defined by the amount of energy a student puts into activities and showed the more energy put in, the more successful a student would be (1984). Employment on campus, living on campus, engaging with peers and faculty, and joining organizations are types of involvement under Astin's theory (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Tinto's "integration" is the student's perception of how socially and academically connected they are to the campus (1993). Kuh's "engagement" had two key parts to his definition which included the amount of time and effort a student puts towards studies and activities which lead to student success, as well as the amount of resources an institution puts towards these learning opportunities to encourage student involvement (Kuh, 2001). Kuh focused on the inputs being educationally purposeful activities noted that students can put energy into things that are not educationally purposeful which would not lead to student success. Although all terms have slightly different meanings and implications, Wolf-Wendel, Ward, and Kinzie agree that Kuh and Tinto's "research on college students indicate that the time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities is the single best predictor of their learning and personal development" (p. 410). Kuh (2009) suggested students become integrated through both involvement and engagement and all three researchers (Kuh, Tinto, and Astin) believe engagement and involvement are used together quite often and it is difficult to see the differences. Although terminology (engagement or integration) might be slightly different, both engagement and integration research shows that social integration to a university was positively related to student's commitment to graduating (Kuh & Love, 2000; Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997). My research study of LIFG college students uses the term engagement as it is the belief

that students need to invest their time in creating networks that are educationally meaningful but

that the university needs to understand which activities, both academically and socially, best

engage LIFG college students.

Campus engagement is the active involvement of a student in their college experience by

participating in both course work and co-curricular activities. Involvement helps to establish

connections between the student and the college (Tinto, 1993), and these connections according

to Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008) increase student engagement, persistence, and

the likelihood that students will graduate.  Kuh, et al.'s study included data from institutions that

completed the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and analyzed survey information

of over 6000 students before they started college through the fall of their sophomore year.  For

Kuh et al.'s study, student involvement was defined using three separate measures from the

NSSE survey: "time spent studying, time spent in co-curricular activities, and a global measure

of engagement in effective educational practices made up of responses to 19 other NSSE items"

(p.544).  Some of the results indicate that students who are engaged in activities that are

"educationally purposeful," such as research with a faculty member, earned higher grades during

their first year and were more likely to return for their second year (Kuh, et. al., 2008, p.547).

Kuh suggests that institutions can aid in student engagement through "teaching practices…first

year seminars, service learning courses and learning communities" (p.555).  The findings from

Kuh's research most germane to this study are that particular groups of students, such as those

with lower ability, students of color, students academically unprepared, first-generation, and

low-income, benefited more than their peer groups from activities that engaged them in the

college experience (Kuh, et. al., 2008); however, it lacks the student's voice of what the role is in

LIFG college students' experience, how these connections are established, and the qualities of

the connections.  My study looks to understand the attributes and characteristics of the

relationships that LIFG establish and the qualities that students look for when establishing a

relationship with a faculty, staff, student, office, or organization on a campus.

How to best engage and connect with students continues to be a significant area of study

in higher education (Astin, 1984, 1997; Kuh, 2001; Kuh et al., 2008). Kuh et al. (2008)

explanation of student engagement states that students are not like "black boxes" where

information is deposited and the outcome is a GPA or academic achievement, but instead that

students are active participants in the output that is established.  The more time and effort

students invest, the more they learn and take away from an experience.  But the reality might be

more in the quality of the relationships over the time on task relationship.  In theory, colleges

that create environments that are supportive and engaging to all students have potential to

increase the academic success of their students.  Researchers, such as Chickering and Gamson

(1987), Kuh et al. (2008), and Tinto (1993, 2009) suggest that there are specific educationally

purposeful practices that work for all students.  Research suggests that these practices work

specifically for low-income students and their academic success (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Kuh,

2010; Tinto, 1993), however, the research lacks the voice of the LIFG college student explaining

what the role is in their experience, how they establish these connections, and the qualities of the

relationships that make them deep, helpful, and meaningful.  The next sections focus on

literature that highlights educationally purposeful activities, both academic and social

engagement, while drawing out areas where the literature lacks the voice of the LIFG college

student or their stories that showcase the role of connections and how they establish them.  The

next section is broken down into two main categories:  academic engagement such as

interactions with faculty, involvement in learning communities, and research opportunities, as

well as social engagement such as extracurricular activities, residential life, internships, and employment.

## Academic Engagement

Academic engagement is opportunities when students interact with the university around activities that are directly related to course work, major material, and grades and whose purpose is learning which relates directly to academics.  These would be opportunities for students to talk about information that they are learning in a course, put what they are learning into practice, and have deeper conversations about what they are learning.  Examples of academic engagement are student faculty relationships, such as attending office hours, being mentored by a faculty member or even doing research with a faculty member.  Additionally, another example of academic engagement would be participating in a learning community, where a group of students come together to discuss course work and make connections between learning.

### *Student faculty relationships*

Student interactions with faculty and staff can be crucial in enhancing their educational experience, especially when there is a genuine interest in the student's experience and learning. Institutions that work to develop these relationships are more likely to reap a variety of benefits from such initiatives.  My study uses George Kuh's term and definition of engagement as the time and energy that students give to their college career and the way an institution allocates resources to encourage students to be active participants in these resources (Wolfe-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). Kuh's definition of engagement indicates that engagement is a "two-way street" where both the student and the institution are active participants in the process. A meaningful conversation with a faculty or staff member about a topic of interest or encouragement on a paper or project can motivate students and encourage students to place more value in what they are learning (Pascarella, 2005).  Faculty and staff who are interested in

students' academic success could potentially make significant contributions to their intellectual

growth and professional development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).  Although most interactions

with faculty happen in a classroom setting, students who have informal interactions with faculty

tend to be more motivated, engaged, and actively involved in the learning process (Thompson,

2001).  These informal connections allow students to build confidence and talk more about their

education and the material that they are learning.  Educationally purposeful out-of-the-classroom

experiences, such as research, internships, and employment opportunities can build strong

connections between students and faculty.

### *Mentoring*

Mentoring is "a practice for developing individuals" that can be either a formal or

informal connection between peers or student and faculty or staff (Adams & Scott, 1996, p.1).

There has been much study of the positive benefits of participating in mentorship for student

development (Butler & Carter, 2009; Bauer & Bennett, 2002; Adams & Scott, 1996).  A more in-

depth definition is a "deeply personal and professional relationship – between a student and

faculty member – whereby the individual with the greater experience supports, guides, and

counsels the less experienced individuals as they attempt to accomplish an important task"

(Butler & Carter, 2009, p.141).  Mentoring relationships can be formal one-to-one between a

student and faculty, staff member, or more experienced student, or they can happen during a

student's participation in an organization, job, or internship. Mentoring research overlaps most

other forms of involvement, as mentorship relationships can develop in clubs, classrooms, and

internships. Additionally, mentorship research overlaps with the relationships that develop

between faculty, staff, and peers.  Kuh et al. (2005) indicate that mentoring can help students

better understand and successfully navigate policies, as well as learn academic strategies from

peers that will aid in their success.  Although not a substantial amount of research on mentoring

relationships and the role that they have on LIFG students' academic success has been

conducted, Ladson-Billings (1994) found that mentors who exhibit culturally relevant behavior

and pedagogical methods tend to be the most successful.  A student who feels they can relate to a

faculty or staff member because they had similar educational, cultural, or familial backgrounds is

more likely to benefit from the mentorship that they receive. These kinds of peers, teachers and

mentors legitimize a student's experiences, and they understand and are more likely relate to the

experiences that students from disadvantaged backgrounds go through.  These mentors do not

need to be LIFG, but having an understanding of these students is especially helpful for forging

positive mentoring relationships.  Mentor relationships have critical importance to students, their

success, and feeling accepted (Ladson-Billings; 1994).

### *Learning Communities*

Learning communities are a form of involvement that allows students to build strong

connections with other students, faculty, and staff around an educational topic of interest.  Tinto

(2009) defines learning communities as groups of students that come together to learn about

problems and topics, often problem solving and learning about new issues together.  Learning

communities can be formalized groups such as college formed first year seminars, but also

informal such as student formed and run study groups.  In Tinto's conceptualization, learning

communities are environments that allow for an exchange of ideas, a safe place to share

knowledge, and place to share resources.  Learning communities have three things in common:

shared knowledge (taking the same courses), shared knowing (taking classes together), and

shared responsibility (equal partners in the experience) (Tinto, 2009).  Students who participate

in learning communities are more likely to spend time outside of class supporting each other and

learning together, which allows students to develop stronger relationships with a cohort of peers.

Additionally, learning communities allow students to have a direct relationship with faculty and

an area to process knowledge in a safe environment (Tinto, 2009).  Research has indicated many

additional benefits, such as higher levels of engagement with the campus community, for the

general population of students participating in a learning community (Kuh, 2010; Engstrom &

Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 2009).

      Most research on learning communities is directly focused on the general student

population, and does not drill down to the role learning communities play in LIFG student's

experience. The limited research that is directly focused on LIFG student populations does

indicate that these students benefit from participation in such programs (Tinto, 2009).

Specifically, "for students who enter higher education academically under-prepared, a

disproportionate number who are from low-income backgrounds, learning communities that

include one or more basic skills courses, serve to promote learning and persistence in ways in

which stand-alone learning centers typically cannot" (p.8).  Kuh (2010) finds that students from

LIFG backgrounds garner greater rewards from engagement programs and initiatives than do

their middle and upper-class peers.  In another important study, Engstrom and Tinto (2008)

found that "academically under-prepared students in the learning communities were significantly

more engaged in a variety of activities than similar students on their campuses, including in

classwork and in activities involving their faculty and classmates in and outside of class" (p.47).

Engagement for LIFG students reaps valuable rewards; however, a better understanding is still

needed of how these connections are established and how they are utilized to aid in success.  In

addition, Engstrom and Tinto (2008) found that LIFG students who were involved in learning

communities felt that they had a safe place to learn, where they found support and a sense of

belonging and were learning deeply and making connections.  "Access without support is not

opportunity.  That institutions do not intentionally exclude students from college does not mean

that they are including them as fully valued members of the institution and providing them with

support that enables them to translate access into success" (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008, p.50).

Most research is geared towards the benefits of "creating conditions that matter" for all students

not specifically low-income students (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2010; Tinto,

1993).   There is a lack of understanding of the conditions under which LIFG might choose to

become involved or develop connections in learning communities especially since not all LIFG

college students have knowledge of all that a university has to offer and might miss valuable

opportunities that research indicates aides in their academic success.

### *Research Opportunities*

Another way students can have a meaningful experience is through research opportunities

with faculty and staff.  Studies indicate that students who conduct research develop stronger

relationships with faculty, learn more about course material, gain a better understanding of the

research process, and have a more focused career path (Lopatto, 2003; Chapman & Pascarella,

1983).  Faculty-student interactions come most often from a formal lecture setting.  However, the

benefits from more informal connections and pairings are numerous.  Although research

opportunities tend to be formalized in structure, it allows the ability to engage with a faculty

member on an informal and more regular basis.  Being paired with a faculty or staff member to

conduct original research provides a realistic view of what research entails, as well as a place to

share knowledge and experience (Green, 2007).

Lopatto's (2003) research investigated what features students and faculty believed were

essential to the undergraduate experience. Lopatto found that students who participated in

research said that the top five benefits to participating in research were "enhancement of

professional or academic credentials," "clarification of career path," "understanding the research

process in your field," "learning a topic in depth," and "developing a continuing relationship

with a faculty member." Research opportunities illuminate another side of academia that is

typically not seen in the classroom experience.  Moreover, research opportunities that are

meaningful and educationally purposeful can be predictors of learning and development (Kuh, et

al., 2010) and help students formulate their own ideas and thoughts about how the world works.

Additionally, connections where students have interactions with faculty provide opportunities for

faculty to be advocates or strong references for students.  Research in this area covers the

benefits that students receive from taking part in research opportunities, especially those that

allow students to work closely with faculty, but the literature falls short of directly showing the

role research plays for students from LIFG populations.  Considering Terenzini et al. (1996)

noted that there are significant differences between first-generation students and their peers,

especially in terms of college expectations and the desire to seek a personal connection with a

faculty member, there is a need to better understand the role that connections with faculty

members has on this population.


**Social Engagement**

　　　　Social engagement refers to the learning interactions that students have with the

university community around activities that are related to being part of a community and the

roles that community members take on which are more focused on developing connections to

resources, people, and participating in activities that enhance the academic experience.  This is

not to indicate that learning does not take place during any or all of these activities, but that the

focus is more on the social aspects of the university community.  By participating in social

engagement students gain valuable connections which offer peer groups to study with, practice in

leadership development, and many other skills that aid them in academic success.  Examples of

social engagement are peer connections, participating in co-curricular activities, living on

campus, student employment, and internships.

*Peer connections*

Peer connections, similar to interactions with faculty and staff, can be a significant factor

in student success.  According to Kuh, et al. (2008) "peers are very influential to student learning

and values development, [and] institutions must harness and shape this influence to the extent

possible so it is educationally purposeful and helps to reinforce academic expectations" (p.557).

Furthermore, peer connections can aid in success for students in a college setting (Chickering &

Gamson, 1987).  These connections include support, discussion, and feedback groups, and

learning methodologies such as cohort style learning and study. These groups can be formally or

organically organized and can be formed in a classroom setting, on a residence hall floor as part

of a learning community, or as a support for outside-of-the-classroom challenges.  Chickering

and Gamson (1987) state that "working with others often increases involvement in learning"

(p.3).  Opportunities to work with peers, include learning communities, group projects, and

student employment.  Engstrom and Tinto's (2008) study on learning communities found that

peer support had positive effects on a student's success.  Students felt that by having close

relationships with peers they felt less alone, more supported, more confident in their ability to

succeed in college, and had a better understanding of their studies (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

Additionally, Kuh, et al. (2010) emphasized the importance of students learning from peers.

Whether it is in the form of learning groups, tutoring, peer evaluation, or learning communities,

all have a great impact for both the learner and the peer teacher.   The literature indicates that in

many ways the relationships that happen between peers at college have contributed to academic

success.

Ward, Thomas, and Dirsch (2010) found that peer-to-peer relationships that are supportive of academics, confidence, career, social connectedness, and well-being have a positive impact on academic goal attainment and retention.  The study paired 34 first-year and sophomore students with junior and senior students.  The goal of the mentoring study was "to foster a community of intense, nurturing relationships" (p.171).   The juniors and seniors were required to have above a 2.5 GPA, good interpersonal skills, and an interest in fostering the development of a first-year or sophomore student.  Participants in the study engaged in goal setting and monitoring, met weekly for 90 minutes, and the upperclass students encouraged their younger peers to pursue academic, career, social, and personal well-being goals for growth.  The results indicate that these relationships aided in goal attainment and retention efforts.  At the end of the study, students reported that they were significantly more likely to establish, pursue, and attain academic goals than they had been before working with the upperclass peer.  Ward et al.'s (2010) research indicates the important role upperclass peers can play in supporting younger students through their academic experiences. There are many details and insights to peer connections yet to be pursued, including the importance of the makeup of the peer support group, the types of connections formed, how they are established, and whether the groups formed on their own or are they intentionally planned and sought out.  Knowing these answers could potentially help college faculty and staff understand their roles in shaping peer support groups to best serve LIFG students.

### *Co-curricular Activities*

Tinto's (1993) research indicates that students' retention rates are influenced by their amount of integration into a campus's social and academic systems.  The more a student is engaged in particular activities on campus, the more likely they will persist until graduation.  Co-curricular activities that students participate in include athletics and recreational services, service

learning, and leadership activities such as participation in a student club.  These activities yield

many benefits for students including stress relief, educational opportunities outside of the

classroom, connections between material learned in the classroom, as well as connections

between peers, faculty, and staff (Kuh, et al., 2008).

Research particularly highlights the unique benefits of membership with student clubs,

organizations, sports and recreation teams (Dugan, 2011; Kuh, et al., 2008).  Estimates suggest

that as many as 80 percent of students participate in at least one group experience before the end

of their senior year (Dugan & Komives, 2007).  The amount and variety of clubs and

organizations in which students can participate is vast.  These organizations can include

academic and sport clubs, cultural, religious, and Greek organizations, and student governance.

A piece of the variety in these organizations is the diversity of how they function; some have

faculty/staff involvement while others are comprised of and run solely by students.  Current

research highlights many benefits to students participating in organizations, such as development

of leadership skills and stronger connections to the institution (Kuh, 2008).  Kuh (2008) states

that when students "engage in meaningful way(s) with something that excites them, doors to

other educationally purposeful activities often open up" (p.269).  Participating in an

organization has the ability to influence a student's values, attitudes, and college outcomes

(Astin, 1996; Newcomb, 1962).  Newcomb writes:

> In so far as we are interested in what college experience does to students' attitudes we
> must, because of the nature of attitude formation and change, be interested in the groups
> to which students (wittingly or not) yield power over their own attitudes.  Most
> attitudes—and particularly those in which educators are interested—are, as social
> psychologists like to say anchored in group membership. (p.479)

With the high variation of organizations that a student can become involved in, research

indicates that those groups that have high peer interaction have more influence over the student

(Dugan, 2011).  However, research lacks a focus on the role that connections made between

participants play on a student's experience, especially for LIFG college students.

Another activity that many students participate in during college is service-learning.

Service learning is rooted in Kolb's (1981) research on experiential learning which highlights

four areas a learner needs to engage with to fully learn a new concept.  These areas include: first,

students fully involving themselves in a new experience, second being able to observe and reflect

on the experience, third create new concepts from their experience, observations, and reflections,

and last use these new concepts to solve future problems.  The terms "service-learning" and

"civic engagement" are defined as "teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful

community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic

responsibility, and strengthen communities" (National Service-Learning Clearing House, 2012).

Most institutions have service-learning programs that are instituted in a variety of ways, such as

graduation requirements, course requirements, or separate co-curricular activities and offices.

Much of the research is focused on the differing types of programs and which has more benefits,

as well as research that focuses on how participation in service learning impacts the college

experience (Keen & Hall, 2009).  The benefits from service learning include linking students to

their communities and future employers, job experience, and the ability to apply principles

learned in the classroom to real world experiences (Kuh, 2008).   In Keen and Hall's (2009)

study, the strongest benefit that community service had on both first-year students and seniors

was the opportunity for dialogue, along with a moderate increase in time studying.  The research

lacks a rich explanation for the role the dialogue played in a student's success, who the dialogue

was between, and what the dialogue entailed.  There is not substantial research on the specific

benefits that service learning has for LIFG college students. The need for further study in this

area is important to further understand how putting LIFG students in areas where they have

valued cultural capita, their hometowns or school, with peers and then engaging in educational

conversations with faculty and peers could build on academic success. This would allow

students to feel more comfortable talking about their experience while enhancing it with

educationally purposeful conversations.

### *Living on Campus*

Many students take advantage of living on campus in order to be close to classes,

academic resources, social connections, and peers. Pascarella et al. (1994) concluded that after

controlling for academic ability, students who live in the residence halls do not earn higher GPAs

than those who live with their parents and only slightly higher than peers who live in off-campus

apartments. One reason for this GPA difference might be because residence halls give students

more opportunity to socialize with other students than their peers who live at home (Pascarella et

al., 1994). Living on campus is an important factor in determining a student's academic

engagement (Turley & Wodtke, 2010; Blimling, 1989; Astin, 1984) due to the proximity to study

groups, campus resources such as the library or tutoring center, and ability to engage with faculty

and staff on a more regular basis. Living on campus produces many desirable outcomes that

enhance a student's overall academic experience, such as increased faculty and staff contact,

more participation in co-curricular activities, and use of campus resources (Astin, 1984;

Pascarella, Terenzini, & Blimling, 1994). Grades, although significantly important to one's

academic success, are not the only way that students demonstrate to future employers what they

have learned and can do. Students who participate in activities or are part of communities

demonstrate that they can apply their academic knowledge in a variety of experiences. Many

colleges and universities have started to move towards living-learning communities within their

residential education program which helps to continue the academic experience outside the

classroom by bring faculty into the residence halls, offering seminars or courses with students

who live together, and programming around topic areas that are covered in classes.  Research has

indicated that such programs have had positive influence on both academic involvement and

performance (Pike, Schroeder, & Berry, 1997).  Living in a residence hall with a living-learning

community has the ability to improve a student's academic experience by providing more

opportunities to make connections outside the classroom to course material, however if the

connections in a residence hall are not utilized correctly, they do not provide any academic

benefits.  Living on campus also separates students from the responsibilities and expectations

commonly associated with them at home (e.g., taking care of siblings, working, contributing to

family's bottom line finances).  This separation allows all students who live on campus more

time to focus on their academic experiences and easier access to resources, and this may be

particularly important for LIFG students.

Several studies have suggested that there are differences between racial and ethnic

groups, as well as among gender, in who utilizes resources in the residence halls and the benefits

these groups might receive academically (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Hu, 2002; Turley et al.,

2010).  However, there appears to be a lack of research on the role that living on campus might

have specifically on a LIFG students' experience and academic success.  This is important

information that needs to be uncovered due to the additional costs that living on campus can

have, resulting in LIFG students needing additional loans to live on campus. If research indicated

that LIFG college students performed better due to living on campus then there would need to be

additional ways to financially support these students in order for them to be able to afford living

on campus.

Living in residence halls also has a positive effect on students' appreciation of diversity (Pascarella, 2005). Students who live in the residence halls are more open to diversity and show more knowledge and acceptance of those who are different from themselves than they did prior to attending college (Astin, 2003; Pascarella, 2005). Living in close proximity allows for students to have more regular and frequent interactions with students other than those from their hometown. The role this knowledge and appreciation for others plays in a LIFG student's academic success is not explored in the literature but might allow for intellectual growth by students exploring topics with others who have a different point of view on a regular basis.

*Employment*

Many students work to pay for college tuition, books, and other needs and this is considered normal in the American educational system (Pike, Kuh, & Massa-McKinley, 2008). National data indicates that 68% of all students in college have a job during the academic year, and a third of them work more than 20 hours per week (Pike, et al., 2008). Students can develop connections during these jobs, which may play a positive role in their academic experience. Campus jobs help to connect the student to faculty and staff at the institution which aids in academic success (Tinto, 1993). Some students continue jobs they had while they were in high school, others take work-study jobs that are offered through their financial aid package, while other students take jobs working in their future career choice. There is evidence indicating students who work during their college experience have higher grade point averages than their peers without jobs (Gleason, 1993; Hood, Craig, & Bruce, 1992); however the details in which jobs, how many hours, and whether they are on or off campus vary significantly. Astin (1997) concluded that there was a small positive relationship between working on campus and grade point averages. However, Pike et al. (2008) found a negative relationship between students that worked more than 20 hours per week and grades. Additionally, Kuh, Kinzie, Cruce, Shoup, and

Gonyea (2008) found that students who worked 20 or fewer hours on campus had higher grades than students who worked more, did not work at all, or worked off campus.  Pike and colleagues (2008) found that working 20 hours or less on campus had a strong relationship with student-faculty interaction due to the ability to get jobs with faculty, paid research opportunities, and also not working so much that it kept students from seeking out faculty during office hours.  Most research is focused on the amount of hours a student works and whether they work on or off-campus, with less focus on the what is happening during the connections that are being established. For LIFG students who have the greatest need for employment, these connections can have both positive and negative outcomes on their academic success.  Perhaps the need for LIFG college students to seek employment of more than 20 hours per week puts them at risk for compromised academic success.   In another study by Walpole (2003), her work explored how socioeconomic status affects college outcomes focused on persistence.  Her findings raised concerns about persistence of low-income students who must work in order to pay for college. Students in Walpole's study had less time for involvement on campus, but also reported that they had significantly less time to study.  These findings are echoed by Alford (1999) who studied social adjustment for college students.  He argued that the high value placed on low-income students to work prevents them from participating both academically and socially in campus activities. The research lacks substance in exploring the ways connections between faculty, staff, and peers developed during employment might be utilized to augment academic success, especially for LIFG college students who are more likely to need the job to pay for their education, housing, and books.

### *Internships*

Participating in an internship has also proven to be an effective means of successfully engaging students and can be an important learning experience (Parris & Adams, 1994).

Internships are out-of-class experiences that can be paid or unpaid, for credit or not, and typically

are in a field of interest or based on a student's major.  According to Parris and Adams (1994)

internships provide an educational opportunity where students gain career-related experiences.

These career-related experiences can help students form valuable networks outside of the college

with future employers.  Internships can also help LIFG students build connections to the college

and have the power to increase retention rates for this population (Nagda, Gregerman, Jonides,

von Hippel, & Lerner, 1998).  The connections within the college setting can be established

through discussions that students have in their academic field and with other students in their

major. Internship opportunities have shown to increase persistence and academic success,

learning and development, as well as the belief that a profession is open to them (Buckley, 2008;

Hunter, Laursen, & Seymour, 2006; Villarejo, Barlow, Kogan, Veazey, & Sweeney, 2008).

LIFG college students have been exposed to fewer careers that require a college education than

their more affluent peers, which is why career exposure through internships helps LIFG students

experience new careers, as well as opens doors that they were not aware even existed.

Similar to research on students living on campus, the research about internships shows

that there was more interaction outside the classroom between students who participated in

internships versus those who did not, which increased discussions about diversity, academics,

and politics (Pascarella, 2005).  The connections that students made move beyond the company

or organization they are doing their internship with and allowed for meaningful connections with

peers and faculty. Most research in this area is broad and overlaps with employment and does not

specifically focus on students from LIFG backgrounds.  Understanding where LIFG college

students learn about internships and where they do them will help universities better understand

where they might be missing opportunities to connect these students to internship experiences, meaningful opportunities, and future employers.

**Student Resiliency**

The importance of a university offering meaningful opportunities for students to engage, both academically and socially with the institution, aids in their experience and overall academic success, but the role a student plays is also important. LIFG students might enter a university underprepared but something has allowed them to persist.  Research by Masten (2001) suggests that this quality within the student is resiliency. The idea of resiliency was originally researched in the field of psychology and later introduced to educational research (Garmenzy, 1991; Masten, 2001). Resiliency research is the study of high educational achievement despite the presence of risk factors that normally result in low academic performance (Garmenzy, 1991; Masten, 2001; Morales, 2008). Resilience is defined as "phenomena characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development" (Masten, 2001, p.228). Students are not considered resilient unless there has been a significant threat to their development; there must be current or past hazards to their development, from which they overcame. Resilience within the university can be seen as a form of resistance or adaptation when faced with a challenge (Masten, 2001; Yosso, 2002). Resilient students often see the world through a different lens, viewing both people and experiences from a positive perspective that enables them to see the big picture and potential in others, and as a result recover from adversity with renewed energy.  Even when a student is faced with a life changing experience, such as a loss of a family member, or an academic set back, such as failing a course, students are able to remain positive and continue making decisions that keep them moving forward.  Gayles states that "rather than focus on self-defeating behavior and cultural strategies that reproduce and entrench social stratification, these

studies situate academic achievement as a transformative act" (2005, p.251).  There are two

major variables present in resilience theory: risk and vulnerability areas, and assets; also called

protective factors and compensatory strategies (Garmenzy, 1991; Masten, 2001; Morales, 2008).

*Risk and vulnerability areas* are the circumstances over which the participants have no control

such as quality of education, lack of financial resources, and/or lack of parental involvement.

These qualities are often seen in the educational research of LIFG college students and therefore

these students are labeled as at risk (Lareau, 1987; 2003). Secondly, the assets or *compensatory*

*strategies* and *protective factors* are the tactics that the students develop and later utilize to

overcome their risks and vulnerabilities. These are the inherent strengths that the student

possesses that allow him or her to mitigate the risk factors that may be present in their life. Some

of these factors are characteristics such as having a strong work ethic, being able to adapt or

learn from previous situations, and having an involved and caring individual in their life. The

resiliency process is the result of the interplay between all of these components (Garmenzy,

1991; Masten, 2001; Morales, 2008). The resiliency process and engaging academic and social

resources are vital for the academic success of LIFG college students. Understanding resiliency

is important to my research because LIFG college students have persisted and beat the odds of

getting into college when 60% of their peers did not (Bozick, Lauff, & Wirt, 2007; Engberg &

Allen, 2011).  LIFG have developed strategies for developing relationships and mechanisms to

overcome challenges and research needs to better understand what those mechanisms are so

when a LIFG college student is struggling academically an institution can create plans to help a

student recover more effectively and get back on the correct academic path.

**Conclusion**

In summary, this chapter has provided an overview of the multiple literatures, key researchers, and areas of interest that have informed this research study.  The review of the literature indicates that how a student builds connections on campus plays a role in their academic success (Tinto, 1991; Kuh, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2005).  Students make connections, both strong and weak, with faculty, staff, and peers during their academic career.  These academic and social connections happen during a variety of opportunities, such as research, living on campus, internships, and co-curricular activities  The review of the literature indicates that students who fully engage in these connections get the most out of the experience and in turn get more out of their university experience, including academic success. Using this relevant literature, the current research responds to the lack of specific attention spent on the formation of social capital in LIFG students, how these students are utilizing these connections, and the role these connections play in their academic experience.   My study looks to fill that gap and provide insight into the experiences and perspectives of LIFG students.

# CHAPTER III-RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

**Research Design**

My research of the role social capital plays in low-income first-generation (LIFG) student success uses in-depth qualitative interviews with 22 college students. My study uses an ethnographic epistemology, focused on changing ways of thinking about traditionally marginalized individuals, more specifically from the point of view of low-income first-generation students (Creswell, 2007). In-depth interviews are a useful method to uncover individual points of view and to understand the meaning that participants draw from their experiences (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Maxwell, 2005; Museus, 2007). I drew on an ethnographic research design because it possesses a strong link to the epistemology guiding this study. Participants were asked to describe how they were experiencing the connections that they were making, the role those connections played in their academic success, how they were making connections, and how these connections influenced their behavior by asking in-depth open-ended questions (Maxwell, 2005; Seidman, 2006). Through qualitative measures, my study sought to capture the meaning of lived experiences of 22 LIFG college students through their eyes (Creswell, 2007). The purpose of this research design is to foreground the voices of traditionally marginalized low-income first-generation students at the university. By incorporating the stories and experiences, I collected stories and experiences by conducting in depth, open ended interviews with LIFG students and then using capital theory (Bourdieu, 1977; Coleman, 1988) along with engagement research (Kug, 2001) to analyze and construct the data of the 22 Deeply-connected, Connected, and Under-connected students at a major northeastern public research institution.

**Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of my study, it is important to have an understanding of the following terms: low-income first-generation college students, social capital, and academic success.

1.  Low-income first-generation: The definition of *LIFG* are defined by most relevant literature as family income and parental education level (Terenzini et al., 2001). Education is believed to be one of the most influential components of socioeconomic status because it provides the credentials often used to determine the type of employment individuals are able to obtain and the income they will likely earn. The parents of LIFG students also typically have little or no college education resulting in employment in jobs requiring manual labor, have little or no net worth, and live in rental property or are homeless (Leondar-Wright, 2005). For the purpose of my study, LIFG is defined using two key markers: household income and parental education. The economic standard guiding identification of household income in my study is the Educational Opportunity Fund Qualification for Services Guide (Table 1). For the second marker of parental education, students will be considered first-generation if neither parent/caregiver has completed a bachelor's degree in the United States.

2.  Social Capital: In my study, I examine the social capital that is made available to students through the connections they have with faculty, staff, campus organizations, and peers. These connections can be formal, as with interactions a student has with an advisor during a meeting, or informal, as with interactions between students during an event on campus. Specific campus connections are broken into two forms of engagement: academic and social engagement examples respectively are interaction with faculty, research opportunities, and learning communities; and living in on-campus housing, co-curricular activities, internships, and outside employment.

3.  Academic success:  Academic success is measured using cumulative GPA at the time of the

interview.  This study defines academic success as all students that are in "good standing" with

the Mid-Atlantic university.  Being in "good standing" is defined as having a cumulative GPA of

2.0 or higher.

**Table 1:  Qualification for Services Guide**
Academic Year 2012-2013

| Applicants with a Household Size of | Gross Income Not to Exceed |
|---|---|
| 1 | $21,780 |
| 2 | $29,420 |
| 3 | $37,060 |
| 4 | $44,700 |
| 5 | $52,340 |
| 6 | $59,980 |
| 7 | $67,620 |
| 8 | $75,260 |
| ** | For each additional member of the household add $7,640 |

(Federal Student Aid, 2014)

## Research Setting

My research was conducted at a public research institution in the Mid-Atlantic region that

enrolls students from all 50 states and 125 countries.  The university had an undergraduate

enrollment during 2009-2010 of approximately 42,300 students on three distinct campuses.  The

cost for attendance was $23,993 for in-state tuition.  The university is racially and

socioeconomically diverse, which is important to offer different perspectives to the study:  48%

White, 23% Asian, 12% Latino, 10% African American, 2% foreign, and 5% other.  Seventy-

three percent of students receive financial aid or need based-based institutional aid, between

$500 and $24,000, with the average aid being $14,000.  Eighty-seven percent of students are

state residents, while 13% are from other states or countries.  The campus is comprised of

multiple colleges, offering over 100 liberal arts and sciences, applied science, fine arts, and

professional degree programs.

**Sample**

My sample of 22 current college students at Mid Atlantic University (pseudonym) who were purposively selected based on the following criteria:  1) self-identified as being LIFG college students, based on parent/guardian's education and family income and 2.) having a grade point average (GPA) above 2.0.  To recruit participants, assistance of key contacts on campus was sought, including the directors from three different programs which provide academic and social supports to students, including students from low-income and/or first-generation backgrounds. The directors were given an email (Appendix C) that was sent directly to students who were interested in participating in my study. All three directors reached out to all students in their respective programs to request student participation by informing them about the study and criteria for participation. Participants were offered a $15 gift card from Barnes and Noble for participating, which was handed to them at the end of their interview.

Additionally the email had the Biographical Information Survey (Appendix A) attached. Students who were interested in participating in the study completed and emailed back a short demographic questionnaire requesting biographical information, including their background, school experience including college, educational attainment of parents, and family income, to determine if they met the study criteria.  In choosing participants, attempts were made to interview an equal number of high (cumulative GPA of 3.0 and above) and low (cumulative GPA of between a 2.0 and 2.99) GPA candidates.  Additionally, attempts were made to have a balanced sample of males and females, as well as other diverse characteristics such as class year, ethnicity, and majors.  From the original 42 eligible participants that submitted forms, 30 were selected to have a balanced sample and were emailed for participation in the study.  Biographical information of all ineligible participants was destroyed.

Of the 30 selected participants, 22 were interviewed.  The other eight potential participants either dropped out or did not show up for interviews. Characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 2 with a more detailed list in Table 3.    Twelve of the participants had a cumulative grade point average of 3.0 or higher, which is the cumulative GPA required to be eligible for scholarships, with seven of those participants having a 3.5 or higher GPA, which is considered Dean's List.  Nine of the participants had a cumulative average between 2.99 and 2.0, the cumulative average needed to graduate from the institution.  One participant had a GPA that fell between 1.99 and 0.00 but was included in my study as she was returning to the university after being academically dismissed and was waiting for grades to be transferred from summer courses taken.  These grades helped her get readmitted and on track for getting back on track for the 2.00 and 2.49 cumulative GPA range.   While investigating the link between campus connections and academic success was one of the goals of my study, additional research needs to be completed to strengthen the argument that there are distinct variations in LIFG students with GPA differences.  Participants were considered "low-income" in accordance with the State of New Jersey's Department of Education's Educational Opportunity Fund Eligibility scale (Table 1).

**Research Methods**

The focus of my study is to capture LIFG students' perspectives regarding how connections were established, the qualities of these connections, and the role connections played in students' academic success.  A qualitative research approach is most suitable to capture such perspectives.  According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), "many qualitative studies are descriptive and exploratory; they build rich descriptions of complex circumstances that are unexplored in the literature" (p.33).  For chosen participants, biographical information from the

demographic questionnaire was reviewed in order to formulate additional interview questions.

Relevant questions included ages of siblings, siblings' college attendance, and clarifying

questions about family structure and background. These interviews were semi-structured using

an interview protocol that guided the questions, but allowed interviews to remain open to asking

follow-up questions as needed for further understanding or clarification (Bryman, 2008). In-

depth interviews allowed for the participants to identify and provide rich and detailed

information about their connections and the role connections had played in their college

experience. Since the experiences of LIFG students were the essence and main focus of the

study, qualitative interviewing was particularly appropriate because it "begins with the

assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit"

(Patton, 1990, p.278).

All interviews were conducted on campus at a time and location that was convenient to

the participants. Most interviews took place in a quiet and private location at a student center or

a bookstore. Interviews lasted between 50 to 90 minutes and began with a short discussion of

the study, signing the consent form, and conducting the interview. Interviews were recorded and

transcribed. Each participant received the opportunity to read transcripts of their individual

interview and make necessary clarifications to the transcripts (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Only two of the twenty-two participants gave additional comments after reading their transcripts.

This added trustworthiness to the research by allowing participants to review and comment.

**Table 2:  Participants' Grade Point Averages**

|  |  |  |
|---|---|---|
|  | 3.50 or higher GPA | 7 students |
|  | 3.00-3.49 GPA | 5 students |
|  | 2.50-2.99 GPA | 5 students |
|  | 2.00-2.49 GPA | 4 students |
|  | Below 1.99*** | 1 student |

***Participant was returning to the university after being academically dismissed.

Based on Biographical Information Survey and individual interviews, student profiles were

created which highlights important family and educational history, campus connections, as well

as academic year, anticipated graduation date, and cumulative GPA.  Student profiles have been

grouped based on cumulative GPAs.

### *Student Profiles with Cumulative GPA 3.5 or higher*

Ben:  Ben found himself in jail at a young age, facing a sentence of 17 years for a violent crime.
He ended up serving 10 years and was presented with a unique opportunity to be part of a college
program called Successful Paths.  Successful Paths worked to prepare Ben for attending college
when he was released from jail, as well as providing supports while he attended college.  Ben
was a White/Caucasian with Hispanic-origins not in Mexico nontraditional male student at age
30, and at times, he felt he was struggling with whether he was an adult or a traditional 18 year
old college student. Ben was adopted at a young age and lost his mother in 2004 in between jail
stints.  His father was a hoarder and was not involved in Ben's college experience.  When Ben
was first released he attempted to stay with his father, but their arguments and his father's health
and mental health issues made that situation untenable. Ben moved out and his father ultimately
told him, "you need to get a real job."  Ben struggled to find a place to live, but after advertising
his situation on Craig's List, connected with a family that he is currently staying with.  At this
time Ben financially supports himself with two jobs, working at Burger King and as a work
study student in the Financial Aid office on campus.  Ben works close to 40 hours per week in
these two jobs.  He is a junior (anticipated graduation date of 2015) who is majoring in
Communications with a cumulative GPA between the 3.5 and 3.99 range.  He would love to
double major in Visual Arts, but believes doing that would require him to stay for an additional
year, for which he does not have the funding.  Ben is currently an Executive board member of
the Successful Paths student organization and finds most of his support through peers that
participate in this organization or know about the Successful Paths Program.  Ultimately upon
graduation, Ben would like to find a job, attend graduate school, and travel.

Korey:  Korey a White/Caucasian non-Hispanic female, currently a 5th Year (anticipated graduation date of 2014), who lived in an area and went to a high school where she was one of the few white students, so attending college was a new experience because she was exposed to more students that looked like her.  However, most of the students she initially became friends with were from the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program whose diversity looked more like the area where she grew up.  She struggled with being considered both part of EOF and seen as an outsider.  Due to her "whiteness," initially both EOF and general students struggled to accept her because she was not a minority and they had misperceptions that EOF was only for minority students.   Korey and her younger sister live with their father and grandmother.   While in high school, she attended a private all-girls Catholic high school, which she only attended due to scholarships and financial aid. Korey believed that her mother had attended a year of college, and her father did not graduate from high school.  Due to their limited experience with college, her family provided more motivational support rather than specific academic advice like editing papers.  Korey described navigating the experience as an independent process which she had to learn on her own; she felt this independence aided in her current GPA being between 3.5 and 3.99.  Initially, she struggled with college when she went home most weekends during her the first semester of her first year.  Korey spoke at length about the role that money played in her life; at times, she sent money that she made in her college job home to help support her family.  She only opened a savings account during her senior year because of the need to spend money on groceries, books, and school supplies.  The experience that connected Korey to the college most was joining the Residence Hall Association (RHA) and being a student staff member in residence life.  During both experiences she met many of her closest friends.  She identified the friends that were most beneficial as the friends that were both residence life student staff members and EOF students.

Colin:  Colin, a White/Caucasian non-Hispanic male, went to community college immediately out of high school where he ended up getting in trouble and going to jail.  When he got out of jail he went to a different community college prior to transferring to his current 4-year institution.  He is in the Successful Paths Program.  Colin is currently a junior (anticipated graduation date of 2015) with a GPA between a 3.5 and 3.99.  Colin lived with his mother during his first year at the college and commuted over an hour to the campus five days a week.  His proudest academic moment was receiving a 4.0 during his first year at the college.  He recently moved to an apartment off-campus where he lives with his girlfriend.  He works on campus as a supervisor in the recreation center.  He started his job as a work study student and put in additional efforts in hopes of getting promoted.  Additionally, he reached out to a professional staff member at the recreation center and asked for more money and responsibility.  His other time commitments include the Successful Paths Program where he conducts interviews of future potential Successful Paths students and the Successful Paths Student Organization where he attends regular meetings and volunteers his time with the community.  Colin does have a second job working as a server in Longhorn Steakhouse.  Colin discussed the difference in his jobs: as his Longhorn Steakhouse supervisors are more concerned with profits and his recreation center

supervisors are more concerned with his education. Neither of Colin's parents attended college, however, both of his siblings attended and graduated from college. His parents provide a lot of emotional support.

Sunita: Sunita, an Asian-American non-Hispanic female, was preparing for her sophomore year (anticipated graduation date of 2016). Although she said that she felt she had a successful first year, she wished that the students she lived with were more social. Sunita had originally signed up to be in a learning community but had not been placed in it. Sunita was double majoring in Business and Economics with a GPA between a 3.5 and 3.99. Many of her friends are from her first-year orientation group. Additionally, she joined a professional club called Scarlet Capital Management, which was a finance club where students learned about the stock market and stocks. Upperclass students taught topics to other members, including many of the new members. Additionally, there were projects that members had to do and present back to the group about specific topics around stocks. As a first-year student, Sunita felt that she learned a lot and had many opportunities to present and learn. Many of her friends lived on the same campus and kept in touch with each other and their orientation leaders via Facebook. They would eat meals together at the dining hall throughout the year. She also selected her sophomore year roommate from a student who was in her orientation group and with whom she hung out throughout her first year. One of the best experiences that Sunita had was her workstudy position as a peer counselor with the financial aid office. She enjoyed her job because of her supervisor, her peers, and what she was learning from the experience. Sunita talked about how finances played a role in her experiences in that her father would continually tell Sunita and her sisters that after they graduated in four years they should plan on going to work and getting a job where their employer would pay for any additional schooling.

Alyssa: Alyssa, a Multi-racial Hispanic with origins not in Mexico female is a junior (with an anticipated graduation date of 2015). Alyssa is a "self-proclaimed over-achiever" with an overall GPA between 3.5 and 3.99. Alyssa decided to attend college based on the close location to her home (45 minutes away), as well as her desire to be part of a women's college and still be allowed to take classes with men. As a [women's college] woman, Alyssa felt she was given many opportunities that other college women were not given, including getting to know faculty, taking a course that introduced her to women's and gender study issues, and living in an active living-learning community. Alyssa joined the Women and Creativity House, which allowed her to have a creative release. She attends counseling and the health center on a regular basis for hypochondria but finds that being in the Women and Creativity House allows her to paint and de-stress from her academic workload. The Women and Creativity House is a living-learning community for women majoring in or interested in the arts. Students living in the Women and Creativity House take 3 credits (1.5 year semester) taught in-residence by a living-learning coordinator. Alyssa has a close relationship with her mother, but was glad to go away to college because of the stress that her mother places on her to be successful and follow rules. Additionally, she has a stepfather with whom she does not get along well. Alyssa works at one

of the campus centers, a job that she enjoys because she has met many other students and faculty due to her position; she also sees the job as easy, flexible, and says her supervisors are focused on her academics as well.  Alyssa is a very involved student; in addition to her job and participation in a living-learning environment, she is part of the Douglass Recruitment Network, participates in Spoken Word, and the Institute for Women's Leadership, which provided her with opportunities to present outside of class.  Alyssa was in the middle of her summer McNair preparation program during the interview.  McNair is a program for low-income, first-generation, or minority students that are unrepresented in graduate, doctoral, or law programs.

Eve:  Eve, a Black/African American, non-Hispanic female, is a women's college student who only applied to attend a women's college because her older sister recommended she attend.  She is a senior (anticipated graduation date of 2014) McNair student with a GPA between a 3.5 and 3.99.  Eve had very specific plans of attending a doctoral program for political science in California immediately after graduation.  Eve struggled being a political science major as many of the faculty members she first encountered were "old white men" and seemed disinterested in her research.  She felt that she did not connect with faculty in her major until she found female faculty members who really cared about her, her growth, research interests, and future jobs and graduate school programs.   Eve's father received a four-year degree from Romania but the degree was not recognized in the United States. Eve's mother currently was not a part of her life.  Her father moved to the United States so that Eve and her siblings could get a strong college education.  Eve has an older sister, who attended the same institution and received her Bachelor's Degree in Biology and her Master's Degree in Education from a college in North Carolina.  Eve is a resident assistant at the [women's college] to help pay for her room and board; without that job, she would have to transfer to another college near home and commute from home.  Eve felt that her biggest challenge while in college was financial management.  Her oldest sister helped her fill out her FASFA forms each year.  Additionally, Eve works over 40 hours a week during the summer so that she can raise enough money to pay for books and food for the year.  She discussed the challenges of not eating as much as she should and budgeting only $50 a month to eat, in addition to the meal plan she gets with her resident assistant position.  She also talked about searching both online and in the book store in order to find the cheapest books for classes.

Milagros:  Milagros, a multi-racial Hispanic with origins not in Mexico female, was a junior (anticipated graduation date of 2015) with a GPA between 3.5 and 3.99.  She is a Psychology major, and a Women's and Gender Studies minor.  Milagros has both an older sister and brother, both of whom attended college.  Besides her sister helping her fill out the FASFA the first time, she is not close with them and does not talk to them often.  Milagros was the first student who brought up and directly discussed "other students."  She describes these "other students" as students who had more opportunities than she did and were from "other classes, they have money" and reported that "had a different way of living."  The first time she explained this was in reference to studying abroad in the context that she knew a student who wanted to study

abroad and did.  While Milagros could not consider this as an option; even though she knew that financial aid could cover the cost, she felt it would be stressful to make this happen and "selfish" if her family needed extra money at home.  Additionally, Milagros discussed another student wanting to be a painter and that a profession like that was not an option for Milagros because she needed to take care of her family and pay back student loans.  Conversations with Milagros about money were extremely difficult; she discussed dropping courses because she could not afford the books and choosing courses because the professor did not require a textbook. Milagros also got emotional during the interview several times when the conversation turned to money, which was frequent.  In discussions about living on campus, she brought up a transfer student who was placed in her apartment and how her new apartment mate had support from her family that Milagros did not have.  Additionally, she said she lowered her meal plan, eating only once a day and grabbing additional food from the dining hall, and said "I'm starving myself" due to the cost of food which she could not afford.

### *Student Profiles with Cumulative GPA between 3.00 and 3.49*

Farah:  Farah, a White/Caucasian non-Hispanic student who is currently a junior (with an anticipated graduation date of 2015), started off by sharing how "absolutely terrible" her first year at college was.  She indicated that she had a very difficult time making friends, which resulted in some serious mental health related issues for which she sought counseling. Additionally, she lived on campus in a first-year student residence hall and did not get along with her roommate.  Her roommate moved out after winter break and Farah lived alone in her double room for the remainder of the year.  She admits that she "didn't really engage with [Mid-Atlantic University]" which resulted in a low initial GPA of 2.6.  She felt like she only made acquaintances, not friends, in her first year.  However, Farah started her sophomore year with a different attitude, which made her experience significantly better.  She made friends, got involved, engaged with faculty, did not live on campus, and slowly saw her GPA increase.  Her current GPA is 3.00 and 3.49.  She did feel the impact of not having friends from her first year, especially when her new friends from her sophomore year would hang out with their first-year friends.  Farah believes that where you live on campus has a significant impact on your college experience, grades, and mental health.  She was born in Morocco and moved to the United States with her mom when she was 6 years old.  They lived with Farah's older brother, who took on the role of father figure to Farah, though she believes he did a terrible job.   Consequently, she has strained family ties: no relationship with her father who still lives in Morocco, limited relationships with older siblings, and a strained relationship with her mother.  She believes her relationship with her mother is strained because of her mom's lack of formal education and traditional opinions which she forces on Farah.  The only family member that Farah does have a relationship with is her "Americanized college-aged" cousin who has been a significant support throughout her college experience by helping navigate financial aid and discuss course work.

Allison:  Allison, identified as "Other", Hispanic with origins not in Mexico female, started her interview talking about the importance of getting involved because she didn't want to get lost at college.  She wanted to "do everything while in college."  During her first year, she got involved in Hall Government in her residence hall because it was the first activity that was presented to her.  She figured her floor mates liked her and would vote for her.  Being part of Hall Government allowed her to get to know the Hall Director in her building who then suggested that she apply to become a resident assistant.  Currently, Allison is a sophomore (anticipated graduation date of 2015) with a GPA between 3.0 and 3.49.  Allison discussed how she grew her network by working a work study position in one of the student centers, where she became close to the campus center Assistant Director.  When Allison was interviewed, she was in the middle of her summer McNair program which offered her perks like networking and attending a McNair conference in California where she could present her research.  Allison was studying food supply security in Paterson and the lack of access to quality food.  Allison discussed two large areas of development during the McNair summer program.  First, she felt more comfortable speaking with faculty members about topics besides classroom materials and superficial subjects; she learned to ask about their current research and learn about their areas of passion.  The second development was having intellectual conversations with peers about academic topics.  Allison discussed being the big sister at home with family and while volunteering at a local elementary school.  Unlike many of the other interview participants, Allison's father has his Associate's degree and completed her FASFA and financial aid paperwork for her.  Allison's family has been supportive of her attending college and encouraged her to do her homework; she explained that they "don't know what it is" but pushed her to do well.  She applied to be a resident assistant and admitted that her parents did not know what it was, but when she said it paid for her education, they fully supported her doing it.

Derek:  Derek, a White/Caucasian Hispanic with origins not in Mexico male,  is a fifth year senior (anticipated graduation date of 2014) who has been living on his own since he was 16 years old, bouncing from his siblings' to friends' houses.  His mother was arrested when he was in high school for selling prescription drugs and spent several years in jail.  Derek has a GPA between a 3.0 and 3.49.  He began college as a Biology major, with hopes of pursuing medical school.  However, during his first year, he took Introduction to Planning & Public Policy and enjoyed both the material and the professor.  The class was critically important to his college experience, because it was the first time that he realized that there were people who researched and studied the policies that had impacted his experience growing up.  Additionally, the faculty member ended up playing a large role throughout Derek's academic career.  Derek conducted research and volunteered at a Head Start program with this faculty member, and he says he used her as "a resource and source of knowledge" throughout his academic career.  Derek was a student who had a lot of initiative with starting relationships and conversations with others that ended up significantly benefiting him.  Whenever an opportunity presented itself, he reached out.  He got an email from his scholarship organization about pairing students up with mentors, so he signed up for a mentor.  He was reading during a class about a national institute and learned it

was at his home institution.  While he was walking home from class, he passed the building, walked in, and asked the secretary about volunteering there.  The national institute did not take volunteers but gave him an application for a position.  A few weeks later, Derek had a job at the national institute learning about and conducting research related to his field of interest.  Overall, Derek's experiences and interests were based on his own personal struggles and wanting to connect to classes, faculty, internships, and jobs that would allow him to give back to others who had similar life experiences.  For example, he became a mentor on campus because he wanted to help other low-income first-generation students be successful.

Pratik:  Pratik, Indian non-Hispanic male, is a senior (anticipating graduation date of 2014) majoring Computer Engineering with a GPA between 3.0 and 3.49.  Pratik's family moved to the United States in 1998 when he was five or six years old.  Pratik's father has a bachelor's degree in chemistry from India.  He felt that his father's degree was not fully accepted in the United States and believes that his father's college experience was different than Pratik's experience, thus Pratik labeled himself as low-income first-generation.  Pratik hopes to help his family by being the first to get a Master's Degree.  He feels that his father was a major contributor to his future career plans.  Pratik loved computers as he was growing up, and his father supported this love by finding ways to get Pratik access to computers and technology, no matter the cost.  Additionally, Pratik's father does not want him to have a job while studying in college because his job is to completely focus on his academics and GRE preparation for graduate school.  Pratik's mom, who does not have a college education and is not "tech savvy" gives Pratik emotional support and helps him become a "well-disciplined man".  Pratik believed being in a small major allowed him to get to know his faculty really well, including having one faculty member for four different courses.  Additionally, between utilizing his faculty and the Career Center on campus, he has been able to network with Engineering Alumni, as well as get some paid summer internships.  Pratik also had a strong relationship with his roommate, who is also an Engineering major.  His roommate plays a significant role in his experience and success, since they can study together, discuss classes and faculty, and discuss their experiences with internships.

Ilena:  Ilena, a multi-racial Hispanic with origins not in Mexico female, is a sophomore (anticipated graduation date is 2016). She lived at home, 15 minutes from campus, with her sister, father, aunt, and uncle during her first year.  Ilena spent much of her early education in the Dominican Republic until she attended high school in New Jersey.  Ilena is part of a women's centered learning community at college, an involvement she takes pride in.  She is an Anthropology major with a GPA between 3.0 and 3.49.  She discussed a class that she took last semester which many people dropped out of or failed, emphasized how she did well because she went to the professor's office hours, got to know the professor, and asked lots of questions.  She stated that she was one of the few students who got a "B" in that course because she tried very hard.  Ilena would like to obtain her Master's Degree in Education or go directly for a doctorate immediately after graduating.  Ilena spent a great deal of time talking after the interview about

this research and her interest in education.  Ilena discussed dropping out of two organizations because she felt the need to focus more on her academics.  She did not live on campus during her first year, but felt that she would be able to do better if she stayed on campus, so moved on campus during her sophomore year.  When she goes home, she does not study. Although her sister pressures her to come home, Ilena lies to her sister and tells her that she has exams to study for so she can stay on campus.  She believes her family supports her but does not understand her college experience.  Her family compares Ilena to her cousin, whose college major is Nursing; they believe that her major is not popular and will not allow her to get a job after she graduates.

### *Student Profiles with Cumulative GPA between 2.50 and 2.99*

Sadia:  Sadia, Asian-American non-Hispanic female, grew up in a small village in Bangladesh where she lived in her uncle's home with her uncle's family, and her mother, brother, and grandparents.  Her father was living in the United States, attempting to save enough to bring his family to the U.S.  Sadia moved to the United States when she was 12 years old.  She is currently a junior (anticipated graduation date of 2015) with a cumulative GPA between a 2.50 and 2.99.  Sadia clearly separated her life at college from her life outside of school.  While at college, Sadia focused on her future goal of attending medical school.  Her friends, her limited activities, and discussions were focused on academics and academically-related topics.  Most of Sadia's friends were either biology majors or in a science field.  Additionally, many of Sadia's friends are also immigrants.  Sadia has a smaller group of friends that she has met through the Educational Opportunity Fund program, the Office of Diversity and Success in the Sciences program (ODASIS), her Biology major, or those that live on her residence hall floor.  Sadia has a strong relationship with her family and only goes home once a month because she describes home as "fun" and would be too tempted to hang-out with her parents and not study.  Additionally, when she is home, she spends a great deal of time with her Muslim religious organization, either volunteering or hanging out. Sadia has a seasonal job working summer and winter as a sales associate at the Children's Place store.  Sadia believed that she would not be at college if it wasn't for the support of her family, money from financial aid, and programs like EOF and ODASIS.

Anthony:  Anthony, Black/African American non-Hispanic male, was a sophomore student (anticipated graduation date of 2016) with a GPA between 2.50 and 2.99.  Anthony discussed that his father wants him to do well, but Anthony intentionally does not keep in contact with his father during the academic year because he does not want to let his father down and feels lucky that he was able to attend college.  Anthony's father was working at a hospital as a janitor.  He stated that he "wished he (his father) went to college" because is dad would be able to discuss a lot of the ins and outs of college and his father could help prepare him for the college experience. He specifically intended to use his experience in college to help his future children be more focused on their academics instead of worrying about money while attending college. Anthony has a little sister and he felt it was his responsibility to be a strong role model for her, but he

admitted that was a lot of pressure as he attempted to learn both academic material and how to navigate the university system.  Anthony occasionally went to campus activities but spent most of his time with his girlfriend, Tynika, who he brought with him to the interview. Anthony was most active in a Christian group on campus, which he attended on most Thursday evenings. When Anthony does attend campus events it is with Tynika, who has a very similar background to his.

Salma:  Salma, Asian-American non-Hispanic female, is a senior (anticipated graduation date of 2015) with a GPA between 2.50 and 2.99.  Salma began college wanting to go to medical school. When she arrived at college, she believed that she did not know how to study and "crashed" several times before she learned.  Due to these challenges at the beginning of her college experience she did not think that she would be able to pursue medical school, let alone get into a graduate program.  Salma's mother passed away five years ago and Salma is the youngest of her three siblings.  Her father has been a "hands-off" parent which has made Salma very independent.  Salma has an older brother and sister who both attended and graduated from the university she is attending.  Salma's older sister played a significant role in her experience by helping her complete her FASFA and financial aid paperwork.  One of Salma's research opportunities came from her workstudy position with a faculty member.  The faculty member liked the work that Salma was doing and recommended her to another faculty member who needed help with research.  Salma did research with this second faculty member for academic credit. Salma's second workstudy position was in one of the campus student centers.  She loves her job due to the relationships she has with her supervisors who see her as a student first.  They support her academically and are often asking about classes and course work.  Additionally, she explained that a perk to her position was that she was able to know about and attend many activities, including big name outside speakers that are held on campus.

Katie:  Katie, Asian-American non-Hispanic female, really felt that she had a story to share and was the most eager participant to meet to discuss her experience.  She lives with her mother, brother, and sister, and her mom is a single parent who works as a hair stylist, six days a week for eight hours a day.  Her mom expects Katie will be successful with a high-paying job so that Katie can support her family in the future.  Katie started her college career as an Educational Opportunity Fund student, beginning with the six-week summer program.  She said this program gave her a heads up on the college experience by allowing her to make friends, and by the time September started, she felt she knew her way around campus and had many strong friendships. Katie is currently a sophomore (anticipated graduation date of 2016) with a GPA between 2.50 and 2.99.  Many of Katie's friends from her first year were very outgoing and were the "party type."  Because Katie does not party, drink or do drugs, she felt like she was missing out on the college experience.  She says she always feels "awkward at parties and this might be one of the reasons for a lower GPA".  Katie talked about the difficulties of making friends during her first year because they came from different cultural backgrounds, had more money, or they drank and smoke when she did not.  Katie has not gotten to know any of her faculty, although she believes

that they are very knowledgeable about the subject they are teaching and care a great deal about their course.

Deepak:  Deepak, Asian-American non-Hispanic male, scheduled to interview six times, but cancelled a few days prior to the meeting repeatedly due to having to study for an exam that he said he did not feel prepared for.  Deepak is a sophomore (anticipated graduation date of 2016) with a GPA between 2.50 and 2.99.  His academic goal is to go to medical school and become a doctor.  His family has played a large role in motivating Deepak to study harder and become something in life.  He is the first person to attend college in his family, and he repeatedly stated puts a lot of pressure on him to succeed. His parents frequently tell him that they want him to take advantage of all the education system provides because they were not able to get the same privileges. One of his biggest influences was his cousin who has pushed him to go beyond his limits.  His parents have expected a lot from him, saying they don't want him to go through what they had went through.  In his opinion, his family's support is his biggest motivation. He really wants to make his parents happy by becoming a doctor.  Deepak admitted that due to his desire to achieve his and his family's dreams of becoming a doctor he has not gotten involved in any formal activities on campus.  He does occasionally work out with some of his friends, many of whom were friends from high school.

### *Student Profiles with Cumulative GPA between 2.00 and 2.49*

Sabina:  Sabina, identified as "Other" Hispanic origins not in Mexico female, was a sophomore (with an anticipated graduation date of 2016).  Sabina wants to be a teacher, specifically a special education teacher, due to having a younger brother with special needs.  Her GPA is between a 2.00 and 2.49. Sabina had a work study job during her first year, working as a tutor in the local schools.  However, Sabina did not receive work study during her sophomore year, because she completed her financial aid paperwork too late.  Sabina fills out paperwork on her own and says this is a major area of stress because of her lack of knowledge and experience in this area.  She said that during her first year she had a roommate who was not very social or involved on campus.  Her roommate would go home every weekend, and because Sabina did not want to be on campus alone, she would also go home.  When she went home, she would not study. Later, during Sabina's first year, her roommate moved back home with her family. During Sabina's second semester as a first-year student, she got a new roommate, who was still not actively involved but who would go to activities with Sabina. Sabina explained that during this semester, she was staying on campus during the weekends, which resulted in her studying.  Sabina talked about feeling that it was easy to be overlooked at a large institution unless you were in a fraternity/sorority or "super involved" in activities on campus.  She also discussed not being able to get involved or join activities because of lack of money.

Lucia:  Lucia, identified as "Other" Hispanic origins not in Mexico female, was a 5th year (anticipated graduation date of 2014) student who began her college career as an Engineering

major.  Her decision to study engineering stemmed from the fact that she and her mother thought that it was a profession that would bring her financial security.  Lucia struggled as an engineering student for three years because she felt others questioned her intelligence and ability to succeed, so she changed her major in her junior year.

She will be graduating with a double major in Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies and Sociology.  Due to spending a great deal of time battling to remain in the engineering program, Lucia's GPA was between a 2.00 and 2.49, but after her first full year in her new major, she achieved a semester GPA of 4.0 .  Lucia hopes to attend graduate school for Social Work. She is worried that her lower GPA will prevent her from getting in, so she signed up for a graduate preparation seminar offered all day on three Saturdays.  She learned about this seminar through an email that was sent out to all Sociology majors.  Lucia's ultimate goal is to get her doctorate and become faculty at a college or university.  Lucia has two older sisters who both attended college, one of whom is currently teaching English in South Korea.  Lucia has a work study job working at the university's call center.  She received this position through work study and slowly moved up in responsibility.  Initial training for this position included 20 hours and ongoing training sessions, which exposed her to a great deal of information about the resources that the campus offered.

Afreen:  Afreen, an Asian-American non-Hispanic female, was roommates with Milagros. Afreen valued Milagros as a roommate because she felt that Milagros understood her experience and also could not or did not want to do things that she described as activities "typical colleges students" participated in, like going out on the weekends or eating out frequently.  Afreen discussed how she and Milagros only participated in activities that did not require money. Afreen is a junior (anticipated graduation date of 2015) with a GPA of 2.00 to 2.49.  Afreen was very close to her family and went home on most weekends.  Afreen, like Milagros, spent a great deal of our interview explaining how not having money affected her college experience.  She shared a story about failing a class during her first year which meant that she lost a scholarship, had to tell her dad, and was concerned that she could not continue to attend college because of costs.  She had to work with the Financial Aid office to write an appeal to keep her scholarship, as well as request additional funding.  The process was challenging, stressful, and time consuming.  Another story that Afreen discussed was about one of her apartment-mates, a transfer student, whom she believed was affluent.  Her apartment mate wanted a new microwave and walked to the store across the street and immediately purchased it.  Afreen discussed how a similar purchase would happen in her family, where the discussion about the need for a microwave would happen for a few months, then the family would do comparative shopping while they saved for the microwave, and would finally purchase the microwave.  She also discussed how it was difficult to separate the spending she was noticing for issues of class and race, and it was hard to separate her assumptions that white students all had money.

Tynika:  Tynika, a Black/African-American non-Hispanic female, scheduled her interview with me four different times and cancelled each time, but each time, she said she really wanted to

participate in this study.  The night that I interviewed her boyfriend, another study participant, she showed up and asked if I had time to interview her as well.  She was very interested in being interviewed and participating, but was either too busy or unorganized to attend.  Tynika is a sophomore (anticipated graduation date of 2016).  She is a Social Work major who hopes to become a social worker.  Her mother currently works with Department of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) where she drives clients to appointments, school, etc.  Tynika would like to work for DYFS but as a social worker helping low-income families struggling to get the resources they need.  Tynika has between a 2.00 and 2.49 GPA.  She had a workstudy job during her first year but had her workstudy taken away during her sophomore year.  She was told by the Financial Aid office that her workstudy award was removed because the institution needed additional workstudy funding for first-year students.  Tynika was very involved in high school, but when she arrived at college, she stated that she was lazy and did not get involved in anything when she first got to college.  She struggled academically during her first year because she didn't relate to her professors and even when she attended office hours, she felt that the professor was not helpful and did not explain information clearly.

### Student Profiles with Cumulative GPA below 1.99

Denise:  Denise, a Black/African-American non-Hispanic female, considered herself a non-traditional student.  She started her college career in 2007 as an Educational Opportunity Fund program student.  During her fifth, year she was academically dismissed after being on academic probation for 3-4 semesters in a row. After she was academically dismissed, she decided to take a year off before returning to classes because she was not ready to change anything.  After taking a year off, she took summer classes at a community college where she admits it was the first time she was more academically engaged with her courses, faculty, and other students in the classroom.  After doing well in summer courses, she was readmitted to Mid-Atlantic University to complete her degree.  She is a Religion major and an English minor.  Denise is a fifth year student (anticipated graduation date 2015) with a GPA between 0.0 and 1.99, but was waiting for summer course grades to change her GPA placing her in the 2.00 and 2.49 cumulative GPA group.  Prior to being academically dismissed, Denise lived on campus, but she returned as a commuter student.  She lives at home with her grandmother and father and commutes on the train for 1.5-2 hours each day.  While living on campus, Denise lived with friends who were doing well in classes, but they did not realize that Denise was not attending classes or doing school work.  Denise said that she was academically successful in high school and involved in a lot of activities (Student Council, Board of Trustees, church); she also had relationships with teachers outside of the classroom. While attending college she attended events, but did not fully engage in the events.  Denise was not attending classes, did not have a job, and although she attended events on campus, she was not actively engaged in any activities on campus during her first three years at the university.

**Human Subjects Protection & Ethical Considerations**

In alignment with Rutgers Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines, I participated in Human Subject Certification Training and received a certificate in October 2007 by the Rutgers University Human Subjects Compliance Program on human subjects' protection. This certificate is on file at Rutgers University's IRB office. In addition to this preparation to conduct research with human subjects, I had also taken steps to design a study that ensures the privacy and confidentiality of study subjects and the associated institution, minimize risks to participants, and obtain informed consent from all study participants. All student, university, and program names, as well as all identifying factors have been changed to protect confidentiality. IRB approval was received at Rutgers University in April 2013.

Measures taken to ensure my study was carried out ethically include confidentiality and informed consent (Creswell, 2007). In accordance with the institution's guidelines for human subject research, participants were asked to sign a consent form that informed them of their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any point, as well as potential risks and benefits associated with my study, prior to participating in my study. All candidates were assured that their identities would be kept confidential and were given the opportunity to ask questions about my research prior to agreeing to participate. All interviews were conducted in a semi-private area and were recorded. Participants were informed that they could stop recording at any point during the interview if they wanted to make a statement they did not want on tape. Additionally, notes were taken during the interviews.

**Limitations**

Although the proposed research design and methods have ensured a rigorous qualitative study, as with any research there are limitations. My study was limited because of its site within a large research institution and small sample size of 22 students. The size was intentionally

limited due to the desire to be able to gain more in-depth, rich information from a smaller group of students, but "a small sample imposes restrictions that cannot be surmounted with felicitous phrases such as 'one half of the sample believed'" (Lareau, 1996, p.231). Additionally, due to my study being conducted at a large research institution, my research might not translate to other institutions since different students may be drawn to different types of institutions.

An additional limitation could be my perspective which plays a significant role in the design and analysis of the study (Creswell, 2007). As a LIFG college graduate myself, I acknowledges that I may have developed certain perspectives relevant to this topic of research. Attempts to overcome this potential bias have been addressed through noting personal thoughts during interviews or observations carefully, and identifying any possible biases. Additionally, having outsiders read personal notes and documents to cross check for biases has been employed as a method to keep personal perspectives from seeping into my research.

Despite these limitations, my study offers rich insights about LIFG students establish connections on a college campus, who they are establishing connections with, and the roles these connections play in their college experience. These stories and authentic experiences shed light on additional areas that require further research, as well as contribute to the understanding that faculty and staff have of low-income first-generation college students.

## Researcher's Perspective

My perspective as a researcher and low-income first-generation college student both inform my research, as well as give a unique perspective to the topic. This perspective adds to the rigor and enhances the validity to this research. I was raised in a single family home by a mother who did not have a college education and worked in several minimum wage jobs. I excelled at school, but always felt that I struggled to keep up with my peers. As I was working

two part-time jobs to have money for any extras in high school, such as cleats for soccer, or

money to go on a class trip, my peers were going on family vacations, taking SAT prep courses,

or visiting all of the colleges that they planned on attending. I knew I was different but believed

in meritocracy, if I worked hard enough I could be as successful as they were going to be. As my

friends were having their parents edit their personal statements for their college applications, I

was struggling to figure out what paperwork I needed to fill out or what I needed to do to apply

for financial aid. I truly hoped that college would be the great equalizer. I attended a state school,

while many of my friends left the state or went to private schools. During college again I started

to notice large differences between myself and my friends, but didn't have the words to articulate

it. I was working two jobs, one as a workstudy student in the Residence Life and Housing office

and the 2nd as a Resident Assistant, to pay for my books while they had parents who were buying

them cars, helping them get internships, and talking with them about law or medical school.

Additionally, I was using refunding checks to pay for any extra things that I needed.

Understanding financial aid paperwork, doing additional research in the hearing lab, finding a

mentor, learning about the Graduate School process, or having parental involvement beyond

support and encouragement were areas I often found I would struggle and cause additional stress.

I was offered my first full-time position during my second year in graduate school as a residence

hall director, typically a Masters required position but due to a late resignation in the department,

I was given the opportunity.  Balancing a full course load and a full time position was incredibly

challenging, but I felt that I could not pass free housing, a meal plan, and salary by and would

need to just continue to work hard.

     After I completed my Masters in Education I headed out of state to my second job

working in student affairs at a state institution where the makeup of class was less obvious due to

the more visible intersection of race and ethnicity with class.  This is where I learned about the

importance of TRIO support programs and went to work for the Educational Opportunity Fund

program as an Academic Counselor. I worked with low-income first generation college students,

as they learned how to navigate the university and financial aid, and had to take several courses

to get caught up academically to their peers. It was in this program where I first came to realize

and articulate all the differences between students who were raised in families and communities

with money and capital valued in the educational system versus those that were not. During my

first year working with the Educational Opportunity Fund program, I took a class in a graduate

school of education where I read the book by Annette Lareau called Unequal Childhoods; Class,

Race, and Family (2003). This book opened my eyes to the amount of differences a student from

a middle class family receives versus one from a low-income family. However, the book is

framed in such a way that the differences are not considered deficits, but just differences of

which one has more value in the education realm. Being able to articulate my own experience

and lack of certain types of knowledge helped me look for new ways to help other students find

their own paths, learn institutional knowledge, and build a network of connections.

**Data Analysis**

In analyzing the data, the first step was to organize all information, including

biographical survey and interview transcripts, by individual participant.  In order to protect the

identity of the interviewees, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant, as well as anyone

mentioned by an interviewee.  Data analysis began with reading and re-reading all data collected

(Maxwell, 2005).  Luttrell's (2000) "Good Enough Methods for Ethnographic Research" were

used during an initial reading of transcripts not only to look for meaning in what was asked but

also for meaning in the overall stories and information shared.  Prior to a second reading all

interviews were listened to and additional memos were taken.  The second reading concentrated

on passages that described relationships with faculty, staff, and peers.   The third reading focused

on identifying patterns between all data about campus involvement, how, when, and the

attributes of connections that were established or not established, specifically looking at students

participating in academic and social engagement (Luttrell, 2000).

All transcribed interviews and memos were coded for emerging themes using Dedoose,

qualitative research analysis software.  Coding happened during the third reading using an

inductive scheme.  According to Patton (1990), it is in this third reading where the researcher is

immersed in the details of the data and can discover important categories, dimensions, and

relationships.  This reading allowed meaning to come out of the data without "imposing

preexisting expectations" (p.44).   During this third reading each interview was read line by line

and assigned labels/codes that gave meaning to what participants said.  The same labels and

codes were used for the biographical questionnaires, which were coded at the same time as the

interviews.  A list of codes can be found in Appendix F.  For example, one code that emerged

was "the others" which was a reference that three participants made when describing students

from more affluent backgrounds.  Another code that emerged was "doing it on your own" where

students referenced experiences that they had to do an activity on their own or they felt alone in a

process, at times this code was used when students discussed having to do things for themselves

that they saw other students get help from their parents with.  From these labels/codes, larger

themes were observed and will be discussed in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.  Patterns continued to be

refined until larger themes adequately represented the data collected.  After the third reading,

connections were made between common patterns that were seen with individuals' information.

Initially, large themes for the entire group of 22 LIFG students interviewed were analyzed for

common themes or patterns.  Then patterns were observed within all 10 low-GPA students' data and separately patterns were observed within all 12 high-GPA students' data. Data patterns from the low-GPA and high-GPA students were compared to see if there were any common patterns or differences in the roles of campus involvement, faculty, staff, and peer relationships in their experiences.  Finally, students were broken into groupings based on their involvement:  *Deeply-connected*, *Connected*, and *Under-connected* based on the amount and strength of connections then data was compared between groupings.

Several processes were in place in order to ensure the validity of my research, including member checking and peer review (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).  The first method, member checking, provided participants the opportunity to review their interview transcript and give feedback so that any errors were addressed.  This helped participants check that they accurately described their lived experience and provided an opportunity to add any further interpretation of their lived experience.  The second method to ensure validity of data was to have the data analysis peer reviewed once it was completed (Creswell, 2007).  The data analysis and findings with only pseudonyms was reviewed by two colleagues with prior background knowledge of student engagement to ensure the research findings and process were comprehensive and free of personal biases.

Finally, conclusion drawing and verification required meaning and interpretations from the grouped data (Maxwell, 2005).  I sought to identify and understand the qualities of the connections and the role connections play in LIFG college students' academic success and college experience.  I reviewed the findings of my study and sought to identify if the findings confirmed or differed from current literature on social capital in college students' experience.

## CHAPTER IV-FINDINGS:  CONNECTEDNESS

Participation in educationally purposeful campus connections-- such as academically engaging in learning communities, research opportunities, or conversations with faculty; or socially engaging in co-curricular activities, living on campus, internships, and employment-- play an important role in student retention, persistence, and academic success (Kuh, et. al, 2008; Pascarella, 2005; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) and this is particularly the case for low-income first-generation students (Pascarella, 2005).  My study's findings suggest that what is happening in the connections and how they are facilitated are important to their effectiveness.  Universities need to provide ample resources that demonstrate caring while also understanding the characteristics that low-income first-generation (LIFG) college students possess and bring to bear on their connections with the university.  LIFG students' attributes of passion, independence, and resiliency, can both be strengths and barriers to students' success. In order to facilitate successful student engagement, a "two-way street" needs to be established in which both the student and the university seek to intentionally develop connections.  The university needs to offer ample resources and support that is compassionate and understanding, while at the same time considering the attributes LIFG students bring to the relationship and how those attributes will affect them accessing support. This requires an intimate understanding of the characteristics, attitudes and tendencies that seem to be most associated with the success of LIFG college students.  My show shows how passion, independence, and resilience enable LIFG students to develop connections with peers, faculty, and staff, thereby giving them access to resources and opportunities that would otherwise have been unavailable to them.

**Connections:  A Two Way Street**

The students in my study discussed many opportunities to establish connections either through academic or social engagement.  The term *Academic engagement* designated the connection that was directly related to grades, such as interactions with faculty and advisor as well as course/major selection. Similarly, *social engagement* is defined as the connection that helps students learn about campus, feel part of the educational community, make connections from academic material to job opportunities, and outside-the-classroom learning opportunities. Whether it was an academic or social opportunity, students who seized opportunities typically felt more connected overall, performed better academically, and clearly articulated meaningful experiences that they were experiencing both inside and outside of the classroom.  Connected students demonstrated self-efficacy for their own education and felt that they were participants in the experience.  In twelve instances, students talked about having found passion things that they were excited to participate in, both academically and socially.  Participants also discussed the importance of forms of resiliency, that if they were struggling, they had to climb over an obstacle and continue moving forward.  Lastly, students shared stories of their independence prior to college and identified the ways that this independence allowed them to accomplish tasks and create connections more successfully than some of their peers.  Interestingly, though, seven students at times felt that their independence created barriers and hesitancy to ask for help. Whether it was due to embarrassment for feeling that they did not know course material that they thought was expected of them to understand or having always been independent with regards to their educational experience, not asking for help added to their struggles or kept them from making necessary connections.

The other side of this "two-way street" is the necessity for the university to provide ample resources that allow students to engage in meaningful and educationally purposeful experiences.  Students expressed the need for these connections to show support and care for the students.  Students desired authentic relationships with employers, faculty, and staff who had a genuine interest in their academic success and out-of-classroom experiences.   Students also reported these connections needed to feel academically authentic as well, that the faculty member did not want the student to learn simply to pass a test but that they truly wanted to help the student on their path to success.  Faculty demonstrated this by initiating and engaging in conversations beyond course material.  Students identified that faculty and staff who understood who they were, their experiences, and struggles were the ones that were easiest with whom to connect and build lasting relationships. Lastly, students discussed that the resources that were most beneficial and caring were the ones that opened the doors to other opportunities, networks, and resources.

However, this was not the same experience for all students.  Demonstrating caring was important because when students did not read university efforts as caring, they didn't feel attended to.   Some students did not feel that the university provided caring spaces that allowed them the opportunity to establish genuine relationships.  These students often had doors closed in their faces and did not bounce back to look for new opportunities.  The independence that students had relied on their entire life caused obstacles to connections, either because they were afraid to fail or scared to approach faculty.  Additionally, some students did not identify a passion and struggled along their path to establish relationships with the university, faculty and staff. In the sections below, I present a typology of student connectedness that characterizes how these students managed their academic and social engagement to the university.

**Connectedness:  Deeply-connected, Connected, and Under-connected Students**

Analysis of the purposeful connections that the 22 students in my research sample made

at the university gave rise to a typology of connectedness (see table 3).  Students in my study that

reported both taking initiative and establishing relationships with supportive faculty and staff

members who cared, were authentic, and connected them to others are considered *Deeply-*

*connected*.  This group of students was comprised of individuals who had developed strong ties

with at least three distinct areas at the college; for instance, these students, worked at the

Financial Aid office, developed close relationships with peers or felt a strong connection with the

Educational Opportunity Fund program that they utilized often.  *Deeply-connected* students

reported some common traits to the relationships that they formed with groups, organizations, or

departments, including:  a sense of belonging, having access to opportunities, feeling happier,

having friends, being more optimistic, having more confidence, and feeling the need to give back

to others.  Additionally, these students not only joined groups, forming strong ties, but took

leading roles in these groups, such as officers, lead projects, or asked for more responsibility at

work.  The last commonality for *Deeply-connected* students was that their connections lead to

other opportunities and connections.  All the students among the *Deeply-connected* group had

above 3.0 cumulative GPAs (two in the cumulative GPA of 3.00 to 3.49 group and six with a

cumulative GPA between 3.50 to 3.99 group).

The second group in the typology was *Connected* students, those who established

connections to smaller groups, but did not consider them strong ties.   If they had strong

connections it was only with one group or a few individuals and did not last their entire academic

career.  These connections were not strong, and more importantly did not lead to the

establishment of additional connections. In this *Connected* group there was one student with a

cumulative GPA of between a 2.00 to 2.49, one with 2.50 to 2.99, and two between 3.00 to 3.49.

None of the students in this group achieved the highest level GPA, a cumulative GPA of 3.50 to

3.99.

The last group was the *Under-connected* students, those with few or no strong campus

connections.  Each student had connections but only a few were deep and constant, and in most

cases their relationships were established with one other peer.  This group of students reported

occasionally attending and participating in campus events but not on a regular basis and not

enough to be considered an active member of an organization.  These students displayed

common traits, which included: feeling lonely, discussing a lack of friends, being unwilling to

attend events because they felt that other students already had established a set of friends, and

having negative interactions with faculty.  In this *Under-connected* group there was one student

with a cumulative GPA between 0.00 to 1.99, three students with a cumulative GPA between

2.00 to 2.49, four students with a cumulative GPA between 2.50 to 2.99, one with 3.00 to 3.49,

and one between 3.50 to 3.99.

Table 3. Participants' Connectedness

| | Student | GPA | Graduation | Gender | Race/ Ethnicity | Family Income | Household | Major | Job | Residence |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Deeply-connected* | Allison | 3.00 - 3.49 | 15 | F | O HONM | $80-89,999 | 5 | Social Sciences | X* | ON |
| | Derek | 3.00 - 3.49 | 14 | M | W/C HONM | $0-9,999 | 1 | Humanities | X* | OFF/f |
| | Ben | 3.50 - 3.99 | 15 | M | W/C HONM | $0-9,999 | 1 | Humanities | X* | Other |
| | Korey | 3.50 - 3.99 | 14 | F | W/C NH | $10-19,999 | 4 | Education | X* | OFF/f |
| | Colin | 3.50 - 3.99 | 15 | M | W/C NH | $20-29,999 | 2 | Business | X* | Other |
| | Sunita | 3.50 - 3.99 | 16 | F | AA NH | $50-59,999 | 5 | Business | X | ON |
| | Alyssa | 3.50 - 3.99 | 15 | F | MR HONM | $40-49,999 | 3 | English | X* | OFF/f |
| | Eve | 3.50 - 3.99 | 14 | F | B/AA NH | $40-49,999 | 4 | Social Sciences | X* | ON |
| | | | | | | | | | | |
| *Connected* | Lucia | 2.00 - 2.49 | 14 | F | O HONM | $10-19,999 | 3 | Social Sciences | X* | ON |
| | Sadia | 2.50 - 2.99 | 15 | F | AA NH | $20-29,999 | 4 | Natural Sciences | X | ON |
| | Pratik | 3.00 - 3.49 | 14 | M | O NH | $50-59,999 | 6 | Engineering | X* | ON |
| | Ilena | 3.00 - 3.49 | 16 | F | MR HONM | $10-19,999 | 3 | Social Sciences | X* | ON |
| | | | | | | | | | | |
| *Under-connected* | Denise | 0.00 - 1.99 | 15 | F | B/AA NH | Unsure *qualifies for EOF | 3 | Humanities | X* | OFF/fam |
| | Afreen | 2.00 - 2.49 | 15 | F | AA NH | $40-49,999 | 8 | Social Sciences | | ON |
| | Sabrina | 2.00 - 2.49 | 16 | F | O HONM | $0-9,999 | 6 | Education | | ON |
| | Tynika | 2.00 - 2.49 | 16 | F | B/AA NH | $10-19,999 | 4 | Social Sciences | | ON |
| | Deepak | 2.50 - 2.99 | 16 | M | AA NH | $40-49,999 | 5 | Natural Sciences | | ON |
| | Katie | 2.50 - 2.99 | 16 | F | AA NH | $10-19,999 | 4 | Business | X* | ON |
| | Salma | 2.50 - 2.99 | 15 | F | AA NH | $20-29,999 | 4 | Natural Sciences | X* | ON |
| | Anthony | 2.50 - 2.99 | 16 | M | B/AA NH | $40-49,999 | 3 | Humanities | | ON |
| | Farah | 3.00 - 3.49 | 15 | F | W/C NH | $10-19,999 | 2 | Social Sciences | | OFF/f |
| | Milagros | 3.50 - 3.99 | 15 | F | MR HONM | $0-9,999 | 3 | Social Sciences | X* | ON |

**Gender:** M: Male; F: Female
**Race/Ethnicity**: B/AA: Black/African American; AA: Asian American; AI/AN: American Indian/Alaskan Native; PI: Pacific Islander; W/C: White/Caucasian; MR: Multi-racial; O: Other; NH: Non-Hispanic; HOM: Hispanic-Origins in Mexico; HONM: Hispanic; Origins not in Mexico
**Job:** X: Currently Working; *: Work on campus; Gray: Work more than 20 hours
**Residence:** ON: On-campus; OFF/f: Off-campus with friends; OFF/fam: Off-campus with family; Other: Other living circumstances

***Deeply-connected Students' Connectedness***

Allison (GPA between 3.0 and 3.49):
>     Race/Ethnicity:  Other, Hispanic-Origins not in Mexico
>     Strong Ties:
>     - Lived on-campus
>     - Participation in Residence Hall Association (RHA) as an Eboard member
>     - Relationship with Residence Life professional staff member, who she identified as a person of color, and advisor of Hall Government
>     - Employment with the department of Residence Life as a Resident Assistant
>     - Relationships with other Resident Assistants
>     - Workstudy employment in Student Center
>     - Relationship with Student Center Assistant Director
>     - McNair participant
>     - Research with faculty member through McNair program
>     - Used race/ethnicity identifiers when discussing relationships, focused on the importance of having a female faculty member who was Latina
>     Weak Ties:
>     - Relationships with floormates, both when in RHA and as an RA
>     - Relationships with McNair participants, staff, and faculty
>     - Volunteers at local elementary school

Derek (GPA between 3.0 and 3.49):
>     Race/Ethnicity:  White/Caucasian, Hispanic-Origins not in Mexico
>     Strong Ties:
>     - Currently lives off-campus, met current roommates when they lived together on-campus
>     - Relationship with faculty member who he took Introduction to Planning & Public Policy with and later did research with
>     - Relationship with mentor through scholarship program
>     - Employment at a national educational institute that is directly related to career path (Workstudy)
>     - Relationship with staff in a Student Support program where he mentors other students
>     - Participated on several intramural teams during college career, with many with his housemates from his apartment or past roommates
>     - Did not use race/ethnicity identifiers when discussing relationships
>     - Discussed comparing himself to "the other" because they had more opportunities, he felt they had an easier road to success, and he was academically disadvantaged
>     Weak Ties:
>     - Volunteered and conducted research with a Head Start program
>     - Mentors other college low-income first-generation college students through a Student Support program
>     - On-going connections with his friends' parents

Ben (GPA between 3.5 and 3.99):

    Race/Ethnicity:  White/Caucasian, Hispanic-Origins not in Mexico

    Strong Ties:

- Lives off-campus
- Participant in Successful Paths, program for students who have been previously incarcerated
- Relationship with staff and other students in Successful Paths
- Participation in the Successful Paths' student organization as an Eboard member
- Employment at the Financial Aid office
- Relationship with staff and  supervisors from the Financial Aid office
- Participated on two intramural teams during college career
- Did not use race/ethnicity identifiers when describing relationships
- Discussed struggling with establishing meaningful relationships with "the other" because he felt "they were greater" and could take advantage of all the educational opportunities a university offers

    Weak Ties:

- Family that Ben lived with, which he found on Craig's list
- Co-workers, who attend the university, from Burger King

Korey (GPA between 3.5 and 3.99):

    Race/Ethnicity:  White/Caucasian, Non-Hispanic

    Strong Ties:

- Lives on-campus
- Participant in the Educational Opportunity Fund program
- Relationship with advisor from the Education Opportunity Fund program
- Relationships with other students from the Educational Opportunity Fund program, especially strong bonds with individuals that attended the same 6-week summer program
- Participation in Residence Hall Association (RHA) as an Eboard member
- Relationships with Residence Life professional staff and advisors of RHA
- Employment with the department of Residence Life as a Resident Assistant
- Relationships with other Resident Assistants
- Participated on several intramural teams during college career, some with her residents and others with other Resident Assistants
- Did not use race/ethnicity identifiers when describing relationships, however shared a stories of being aware of her Whiteness when she was working with the financial aid office or when friends/other students questioned her being an Educational Opportunity Fund student because she was White
- Discussed that "the other" students got academic help from their parents

    Weak Ties:

- Relationships with floormates, both when in RHA and as an RA

- Relationships with classmates in education program

Colin (GPA between 3.5 and 3.99):
- Race/Ethnicity:  White/Caucasian, Non-Hispanic
- Strong Ties:
  - Lives off-campus with girlfriend
  - Participant in Successful Paths, program for students who have been previously incarcerated
  - Relationship with staff and other students in Successful Paths
  - Participation in the Successful Paths' student organization as a general body member
  - Relationship with girlfriend, who is another university student
  - Workstudy employment at the Recreation Center as a supervisor
  - Relationship with his staff and  supervisors from the Recreation Center
  - Participated on several intramural teams during college career, with many of the same students
  - Did not use race/ethnicity identifiers when describing relationships
- Weak Ties:
  - Relationships with regular students that attend the Recreation Center
  - Interviews potential students for the Successful Paths program
  - Co-workers, who attend the university, from Longhorn

Sunita (GPA between 3.5 and 3.99):
- Race/Ethnicity:  Asian-American, Non-Hispanic
- Strong Ties:
  - Lives on-campus
  - Friendships with several students from her First-Year orientation program, including the Orientation Aide.
  - Member of a professional club called Scarlet Capital Management (several students in club were also in her major or classes)
  - Relationship with roommate, friend from her First-Year orientation program
  - Employment as a workstudy peer counselor with the Financial Aid office, where her older sister had worked when she attended college
  - Relationship with supervisors and co-workers at the Financial Aid office
  - Did not use race/ethnicity identifiers when describing relationships
- Weak Ties:
  - Casual relationships with floormates from residence hall

Alyssa (GPA between 3.5 and 3.99):
- Race/Ethnicity:  Multi-Racial, Hispanic origins not in Mexico
- Strong Ties:
  - Lives on-campus
  - Participates in a women's college, smaller college of students at the larger university

- Relationships with several faculty and staff members which were developed through participation in the women's college
- Lives in a living-learning community paired with a 3 credit course (Creativity House) in her residence hall and established close friendships with other students participating in the program
- Attends weekly meetings at the university's counseling center
- Employment in the Student Center
- Relationships with supervisors for her job at the Student Center & supervisors actively support her academics
- Participates on a weekly basis with Spoken Word
- McNair participant
- Research with faculty member through McNair program
- Relationships with McNair faculty, students, and staff
- Did not use race/ethnicity identifiers when describing relationships

Weak Ties:
- Utilizes the health center on a regular basis
- Relationships with other students, faculty, and staff through her position at the Student Center
- Participates in the women's college recruitment network
- Participates in the Institute for Women's Leadership


Eve (GPA between 3.5 and 3.99):

Race/Ethnicity:  Black/African American, Non-Hispanic

Strong Ties:
- Lives on-campus
- Actively participates in the women's college events, built strong relationships with faculty through attendance
- McNair participant
- Research with faculty member through McNair program
- Relationships with McNair faculty, students, and staff
- Relationship with faculty member from political science major who is a woman of color (Eve stated more faculty were "old white men" and she did not connect with them. Stressed the importance of having faculty and staff that she could establish connections with that were female, as well as someone she could "visually identify with".
- Employment with the department of Residence Life as a Resident Assistant
- Relationships with other Resident Assistants
- Relationship with professional staff in Residence Life

Weak Ties:
- Connections with two female faculty members outside of her department
- Connections with residents on the floor that she is a Resident Assistant

### *Connected Students' Connectedness*

Lucia (GPA between 2.0 and 2.49):
        Race/Ethnicity:  Other, Hispanic origins not in Mexico
        Strong Ties:

- Faculty in both Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies and Sociology (developed at the end of her junior year after switching from being an Engineer major).
- Relationships with a faculty member and students from an alternative Spring Break trip (spring break:  junior year)
- Workstudy job on campus
- Discussed race/ethnicity in relationships she established with faculty from the spring break trip which helped her decide to change majors

        Weak Ties:

- Relationships with Engineer majors
- Friendships with students working at university's call center where she is a workstudy student, weak ties due to job does not allow for a lot of interaction
- Workstudy job trained Lucia in all campus resources in order to better direct calls

Sadia (GPA between 2.5 and 2.99):
        Race/Ethnicity:  Asian-American, Non-Hispanic
        Strong Ties:

- Friendships with small group of students who are biology or science majors, which she studies with
- Small group of friends from EOF, ODASIS, and floor who are also science majors, she only studies with them (nothing social)
- EOF student, but did not have a relationship with her advisor or other EOF students, beyond the connection mentioned in previous bullet
- Strongest relationships were with family and her Muslim community from home (she did not participate in Muslim student organizations on campus).
- Workstudy job on campus
- Did not use race/ethnicity identifiers when describing relationships

        Weak Ties:

- Relationships with a few students that live on her floor

Pratik (GPA between 3.0 and 3.49):
        Race/Ethnicity:  Indian, Non-Hispanic
        Strong Ties:

- Lived on campus
- Computer Engineering major, small major allowed him to get to know faculty in the classroom (one faculty member taught 4 of his courses)
- Relationship with roommate who was also an Engineering major
- Participated in one intramural team during first year
- Strongest relationships were with mom, emotional support, and father, academic support

- Workstudy job in computer lab, but did not have strong connections with supervisor or co-workers
- At the time of the interview was not participating in any activities on campus
- Did not use race/ethnicity identifiers when describing relationships

Weak Ties:
- Relationships with a few students that live on her floor who are also Engineering majors
- Networking through Career Center with Engineering Alum
- Summer Internship

Ilena (GPA between 3.0 and 3.49):
    Race/Ethnicity:  Multi-Racial, Hispanic origins not in Mexico
    Strong Ties:
- Lives on campus (did not live on campus during First Year)
- Relationship with women's center learning community (recent relationship developed after she moved on campus)
- Relationship with an Anthropology professor from a course she took the previous semester, due to attending office hours
- Workstudy job on campus
- Did not use race/ethnicity identifiers when describing relationships
- Illena discussed wanting to establish relationships by joining a sorority, but could not be part of this group (the others) because she lacked the finances to join

Weak Ties:
- Participated in two organizations which she stopped attending during her First Year because she lived off campus and wanted to focus on academics, no close relationships were formed as a result of participation

### *Under-connected Students' Connectedness*

Denise (GPA between 0.0 and 1.99):
    Race/Ethnicity:  Black/African American, Non-Hispanic
    Strong Ties:
- None
- At the time of the interview was not participating in any activities on campus
- Did not use race/ethnicity identifiers when describing relationships

Weak Ties:
- EOF student, but does not have strong relationships with advisor or other EOF students, does not attend classes
- Had a workstudy job on campus; not at the time of the interview
- Has had faculty members reach out to offer resources and request meetings, but Denise did not reply to emails
- Occasionally attends events with boyfriend on campus, but does not have strong friendships with students in organizations
- Commuter student with a 1.5-2 hour train ride each day which prevents her from staying late to get activity involved

- Relationships with students that she use to live with on campus, but did not go to meals with them, attend events with them, and although she had some of them in classes she rarely attended classes

Afreen (GPA between 2.0 and 2.49):

Race/Ethnicity:  Asian-American, Non-Hispanic

Strong Ties:

- Lives on campus in an apartment setting
- Close friendship with roommate, Milagros
- Strongest relationship was with family, Afreen went home most weekends
- At the time of the interview was not participating in any activities on campus
- Did not use race/ethnicity identifiers when describing relationships
- Afreen introduced the term "The Others" when discussing relationships which she described as "people with money", she did not identify if there was a race/ethnicity attached to this attribute.

Weak Ties:

- Occasionally attends free events on campus with Milagros

Sabina (GPA between 2.0 and 2.49):

Race/Ethnicity:  Other, Hispanic origins not in Mexico

Strong Ties:

- Lives on campus
- Educational Opportunity Fund program
- Relationship with EOF advisor
- Attends two organizations on campus; could not remember names, and does not attend meetings regularly.
- Did not use race/ethnicity identifiers when describing relationships

Weak Ties:

- Lives on campus but no relationship with first roommate as her roommate went home every weekend, 2nd roommate did not want to attend anything events on campus so Sabina did not develop a relationship with her.
- Workstudy job during first year at a local elementary school where she tutors, developed friendships with some of the other tutors, no longer keeps in touch
- Sabina would like to join a sorority but does not have the money to join.

Tynika (GPA between 2.0 and 2.49):

Race/Ethnicity:  Black/African American, Non-Hispanic

Strong Ties:

- Lived on campus
- Relationship with boyfriend, Anthony, who is also an *Under-connected* student
- Relationship with EOF advisor
- Did not use race/ethnicity identifiers when describing relationships

Weak Ties:

- Workstudy job during first year, but workstudy was not renewed because she did not complete paperwork on time.

- Occasionally, attends a religious organization with boyfriend
- Has no relationships with faculty because she said she could not relate to her professors, they were not helpful and did not explain information clearly.
- Discussed six week summer EOF program, but did not keep many of the friendships established during program

Deepak (GPA between 2.5 and 2.99):
    Race/Ethnicity:  Asian-American, Non-Hispanic
    Strong Ties:
- Lives on campus
- Few close relationships with friends from his high school.
- Did not use race/ethnicity identifiers when describing relationships

    Weak Ties:
- Friends with students that live on his floor, but no close relationships, occasionally he works out with friends many of whom are from his high school.
- No involved in any formal activities on campus due to his focus on academics.

Katie (GPA between 2.5 and 2.99):
    Race/Ethnicity:  Asian-American, Non-Hispanic
    Strong Ties:
- Lives on campus
- Few close relationships during her six week Education Opportunity Fund program, as well as knowledge of resources on campus.  Has not kept up on many of the friends or felt the need to utilize campus resources.
- Workstudy job on campus
- Did not use race/ethnicity identifiers when describing relationships

    Weak Ties:
- Participates in the Educational Opportunity Fund program; but beyond the six week summer program does not have strong relationships with her advisor or other students from the program.
- Friends that were developed during first year liked to go out and "party" which Katie does not do, which she felt prevented her from establishing strong connections during her first year.

Salma (GPA between 2.5 and 2.99):
    Race/Ethnicity:  Asian-American, Non-Hispanic
    Strong Ties:
- Lives on campus
- Workstudy position during first year in a campus student center, developed relationship with other students and supervisor, but did not last beyond first year
- Workstudy position in an academic department which provided her a connection to another opportunity to do research with a faculty member, but did not last beyond the small research opportunity.
- Did not use race/ethnicity identifiers when describing relationships

    Weak Ties:

- Through campus center job Salma knew of many opportunities on campus, which she attended, but no events that helped to connect her with other students, staff, or faculty.

Anthony (GPA between 2.5 and 2.99):
      Race/Ethnicity:  Black/African American, Non-Hispanic
      Strong Ties:
- Lives on campus
- Relationship with girlfriend, Tynika, who is also an *Under-connected* student
- Relationship with EOF Advisor
- Participated on two intramural teams during first year at college, with many students from EOF
- Did not use race/ethnicity identifiers when describing relationships

      Weak Ties:
- Occasionally attends a Christian organization with girlfriend
- Occasionally attends events on campus, including Spoken Word events, but has only met acquaintances
- Had a workstudy job on campus, not working at time of interview
- Participated in EOF program and occasionally hangs out with other students from his six week summer program

Farah (GPA between 3.0 and 3.49):
      Race/Ethnicity:  White/Caucasian, Non-Hispanic
      Strong Ties:
- Lives off campus due to a really bad first year, both academically, socially, and mentally.  She did not establish any relationships during her first year on campus.
- Did not use race/ethnicity identifiers when describing relationships

      Weak Ties:
- Friendships with housemates, but does not participate in activities on campus with them and she indicates are not "strong" friends.  Additionally, these relationships are recent and not been part of her entire academic career.
- Participates in a few organizations on campus, but did not attend on a regular basis.
- Workstudy position on campus, but has a different philosophy than her supervisor and does not have co-workers she considers friends.

Milagros (GPA between 3.5 and 3.99):
      Race/Ethnicity:  Multi-Racial, Hispanic origins not in Mexico
      Strong Ties:
- Lives on campus in an apartment setting
- Close friendship with roommate, Afreen
- Strongest relationship was with family, Afreen went home most weekends
- At the time of the interview was not participating in any activities on campus
- Did not use race/ethnicity identifiers when describing relationships

- Milagros discussed "the other" with regards to not establishing her new apartment mate who was "from money", the new apartment mate was also White, but Milagros did not add this into her description of "the other"

Weak Ties:
- Occasionally attends free events on campus with Afreen
- Had workstudy job on campus, not working at time of interview
- Resistant to developing relationships with students she considered "the other".

Participants shared a range of life challenges that played a role in their life and education, however how the three groups responded to the challenges at times were different. These life circumstances included lack of financial support, lack of knowledge about college system, and other obstacles that they felt had to be overcome to be successful. *Deeply-connected* students were active participants in their college educational experience and took advantage of a variety of rich campus resources, and discussed feeling stronger connections to their experience and more in control of their educational experience. When discussing connections, these students used terms like "caring," "understanding," "patient," and "kind." These students had common traits which some clearly articulated as ways that they overcame life's challenges, such as an internal drive or passion about something which encouraged them to participate or reach out to a connection, their previous experience of success as an independent student who handled many life circumstances on their own, and finally, their ability to bounce back and be resilient during difficult life circumstances.

*Under-connected* students that did not actively participate in their college experience and/or make authentic connections to rich campus resources discussed struggling through their college experience. This group of students described the campus culture and some of their connections as uncaring, perceiving them as not invested in them, and not interested in anything beyond classroom material. These students largely felt misunderstood. Additionally, these

students' independence worked against them. They felt that they had always accomplished successes in high school and in life without the help of others, so they were resistant to reaching out to build connections, particularly when they perceived indifference from the university. They also struggled to find the internal motivation to discover what they were passionate about and when they failed, they were not as quick to persist or try again. When the student lacked motivation to seek out resources, could not find resources, or felt that there was no authentic connection, they struggled both inside and outside of the classroom.

When the "two-way street" of engaged students and a university full of caring and understanding resources is complete, students reported outcomes of success, knowledge, more satisfaction with their college experience, and the cultivation of additional opportunities. *Deeply-connected* students reported feeling that they had access to opportunities and often sought them out, whereas *Under-connected* students either did not take advantage of what the institution offered or when they took initiative they felt as if the office or person they reached out to did not care about them and their experience. The next two chapters explore the caring and understanding communities that students were seeking, as well as further develop the attributes that students bring with them to the relationships and the role those attributes played in the relationships.

# CHAPTER V-FINDINGS:  UNIVERSITY CULTURE

Creating connections on a campus aid in student retention, persistence, and academic success (Kuh, et. al, 2008; Pascarella, 2005; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) and this is particularly the case for low-income first-generation students (Pascarella, 2005).  My study's findings suggest that for LIFG college students these connections need to be both caring and understanding.  Caring connections were relationships when students felt that someone was invested in them both inside and outside of the classroom.  Faculty members that both wanted the student to be successful with course material but also took time to invest in their future, or staff who wanted a student to perform well at their job on campus, but also spent time encouraging them with their course work.  Students were also looking for relationships where they felt that they were understood, where resources knew the struggles that they were encountering both inside and outside the classroom.  For students who found caring and understanding connections, it made it easier to establish this connections and for students to fully engage in their educational experience.

## University Culture: Establishing Connections that Care

Many participants talked about the university culture and that stronger or easier connections occurred in a caring and compassionate space. Students reported that these relationships felt genuine and authentic when there was care and concern for the students, their experience, and what was happening in and outside of the classroom.  Students reported these experiences happened during orientation, the EOF Summer Program, the McNair Summer Program, the Successful Paths Program (SPP), and during one-on-one experiences with faculty, staff, and peers. These connections were built by the university to introduce students to peers, to

prepare them for academic expectations, and to expose them to resources on campus. Students who described the connections as authentic and caring also spoke highly of their introduction to the university and felt these connections were reflected in their desire to get involved in the university. Those students who felt that they did not build caring connections, especially connections to other students, discussed the negative impact in their ability to get involved and the role they felt the lack of connections played in producing lower grades. A common example of this is seen in students not connecting with faculty during classes and office hours, which left students confused about material, unsure who to ask, and thus performing poorly in the course.

### *A Culture that Cares:  First Connections*

Compassionate environments like new student orientation programs, which were held over the summer for all incoming first-year students, included providing spaces and opportunities for students to establish connections. Many of the students, even juniors and seniors at the time, reflected back on their orientation experience as a time when they met many of their first friends and learned about the campus. For participants in my study, orientation helped students establish friends on the college campus and future roommates. Alyssa, from the *Deeply-connected* group, explained how during orientation she met her future roommate, who helped her feel "comfortable" at the university and "gave me a partner to explore the campus with and take classes with." Some students also discussed that orientation introduced them to some older students, including their orientation leaders, who cared about each student and worked to connect the student to other students and the university. Sunita, from the *Deeply-connected* group, discussed the role her orientation leader played in her college experience, saying, "She helped me realize I was at the right college."  Sunita described orientation as an experience dedicated to helping her establish friendships:

> We participated in name games and ice breakers After that we had a game show and we made a team chant and a really nice team name so everyone was really excited about that. There was a mini dance floor or you can go ice skate, you can get ice cream so that was a lot of fun at night.  We hung out together all night.  And the next day I think we did like another activity maybe a tour or something.  All these things helped me make friends.  Our orientation leader created a Facebook page, so we can all keep in touch.  We all eat dinner together once a month, it is like a little reunion. I met so many caring friends.

Such caring connections can help students build relationships to the university, peers, faculty, and staff.  Sunita described a need to feel "comfortable" in her "home away from home" and the time, dedication, and thoughtfulness that went into her relationship with her orientation leader; she believed that the relationship the orientation leader cultivated between her and her peers helped her to explore the university faster, develop friends she could study with, and seek out resources.

However, not all caring communities lead to connections that matter, and at times, caring conditions were viewed as very uncaring environments. Alyssa, a *Deeply-connected* student with many examples of ways which displayed her independence, felt that her orientation only helped her establish a few connections, including with her roommate, but it also made her regret choosing the university. She explains, "It was horrible. No one cared what I wanted to do.  I was like I am not looking forward to coming to [Mid-Atlantic University]… I hate these buildings; it is so hot.  The people were very superficial. Like, all the kids we were meeting; all they wanted to do is like drink or like all the guys wanted to talk about the blond girls; you know very superficial experience." Alyssa was looking for like-minded people who she could connect with, but only felt she found students during her orientation that wanted to party, something she was not interested in. Alyssa's sense of independence and dissatisfaction with feeling like she was obligated to make friends with a small set of peers who were all assigned to the same orientation leader caused her to struggle during orientation.  She characterized her environment as "hostile"

and struggled her first year until she established caring connections with the other students and

faculty from the [women's college] who understood her struggles of being LIFG.  She attributes

some of this struggle to not making friends during her orientation due to her independence, but

she overcame this environment due to her resiliency. The effects of students' independence and

resiliency will be further discussed in a later section to demonstrate how these traits served both

to aid in building connections but also as barriers to student connection.

　　　Other students discussed how their first connections to the institution impacted their

academic experience, both positively and negatively. The role of a negative first introduction to

the university was reported by students to have a negative relationship on grades, feeling

connected, and wanting to get involved with other activities on campus. Farah, one of the few

*Under-connected* students with a high GPA (3.0 to 3.49), admitted to almost failing out after her

first year. She explained that her orientation experience did not allow her to meet friends, which

had a ripple effect that impacted her to her junior year, and resulted in her starting her academic

career with a low GPA.  Farah describes in detail the role of not taking advantage of the caring

opportunities orientation experience presented:

> My lack of good friends…I stayed in my dorm a lot. I didn't really interact with others.
> There's just so many reasons, and there's just so many things there that made it bad.  I
> didn't discover that until it was way over.  And I wish I took advantage of what was
> offered during orientation; I really do.  I wish I went out there and put myself out there
> and made good friends. I mean I made friends from sophomore year, but my friends from
> sophomore year have friends from freshman year and freshman orientation, and they're
> having these awesome, awesome relationships and I don't have that.  I can't…I mean
> when friends ask me how my freshman year is I don't usually say much.  I usually just
> say, "Oh, it was okay."  And I don't want to talk about it cause I feel like it's just…even
> talking about it right now brings back really bad memories.

　Additionally, since she did not establish meaningful relationships during orientation and her first

year, Farah continued to struggle to connect with other students during her sophomore and junior

years.  Conversely, those students that reported having a positive first introduction to their

college through a formalized experience talked about how those institutional connections and

friends that they made helped them feel part of the university or "community" or "family."

### *A Culture that Cares:  Supportive Services*

One program that provided a positive first introduction for participants was the

Educational Opportunity Fund Program (EOF).  EOF provides access and support to students

from economically- and educationally-disadvantaged families and communities. The connections

students established with EOF clearly played an overall positive role in students' experiences, as

every interview with an EOF participant specifically mentioned the role of the EOF program

without being prompted.  In order to help with the transition from high school to college, EOF

provides a program for incoming first-year students who come to campus during the summer for

six weeks to take classes, learn about the campus, and gain knowledge of campus resources to

provide them with some college cultural and social capital prior to their entrance to college. Most

of students' connections to this group of students developed during this initial summer program.

Many students referred to the relationship that they established with the EOF community as a

second family and support system. Lucia, from the *Connected* group, describes the relationship

she has with her EOF family:

> I would suggest for people from low-income families and minorities be a part of EOF; I
> thought that was one of my best experiences here at [Mid-Atlantic University], just the
> fact that everyone went through that struggle, a financial struggle, not that it was a
> terrible struggle, just that we all went through it, it makes you a family so, when I see
> them, I am still close with all my friends from EOF. I see them and like we get excited
> that we see each other and stuff-just like family.

During the summer, EOF program students were introduced to their advisor, who would work

with them until graduation.  Participants described their advisor as playing a significant role in

many of their college experiences: reporting the relationship with the advisor as mentorship,

friendship, financial advisor, academic advisor, counselor, and family member.  Even students

from the *Under-connected* group, who lacked many strong caring connections, mentioned their

EOF advisor or connections that they established during their summer program. Anthony, an

*Under-connected* student, referred to his counselor by stating, "she is kind of like mom," and

Tynika, also from the *Under-connected* group, described her relationship with her advisor by

saying, "I don't have a father in real-life.  When I turned 18 my father emancipated me. I just had

a real relationship with my counselor. He was like, just call me Dad. So, I call him Dad."  This

feeling of family extended beyond their advisors and was also extended to EOF secretarial staff

and peers. Many of the stories from these students identified their connections as introductions to

their first friends, advisors, interactions with academics and faculty.  Sabina, an *Under-connected*

student, described her experience with EOF and the important role her advisor played in her

success, "… I had nobody…So I always went to my counselor…she was my first resource."

Establishing caring connections was important to many of the students interviewed; however as

illustrated by Sabina, Tynika, and Anthony, all *Under-connected* students, having caring

dedicated resources is significant, but it is only one part of the story, the other side of the street

needs to come to the table as well.  Despite having a strong connection provided by the

university that was caring and understanding of their experience, both Tynika and Anthony

reported missing meetings, not responding to emails, and not putting effort into the relationship.

As we have seen, some common attributes that *Under-connected* students bring to a relationship

are their lack of drive, resiliency, and independence; these attributes can be both strengths in

establishing relationships or in the case of these students, they can be barriers, no matter how

caring an environment is.

Another example of a student sharing the need to have the university be a caring environment came from Colin, a *Deeply-connected* student who participated particularly in the Successful Paths Program.  The Successful Paths Program (SPP) is a grant-funded program established to help previously incarcerated students to successfully transition to and graduate from college. During a formal orientation program for SPP students, Colin learned about all of the services offered to SPP students; although he admitted he did not feel he needed them at that time, he valued knowing what was offered and how much the SPP office cared about his success. Colin explained the services he learned of during his orientation with SPP:

> … it's amazing how people actually care and if you need anything from tutoring to, if you can't afford to get a calculator for one of your classes, they'll help you out or a textbook and whatever they can do, they will do to help you.  And it's just amazing knowing that that support is there.  Thank God I haven't had to, knock on wood, taken advantage of that support.  But just knowing that it's there and if I go through anything that's a bad hardship that I know I can count on them to help me get through this.

Colin's quote highlights support as an area that many students identified when referring to caring connections. Students' stories emphasize that the amount of compassion that a person or program showed for them and their academic experience would determine if students utilized these connections again or not. Students identified care in the forms of faculty taking time to answer questions or get to know them, and also in supervisors who emphasized that their employees were "students first," which is a term higher education staff use to tell students that their academics and academic experience comes before other obligations, including their campus jobs.

### *A Culture that Cares:  Getting Involved*

Participants consistently were clear that their participation in an activity alone did not indicate that they felt they were participating in a caring community. Most of the *Deeply-connected* students in this research participated in two to four clubs, organizations, or intramurals on campus, while the *Connected* and *Under-connected* students participated in only one or two,

if any at all. Although these students participated in a variety of activities, many seemed to really focus on just one of the co-curricular activities and devoted their time primarily to that activity. Sabina, from the *Under-connected* group who was participating in two organizations discussed the differences of being involved at college versus involvement at the high school level. She said, "It's so different, because in this school no one really knows you unless…I feel like I want to say unless you are super smart, no one really cares. Or unless you are like really, really involved.  So, it's hard because like in high school I was just cared about…I don't know, it was just easier.  Just be known, it's harder now." Sabina struggled academically at college and told stories of the importance for her to feel "cared about by someone" while at the university, but struggled to find that connection. Sabina's stories showcase her need to have connections that cared and her feelings of being lost because she had not established strong connections to faculty, staff, peers, or activities at the university.

Students' stories indicated that being part of a caring community not only aided in their university experience, but it also offered added benefits. The students' narratives indicate that co-curricular activities played a variety of roles in their college experiences. They indicate that some activities, especially involvement in career or academic organizations, led to or prepared them for future jobs. Allison, from the *Deeply-connected* group, discussed how she felt her academic success and strong relationships with faculty and staff were due to her involvement on campus: "But, a lot of [my success] has come from being involved with students and staff that introduce me to others." Allison also discussed how connections to faculty led to conversations about other faculty members and their research.  Additionally, co-curricular activities gave students opportunities for community service and volunteering in community schools, which also expanded students' networks.

Students focused on the role that their participation in co-curricular activities played in personal development, such as building confidence, growing in faith, development of leadership skills, being stress reliever, helping them manage their time better, and learning about themselves and others.  Students attributed this to other students, faculty, and staff caring enough to find it important to help develop students, and as Eve, from the *Deeply-connected* group, shared to "know me well enough to care about strengthening my weaknesses."   There were three students, all from the *Deeply-connected* group, who participated in four or more activities. Not only did they report they were actively participating in multiple organizations, but these students very actively engaged in each organization by either starting the organization, serving as an executive board member, or specifically using this experience to make them more marketable in future careers.  These students shared that they cared a great deal about the organizations because, as Korey describes it, "an upperclass student took me under their wing and made me feel important [to the organization]."  Eve was one of these students who described her efforts figuring out which activities would be the most beneficial to her experience:

> I kind of figured out what I wanted to do, and from there I thought about it, and I started Googling...Originally, I wanted to be a journalist…And on top of that, I figured out that there are all these opportunities for students to get involved through [Women's College]; which is where I met faculty who spent a lot of time helping me figure out what to get involved with, what classes to take, and spent a lot of time talking with me. So they helped me figure out that there were all these opportunities for me to develop myself and grow, I just got really motivated and I realized, you know, they [co-curricular activities] are only one aspect of my life.  Faculty and staff helped me see that I can't just rely on my grades and, at the same time, I'm going to need that as a stepping stone to kind of get these opportunities so I can make myself a competitive applicant in the job market.

Although this *Deeply-connected* group that was involved in four or more activities was small, the value that these three students saw in the amount they were involved in activities that they cared about and which demonstrated caring for them was important to their college experience.

Additionally, these three students all had grade point averages above a 3.00, two fell into the

group with GPAs between 3.50 to 3.99.  Their passion and commitment was reflected in both

their academic success and the success they achieved in co-curricular activities, jobs, and

internships.

Four students were not involved in any activities on campus.  Three of these students

were from the *Under-connected* group and one was from the *Connected* group.  The student from

the *Connected* group, Pratik, explained that his lack of involvement was because he was focused

on his heavy course load.  A student from the *Under-connected* group, Denise, had just returned

after being academically dismissed during her previous semester and was now commuting from

home.  She believed as a commuter that she did not have time for extra activities and was

focusing on her academics.  Prior to being dismissed, she did occasionally attend events on

campus, but was not actively involved in any organizations.  Denise spoke about faculty and

staff being caring and concerned for her experience and grades, but admitted that she never took

advantage of meeting with them or rarely returned faculty members' emails. Afreen, the other

*Under-connected* student, shared how she went to a few clubs and activities on campus but felt

that everyone already knew each other. She stopped attempting to participate and explained how

she and her roommate, Milagros, felt left out from the college experience: "I feel kind of left out

a little. That's basically, I just feel a little left out, but I'm coping with it."  Milagros had a grade

point average between 3.50-3.99, Pratik's fell in the 3.00-3.49 range, Afreen's GPA was between

2.00-2.49, and Denise's GPA was between 0.00-1.99.  Milagros, who proved to be successful

with her coursework, struggled with participation while at college.  Milagros had many reasons

why she was not participating on campus, including describing the university environment as not

caring, other students from the *Under-connected* group also attributed the environment as one of

the factors.  Additional factors that students discussed as for a lack of involvement, include

focusing on grades, lack of motivation, having a job, and lack of individuals that understood their

experience.

### *A Culture that Cares:  Faculty Interactions*

Students' narratives about their connections with faculty were distinctly different

between the *Deeply-connected* and the *Under-connected* groups.  Participants from the *Deeply-connected* group all reported initiating conversations with faculty members about classroom

material, questions, research, and career advice. Participants from the *Under-connected* group

reported initiating conversations with faculty only when they had specific questions about course

work or an upcoming exam. These students reported that they wanted to have conversations with

faculty but were nervous, because they felt they lacked knowledge about a topic or believed that

the faculty member was not interested in them. Afreen, from the *Under-connected* group,

described it as "…something that I talk myself into every semester. I'll get to know my

professor, but I just never do. I'm nervous. I haven't really bonded with any faculty members.

They seem so academic. I just don't spend enough time with any one faculty member in order to

like them or dislike them."  Where *Under-connected* group students struggled with these

relationships, students from the *Deeply-connected* group discussed taking chances to reach out to

faculty and bonding most with faculty whom they perceived cared about them.

While all students discussed having had negative experiences with faculty members, what

they did with those experiences seems to be the difference between the two groups.  Students

identified a range of negative experiences from finding a course difficult because the professor

was "dull" to getting no replies to their emails. Eve, from the *Deeply-connected* group, describes

a negative uncaring experience with a faculty member:

I think on my first paper he was very critical in ways that had surprised me cause I wasn't used to that [feedback].  Looking back, I realized that's definitely how you critique a graduate student.  But he was very, very clear that I wrote poorly…anyway, it was a very confusing experience cause he told me that I had submitted subpar writing.  And then he told me that my grammar was 'horrible' and suggested I see a tutor, you know, which sounds helpful, but the way he wrote it was just not.  And it was the first time I'd been at [Mid-Atlantic University]…I was entering my second semester and it was the first time I had that issue.  I've actually gotten an A in every class except for his.  So the way he had addressed my inability to write or my grammar completely…it just made me really angry.  It made me feel very disrespected.  And anytime I would see him in that class to ask the same questions, he was just so curt with me.  He made it very clear through his actions that he just wanted me to get out of there, you know.

Similarly, Tynika from the *Under-connected* group discussed after she got her first paper back, that she had a failing grade in a course which she thought she was doing well in.  Tynika made an appointment to meet with the professor to discuss the paper. She said, "It made me very upset because last year, when I thought I was doing good, then I got my paper back and thought, noooo what am I doing wrong? I would go to his office and asked him for help, but he didn't help." Tynika describes the interaction as short, cold, and as if the faculty member treated her like Tynika was wasting her time.  After this interaction, Tynika stopped asking that specific faculty member for help and failed the course. Tynika explained, "I didn't understand and he didn't care. He wasn't much help, so I stopped going to see him." This was a common experience for students, how they worked up the courage to attend a professor's office hours to ask for help and the student's perception was the professor made the student feel like the professor did not care about the student or that the student should simply understand the material.  Eve, from the *Deeply-connected* group, shared a time when she felt disregarded by a faculty member.  She went to a faculty member's office hours to ask about their research, but the faculty member asked if she had questions about the course material and after her one question was answered the faculty member told Eve that they had work to do and she could email if she had additional

questions.  Eve discussed feeling that the faculty member did not want to help her or get to know

her and that was the only time she went to that faculty member's office hours. Ilena, a student

from the *Connected* group, discussed how she struggled during her first year in a writing

intensive course and went to see the professor, who just referred Ilena back to class notes and

reading materials as a reference to answer her questions. Ilena discussed how frustrating this was

because she did not understand the course materials and felt a personal conversation with the

professor would help to clarify information. Ultimately Ilena "gave up" in this course and failed

it.  The following semester when she took the course with a different faculty member, someone

that Ilena labeled as "caring," she felt that she better understood the material and received a "B"

in the course.  Ilena and the second faculty member had conversations about course material, but

also about Ilena's major, future career choices, and high school experiences. Ilena had another

example of a professor whose course work was difficult, and she felt that it was difficult to

engage in conversations with him outside of class: "he went to big schools and he expected us to

be like him, I guess. His lectures were confusing. He used a lot of unnecessary words." She

explained that she felt he cared more about his reputation and the material than he did about his

students. Frequently, study participants who discussed failing a course mentioned not connecting

with, feeling intimidated by, or not relating to the faculty member that was teaching their course.

Every student that discussed failing a course, when talking about retaking the course with a

different faculty member, discussed the role that the new faculty member played in their ability

to pass the course.  Eve reached out to faculty often to ask for help, but not all of her interactions

proved to be caring or helpful to her college experience:

> I built connections with all of them [faculty] cause they're the ones that actually cared.
> So all the political science professors I met…this is horrible...I don't know if it's because
> of the race, class, and gender dynamic, but the professors who happen to be white and
> male were never interested in my research.  And they were never…they just didn't put

> that much time.  Like I remember emailing one professor; he didn't even respond to me. When I was looking for someone to support me in my senior thesis, there was like the advisor of the department who…he doesn't really read his emails I mean on a regular basis.  I'll ask him a question and he won't answer the question.  He'll kind of come back to me with something else. Apparently I am not important.

When courses were difficult and had more challenging material, students felt that the professor played a key factor in their success. The relationships that students attributed to being the most successful were with faculty that spent significant time with them during office hours, stayed after class to answer questions, talked about their life experiences and passion for course materials, and showed interest in students' lives.  As Derek, a *Deeply-connected* student, stated, in upper level courses "faculty were the tipping point" for whether you passed or failed. His examples included the way they taught the material and interacted with students during office hours.  Derek had a few faculty members that he worked on research with and shared how casual conversations during research helped him to develop meaningful relationships with those faculty members.  During those conversations faculty would share their struggles, academic passions, and pieces of their personal experiences which helped Derek to see them as more than faculty. This allowed Derek to discuss more topics with faculty in a more natural way, leaving him to feel less intimidated and more engaged.  For Derek, these positive interactions helped to solidify a meaningful and engaging relationship with several faculty members.

Students who discussed having positive interactions with faculty indicated that many were with faculty members in their major.  Students felt that it was easier to talk with faculty in their discipline because the students felt that they had knowledge for the major; as well as faculty were passionate about their field of study and willing to share a great deal of information. There was a trust students had with faculty in their major, which often allowed students to bond easier with their faculty. Students from the *Deeply-connected* group used the word "caring" twenty

different times to describe faculty members with whom they had positive relationships, while

only one student from the *Under-connected* group used the word "caring" to describe a faculty

member. Students discussed doing better academically or enjoying a course more when they felt

that the faculty member knew them, knew their name, or cared about them as students.  There

were numerous stories from students who felt their faculty cared about them and their success.

Lucia, from the *Connected* group, described how she perceived that a faculty member showed

concern about her:

> She knows us by name and she knows our strengths and weaknesses, which is great.
> That is something that I like about that department, that since it is a smaller department,
> the professors actually get to know you by name, you're not just a number, a student ID
> number. Which helped a lot, in like the sciences. I like connecting with people, so, it
> was important for me, for professors to actually know who I was.

Many students shared stories about how they perceived their faculty demonstrating care,

and they indicated that this was important to their college experience. Students perceived

faculty caring in many forms including the relationships that they built with students;

listening, knowing their name, spending time with students, and not judging them for

inexperience in a topic. Eve, from the *Deeply-connected* group, offered another story of

how faculty members demonstrated that they cared:

> I met these professors in the last two years, and they were phenomenal.  This one
> professor, she brought in a few speakers to talk to us about like different programs, and
> she offered us different programs too that she knew of.  So she was like actively trying
> to connect us.  She was just so supportive and encouraging for me as a student and as an
> academic.  I had another professor, she taught this class called American Public
> Opinion, and she went out of her way to teach us like basic knowledge on statistical
> programs which is really essential.  And I didn't realize that I could actually do it until
> this person showed me.  So she was phenomenal, and she went out of her way, she's still
> going out of her way to keep in touch with me.  So it was just really nice to meet
> someone who like really cared and showed through their actions that they were there for

me, and that they, I guess, understood that I needed guidance, and that they were willing

to kind of put themselves out there.

Similarly, other students explained about professors who spent time with them and asked

students questions beyond course material were easier to develop relationships with.  Students

discussed how they initiated the relationships that they developed with faculty, and only a few of

these relationships developed into a mentor/mentee relationship. Students who had developed

strong relationships with faculty discussed how they felt that their professors listened to them. A

caring environment was created when students felt that faculty listened to them, their stories

about struggling with material without passing judgment.  Korey, from the *Deeply-connected*

group, explained how she had a strong relationship with a faculty member who helped her

"problem solve out loud without making me feel bad for my lack of experience."  Students from

the *Under-connected* group notably and consistently described their professors as "experts," a

term not used by participants from the *Deeply-connected* or *Connected* group. Denise described

how "intimidating" it was to discuss course material or reasons why she was struggling in a

course with faculty because they are "brilliant."  This label of "expert" built a wall between

students and the ability to build strong relationships with faculty.  An interesting and

complicated label that faculty might not be aware was giving to them, making this perception

students had for faculty a difficult one to combat. These *Under-connected* students felt

intimidated by faculty members. Tynika explained, "I have to put myself out there, I have to, I

wouldn't say throw myself out there, but speak to professors. My English professor, he would

say this too. He was like, you guys are in college, you can't act shy, because you are not going to

get by like that you know. He was telling the truth, you know."  However, despite wanting to

reach out and build connections to faculty, students found it difficult to get past the perceived

expert status to build connections with faculty.

Students were particularly intimidated about reaching out to faculty when they were struggling with course material. Derek, a *Deeply-connected* student, noted the challenges and fear of reaching out to faculty when your biggest struggle was the academic material but that it was made easier when his faculty had an invested interest in his success. He shared that reaching out to faculty to ask for help about writing was very difficult because he knew this was his weakness. Derek reached out to several faculty members during college asking for help until he found some that "cared enough to spend a lot of time with me." Derek admits that reaching out is challenging, but he recognized that  his passions or other successful relationships were the reasons why, despite the difficulties of finding and building caring relationships, he would continue to reach out.  This story demonstrates the interaction between both a caring community and the attributes which student bring to the relationship, which will be discussed further in the following chapter.  Fear appeared to be a key factor for all students: fear of not knowing what to say, fear of rejection, and fear of feeling unintelligent. Korey, from the *Deeply-connected* group, explains "I think I've been pretty lucky because I've heard other students who have been singled out or haven't talked to their professors because their professors kind of talk down to them. And I don't think I've ever had that experience." Students found that in caring communities it was easier to overcome their own fears and make necessary connections.

Most students articulated that faculty members played a tremendous role in their performance in a course. Students mentioned going to websites like RateMyprofessor.com to investigate faculty members prior to taking a course to better understand how they grade and if other students perceived them as a caring faculty member.  Additionally, students routinely dropped courses after making judgments about faculty during the first class meeting.  Lucia, from the *Connected* group explained, "I'm a firm believer that the professor has a huge effect on

your grade for the course. If they are mean, too strict, or have unrealistic expectations, I would

drop the course." Students stressed the importance of having positive and caring relationships

with their faculty and how these relationships played a role in their success.  Students spent a

great deal of time discussing caring relationships with faculty and the need for compassion in

those relationships.

### *A Culture that Cares:  Financial Compassion*

Whether it was a conversation with faculty, staff, or other students, the one topic that

students spoke about most and addressed in all relationships was related to finances.  One

campus connection that every student discussed as a large influence in their academic experience

was related to money and finances. Students discussed how not having money or having to work

with the Financial Aid office was very stressful.  However, several of these students emphasized

the importance of finding someone who cared enough that they would take the time to walk them

through paperwork, explain processes to them, or connect them to a personal contact at the

Financial Aid office. Financial stress was described by many as being time consuming, taking

time away from their school work and ability to study.  Students explained that financial stress

started with filling out financial aid paperwork, which was a task that fifteen students completed

themselves or with limited assistance.  Most of these students did not feel confident in their

abilities and often had to reach out to someone from the Financial Aid office for additional

information or corrections. Five students had a parent or sibling help them fill out their financial

aid paperwork. Ilena, from the *Under-connected* group, had some help filling out her financial

aid paperwork, but still found it a "stressful and time consuming" experience:

> Scary, because I didn't know anything about taxes. And then my dad obviously couldn't
> fill it out because he doesn't know anything about computers, so I had to do it on my
> own. And then I asked my counselor a few things but in my high school they just, they

try to help but they would be like no we don't want to do it for you. But then I would

meet with other people who came from better high schools and stuff and their parents had

someone that filled it out for them. And I know people who shouldn't be getting like a

certain amount of money and they are getting it because they paid someone. So, I'm like,

I wish I knew one of those people.

Students discussed the importance that financial aid and the Financial Aid office played in their

college experience.  Farah, from the *Under-connected* group, said, "Without the financial aid that

I'm getting I wouldn't be able to go to college. I wouldn't be able to afford to go to college. So I

feel like money, money is very, very, very important in my experience. I don't have a lot of it."

Students often felt that this was an area that they had to "do it alone".  However, there were a

few students who found or were connected with support services or with a counselor who helped

them with the financial aid paperwork.  Korey from the *Deeply-connected* group, explained her

EOF advisor would email everyone a reminder that financial aid paper work was due.  He would

hold an educational meeting about completing the paperwork, which someone from the Financial

Aid office attended and answer questions.  Additionally, she said "the best thing he did was to

meet with me individually and walk me through line by line what it meant and the information I

needed.  This eased my mind significantly about getting this done."  Korey said that her

counselor offered the one-on-one help to all his students, but she didn't believe everyone took

advantage of it.  For her, having someone she trusted who would not judge what she did not

know was a huge asset to completing the paperwork and relieving her stress.  Students described

financial stress as playing a tremendous role in their experience since it directly impacted their

courses and the activities in which they could or could not get involved.

An additional financial concern for many students was the cost of books for their classes.

Several students spent a great deal of time selecting courses based on strong faculty, courses that

were recommended by other students, and courses that would be most beneficial to their future

careers.  However, at times, students then dropped these courses due to the cost of the required

books.  Milagros tells a story of a course that she needed for her major that she kept delaying:

"Usually books…if I save money from work I buy them but usually there are some classes where

they have a required textbook, and it's super expensive, I just drop the class and take another

class.  I had to do that once for a class required for my major."  Students described feeling

stressed about selecting courses because they are unsure if they could afford the course. One

participant, Derek from the *Deeply-connected* group, would reach out to faculty in courses that

he really wanted to take and ask about the books.  He explained that some faculty were "not

helpful with finding alternatives" but there were a few faculty members that cared enough to

lend him a copy for the semester or gave him recommendations of where to find the cheapest

version of the book.  He admitted that how a faculty member responded might determine if he

signed up for the course or not.  This was an example of when caring and understanding faculty,

as well as Derek's own attributes, contributed to Derek being able to take courses that his peers

might have dropped.  These moments demonstrated Derek's own resiliency and independence,

but also the impact of faculty who took time to learn about Derek, his struggles, and make

helpful suggestions. These relationships ended up being some of the strongest connections that

Derek made.

In addition to financial stress keeping students from taking classes, it frequently kept

them from fully engaging in their college experience and missing out on experiences. There was

an opportunity cost for students who needed to work to make ends meet; they reported being

unable to fully engage in all the opportunities available on a college campus, especially

opportunities that can create some of the most supportive and caring environments. Ilena, from

the *Connected* group, discussed not being able to join a sorority due to the membership dues.

Afreen, from the *Under-connected* group, also talked about numerous ways that she felt not

having money kept her from fully having "the college experience":

> I buy all used and rented books. So I don't really come to college book stores any more,
> that was a mistake I made freshman year, and I learned from. I don't really go out,
> because that would mean shopping and spending money. I don't have a job, so I'm
> looking to find a job on campus; even then, I'm like really tight with spending money.
> And then when I do have the chance to spend it, I kind of still have these doubts that I
> should save it or something. So I don't really spend a lot of money here. So, when
> Milagros and I are going to order food we can't do that every day. We plan when we can
> order food. We will order food every other Friday, because we know each other's
> situation. So that's another reason we only hang out with people in the same class as us,
> they can relate more. And they don't really judge you for doing that kind of thing or not
> being involved.

Students also chose not to join certain clubs because of the cost of traveling to activities. Farah,

from the *Under-connected* group, explained that "money plays a huge [role]…money basically

restricts and unfortunately controls what I do." Many students from the *Under-connected* or

*Connected* groups shared that they knew there were reasons to join groups and feel a part of

something, but financially they felt unable to commit to activities. At times it made them feel as

if they were on the outside of the college experience looking in and missing out on a significant

part.

Participants consistently were frustrated when faculty, staff, and other students did not

understand the struggles that they encountered at the university. They reported that the university

community routinely assumed that participants had money to pay bills, purchase books, or go out

with their friends. Korey, from the *Deeply-connected* group, was one participant who described

an interaction when she did not have enough money to cover her term bill and the lack of care

and concern she felt greeted her difficulty. She spoke with a representative of the Student

Accounts office who suggested that Korey simply speak with her parents about the bill.  Korey

describes this experience:

> And I owed two thousand dollars.  And I wasn't the type of person that could come up
> with that.  Someone in the Financial Office said, "Well talk to mom and dad and see what
> they can do."  And I was kind of like I can't do that.  I don't just have a magic credit card
> that I can swipe.  So that was very stressful.  It was really frustrating because it's kind of
> like I know that works for a lot of other people, but it's not going to work for my
> situation.  And once I said like I'm an EOF student, I don't think I'm going to be able to
> do this, she was a little more helpful.  I think she kind of understood, "Okay, I guess you
> can't talk to your parents."  But I think it was just kind of…it was very annoying for her
> to assume I could ask my mom and dad. I got angry.  Like excuse me, no I will not talk to
> mom and dad.  So it was something that I didn't really think of until after I had left, and I
> actually had met with another EOF student; he had a similar experience and we both kind
> of just went on a ten-minute rant about who do they think they are and why should they
> assume our parents can pay for our schooling.  So, I don't know, it was just frustrating I
> think at most.

Students also discussed assumptions that others made about their ability to purchase books and

be prepared for classes. They felt that they were behind peers in class because they could not

afford to purchase the books or supplies needed, but they needed the course to graduate.

Anthony, from the *Under-connected* group, stated that he knew he would not perform as well as

his peers when he did not have books, but he had no choice. He illustrated an interaction with a

faculty member who "assumed that I was being lazy or did not want to do my work, but the

reality was I did not purchase the books.  I could not purchase the books, but I was too

embarrassed to tell him that."  Unlike Derek, who had conversations with faculty about not being

able to afford books, most study participants were like Anthony and did not feel confident in the

response they would receive from their faculty or that their faculty cared enough or had not built

relationships that they felt would support the conversation.  These students frequently cited the

embarrassment that they experience having to ask a faculty member for an exception because

they could not afford books. They reported feeling embarrassed that they could not have access

to the same resources as other students, and they were frequently angry when assumptions were

made that they were not working hard because they did not have access to the same resources. In

these situations, there was an opportunity cost where students could not fully participate in

classes or other activities because of their need to make money to meet basic needs and cover

their primary academic expenses.

### A Culture that Cares:  Employment

For the LIFG students in my study, lacking money means having to work jobs either on-

campus or off-campus, sometimes both.  Sixteen of the students were currently working at the

time of the study, and an additional five had worked at some point during their academic

experience. Of the twenty-one participants with jobs, sixteen have or had a job that was

supported through Federal Work Study.  Work Study is financial aid that is based on need and

provides students part-time jobs on-campus in university offices to help them earn money for

college expenses.  The five students who previously had jobs all discussed wanting to continue

working, but either felt that they needed to focus on their academics, had no time, or had lost

their work study jobs due to not completing their financial aid paperwork in a timely manner or

no longer qualifying.  Of the sixteen students that were currently working, thirteen had positions

that were on campus. There were four students who currently had two different jobs.  All

students who had internships also had jobs, and two students reported having jobs both on and

off campus.  Three students reported working more than 20 hours per week during the academic

year, and one student worked more than 40 hours a week during the academic year.  Most of

these students reported spending more time at their jobs than in the classroom or studying.  With

the amount of students that reported working and the number of hours that they reported

working, it was important to understand the impact that the environments they were working in

created relationships that influence their academic careers.

All students, but one, who were currently working in on-campus positions discussed

positive experiences they had with their supervisors and indicated that those experiences were

connected to their academic experience.  Farah shared stories of a supervisor who did not care

about her as a student and had a different Human Resources philosophy than Farah.  Farah's

future career was moving towards Human Resources. Three students said that their on-campus

supervisors would often tell them that they were students first and employees second.  Colin,

from the *Deeply-connected* group, said one of his on-campus supervisors had the student first

philosophy which helped him remain focused on his course work. He was often given time

during his job to complete homework or study. Salma, a student from the *Under-connected*

group, talked about how she mentioned to her supervisor that she was struggling academically

and her supervisor motivated her to work, "I fell behind in my school work. She said 'listen,

some of us need that extra push sometimes so if you ever need to come into my office and have

me watch you work we can do that or you can sit in one of the meeting rooms and do school

work'. So, they are very understanding and they are very helpful." Colin had two different jobs:

one on-campus working in the recreation center and the second off-campus at a restaurant. He

needed both jobs because he was paying for what financial aid did not cover, his off-campus

apartment, and all living expenses.  He was only allowed a certain number of hours at his on-

campus job which required him to work additional hours elsewhere. Colin discussed the

importance of additional benefits of working on campus and the relationship with his

supervisors:

> They're more supportive here [campus recreation center] than there [restaurant].  It's a
> different scenario though because they're running a business obviously.  But the
> university is also a business as well.  However, they're [on campus supervisors] more
> supportive than at the restaurant [off-campus] just because of they know the situation
> being academics.  And over there they're more concerned about profits, where here
> they're more concerned about education.

Colin clearly articulated how he felt his academic success was supported by the on campus staff,

while working off campus only provided him with a check and additional hours. The forms of

support and benefits students mentioned from on-campus supervisors included: skill training,

professional networks, future job experience, and learning work ethic. Additionally, on-campus

supervisors were seen as encouragers, listeners, and advice-givers. Students reported on campus

supervisors were more invested and cared about the students' success. They discussed the role

their supervisor played in their experience but also highlighted the importance their on campus

job played in their overall academic experience.

The LIFG students that participated in my study felt that they had no choice but to work

through their college experience, but they spent large portions of their interviews highlighting

how working on campus "enriched" their academic experience.  Ben, from the *Deeply-connected*

group, knew that he had to work in order to attend college, but after he got a job at the Financial

Aid office was surprised by all the additional benefits that he received:

> I work.  Over the past year I've been working for money.  You're not working to enrich
> your life.  You're not working to push for the benefits something later on down the road.
> You're working to pay bills.  You're working to eat.  You're working to keep clothes on
> your back and make sure you get to where you need to get to.  And then I get this job
> over in the Financial Aid Office and it's offering me the opportunity to work for money
> way better than I'm getting over at Burger King.  So that's definitely there too, but it's
> providing me with opportunity to get real work experience.  Work with great caring
> people.  Use computer programs, deal with people, and talking to them on the phone,
> talking to companies and different employers.  I maintain a database online that the
> employers use to post jobs and students use to look for jobs.  I'm doing orientations all
> over the summer for new students coming in.  I have speaking engagements that I have to
> go do.

Here Ben, like other LIFG students in my study, identifies how working in campus offices

provided him opportunities to ask questions about campus resources, course work, and future job

planning. These questions allowed students to gain knowledge about the campus, resources, and future job information. These on campus positions also helped to build networks for students in the forms of campus friends and future career connections. These connections came in both the form of strong and weak connections. Many of these students started their jobs as work study students, but some students segued those positions into other higher paying positions in the office.  Sunita, from the *Deeply-connected* group, discussed how her work study position in the Financial Aid office helped her gain a better understanding of her own personal finances, increased her confidence in completing paperwork and asking tough questions about her personal situation, as well as helped her establish a strong group of professionals who were resources on campus to address any challenges that she encountered. Their experiences working on campus helped students identify other resources, kept them focused on their academics, helped them establish strong networks, and provided a pay check for their educational needs.

Students identified numerous other benefits that they received from having a job. Specifically, they felt that having jobs forced them to manage their time in different ways, including planning the time to study and complete course work. They discussed time management as an attribute that future employers would want in an employee.  Derek, from the *Deeply-connected* group, whose current job was doing research, was gaining valuable experience in an area of academic interest.  Through this position, Derek learned how to conduct research and had access to numerous faculty and researchers working in areas of interest to him. Derek explains how his experience allowed him to get to know experts in a personal way, "I meet with [faculty member] on a week-to-week basis and talk about what kind of progress I have made on my research topics and how I can improve them. And I also talk to him a little bit about other topics. We have gone out to lunch a few times and just talked. I've asked him about his

experience, getting into graduate school, what it was like. Just trying to find out a little bit more about him." Overall, students reported that the conversations they had with supervisors who were faculty allowed them to build confidence in talking about their course material and other areas of interest.

Students appreciated and credited their jobs, connections with caring supervisors and co-workers, as meaningful experiences in college career, despite all the perks students also discussed disadvantages. Among the disadvantages that students identified about having jobs while in college was the inability to participate in as many co-curricular activities as they wanted. Although research shows that participating in campus activities aids in retention and overall academic success, many of the students in this study reported finding it difficult to participate due to lack of time from academic and job commitments (Kuh, 2001; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Ben, from the *Deeply-connected* group, discussed his lack of time to do anything besides his course work and job: "it's also a matter of time. With this time, usually I'm leaving class and going to work. And then by the time I get done I'm tired, and I try to study somewhere or go home. But if I don't have to go to work right after class then I'll try to go study and get up with everything else." This was a common experience that students reported. Farah from the *Under-connected* group, had quit her job in order to take an unpaid internship and explained:

> I feel like money, money is very, very, very important in my experience. I don't have a lot of it. This mom makes just enough to…she lives by every paycheck that she makes, and I don't work because I have an internship…unpaid internship and also a summer class. So I don't have any free time to do as I please and to even work, so I'm constantly stressed out. So yeah, money is a big deal. Yeah, it affects a lot of things. I mean it's the reason why I can't do some things. I can't buy pretty clothes. I can't go to commute to see my friends. I can't buy books. It affects a lot of things. It has a domino effect on my life. It's kind of unfortunately a fact of life. It does restrict you in way cause there's

certain things you can't do.  And so, yes, money and not having a job does play a big role in my life.

Ben and Farah, along with other students, discussed the importance of having a job as a way to

pay for books, gain job experience, and pay their way through college, but they also emphasized

that they were unable to participate in other activities when they had jobs.  Ben did not believe

he would be able to afford his college experience without a job, so opted to not participate in as

many other activities, while Farah felt that an internship would give her job experience that

would be necessary after she graduated, so she chose to leave her job for the internship.  Most

students reported needing their job in order to pay for basic necessities.  Despite feeling the need

to have a job and resenting missing out on other opportunities due to lack of time, students

placed a lot of value in the relationships developed with supervisors and peers.

Study participants did not view working as an option; their weekly pay was critical to

paying their bills and enabling them to get an education. On and off campus jobs helped to pay

for their books, housing, and quite often the food that they needed. Additionally, some students

had responsibilities to help support their families back home.  Lucia, from the *Connected* group,

reflected on how working impacted her education:

> All my years here, I had to work. I pay my own phone bill, then I pay some of my loan, then all this other stuff, I have to have a job. I couldn't have the luxury of just not having a job. But, it's always been, at least with my jobs, I enjoyed them and the people I work and it's nothing, I mean they do get stressful sometimes but the people that I work with aren't a drag or anything like that, so, it hasn't been like the worse experience for me, it just gets a little difficult because like sometimes I have friends that can just sleep in and I have to wake up at like seven o'clock in the morning to get ready and take the shuttle to [another] campus and go to work but by now I'm already used to it, so that's the only thing that I, I did need a job and I did have to work. I couldn't afford not to have a job.

For the participants in my study, having a job was much more than just having some extra cash

in their pockets; it was how they paid for any balances they had on their term bill,  for books and

other education supplies, and many times it paid for them to eat.   Significantly, these job

experiences were also places where they felt cared about by a supervisor that treated them as

more than just an employee and supported them during their college experience. Despite students

needing to have a job in order to survive, many of them spent much of their interview talking

about the benefits that they received from having jobs while on campus.

## University Culture:  Connections that Understand

Participants shared experiences of building relationships with faculty, staff, students, and

resources that were caring, but there also needed to be a level of understanding of the student in

the relationship.  Understanding differed from caring in that students developed stronger

relationships with faculty, staff, and other students who had knowledge of their challenges or

emphasize with them or took the time to find out more about the student and the student's life

experiences.  Students discussed relationships developing when faculty, roommates, or friends

understood the student's background, struggles with a major, or additional challenges that they

were facing. Some students highlighted the importance of these understanding connections to

students with similar academic plans/goals.  Students wanted the community that they were part

of to understand where they came from, their challenges, and the struggles that they faced with

academic course work or career paths.  By building connections and being part of communities

that had similar pasts or common academic struggles, helped the participants in this study feel a

bond with those with commonalities.

### *A Culture that Understands:  Being part of a Community*

The environments that students lived in either created spaces where students felt

surrounded by others that understood them,  their struggles, their course work, and anxiety or

they felt isolated  and alone. Of the 22 respondents, 15 students lived on campus and six students

lived off campus, either at home or with friends in an apartment near campus.  Of the 15 students

who lived on campus, three were *Deeply-connected*, four were *Connected,* and eight were from

the *Under-connected* group.  Three students from the *Deeply-connected* and *Connected* groups

were residence hall student staff members (resident assistants). Of the seven students that lived

off campus, five were *Deeply-connected* students and two were students from the *Under-*

*connected* group, four of the seven had lived on campus at one point during their college career.

The role that living on campus played in these students' experiences varied; however, there were

some distinct experiences unique to living on campus that students felt played a major role in

their college careers.

Students reported many positive experiences that they had as a result of understanding

connections.  Pratik, a *Connected* student, was randomly paired with his second roommate, who

shared both a major in computer engineering as a major and a low-income first-generation

background; he explained how this random roommate connection played an important and

positive role in his academic success because he gained someone who he could study with, relax

with, and who understood the challenges of the major. Pratik explained how this contributed to

his academic success by creating a room environment where each roommate "studied hard and

studied often, in order to stay competitive with [their] peers."  For students that bonded with their

roommates, they discussed how their room became an area to relax and study, and as Milagros,

an *Under-connected* student, described it, a "home away from home."  Milagros also shared how

being assigned randomly to roommates or sitting next to someone unknown in class was

challenging because she was worried that they would not understand her struggles.  This caused

what Milagros called a "wall" between her and many other students with whom she had potential

to build relationships.

Another example of when students discussed being part of environments that were understanding and supportive of their needs as students was when they were part of learning communities. Tinto (2009) defines learning communities as groups of students that come together to learn about problems and topics, often problem solving and learning about new issues together. Study participants took part in various types of learning communities, including communities that housed students together while participating in courses, communities linked by a common interest but no specific academic courses, a women's college program, and alternative break trips. Two students from the *Deeply-connected* group, two from the *Connected* group, and five from the *Under-connected* group had current or past involvement in a learning community. Students commonly felt that by participating in a learning community they gained an opportunity to build friendships with others and go through common experiences together. Alyssa, from the *Deeply-connected* group, felt it allowed her to witness other students "feeling the pressure of coursework," so she felt her struggle was common and not simply because of a deficit in "her background." At first Alyssa felt that attending classes and doing well was only a struggle for her due to growing up in a poor area, but through her friendships and discussions with students in her learning community, she realized that "all students struggle at one time or another." This recognition of a shared experience happened not just with struggles but also for students when they were finding passions.

Although many of the connections mentioned by students were understanding or sought to understand the participants, not all connections did. When there was a lack of connection for students it created stress and a feeling of lack of support. In *Under-connected* student, Farah's description, she and her randomly assigned roommate did not get along and barely spoke to one another. The roommate, according to Farah, "came from money" and had parents that did

everything for her.  Farah felt that there was a "gap of maturity" between what her life

experiences were and her roommate's, and she felt that the roommate did not spend time getting

to know who Farah was.  After one argument during their first semester, Farah's roommate

moved out of the shared room, and she did not get another roommate for the remainder of the

year. Farah explained how not getting along with her roommate and then having no roommate

caused her to "hide" in her room and not get involved on campus, which she believed played a

role in her low GPA during her first year.  She reported feeling isolated in her room and not

wanting to attend events on campus because she felt that everyone else was attending things with

their roommates "who they were best friends with."  She attributes her feelings of isolation as

one of the reasons why she performed poorly academically during her first year.

Lucia, from the *Connected* group, identified an alternative spring break trip as one of the

best learning experiences in which she participated during college. Lucia's experience supports

research by Chickering and Gameson (1987) that working closely with others increases learning.

Lucia's alternative spring break trip to the Dominican Republic with faculty and students

provided the opportunity for shared experience and created an understanding group of peers that

were passionate about working with Dominican school age children.  Lucia reported that this

opportunity was a significant experience connecting her to other students and faculty, but also

that these relationships helped her realize her major interests:

> When I was there, I realized that I loved it. It was also part of the Latino Hispanic
> Caribbean studies program in a sense. So then I realized that I wanted to do that. That
> major and I like Sociology because, you learn about like interactions, people interactions
> in groups and just in general. I like talking to people and things like that, so, I realized
> that both would fit perfectly…being part of that group that is how I came to the
> realization.

Similarly, learning communities not only helped several students confirm decisions about

majors, but also helped them select minors and future careers.  The conversations she had with

others that understood her passion for helping others gave Lucia an "excitement" about her

education that she had not felt before.  This group of peers and faculty she was surrounded by,

also felt the same love for education. For Lucia the connections she made with students and

faculty during the trip helped her to give up her Engineering major, but it was also the

connections that Lucia established with the Dominican students that helped her solidify her new

major choice.

These relationships that were established through participation in learning communities

were reflected in research that such connections provide peer support and a safe place for

students to discuss their ideas and learning (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).  Pratik lived in a building

for science majors and was surrounded by engineering majors.  He was future-focused and

discussed in detail the friendships that he was establishing by living in the residence halls and

how these ties to peers and the major helped connect him to a summer internship. Additionally,

he anticipated the Engineering program and his connections with the program would help him

get his first job out of college.  By living on a campus devoted to the sciences, Pratik stated:

> [I] was able to become good friends with [science major peers]. At night like we would
> have these Yu-GI-Oh! tournaments and just play cards, play games. You were basically
> able to just keep your door open and nobody would do anything. I mean I lived by the
> stairs so I had to close my door at least, but anyone who lived in the middle, they would
> always have their door open. Like you are welcome to walk in, see what they were
> doing. You want to go grab some food, you know, order deliver, just walk in and help
> them if they needed help on a homework problem or whatnot. Do homework together.

Pratik developed a strong tie with his roommate with whom he studied and often discussed his

future career paths.  For Pratik, being part of an "intense major" and living in a building with

others that were on the same study schedules and in the same classes gave everyone an

understanding of the major and their common stress. Whether it was stress, talking about their major, or passion for their future career, the constant contact of living together gave Pratik and his peers a deeper understanding of one another.

Participants additionally stressed that living in learning communities created understanding connections to faculty. Pascarella (2005) demonstrated that informal contact with faculty encourages learning. Students who were attending the women's college spoke about having strong relationships with many faculty members. The interactions with these faculty members happened outside of the classroom and it was during these informal times students built a level of trust with their faculty. Students discussed how important it was that faculty knew their names, cared about them as people and learners, and made them want to work hard to impress the faculty member. Many of these relationships went beyond academic classroom discussions; their stories included having a barbeque at a faculty's home and an advisor teaching students how to knit. These experiences in which faculty took time to get to know students and understand their background and who they were as students became critical relationships. Alyssa's faculty connections established a pride in her and an ownership for her education; she discussed her experience, "I'm really close to a lot of my advisors like Dean Louis and Dean Ryan. They really know me. I love [women's college]. I love everything it stands for. I refuse to move off of [women's college], which is why I'm a [women's college] woman." Not only did these connections allow for students to learn more about a class or major, but they also allowed faculty to get to know their students, which may have contributed to their effectiveness as educators.

One major theme that emerged in my student interviews was the role of living environments in finding friends that had common interests, experiences, and majors. Several

students from the *Under-connected* group reported going home almost every weekend for a variety of reasons, particularly jobs at home, hanging out with friends from home, not having close friends at the university, and not having anything to do at college. Not having a peer group at the university drove some students to return home; a desire to establish peer groups was also the reason why some students chose to live on campus. Sabina, from the *Under-connected* group, did not live on campus during her first year and reported feeling that her experience would have been substantially better if she lived on campus. Sabina moved on campus in her second year to surround herself with others who would also understand the struggles of a college student. During the previous year when Sabina was not doing well academically while she lived at home, she felt that she did not have friends who would understand; now that she lives on campus she dramatically improved her grades and her ability to get her work completed. She explained: "It's more relaxed honestly.  Everyone at college is going through the same thing. When I was home on the weekends last year I didn't really study on the weekends, because no one else was studying, but now I can wake up, sleep, and then do what I want in the day and it's more relaxed and peaceful."  Sabina said she felt "lazy" when she lived at home, whereas living on campus made her motivated because she was surrounded by peers all working towards a common goal. At home, there was no one studying around her and it was easy to hang out with family or high school friends instead of studying for classes. Now living on campus, Sabina can walk to the library to study, study with friends, and she "feels the pressure" seeing her friends and peers doing school work.   Sabina believed that by living on campus with others who understood the life of a college student her grades would improve and subsequently, she proved herself right.

Many students identified living on campus as one of the ways that they met many of the friends "that will be part of my wedding party and my children's godparents," according to

Korey from the *Deeply-connected* group. Sometimes these were strong ties that they made with

their roommate or someone on the hall and sometimes they were weak but lasting ties that they

had with their resident assistant or various individuals who lived on their floor.  Lucia, from the

*Connected* group, had very strong opinions about the benefits of living on campus and being

around other students that understood your experience:

> I think everyone should live on campus, like at least a semester or something.  That is
> how I met my friends. I feel like if you don't, you don't really get the full experience like
> of college or make friends.  You don't build your support network. Um, I feel like that is
> where I grew the most. Had I been home, I mean, I would still grow as a person but you
> learn to have to deal with situations without your parents and there's things you have to
> get done, you learn about responsibility, um, obviously, you have rules and regulations
> that you have to live in dormitories and apartments but you really learn what it is to live
> on your own with friends that come from different places, in a sense. I understand that it
> is like you're under [Mid-Atlantic University] but still, you're living on your own.

Participants identified many benefits to living on campus, including meeting new and diverse

people regularly, the convenience of on campus jobs, events, study opportunities, safety, and

having a common experience with other students.   Pratik, from the *Connected* group, felt that by

living on campus he had made many connections that were beneficial to his academic

experience:

> One of the reasons why I attended [Mid-Atlantic] University was like, if you go to a
> community college for two years and then you try to transfer in, it's very hard to build
> that friendship that you need for later on in life. So, my roommate is my best friend now.
> First day of my Basic Composition class we met and now he's my roommate, he is in the
> same major as me. We're basically best buds now. We do almost every, classes whatever
> we need to take together. Friendship is a very big contributing factor in engineering
> because just our graduating class is very small. You tend to know everyone across many
> disciplines in engineering. You're able to say hi, hey, what's up, how was your
> internship, where did you work, how is your day going and whatnot. So, you can relate to
> them and just hang out with them whenever you want to just have, like you see them in
> the campus center, their having lunch, let's go grab food, like hang out, know what they

are doing, catch up. I feel like just making these different networks, it will help me pursue my career and better it after college.

Additionally, Allison, from the *Deeply-connected* group, reported the following benefits of living on campus in an environment which helped to make friends and build her network:

> It is the connections that you can make. 'Cause I wouldn't be able to make friends with people in my res hall if I didn't live here, if I didn't have a res hall. I don't make friends in class. One friend in my whole class schedule. Living on campus helps foster those connections. I met my [Residence Life Professional staff] that way. I wouldn't be an [resident assistant] if I hadn't met him through [Residence Hall Association]. I wouldn't work at Student Life if I had to be on campus extra time and then it's eight o'clock, I don't want to drive home at that time. I don't even drive; I have to take the train. It's a two hour trip, either way, not including getting to the train station and going home from the train station. So, it's just easier to do anything. It's easier to go to join clubs with friends, it's easier to do my work. I can stay in the library until two o'clock in the morning and walk to my room.

Students that lived on campus felt that it was their opportunity to build a community around them. Allison talked about hanging out in her residence hall at events and in the lounges watching movies. During these moments she felt she shared parts of who she was with her floor mates and they related to each other. She and other students made friends as they struggled with their home sickness, or loss of family members, or failing classes. It was during those moments that they built connections in an environment where they felt comfortable being themselves and asking for help from a peer or supporting each other to discuss classes and professors. The connections offered through living on campus established resources where students felt aided their chance of being successful academically.

However, for some students, living on campus proved an impediment to academic success. There were four students, all from the *Under-connected* group, who had negatives comments about the connections made or not made by living on campus from both students

living on campus and those who lived on campus but chose to move off.  A large number of

negative experiences revolve around roommate relationships and a lack of understanding that

students had for each other.   Either the lack of relationship with their roommate or a negative

relationship played a negative role in many students' experiences.  Farah, from the *Under-*

*connected* group, spoke about fights she had with her roommate over studying habits, sleeping

times, and their "different backgrounds." For roommates Milagros and Afreen, both from the

*Under-connected* group, the lack of understanding they felt from their transfer roommate, who

they felt "came from money," caused friction in their living environment.  Some students

discussed feeling homesick; they felt that living on campus fractured their relationships at home.

Farah, from the *Under-connected* group, was one student who labeled her initial experience on

campus as negative and cited roommate issues as one of the reasons why: "I could have been

more out there if I didn't go home all the time.  But then again I told you my roommate wasn't

really social.  She would go home too, so I wouldn't want to be in my room by myself, so I

would go home."  These negative experiences also extended to negative relationships that

participants made on the floor, including conflicts with other residents over their beliefs and

behaviors and distractions created by other students that live on their floor which made it

difficult for some students to focus on their course work.  Denise, from the *Under-connected*

group, shared how she would attend parties which were her distraction, but she never developed

deep friendships with students at the parties.  These distractions kept her from creating a support

system around her that understood that she "struggled academically," "needed more time to get

papers done," and "had to study in quiet spaces." Farah, from the *Under-connected* group,

explained living on campus was a negative experience for her due to a "lack of friends,"

"stay(ing) in my dorm a lot," and not "engaging with anyone." She "wish[ed] (she) took

advantage" and built strong relationships with other students earlier in her academic career.

Students who served as Resident Assistants on the Residence Life staff spoke in depth

about the connections they made from living on campus in an understanding community.

Resident Assistants (RAs) are undergraduate students who are employed to live on the floors

with students, and who assumes responsibility for building community, connecting students to

campus resources on campus, and enforcing university policies.  The three participants who

worked as RAs listed many reasons this position gave them valuable experience, but one reason

that all three emphasized were the connections that they made with their co-workers and

supervisors having a shared experience.  All three students were from the Deeply-connected

group, had GPAs above a 3.00, and were female. All three students discussed their staff as a

family. Korey, from the *Deeply-connected* group, discussed the role that being a resident

assistant had on her college experience and the connections that she established. She stated, "Res

Life was my college experience.  And the people that I met, the majority of them, were through

Res Life.  And the things I did were through Res Life, and the people I interacted with were

through Res Life.  We had so much in common.  So I feel like that was the most integral part of

my college experience."  Among that ways that these students felt being on staff with residential

education was influential were the large network of friends through peers on their staff and

across the department.  Korey discussed Res Life having a GPA requirement in order to be on

staff, which meant that she was on a team of individuals who valued their academics, and had a

common understanding that in order to be an effective staff member and student they needed to

take their academics seriously.  She also shared that her peers on staff were "over achievers" and

individuals that "cared for others," which she felt made her part of a community that understood

her.  Additionally, resident assistants felt they became friends with many of their residents who lived on their floor and in their building ,and how being part of staff presented them with career experience; leadership experience, problem-solving, mediation skills, event planning, education, training, and dealing with difficult people.

### *A Culture that Understands:  Building Mentorships*

Some of the most understanding relationships that students identified were mentorships with students, staff and faculty.  Some mentorship relationships were formalized, while others happened based on relationships that developed organically with older students.  One *Deeply-connected* student, Derek, was both a mentor and a mentee.  Derek found his mentor through his scholarship provider, which provided the opportunity for students to be paired with previous scholarship recipients.  Derek took advantage of this opportunity and would have weekly Skype conversations with his mentor, who lived out of state.  The conversations covered a variety of topics; including academics, finances, and personal topics.  Due to the benefits he felt having a mentor, he worked through a campus office to mentor low-income first-generation students, mostly through tutoring but also giving advice on resources on campus.  Derek took initiative in most of the opportunities for connections, building both strong and weak ties. He established strong ties to mentors who would give him advice about academics, jobs internships, and future career decisions.  He established weak ties to parents of his friends who offered him advice and would serve as part of his future job network.  Additionally, Derek took advantage of weak ties, such as connections with the Student Support Services (SSS) office.  Derek qualified to get support tutoring and chose not to utilize those opportunities, yet maintained contact in order to hear about opportunities that would benefit him and his academic success and future planning. He was satisfied to take advantage of these weak ties.

Although he was an independent student without any family support, Derek describes having individuals in his life that served as mentors. The mentor had very similar life experiences as Derek, having had a parent in jail and being independent.  Derek's mentor graduated from Princeton University and was working in the field of education.  Derek felt that he related to this mentor who played a large role in his experience and success; he called his mentor when he was making a large decision or struggling with issues.   Three *Under-connected* students spoke about their recognition of the need to find mentors, but they were not sure how to find a mentor or who would serve in that role.  Anthony, from the *Under-connected* group stated during the interview "I don't know, do you just ask someone to be a mentor?  Not sure I would know how to ask or how to start that conversation." Five students, all from the *Deeply-connected* or *Connected* group, reported having mentors.  One, Derek, was in a formalized mentorship, while the other four were student-initiated and developed naturally.  Ilena, from the *Connected* group explains how she found her mentor:

> He was very approachable. And in class he was just a cool dude, somebody you would see as your friend in a sense, but you respect him as a professor. You wouldn't cross the limits, as like, oh yeah he's my buddy, but kind of like that. Like this summer, he helped me a lot with my doubts about anthropology, what I could do. He made me feel so much more confident on my major. I emailed him and said I can't do this anymore, can we talk about this, should I change my major. I was like I don't know if I can do this anymore. So I went to his office hours and just like the way he talked and approached things was so calm, the "you can do it thing". In all honesty he was so much better than like my guidance counselor. I'd rather talk to him for hours than like talk to somebody else.  He understood my nervousness.

For participants, having people in their lives that supported them and understood their challenges and struggles as students aided in the connections that were established and inspired them to give back as well.

Derek felt it necessary to build his future life around giving back and building understanding communities for others. In addition to having a mentor, he volunteered as a mentor.  Derek discussed building his connections and relationships to those he mentored around his own personal experiences, including pursuing the education field and serving as a mentor for other LIFG students.  He felt it was important to him to give back and help other students make the necessary connections to individuals with similar life experiences because he could not have accomplished everything he has accomplished if others had not helped him. Derek described how he discovered the opportunity to be a mentor: "I saw an email and I knew that I wanted to do it. They are all low-income, first-generation kids. If they want the help, I'm more than willing to be a resource for them. I would just like to get to know a kid and his experience, see how it's going, and if I can help then I can help."  Students found value in mentors, especially mentors that had common experiences or understood the struggles they were facing.

### *A Culture that Understands: Missing out on Connections with "The Other"*
Caring communities were identified across campus by participants, but one place where participants commonly struggled was with people they perceived as "the other."  Participants frequently talked about "the other," referring to students whom they perceived as coming from money or having access to advantages that participants did not. Nine students made direct mention of "the other", five were participants of color and four were White/Caucasian participants.  It is important to note that as although students clarified "the other" as individuals from money when directly asked, research indicates that similar references for students of color also include "White" (de Cordoza, 2007; Yosso, 2005).  This lack of connection or perceived assumptions by the participants caused them to miss out on connections with certain groups of faculty, staff, and other students.  Students told these stories about connection and disconnection in relationship to narratives about what activities participants got involved with compared to

what "other" students did.  *Under-connected* students*,* Milagros and Afreen both juxtaposed their

experiences with other students whom Afreen described as "people who have money."  Milagros

articulated her discomfort with connecting with a new apartment mate who was from a higher

income background: "It is uncomfortable. She has all these options and she is from money. It

seems like she has a different ways of living." Ilena, a student from the *Connected* group,

discussed wanting to join a sorority, but was unable to do so due to the costs; she juxtaposed her

situation with other students, "I was rushing a sorority this semester and then the financial part

just threw me off and I think it's just so hard to join other things because it requires a lot of

money and for them, their parents are supporting them. When to my dad I would have to explain

first of all what's a sorority and second of all how does that benefit me in any way and third of

all another loan for a sorority, so I'm like this is ridiculous, I can't do it."  Ilena acknowledged

the benefits of getting involved in Greek Life, which included making friends, joining a network

that would understand her, and leadership opportunities. However, ultimately she could not join

because of the financial costs. Ilena was aware of this as an opportunity cost; she was missing

out on an opportunity to build a caring network because she could not afford to participate. She

saw this as a disadvantage and knew that there was a group of students who could easily

participate in activities, like Greek Life, due to the financial support that their families could

provide.

Participants not only recognized their disadvantage at not being able to participate in

activities like "other" students who had access to money, but they also recognized that those

from higher income backgrounds had an educational advantage.  Milagros, from the *Under-*

*connected* group, clearly articulated many examples where she recognized that others'

educational experiences were enhanced by their positions:

> There was this girl, she had a lot of opportunities. She was like, I want to go study abroad. And just like that she went to study abroad. And if I really wanted to do that, it's just very…although they offer Financial Aid and you can do that, it's still, very stressful, but it's really maybe selfish because what if…let's say like you had to put some money on it, and then like what if I had to help my mom out with money at home or something.

Milagros felt the opportunity cost by not being able to "keep up" with these other students. She was very interested in studying abroad but felt that it was selfish to attempt to do so because of her responsibilities to her mother. Other academic advantages Milagros described were the options for major selection and future job choice. She felt the pressure to pick a "practical major," but felt that her apartment mate, who was from a higher income background, had more options:

> She had more opportunities. Like she was doing photography. And if I decided to do something like…I like art, right, and if I decided to do something like well let's say a painter, it's really like, oh, you're going to be a painter. But then what if I've been in college and I don't have any…like my mom's really old and she's going to retire, and then like what if dies. I have no one and no money.

Milagros distanced herself, as other participants did, from students with money because of perceived differences and lack of understanding. Milagros felt that she needed a "practical" major so that she could make money later. This distance kept students from building caring and meaningful relationships with this group of "other" students. Ben, from the *Deeply-connected* group, clearly recognized this comparison and explained, "I feel like they're greater than me in so many levels, but then you try to have a little conversation with them and then you got to realize that they're still kids, some of them, and they're here to live and mature." There were many experiences that were shared where students felt that students from higher income backgrounds could take advantage of all educational experiences that a university offers. Participants, who directly mentioned "other" students or students from higher income backgrounds, often told stories in order to illustrate the differences between their experiences.

Afreen, from the *Under-connected* group, got emotional and started to cry during a story she told about her apartment mate, who was from a higher income background, making a spontaneous purchase. Afreen choked up as she was telling this story about her apartment mate:

> She does spend money impulsively. Like she bought a microwave and she just went to Sears and saw a microwave and she just bought it. Instead of comparing prices, my dad would kill me if I just spontaneously bought something that expensive. What we do we compare prices to make sure that if you can't get it cheaper somewhere else, because Sears is pretty expensive. If you can get it cheaper somewhere else, you do but she just bought it. She does that a lot, she just buys things. She's a go-getter; she buys things whenever she needs them. She just spends money all the time and I can't.

Most of the students who shared stories of distancing themselves from the "other" were from the *Under-connected* group. Seeing how students from higher income backgrounds could spend money was one reason that students explained having a difficult time making connections with these students. Ilena, from the *Connected* group, talked about struggling to pay for college, but watching "other" students spend $200 on a sweater or designer items and not having to work to support themselves. Ilena stated, "I just don't feel comfortable being around those people and I feel like I'm less or something." Participants felt that these other students would not understand their experience and treat them differently.

Conversely, students from the *Deeply-connected* group also talked about the "other" but not in terms of distancing themselves. They recognized their discomfort and were aware of differences, but still proceeded to make connections with upperclass students. Derek, from the *Deeply-connected* group, mentioned how he is always "comparing myself to everyone else and thinking that I am so different, it was really heavy on my soul and it was hard for me to deal with." Not only did students talk about comparing themselves to students from higher income backgrounds but also feeling disadvantaged academically, yet when they saw a disadvantage

they worked hard to overcome it.  Korey, from the *Deeply-connected* group, discusses how she

has seen students from high income backgrounds getting academic help from their parents; she

recognizes that their parents have a basic understanding of college and she has to introduce them

to college lingo:

> I think especially coming into a school where some students send their mom every paper
> that they have to write for editing, and then doing better because they had that feedback.
> I had to find ways to get that support; through friends or tutoring.  But I think it was more
> challenging in terms of I don't know if they [Korey's parents] necessarily understood or
> understand what I do here.  So once I was a Residence Life staff member, because they
> never had experienced it or lived it or did any of that… I don't want to say I didn't tell
> them things, but like there are just some things I didn't even bother sharing because it
> wouldn't be a "so what" to them because it meant something to me.  But it would be
> almost harder to explain it than it would be to just share like, this happened.

Milagros, from the *Under-connected* group, also added to this conversation by discussing a

transfer student who had just moved into her apartment, who was from a higher income

background, "we don't know her and we're trying to get to know her and sometimes it's

awkward because we don't have… have a similar personality and background. It's just

different."  This perceived difference kept students from establishing connections with students

from higher income backgrounds and missing out on potential caring and understanding

connections.

### *A Culture that Understands:  Faculty Interactions*

Three of the women from the *Deeply-connected* and *Connected* groups specifically

recognized that there was a lack of faculty who looked like them.  These students indicated the

importance of having male and female faculty members from diverse backgrounds.  One of these

students did establish a connection with a male faculty member because he understood her

experiences, challenges, and background.  Eve, a *Deeply-connected* student, struggled being a

political science major as many of the faculty members she first encountered were "old white

men" and seemed disinterested in her research and interests. She felt that she did not connect with faculty in her major until she found female faculty members who really understood her, her growth, research interests, and future jobs and graduate school programs. Additionally, this same group of women discussed having found one faculty member that they were able to connect with that "looked like them" in their area of interest and how critical it was to discover someone that understood them and that they could relate to. Allison, from the *Deeply-connected* group, described the importance of having a faculty member who was Latina like her: "Professor [Herrera] was really exciting for me 'cause I look like her. I took her, what was it a [first year] seminar, - she taught about the Latino experience in college. And, I was like that's a Latina professor, so, I'm going to be taking her in class. And, it was a lot easier for me to talk to her 'cause I knew she was Latina. And, I was like, okay, I can talk to you. Talking to her was great. She was like my first real faculty connection." These women felt it was important to feel understood and to see, as Allison described, "strong intelligent women working in careers I want to be a part of." Lucia, from the *Connected* group, had a similar experience: "I'm not sure why that is, but in the Latino Spanish Caribbean study section of [Mid-Atlantic University], um, the professors, I can relate to them more. Not that they are all Latino, it's just that, um, maybe because they actually care about the issues they, they seem more, I guess, personable." For these women being part of a community with individuals that looked like them and they felt had an understanding of who they were and the challenges they faced was important to their college experience.

The concept of understanding meant a variety of things to students. Some students reported it meaning having peers, faculty, and staff that understand their background as LIFG college students, while for others it meant understanding the struggle of college. Regardless of

the meaning of understanding, students expressed a strong need to be connected with others who understood them and what was important to them. While students shared that university resources which were both caring and understanding were easier to connect with, utilize, and establish meaningful and engaging relationships, as discussed in this chapter, it was important to understand the qualities that LIFG students brought to those relationships. Chapter VI discussed qualities that LIFG students identified during interviews and exhibited in the stories that they shared were resiliency, independence, and passion.  All 22 students demonstrated how resiliency, independence, and passions could serve as barriers to building strong relationships or aids in creating meaningful connections.

# CHAPTER VI-FINDINGS:  STUDENT ATTRIBUTES

Creating connections on a campus aid in student retention, persistence, and academic success (Kuh, et. al, 2008; Pascarella, 2005; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) is a "two-way street". Students in my study felt the need for the university to provide ample resources which were both caring and understanding of their experiences in and out of the classroom.  Additionally, it is important to understand what low-income first-generation college students are bringing to the relationship.  These attributes both aided in and caused barriers in students establishing connections that would aid in their campus engagement, college experience, and academic success.  My study's findings suggest that LIFG college students demonstrate resiliency, independence, and passion; all which can serve attributes that help establish connections with caring and understanding resources, but also prevent relationships from being fully developed.

## Student's Attributes:  Resiliency

One attribute that almost all of the students discussed or demonstrated in their stories was resiliency.  Resiliency was an internal ability to overcome difficult situations and view situations in a positive light, while understanding you have agency to make necessary changes.  They exhibited a drive, determination, and, at times, grit needed to keep moving forward when faced with difficult challenges.  Whether it was Denise, an *Under-connected* student, failed out and was determined to get back to the university to finish her degree or Lucia, from the *Connected* group, demonstrated determination initially in persevering with her Engineering major despite academic struggles and then with her decision to start over in a new major there were many examples of resiliency. No one emphasized resiliency more than Derek, from the *Deeply-connected* group. He understood that his community and family were "different" and recognized that he was going to learn from those experiences.

> I don't know. I've learned a lot from the community growing up where I was, I've always been inquisitive and at some point in time in my life I realized that what my family has is different. You know, my mother sold drugs to support us. I mean prescription drugs, that's still a drug. But she sold prescription drugs to support us and, I didn't know that that was necessarily wrong because the way she explained it to me was putting the clothes on your back, the food in your mouth.

Derek viewed his struggles as learning opportunities, but recognized that they were also necessities to survival for food, shelter, and clothing.  He explained that these challenges forced him to look to others for support, "enrichment," and to build connections.  He sought opportunities anywhere he could; while he was in high school, many of his opportunities came through his friends' parents:

> I played soccer, playing soccer throughout the years and talking to the community members, like my friends' parents about, because they would always have to give me rides home, and in the rides home I would always talk to different people just about random things or whatever, and I just learned a lot about my family and that we weren't necessarily well-to-do. And there were times when we didn't have power. I remember taking cold showers in the winter and that was terrible and we were like heating our house with kerosene and just different things. I realized, this isn't the life that I want to give to my family when I get older, so. That's definitely been a motivation, is that I want to provide for my family and I didn't have a dad growing up, so that's another thing. I would like to provide for my family and try to just be a good dad.

Through all of Derek's challenges in childhood, high school years, and college, he developed an understanding that his challenges were unique and the struggle he felt was something he had the power to change. When Derek discussed his challenges he would use terms like "motivating," "made me stronger" or "push through."  Derek used his struggles as a motivation to be successful in his future so that his future children would not experience the same struggles. Although he wanted to push forward to change his future, Derek did refer to his struggles as "opportunities" and recognized them as "reasons I reached out to so many people for support".

This determination to overcome and be successful despite all odds was similarly demonstrated by Lucia, a *Connected* student, who spent most of her academic career "dusting myself off after struggling in my Engineering major." Lucia describes her childhood as filled with moments when "family, friends, teachers, or society would doubt me" and her ability to be successful. When she came to college and choose "one of the hardest majors at the university" she knew it was going to be challenging. For three years, Lucia focused on her major and proving everyone wrong. Every time she failed or struggled with bad grades, she assumed that this was the same battle she had struggled against her entire life against "the doubters" and thought that she had to dig deep to persevere. What Lucia finally realized after a study abroad trip was that she was not passionate about the major. She had stayed in the Engineering major for as long as she did because she was used to "failing and retrying." It was an old and problematic pattern. Lucia believed that this was just another example of it until she found her passion.

Resiliency was demonstrated by students in all three groups. However, the students who demonstrated passion or having a desire that was greater than their fear were more likely to bounce back and try again. Anthony, from the *Under-connected* group, lumped all faculty together as being uncaring, "too academic," or unapproachable based on an interaction with a faculty member early in his first year. Consequently, he rarely reached out to faculty based on negative interactions. Eve, from the *Deeply-connected* group, discussed getting negative feedback from a professor on a paper. She disagreed with this faculty member's feedback, and her response made her work harder. In addition, she discussed how that was one of the toughest moments with a faculty member but it was isolated to him and did not discourage her to reach out to other faculty in the future because she loved to write and wanted to become stronger at it.

Derek, from the *Deeply-connected* group, despite being independent, having a mother incarcerated, and at times not having a place to live, always seemed to describe his life circumstances in a positive way. He consistently looked for ways to further his life and for people who would help him.  This positive view helped him find a job doing research he loved, have deep and meaningful conversations with faculty about their areas of study, and build a relationship with a mentor who always looked out for him.  Another student who, despite his life circumstances, had a positive outlook on life was Ben from the *Deeply-connected* group.  Ben had spent time in jail, seen his mother pass away, and was not on good terms with his father. Most of Ben's interview answers would start with what he termed a "challenge" and then what he had done to overcome it.  Examples included his not having a place to live but seeking out a place on Craig's List, or feeling that he did not have a support system, but finding a community at his campus job at the Financial Aid office.  For every negative experience Ben shared, he had a positive outcome that he solved or sought out.

Conversely, students from the *Under-connected* group had very negative views on their life situations, and during interviews very rarely switched the conversations from the negative situation that was happening to them to a positive outcome.  Milagros, from the *Under-connected* group, shared example after example of how she felt bad things happened to her, and that she had no agency to change them.  For example, Milagros discussed wanting to study abroad but was unable to she had to care for her sick mother; thus, "studying abroad not an option for me" according to Milagros.  Milagros never discussed exploring options for situations when she felt bad things were happening to her.  Another *Under-connected* student, Farah often described her life circumstances in a negative way, denying having the ability to change them.  As Farah described her negative living experience from her first year, she placed the blame for her not

making friends on her roommate.  Farah and her roommate did not get a long and the roommate moved out of the room.  Farah attributed this as the reason she did not make any friends during her first year, failed most of her courses, and did not have a positive experience.  Many of the stories shared by these students did not have positive outcomes or having moments where the students explained how the situation got better or they did something to improve their situations. Students' negative reflections on bad experiences appeared to still have the same emotional responses that they did when they first lived through the experience.

## Student's Attributes:  Independence

Independence was an attribute that clearly played both a positive and negative role in participants' life and college experiences. Students shared stories of living alone, paying for all of their daily expenses, working one or two jobs, completing their student loan paperwork without any assistance, and many other activities that demonstrated independence. They used terms like "on my own" or "independent" when describing help and support from family members in their college experience.  All students, *Deeply-connected, Connected,* or *Under-connected* talked about being independent or used the phrase "doing it on my own".  Seventeen students used the terms or iterations of the terms "independent" and "doing it on my own."  The common idea for all these students was although they had established some strong connections, both strong ties and weak ties, they were often alone in their college experience.  Being alone was a common feeling that emerged from not being able to ask family for advice or having others that relate to their struggles.  Afreen, an *Under-connected* student, discussed how she knew she could do it on her own but "wanted somebody to hold my hand and take me through it" but that person did not exist for her. Although students strongly desired to feel supported and connected, most discussed being rather independent throughout their high school experience.

Examples of this were not having curfews, having jobs, paying most of their bills, and being

responsible for their education. Most students discussed their independence during their high

school experience and how it carried over into similar independence at college.

      *Deeply-connected* participants were more likely than *Under-connected* students, to reach

out to faculty or staff to make connections.  All eight of the *Deeply-connected* students shared

experiences of having reached out to faculty or staff, while only three of the ten students from

the *Under-connected* group reported approaching faculty or staff.  *Deeply-connected* students

discussed in their narratives how they make appointments with faculty members to talk about

research, future career paths and ideas beyond classroom material.  An example of this is Derek,

a *Deeply-connected* student, who reached out to faculty to discuss research and job opportunities

to inquire about becoming a volunteer. Based on his initiative, Derek found research

opportunities, future career paths, and a research opportunity in an area of interest.  Derek

mentioned how being independent and not having family in his life compelled him to

consistently look for ways to connect with others.  He reported making positive connections by

starting conversations with people in grocery stores.  He often initiated conversations with

parents of his friends as they gave him rides to school or to activities.  Derek capitalized on his

weak ties or acquaintances by initiating conversations at conferences with faculty about their

research, which lead to him being offered new research opportunities.  He also read about a

research institution related to his area of academic interest, and realized one day as he walked to

his apartment that the institute was near his home.  Derek walked into the institution and asked

about volunteering; since the institute did not take on volunteers, they suggested he apply for a

job. He applied that day and was hired a week later. He built on his experiences to maximize his

connections to create new educational opportunities and a job for himself and strengthen his

network.

Alyssa was another *Deeply-connected* student who worked hard to initiate

conversations which she felt helped her "connect" with faculty and "get the most out of

my college experience":

> I'm a very aggressive person, assertive, and I'm very interactive in class so most of my professors really love me. I have a lot of professors who like are willing to write me recommendation letters. I like to build relationships, but when I have a teacher I like I'll take three or four classes with them. I find myself having really good relationships with my professors especially in the smaller classes. It depends on the professor. If he's interested in mentoring a student or if he's just interested in his research or her research. Most of my professors, I really like all the faculty at [Mid-Atlantic University]. They're all really smart. They're all really involved. I'm just really happy being at [Mid-Atlantic University] because the faculty is just so great, my interactions, I have like three or four professors that I really like and I see them on the street it's like, person-to-person basis. Usually professors don't forget me even if it's been a semester and I haven't seen them, they remember me because I'm going to email you and you'll answer me and I'm going to talk in class and I'm going to talk to you after class.

Alyssa saw herself as an active participant in her educational experience, she knew she needed to

be assertive and have conversations with faculty. She had to step out of her comfort zone to

seize the moment and spark conversations with her faculty and staff. Alyssa recognized that she

learned a great deal from these conversations and they opened up opportunities for her. This

independence and ability to take initiative helped students to reach out and establish connections,

but it also served as a barrier when a student would not reach out because they figured they could

solve an issue on their own.

*Under-connected* students discussed their insecurities about reaching out to faculty

because of the uncertainty about what to talk about with faculty and their belief that they could

do the course work on their own. Those students from the *Under-connected* group who reported

reaching out to faculty said the conversation usually focused on one specific question or topic, usually related to an assignment. Denise, from the *Under-connected* group, discussed that she was "nervous" about having these conversations, and Tynika, also from the *Under-connected* group, did not want to appear "dumb." Both women felt that they were missing something by not having full conversations with faculty.

One of the impediments for *Under-connected* students was their struggle to understand how to initiate a conversation with faculty about academics or other topics outside of specific class issues. Many of the students from the *Deeply-connected* group found a faculty member that they felt cared about them and their education, and would reach out to discuss other topics, including the faculty member's research, research opportunities, and career advice. Students from the *Under-connected* group reported that their attempts to reach out via email to faculty either were not answered or any faculty responses did not demonstrate caring about the students and their learning. When faculty did respond, students from the *Under-connected* group reported that they felt that the faculty member was putting them down or making them feel stupid for not understanding the material; this response caused students to reassert their independence and attempt to accomplish their course work without help. Several *Under-connected* students reported feeling belittled, and once they got negative feedback, they would not reach out to that faculty member again even at the risk of failing the course. *Under-connected* students also shared stories of feeling embarrassed or experienced a "bruised ego" as Anthony put it, when they were not doing well in a course or when they had a poor understanding of course material. When their performance was poor, they were more embarrassed and less likely to reach out to faculty for additional resources. Denise described a situation when she was performing poorly and putting in a lack of effort; even when her faculty member initiated contact with concerns, she

would not interact because of her embarrassment at letting that faculty member down and her

belief that it was solely her responsibility to do well in the course:

> I'm actually in a class with a professor that I really liked.  And I think I took him twice
> before and I failed both of his classes before.  And I'm in his class currently. And so this
> professor…I don't even know what it is because I was a horrible student, you know. He
> would reach out to me.  I wasn't horrible in the sense of being disrespectful or disruptive
> or anything, I just didn't do any of my work.  But when he would see me and say "hi"
> and speak to me. I never knew what to say.  I don't know what it is, but yeah, but I
> wouldn't let him in.  The grades I got were because of a lack of my effort, not anything
> he did.

These *Under-connected* students clearly articulated that they knew if they interacted with faculty

members it would and could help them with their course work, but none of them indicated

willingness to initiate or engage in meaningful conversations with faculty.

Other examples of connections that *Deeply-connected* students addressed initiating were

reaching out to career services, church ministries, counseling, health services, libraries, tutoring,

and student assistance programs.  Students referenced learning about these services from a weak

connection, through orientation, a student resident advisor, through friends, or on the institution's

website. Students who utilized institutional support services geared for first-generation and low-

income students explained that they received regular emails about these services.  Students from

the *Deeply-connected* group also discussed taking advantage of the information in those emails.

Derek, from the *Deeply-connected* group, shared that he read every email that was sent to him

because he did not want to miss out on any opportunities.  By reading the emails and acting on

them, Derek received jobs, scholarships, a mentor, and participated in research. Denise, from the

*Under-connected* group, discussed reading some of the emails and knowing that she was emailed

many opportunities, but never following up on the services offered.

One program that *Deeply-connected* students discussed utilizing was the Ronald McNair Program, which is a highly selective program that serves low-income, first-generation college students and students historically underrepresented in graduate and doctoral programs. The McNair program provides a summer experience where students stay on campus, take courses, and work with a faculty member on a research project.  Students who were participating in the McNair program discussed receiving emails about this program from multiple resources and having it reinforced by conversations held with established connections such as other students and friends.

Students discussed reaching out as a fear or sign of weakness.  Denise, an *Under-connected* student, shared her fear of failing and why she attempts to be independent:

> I think I thought everyone would be disappointed because I knew better.  Like I knew, you know, it wasn't like I was ignorant, I thought I'm doing everything I'm supposed to be doing, and none of it is working.  I knew I wasn't doing what I was supposed to do for it to work, and so I guess because I was disappointed at myself, I just thought that everyone else will be as well.

In addition to feeling that she was disappointing others, she admitted to being embarrassed to ask for help.  She discussed how she had successfully completed high school on her own but started to question if she was intelligent enough to complete college.  Many of the students' narratives were similar; Sabina from the *Under-connected* group expressed it particularly well when she explained, "I think I always like did everything on my own because I had nobody."  Many of the students' narratives revolved around the idea that being independent and not being able to fail because they would own the financial burden of failure. Eve described having to study on Friday nights while her peers—who she described as "students with money"—did not need to do this and could have a typical college experience:

I would study on Friday nights and see the other people go out on Friday nights. It was just really hard to stay on track because I didn't…I mean I wanted to be like them in a sense that I wanted to be the person who could just not really care about their work or not put the effort into their work and still turn out okay. So that was my issue with staying on track cause I knew why I wanted to get the degree and I couldn't afford to pay to stay an extra year…it was just harder for me because I was surrounded by people who just didn't have as much drive or responsibility. So that's was a challenge.

Although Eve admitted that her parents were supportive and often used encouraging words to keep her motivated, it was not the same as having them understand her experience and give advice about it. She felt in it alone. This was a common narrative for many of the participants; they had parents who were very proud and encouraging of their college experience but who were unable to explain or provide connections valuable in the university for the students. Korey, from the *Deeply-connected* group, explains her experience:

My family are always as supportive as they can be. Just because both my parents didn't have a college…they don't have a college education. My mom went for it, I think, a year, maybe two, but I'm pretty sure it was only a year. And my father barely…he didn't graduate from high school. So in terms of school I was kind of always independent so I don't ask for help for homework. They don't really help in that way, but they are always motivating me to do my best, and always said how proud they are and encouraging and trying as much as they could. So they tried their best I think in terms of support.

A *Deeply-connected* student Ben, who was part of the Successful Paths Program, not only describes how he has to be independent through his college experience, but also explains how he has to "sacrifice" some of his connections due to the lack of understanding:

I had to sacrifice family and people in my life to be here. Not everybody really… I mean there are people in my family who've been to college. My aunts and my cousins are going now. But the majority of our family, like nobody really went to college. So they don't get it. They don't understand. They don't realize how much is involved here and how much dedication you have to have to certain things. Especially for me cause I'm not a regular college student, so it's not like, oh, I just come here, hop in and I can

fall back on my family when I need to.  I'm kind of stuck over here on my own.  But I
mean it is just me.

Ben felt that he was going through the college experience on his own and that friends and family

from home did not understand his experience and at times intentionally tried to sabotage his

efforts.  Thus he had to take breaks from certain people in his home life to focus on course work

and staying out of trouble.

In concert with the narratives of having to do it on their own, students consistently

explained that this added additional stress to their experience.  For some, like Colin, the stress

was channeled into being successful.  Colin, from the *Deeply-connected* group, described where

his independence came from, saying, "It's self-generated, absolutely.  And it's just…it's a drive

that just came not out of nowhere, but just came out of me and then recognized it and I just

channeled it into education."  And Derek, from the *Deeply-connected* group, discussed the

weight of having to do everything independently and the resulting stress:

> Just being in college is a learning experience, so a lot of challenges that I went through
> with adjusting to school but also being an emancipated minor and on my own. It just
> really weighed on me heavily I would say until my junior year of college, that it really
> like escaped my mind. I was able to just say it doesn't matter, like anything in my past,
> it's only my future that matters kind of thing.

For all participants, being independent was part of their identity; at times, especially for students

that were from the *Under-connected* group, this independence seemed to cause barriers to

asking for help due to embarrassment or fear.  For students from the *Deeply-connected* and

*Connected* groups, it added stress which they channeled positively into ways to overcome the

stress and continue to make connections. For these students, independence was a way of life

that they were accustomed to, so it aided in their willingness to seek out answers and make

connections necessary for success.

**Student's Attributes:  Passion**

*Deeply-connected, Connected*, and *Under-connected* students all had distinctive ways

that they established and utilized their connections, as well as the campus connections in which

they participated. Some opportunities were presented to all students, such as participation in

Orientation or being part of the Educational Opportunity Fund program, while others had to be

sought out, like jobs and internships. Students who seized the opportunity spoke about the

benefits that they received.  All of the participants in my study acknowledged, in some way, that

the connections or lack of connections that they had with other students, faculty, and staff play

an important role in their college experience, but it was those students that took advantage of

opportunities who found more success, knowledge, and opportunities.  Successful students took

advantage of opportunities and connections that they were excited about, had a passion for, or

felt the passion from the connection.  When there was a passion or excitement about a job,

course, faculty member and their research, or activity students discussed feeling more excited to

ask questions during meeting or classes, would seek out additional opportunities, and as Derek

said, would "take more risks."

One student from the *Connected* group, Lucia, a fifth year student with a GPA between

2.0 to 2.49, clearly articulates the role seizing an opportunity to make meaningful connections

played in her experience.  She was an engineering major for her first three years in college and

struggled on a daily basis to complete her assignments and exams.  She did not make any strong

connections with faculty or peers in her classes and often felt that her intelligence was being

questioned in the classroom. She felt attacked because she was female, Latina, and from a low-

income background in a male-dominated major.  These seeming assaults on her intelligence

made her persevere in the major but continue to withhold requests for academic help as her

grades suffered.  In interviews, Lucia talked about how her "stubbornness" (independence) and

"persistence" (resiliency) played a role in her building connections with others and trying new

experiences, but that she was ultimately not excited about any of the new experiences.  Finally,

during her junior year, Lucia took advantage of an alternative break experience with faculty and

other students.  It was during this experience that Lucia reported establishing strong connections

to other students and faculty around an educational experience.  Lucia was surrounded by

students and faculty who were excited to educate children.  She described "deep conversations"

about the experience, the children, and what they were doing on this trip with her peers and

faculty.  Alternative break and subsequent connections caused Lucia to reexamine her academic

choices and change her major to Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies with new plans to attend

graduate school for Social Work.  During her first semester in her new major, Lucia earned a

place on the Dean's List, with a 4.0 semester GPA.  Her own words highlight the importance of

the passion of the connections she made in her college experience:

> I would say with college in general has been great also because I've had people to share it
> with. I feel some students just come to school and focus on academics but they make that
> their priority and they don't really try to extend to professors or counselors or academic
> deans. They don't try to go on trips or study abroad, they just stay in their bubble and,
> "Okay, I have to do well in school and that's it." I feel you don't really get the college
> experience when you do that. I feel you're just taking classes, just to take them.  I also
> feel like it's one of those things that you also have to get out of your comfort shell and
> talk to people. You have to make friends. You have to say, "Hi," or something. Don't be
> so secretive. I feel the friends I made and the people I met here have contributed a lot to
> my college experience and academic choices. Had I not met them, I probably wouldn't be
> where I'm at today and doing certain things that I'm doing.

Lucia's story highlights the importance of taking initiative and capitalizing on connections, but

her passion and excitement could be heard in the stories she shared about her major and future

profession.  Lucia did not start to perform well academically until she found a group of students

and faculty that were passionate and could discuss a topic with excitement.  She discussed how

these connections helped to keep her engaged in the college experience, especially when her

grades were low; they taught her college was more than just attending classes.  By meeting

people, attending events, and building connections, Lucia got a lot more out of her college

experience. Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) research shows that getting students engaged on

campus and establishing connections is a predictor of student success.  Lucia saw these

connections to people who were passionate as important to facilitating her major selection and

future career path, even when she was unable to leverage them, as did many of the students that

participated in my study.

Deeply-connected students and Under-connected students also demonstrated difference in

the types of passions around which they connected with other students.  Deeply-connected

students talked about friends from courses and majors more than Under-connected students.

Korey, a Deeply-connected student who was an Education major, discussed building friendships

with individuals who were in her courses.  She discussed her passion for education and how she

and her friends "love their major."  In addition, Korey also discussed studying with her friends

from Education and working on resumes together. Similarly, Pratik, a Connected student who

was an Engineer major, explained that most of his connections were with faculty and other

students in his major.  He said he felt "comfortable" with his Engineering friends because they

had the same timeline for studying and exams.  Conversely, Under-connected students were

more likely to discuss friends as being individuals from high school, their residence halls, and

non-academic clubs.  Two students from the Under-connected group, Anthony and Tynika only

identified friends from the Educational Opportunity Fund program, and indicated that they were

not close friends.  Anthony admitted to not having any friends in his classes, unless he signed up

intentionally to take a class with a friend.

### Passion and Research

Students connected experience or lack of experience with research to the idea of having a

passion for a topic.  One quarter of the participants (five students) discussed being engaged in

research projects with faculty or staff on campus as important campus connections due to a

shared passion with a faculty member. The students that were participating in research indicated

that they were either passionate about the area they were researching or that they connected with

a faculty member who was passionate about a topic of interest.  For many, that passion was

contagious. Some students like Derek were so passionate that they continually sought out

opportunities.  Lucia, from the *Connected* group, found her passion after her struggle to remain

in her engineering major. Lucia discovered the opportunity for this connection only after she

switched her major from engineering to Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies.  Lucia sought

out a faculty member whom she knew was doing research in an area of interest of hers; she

explains:

> I actually went with the intention to see if he needed help with any research, 'cause I
> know a lot of professors here do research and I just wanted to shadow him in a sense
> because I wanted to see if I, if that was something that I wanted to do. For grad school,
> there's like different routes you can take with research based and things like that. So, I
> wanted to see if that was something that I wanted to do and I knew he was very laid
> back in a sense, so he would allow me to shadow him and see what research he was
> doing. He happened to be doing research at the time with Dominican Republic and Haiti,
> the racial, 'cause he's a linguist. He was studying the racial tensions, the words used and
> the language, so, it was interesting because right before that I went on the alternative
> spring trip with [Mid-Atlantic University], so it fit my interests. Then I always go to him
> to talk to him. I feel like he is a help for me because like I said that no one in my family
> has gone to grad school, so I can ask him questions and he is more than happy to answer
> them for me. So, it's he's like my friend, which is good.

Students discussed numerous ways that participating in research played a role in their college experience. Their narratives valued the opportunity to learn more about a faculty member's research, acquire personal experience in research, confidence in classroom material, an enhanced understanding of material, and to make additional connections. One *Deeply-connected* student, Alyssa, explained that at a conference in another state, she met a faculty member and asked about his research. She proudly noted that she was able to confidently discuss her research. Like Alyssa, other students that were participating in research discussed how they were excited about what they were learning and were spending more time on their research and course work. Derek also discussed how due to his passion for education and the research he was conducting; he saw more connections between material in different courses.

Eight students indicated that they had not sought or encountered any research opportunities or did not have ideas of things that they would want to research. Four students who were actively engaged with research outside of a classroom project were *Deeply-connected* or *Connected* students and one was from the *Under-connected* group. Ben, a *Deeply-connected* student, discussed not getting involved with research, saying "not with the professor. I mean I really wouldn't mind. I haven't had anything really pop up yet or excite me. I guess it's still early for all that too." Ben added that between work and studying to get good grades, he didn't have time to devote to research. When Ben was asked about what he would research if he did have time, he stated that he did not know as he had not found a topic that he "wanted to pour himself into." Most students who did not have research experience had similar stories of lacking a passion for a topic, as well as a lack of a connection to a faculty or staff member with a topic of interest to get them excited.

***Passion and Internships***

Of the 22 participants, four were or had participated in at least one internship. The four

students were Derek and Eve from the *Deeply-connected* group, Pratik, from the *Connected*

group, and Farah from the *Under-connected* group. Three of these students, all from the *Deeply-*

*connected* or *Connected* groups, had participated in multiple internships during their academic

career.  There were only two internships mentioned by Derek and Eve which were unpaid

internships, the other internships were for pay. Students shared that internships helped them to

commit to academic programs, gain career experience, were a financial benefit, maximized

classroom learning, and helped them build professional networks.  Derek stated that participating

in internships helped him "get excited about future careers."  Three additional students discussed

why they believed they should and would participate in an internship, but had not had the

opportunity to engage in internship.

Students who had participated in internships explained that this activity had helped

solidify their commitment to a career or raised questions about the fit of the career.  Pratik felt

his internship made him more marketable and would lead to his future job, either with the

company at which he was interning or with a close competitor.  Pratik also explained how his

experience with his internship built his confidence that he was on the right career path. He felt

his internship "made him look forward to his future."   Conversely, Farah discussed working in

a human resources office, which she thought was her future career path. However, by having her

internship experience, she realized that she might need to reevaluate her goals or look for

companies with different, more suitable, work environments.

Students who participated in internships felt that the hands-on job experience that they

received was a main benefit.  Derek felt he was not a strong writer and had no research

experience prior to his internship.  His internship not only provided him experience in this area,

but also paid for him to take additional weekend classes on research methods.  One of Derek's

internships was with a researcher whose work he had read before; this experience gave him work

knowledge but also informed all of his future class and internship decisions, as well as an

intensive summer research experience:  "then I got there and it was nine to five class every day

and then we had to work on our research projects and homework during the night for the entire

summer. It was definitely one of the most rigorous things I had ever done in my life and it

definitely shaped everything that I have done today.  It never felt like work because I loved the

material."

By participating in internships, students received hands-on work experience and also

started to create their professional networks.  Eve, a student from the *Deeply-connected* group,

started applying for internships during her first year as a student. She explained that looking for

internships paid off later in her academic career; she

> took that as an opportunity to kind of get the internships and to get the professional
> experience and to network, and I know some people who just don't.  So knowing that
> makes me feel like I really took advantage of my undergraduate years.  Cause now I'll
> apply to a program…like I've done a lot of no- profit work, so I'll apply to a non-profit
> internship, and usually at this point I won't even have to interview.  I usually just get the
> offer for a job I love.  It just feels good to know that it's finally paying off.  And I'm
> hoping it continues to payoff obviously.

The students who were not currently participating in internships had not pursued that opportunity

because they believed that their GPAs were too low or they lacked the time to commit to an

internship. They also felt uncertain about their future career.   Sabina, from the *Under-connected*

group, recognized that an internship would be helpful but felt she could not obtain one:  "classes

are really tough.  You saw my GPA, so it's not the best GPA.  I'm waiting to pull up my GPA to

do something, and then I can go, like do internship or do something outside."  Like Sabina, two

other students with low GPAs, reported not looking for an internship because they needed to

focus on their academics and a belief that an internship would not select them due to their low

GPAs. The last reason that students reported not participating in an internship was due to the

need for a paying job. There were students who were very passionate about having future

internships but felt that their GPAs were more important than experience.

## Summary

Overall, research data illustrated that for students from low-income first-generation

backgrounds establishing connections is a two-way street. It is important to understand both the

university environmental elements that are beneficial for these students to reach out, as well as

the attributes that students bring to these connections. Environments that students discussed as

being the most supportive to their college experience were those that cared about them both as a

student and person, as well as environments that made them feel understood; they felt that their

struggles, past experiences, and how they might have different needs had to be acknowledged.

In addition, students contributed three major attributes that determine how they will or will not

engage in these environments. The first of these attributes is resiliency: the ability to bounce

back from difficult situations and seeing your experience in a positive light. The second attribute

is independence; many of these low-income first-generation students saw themselves as being

independent and having gotten to college based on their own efforts. This independence helped

them to reach out to necessary supports and build connections, but it also created barriers when

students felt afraid or embarrassed to ask for help. The last attribute that students displayed and

discussed was their passion for a topic, course, or activity. This passion helped them push

through difficult times or courses because of their love for a topic or desire to be better in their

future.

In the next chapter, I will discuss these findings and introduce implications for future research. Chapter VII will bring the study full circle and will highlight the overall themes that came out of my research.

# CHAPTER VII-DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

## Major Findings

My study was prompted by a gap in educational research about low-income first-generation (LIFG) college students and the role and impact that campus connections play in their academic experience. Guiding this study were four major research questions: (1) What are the roles of campus connections in a LIFG college student's academic success? (2) How are these campus connections established for LIFG college students? (3) What are the characteristics of these connections? and (4) What are the characteristics of LIFG college students who are most successfully establishing their connections at a university? Relevant literature demonstrates that student connections with faculty, staff, peers, and campus resources plays an important role in college success. Engaging students in meaningful experiences has been found to increase retention rates, persistence, and graduation rates (Kuh, 2008). When working with low-income first-generation students who enter college in smaller numbers and have lower graduation rates than their middle and upper-class peers (Bozick, Lauff, & Wirt, 2007), it is important to understand how they establish, utilize, and campus connections in order to facilitate more effective and targeted conditions for these students. My study's six major findings include the following:

1.) Low-income first-generation college students' level of connectedness was positively correlated with Grade Point Average (GPA). *Deeply-connected* students had higher grade point averages than their *Under-Connected* peers.

2.) Low-income first-generation college students are more likely to establish connections in environments that demonstrate care. Caring environments included those in which

faculty, staff, and peers demonstrated care about the student in both classroom and other environments.

3.) Low-income first-generation college students are more likely to establish connections in environments where they feel they are understood. Students identified that they felt understood when faculty, staff, and their peers knew of the struggles LIFG students had faced, as well as their continuing struggles to be a successful student.

4.) Low-income first-generation college students who demonstrated resiliency were more likely to establish campus connections, and overcome challenges, and achieve success.

5.) All low-income first-generation college students struggled with independence. *Deeply-connected* students utilized this attribute as a method to reach out to faculty, staff, students, and campus resources, while *Under-connected* students were more likely to assert their independence, by believing that they could overcome obstacles on their own.

6.) Low-income first-generation college students who identified a passion for something in their education, where more likely to take risks and make positive campus connections.

Overall, my study found that low-income first-generation students felt most supported by their university by providing compassionate environments with access to ample opportunities for students to connect in meaningful ways. These environments require cultivating caring connections in which faculty, staff and peers demonstrate an understanding of the background, attributes, and needs of the LIFG student. Additionally, common LIFG students' unique

attributes may serve as both a strength and barrier to their success.  These students must take

initiative to seek out purposeful connections that foster both social and academic engagement, as

well as cultivate resilience and develop an understanding of their educational passions.   Students

who utilized their attributes in positive ways, to serve as supports rather than barriers, were more

connected to campus and tended to have higher GPAs while in college. Hence, the present

research, with its interest in understanding the role of connections for a frequently invisible

group of first-generation low-income college students, is critical to identifying implications to

help students persist in college. The experiences shared in my research promote a better

understanding of the characteristics that students felt were important to building a relationship, as

well as attributes that students contribute that shape these relationships.  Delving into students'

experiences reveals approaches that are working and not working for facilitating college

connections for low-income first-generation college students.

## Discussion

The participants in my study consistently overcame great challenges in their life simply

to attend college. Their struggles included having a family member in jail, missing or

unsupportive families, having previously being incarcerated themselves, homelessness and

numerous financial challenges.  In interviews, these students shared that frequent challenges they

experienced both getting into and remaining at college were life stressors.  Given these many

hardships, their achievements are hard-earned, but it is clear that their difficulties do not end

once they arrive on campus, thus, colleges and universities must gain a deeper understanding of

how these students make or miss connections with their campus in order to best support them.

Crucial to understanding the experiences of these LIFG students is recognizing the importance of relationship-building on campus as a component to student success.  Connecting and establishing relationships is a form of capital exchanged between individuals involved, (Bourdieu and Passeron. 1977; Coleman, 1988), but LIFG students frequently lack the capital to know how to establish the most beneficial relationships that aid in their college experience; thus, my research is critical to understanding the  important components in relationship-building for these low-income first-generation college students.   Additionally, engagement in meaningful experiences helps to establish connections between the student and the college (Tinto, 1993), which may be characterized as a "two-way street."  Students brought key attributes with them to the relationship which helped to form some of their connections, but the students also made the strongest connections with faculty, staff, and resources who demonstrated both caring and understanding about the students' experiences.  For college students, according to Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008), being involved leads to increased student engagement, persistence, and the likelihood of graduation, which makes it imperative to gain a better understanding of what is happening in these connections for low-income first-generation college students.

My study's findings support Kuh et al's (2008) and Tinto's (1993) research that student engagement is a factor in student success as seen in GPA differences between *Deeply-connected* and *Under-connected* students.  Six *Deeply-connected* students had GPAs between 3.50—3.99 and two students had GPAs between 3.00—3.49, while only one *Under-connected* student had a GPA at the highest level, between 3.50—3.99. At the same time, the *Under-connected* group consistently had GPAs on the lower end of the range; one student had a GPA in the lowest range, between 0.00-1.99, three between 2.00—2.49, and four between 2.5—2.99.  My study reveals

key elements that both types of students sought in order to build connections as well as some

common key attributes that students bring with them to the relationship.

Although it is difficult to know if higher GPAs is a result of getting more connected or if

students with higher GPAs are more likely to reach out, but it is important to acknowledge there

are students who want to be connected but are not taking advantage of it.  All students in this

study, regardless of GPA, wanted to build connections and perform well academically, but some

struggled to build those connections more than others.  The implications of this are that

universities need to gain a better understanding of the environments they are creating and the

attributes of LIFG college students.  These connections are built on a "two-way street":  student

attributes to a relationship and environmental attributes.  Students shared that the environments

in which they thrive are both caring of them as a student and a person, and it is easier to connect

in environments which understand them and their struggles.  Which makes it a necessity for

universities to understand environments that LIFG thrive in based on environmental

characteristics and student attributes.  Universities need to create mechanisms to have programs

established that require LIFG students with low GPA to participate in.  Whether it is a

mentorship program, tutoring, or academic advising these students might need to be mandated to

utilize these resources.  Students might be resistant to this support; as they are flexing their

personal attribute of independence, which makes it most important for students to know there is a

caring and understanding network they need to take advantage of.

Although all students discussed environments that contribute to the ease of building

connections, each group revealed differences in how they perceived those environments.  When

discussing caring environments, *Deeply-connected* students share stories that were framed

positively (how they perceived a relationship to be caring and to function), while *Under-*

*connected* students focused on why a relationship was not caring and was not helping them succeed.  Whether this point of view can be attributed to their resiliency or independence is not exactly clear, but their distinct interpretations of the relationships tended to be consistent and clearly divided. The internal attributes held by these low-income first-generation students - resiliency, independence, and passion – are the key to understanding what resources a student takes advantage of and how the campus community can more effectively facilitate those connections.  The difference in viewpoints of these students and their experience should be important to recognize and again develop conversations of how to make universities more welcoming to all students and supportive of LIFG students who are struggling academically, as they are most likely not going to reach out to the university for assistance.  As previously mentioned mentorship programs, tutoring, or academic advising that care and understand their experiences and struggles would be most supportive to their experience.

## University Culture:  Connections that Care

Both *Deeply-connected* and *Under-connected* students struggled throughout their academic careers not only because they were not academically proficient but also due to their struggle to find their place and make connections to the university.  Their issues appeared beyond the classroom, revealed in questions of why they did not make necessary connections and how difficult it is to get along in a particular university setting.  Pascarella (2005) stated that a meaningful conversation with faculty or staff on a topic of interest or encouragement on a paper could motivate and encourage a student to place more value in learning.  My research upheld Pascarella's assertion for the *Deeply-connected* students: when they felt cared for and supported, these students nourished that relationship, asked more questions about academics, and felt eager to get involved.  Students from the *Under-connected* group often felt confused about

classroom materials and were unsure who they could ask for support.  They reported doing

poorly in courses where there was no connection with a faculty member which additionally

supports Pascarella's assertion.  Students from the *Deeply-connected* group were more likely to

establish relationships with faculty than their *Under-connected* peers.  The research suggests that

faculty and staff who are interested in a student's success could potentially make significant

contributions to that student's intellectual growth and professional development (Chickering &

Reisser, 1993).  Connecting with caring resources was reported to be important to all

participants, but many *Under-connected* students, such as Denise, Tynika, and Anthony, reported

that they did not put in the effort to meet with faculty and cultivate these relationships.  Helping

faculty and staff understand that *Under-connected* students struggle to make the connection is a

first step, but helping faculty and staff understand the 'why' they are not putting in the effort is

more important.  Faculty and staff need to create more informal opportunities for students to get

to know them, their research, and have conversations that are not centered around academics, but

instead focus around areas that these students feel knowledgeable.  *Under-connected* students did

not put in the effort when they felt the environment did not care about them as a student.  This

understanding of care goes beyond caring about their grades, but caring about them as learners

and people.  In addition to feeling that the environment has to be caring; these students struggled

with their own attributes that they brought to the relationship; some were scared to ask for help,

didn't know how or who to ask for help from.   These barriers can only be removed when there is

education about LIFG students' needs, as well as programs in place to support them before and

during times of struggle.

Although *Deeply-connected* students reported taking advantage of caring resources, my

study cannot determine if students who interact with faculty are more likely to be *Deeply-*

*connected* or if *Deeply-connected* students with higher GPAs are more likely to interact with

faculty. While a causal relationship cannot be established without further study, there does

appear to be a correlation between the two.  However the narratives that showed students from

the *Under-connected* group were less connected to faculty.  Several *Under-connected* students

discussed having access to caring connections, such as EOF and faculty who would email them,

but they consistently reported that they did not take advantage of such opportunities to connect

and participate in additional activities.  Denise stated that she knew that meeting with a faculty

member who had reached out would give her a caring resource and support, yet she did not seize

the opportunity due to both embarrassment and laziness.  Denise knew that reaching out to

faculty or taking advantage of what they had to offer would be beneficial, but at times she felt

embarrassed that she did not know the course material.  Denise believed this lack of effort or

passion for her courses, major, and learning, as well as being too nervous to ask for help, caused

her to fail out of the university.  Denise shared that there were faculty members who cared about

her and sent her emails, but that she did not reach back out to take advantage of their offers of

help.  This struggle of knowing they needed help, being offered help, but not accepting help is a

form of independence.  Whether students are afraid of being embarrassed or admitting they need

help, it is stopping them from taking advantage of caring communities.  The implication is that if

more time is not devoted to gaining a better understanding of this dynamic we are going to loss

talented students that are afraid to take advantage of caring environments.  I would suggest that

beyond creating environments that are caring; universities need to build opportunities for

students to socialize with faculty could help students overcome their fears of these interactions,

even if some of these opportunities are required events.  Additionally, universities need to create

mandatory safety net programs for students that end up struggling academically to help plug

them into a network which includes for academic and social engagement opportunities. For the

students in this study, having environments that are caring is imperative to their success on

campus; however, it is important to understand that even when there is a caring environment, not

all students will take advantage of that environment.  Some students will easily access and utilize

compassionate resources, however, other students will require more intentional attention and

pursuit from campus resources. These students may not actively seek out the appropriate

resources for many reasons; including feelings of not knowing what questions to ask, lack of

understanding of the course material, discomfort with interacting with faculty members, or have

not fully identified that they need to access resources as they have always been independent.

As a form of academic engagement, it is important to recognize when LIFG students take

the initiative to speak with faculty.  Such action requires a sense of self-advocacy, self-

confidence, and self-efficacy, especially for those students who may be self-conscious or

embarrassed to seek help.  Students from all groups indicated it was easier to reach out to faculty

when there was a sense that they cared about the student and wanted to get to know the student

as a person.  This is a challenge that needs to be overcome, especially as students perceive

faculty as experts and are reluctant to reach out to faculty.  Faculty might not be aware that

students are perceiving them as experts on course material, which can make students reluctant to

reach out.  Additionally, faculty might not completely understand the importance of their role

with students connecting to an institution, material, and feeling that they belong at the institution.

Faculty need to gain a deeper understanding of the impact their conversations have on students,

especially LIFGs, who might need additional care and understanding to feel part of academia.

LIFG students "feel least equipped to avail themselves to university resources; they are far more

intimidated by the self-confidence required to survive in a large lecture class; asking questions,

seeking conversations with professors during office hours, participation in sections, approaching

teaching assistants, and initiating study groups, and/or participating in supplemental instruction

and tutoring sessions" (de Cordova & Herzon, 2007, p.19-20). Another important aspect that

emerged from all students' narratives was the necessity for students to feel that faculty were

invested in their success. *Under-connected* students' narratives indicated that they only reached

out to faculty when they had specific questions about course work; they did not identify faculty

as resources with whom to discuss research, future careers, or their education. Additionally,

students from the *Under-connected* group indicated that when they did not know material, they

were more apprehensive to establish relationships with faculty. Apprehension in establishing

relationships with faculty due to lack of knowledge in a discipline does not help these students

learn the material. Additional research is needed in this area to determine conditions impacting

confidence in the development of relationships with faculty. However, there were examples in

my study that indicate more informal interactions could help develop the level of trust in a caring

relationship that allows students to step out of their comfort zone. Examples of this include

students attending social gatherings at faculty member's houses, having coffee with faculty, and

having faculty share their personal struggles. Such knowledge could create new strategies for

helping low-income first generation students create stronger ties with faculty, thus increasing

their opportunities for success.

Another aspect that consistently enhanced students' connections was living on campus.

For participants in this research study, living on campus proved beneficial because they had

enhanced access to resources and caring connections. Somers, Woodhouse, and Cofer, (2004)

found that first-generation college students who live on campus are more likely to persist. As

reasons for that are that students are closer to resources; faculty, staff, peers, and academic

connections. Additionally, the students who participated in my research thought the benefits of living on campus included being close to resources, building networks, and having a supportive community. These benefits helped them acclimate to the university and more quickly become community members. Pratik, *Connected* student, credited living on campus with providing him with a large group of peers who were academically focused Engineering students like him. Other students reported being able to build a "family" away from home that not only cared about them but also understood them. The experiences of students who lived on campus support current research that living on campus is an important factor in determining a student's academic engagement. Whether it was living in a learning community, having access to resources such as faculty and the library, or participating in events, students thought living on campus was beneficial to their university experience. However, both Milagros and Farah, from the *Under-connected* group reported that living on campus was a negative experience due to having a roommate who came from a different socio-economic background. These students' experiences complicate the current research which indicates the benefits of living on campus (Turley & Wodtke, 2010; Blimling, 1989; Astin, 1984), but instead highlights the importance of finding caring environments that understand their needs, which, for this group of students, include roommates and floor mates. For the *Under-connected* students had negative on campus living experience but more intentional room selection processes, targeted educational programming or events, or older LIFG mentors that could guide students through living on campus (beyond resident assistant) could prove to be beneficial resources that help LIFG students utilize their connections. These results show a need to determine new ways to support LIFG college students so that living on campus and having easy access to all resources is an option. Most students currently see living on campus as an added cost, and do not recognize the benefits, which means

that they either have to take out additional loans or work more hours.  More research needs to be

done to clarify the benefits on the academic experience for LIFG college students who live on

campus with and without jobs.  This research showed there were some benefits, but it is hard to

accurately see the amount of benefit without pulling apart what a student currently is giving up

or taking on in order to reside on campus.  Additionally, this research did not focus on how

living on campus might put a strain on, or remove students from, their connections to home.  For

students living on campus is there a freedom from responsibilities at home, which allows them to

devote more time to studying, and living on campus add to the burden, making students work

twice as hard to maintain their relationship at home as well as those connections on campus?

## University Culture:  Connections that Understand

All students in the study reported that being in environments that understood them (their

struggles, challenges, and stressors) helped them reach out and connect and to be authentic in

their relationships with faculty, staff, and other students.  Understanding came in many forms;

faculty in the classroom, roommates, and advisors.  One form of was based on the perception

that LIFG felt from peers that they referred to as the "other" which was most often described as

individuals with money.  However, it is important to note that for students of color, otherness

often includes being White, which might not have been pulled out during interviews due to my

own Whiteness and the comfort of the participants to clearly identify this attribute to "others"

and such be considered during future reseach  Of the nine students that discussed "others", five

were students of color and four were White/Caucasian.  The participants in my study told stories

of not making connections with students from higher income backgrounds who were referred to

by participants as the "other".  Whether these lack of connections were due to the participants

feeling less than these peers, seeing the advantages these peers received, or wanting to surround

themselves with students who understood their own experience, the reality is this is a missed

opportunity for students from both groups.  When students from a variety of backgrounds engage

in conversations, new ideas and experiences are shared, which aids in the learning that happens

(Chickering & Gamson, 1987).  Students from LIFG backgrounds considered themselves

different than "other" college students, thereby creating environments which they did not believe

they were understood.  Seeing themselves as different prevented these students from establishing

connections with "other" students from middle or upper class backgrounds.  Mentoring

relationships between students or between a student and faculty or staff help to develop students

(Butler & Carter, 2009; Bauer & Bennett, 2002), but if low-income first-generation students are

hesitant to build relationships with students, faculty, or staff that they view as being different or

having different life experiences, then they are missing out on significant opportunities to build

relationships.   This "other" term was also associated with faculty who were called "experts".

This creates an environment where LIFG feel that they are not welcomed or understood by a

majority of the campus, making them less willing to build diverse connections.  My suggestions

for this would be to educate LIFG students about the importance of their peers and shared

knowledge, how LIFG's experiences are valuable to educational conversations, as well as LIFG

learning from their peers.  Additionally, mentorships that cut cross socio economic backgrounds

could allow students to gain an important understanding of each other's experience.

This lack of understanding by "others" also included the institution not understanding the

financial constraints that came with being low-income first-generation.  LIFG students explained

how they were unable to do certain activities or join clubs or Greek Life due to costs or time that

they did not have.  Both due to a lack of understanding and of resources, students were missing

out on valuable connections that were not established.  Though my study does not indicate the

implications of LIFG students establishing these connections, other research does indicate that

having weak or strong ties with individuals from a more diverse background builds one's

network (Granovetter, 1983). My suggestions would include building in financial workshops to

aid LIFG students on ways to utilize extra grant or loan money to purchase books. Additionally,

for universities to continue to strategize how to best financially support LIFG students so there

time is not consumed with two jobs, but can be used for internships (paid or unpaid), joining

organizations, and studying time.

In addition to study participants struggling with feeling understood by the "other" and

faculty, there was a group of women who specifically wanted to have faculty that understood

them without taking the time to have to explain themselves. Ladson-Billings (1994) found that

mentors who exhibit culturally relevant behavior and pedagogical methods tend to be the most

successful and my research supported this for the women of color. In my study, three female

participants who shared how they felt there was a lack of faculty who "looked like them" thereby

making it difficult to relate. It is difficult to separate participant's race and ethnicity from their

socioeconomic status as these two things interact to shape a student's overall experience.

Complicated intersection of race and socioeconomic status, with other identities, including

gender, are clearly present in all participants' experiences. The stories of students, especially

female students of color, who established strong relationships with faculty and staff who "looked

like them" supports Ladson-Billings (1994) findings that mentors who exhibit culturally relevant

behavior and pedagogical methods tend to be the most successful. A student who feels they can

relate to a faculty or staff member because they had similar educational, cultural, or familial

backgrounds is more likely to benefit from the mentorship that they receive. The three students

who discussed this spoke at length of their experience and desire to find women or women of

color that they could relate to.  The students shared that they could be more authentic in their

relationship with individuals who look like them and have an understanding of their

backgrounds.  The implication is that some students might not feel that the university fully

understands them and their needs because they cannot relate to anyone on the campus. In order

to fully support LIFG students on campus is importance of recruitment of faculty and staff from

similar backgrounds.   This is an important element for universities to take into consideration

when hiring faculty.  There is a benefit of helping students who might have been exposed or

gravitate toward certain majors, if a university strives to hire faculty that will actively recruit

students, who are perceived by other students as understanding them better.

Students discussed how worrying about money or taking care of financial aid took time

away from campus involvement and building connections.  Students did not feel understood by

peers, faculty, or staff about financial stress.  Students reported dropping classes or not

registering for classes because of the high costs of books.  Derek, from the *Deeply-connected*

group, was the only student to mention having conversations with faculty about not being able to

afford books.  Students were embarrassed to ask or to expose themselves as needing some

understanding.  Students also reported earning lower grades because they could not afford books.

Lastly, there was an opportunity cost, where students could not fully participate in activities,

clubs, or classes because they had to work to afford food, books, and housing.  Although more

research is needed, it should be an area of focus for practitioners to find ways to ease this stress,

as financial constraints impact all aspects of the lives of LIFG students including their ability to

form connections.   This might include educating LIFG students on money management,

financial counseling and financial aid resources, as well as educating faculty about the effects of

their choice of class-required materials like expensive textbooks.

Financial stress, along with the stress that students experience to get involved, is a push

and pull.  Students need to work to pay for their academic experience, but when working, they

feel that they are missing out on other college experiences like internships, building networks,

and getting to know other students.  At times this burden of needing to work is too much, and

prevents students from fully engaging in the social elements of the college experience.

Participants' narratives show that students wanted to participate in and saw the benefits from

having an internship but often felt that they had to have a job in order to finance their academic

experience.  The students who were able to have an internship built networks that gave them

benefits for future jobs, additional exposure to career development, and valuable work

experience.  Research shows that LIFG students work long hours to avoid taking on financial

debt, which results in lower levels of campus engagement and, in turn, lower levels of

persistence (Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004).  My findings in this research mirror both

Walpole (2003) and Alford (1998)'s research that students who work on campus reported having

less time to study and be actively engaged on campus. University communities need to gain a

better understanding of the financial challenges low-income first-generation students face and

how that might hinder the number and types of connections they are able to take advantage of.

Many students work to pay for college tuition, books, and other needs; this is considered

normal in the American educational system (Pike, Kuh, & Massa-McKinley, 2008).  Campus

jobs help to connect the student to faculty and staff at the institution which aids in academic

success (Tinto, 1993).  Besides the monetary benefits of having a job, students who worked on

campus gained additional benefits, which included exposure to resources, support systems in

their supervisors, and connections to other students.  Walpole's (2003) research indicates that

working had a negative impact on student's grades, as students who worked had to take time

away from studying. The students in my study discussed the numerous connections with supervisors from on campus jobs which helped them feel more supported as a student. These connections did not happen for students who had off campus jobs. The implication is there is a need to make sure that students with financial need have increased access to on campus positions. Work study jobs appeared to be the area where students, such as Ben from the *Deeply-connected* group, working at the Financial Aid office, connected most with their supervisors and gained "real work experience". Most students from low-income first-generation backgrounds qualify for Work Study jobs, making it important for supervisors to understand the importance of their role in these students' college experiences. Universities would benefit from making sure that supervisors have a basic understanding of the needs of low-income first-generation college students, as well as how to best support them by knowing resources, but also knowing the importance of being a caring and supportive connection. I would suggest an intentional training for all supervisors of Work Study students which outline what it means to support an LIFG student in a caring and understanding way, as well as how personal attributes might cause a barrier to the student asking for help. In addition to training for Work Study supervisors, more targeted information to LIFG students about paid internships. Students in my study made the assumption that internships were all based on GPAs or that most were unpaid, making them ineligible. Education on this topic will help LIFG students see opportunities they did not realize were able.

Creating university environments that demonstrate care and understanding are more likely to get LIFG engaged in their college experience. This engagement has the potential to increase GPAs, as well as the overall learning experience for students. However, regardless of how caring and understanding an environment is LIFG students need to utilize the resources.

For LIFG students there were three key attributes that played a role in utilizing the caring and

understanding environments; resiliency, independence, and passion. *Deeply-connected* and

*Connected* students were more likely to use these attributes as a way to make connections.  For

*Under-connected* students these attributes served as barriers to creating relationships.  The next

sections discuss the finding for each attribute, as well as implications and suggestions for

practice and future research.

## Student's Attributes:  Resiliency

Resiliency can be seen as form of resistance or adaptation when faced with a challenge

(Masten, 2001; Yosso; 2002).  According to Morales (2008) when students are academically

resilient they are able to apply their drive and resiliency attributes beyond just academics.  All

participants were very independent in nature and highly self-sufficient outside the classroom.

They exhibited very strong goal-oriented behavior that allowed them to navigate beyond the

barriers they faced along their educational paths. Aspects of resiliency were identified in all three

groups. Students consistently discussed having to overcome life challenges not only in college,

but in all aspects of their lives.  Whether it was Denise who had failed out of college and took

classes at a community college to return, or Ben who had spent time in jail and was trying to turn

his entire life around, all students displayed this ability to pick themselves up and focus on a

better future.  However, these three groups demonstrated differences in resiliency in different

ways.  The students from the *Deeply-connected* group were more likely to have positive outlooks

on the challenges that they were working to overcome, even viewing them as opportunities.

Students from the *Under-connected* group were more likely to talk about challenges they were

working to overcome in negative terms and view them as a struggle to surmount. Derek, from the

*Deeply-connected* group, stated that he looked at challenges as "learning opportunities" to figure

out how to adapt or ask others for help, "enrichment" and connections.  Derek, like many of the

*Deeply-connected* students, felt motivated when struggling and only needed to make the right

connections to be successful.  On the other hand, Milagros from the *Under-connected* group felt

that bad things were happening to her and did not seek out additional support.  She, like many of

the students in the *Under-connected* group, attributed negative interactions and relationships as

things that were done to her and she did not have agency to make a difference.  These differences

in views on overcoming challenges could also explain interactions with faculty: *Deeply-*

*connected* students were more likely to reach out to faculty and also more likely to attempt to

create more connections after having an unsuccessful interaction with faculty. Conversely,

*Under-connected* students were less likely to reach out to faculty and when there was one

negative interaction, they were less likely to reach out for additional support.

However, there were times when this resilience kept students from reaching out and

making connections that were necessary for their success.  *Deeply-connected* students saw

opportunities in emails they received, meetings with staff, discussions with employers, and

attending student organizations events.  *Under-connected* students, on the other hand, knew that

there were opportunities available to them but did not seek out opportunities or take advantage of

the ones that presented themselves.  Denise, an *Under-connected* student, talked about having

faculty reach out to her, ask her how things were going and invite her to set up meetings with

them.  Despite having the opportunity she did not take advantage of faculty seeking her out

because she felt she could do it on her own or at times was afraid to ask for help.  This is where

other personal attributes, such as independence, tended to override the ability to be resilient.

Denise's sense of independence and feeling that she could do it on her own and not ask for help

kept her from reaching out to get the needed support that she could have used to be more

successful. The different ways that students viewed challenges and their ability to bounce back

often factored into the connections that they established.

The implications of this could be detrimental to LIFG students, if they believe that

obstacles are always a negative experience or that they need to overcome the obstacle without

help.  For the LIFG students in my study, they either were paralyzed by indecision during times

of challenge or felt that they needed to solve the problem on their own, even when they did not

have the resources to do so.  LIFG students need to be educated about the agency that they have

in obstacles that are presented.  This could be done through programming on resiliency, in

addition to utilizing counseling, academic advising, or other resources to look for positive

outcomes in difficult situations.  Being resilient does not indicate that a student needs to

overcome a barrier on their own, however this is where the key attributes can work against each

other.  The next section is focused on independence and how all LIFG in my study exhibited

signs of independence and the role that played in developing relationships.

## Student's Attributes:  Independence

All participants, regardless of their group, had high expectations for their academic

performance.  LIFG students in my study discussed the role independence played through their

entire life, but especially their educational experience.  Regardless of their grade point average

all students believed that they could succeed at the university.  LIFG college students who

participated in my study indicated the independence that they demonstrated from the time they

were young, including filling out all of the paperwork for college and financial aid, both aided in

their success as well as served as a hindrance for reaching out to much needed connections.

Denise, from the *Under-connected* group, discussed reaching out as being a form of weakness

and was embarrassed to ask for help, whereas both Korey and Derek from the *Deeply-connected*

group, discussed reaching out as a necessity. This "doing it on their own" mentality appears to

serve as both a barrier and a motivator. For the *Under-connected*, it served as a barrier to

building relationships and getting the needed help from necessary resources. Even during

meetings, it kept students from asking necessary questions about course material because they

either did not know which questions to ask or did not want to feel less intelligent because of

asking questions to which they thought they should know the answers. *Deeply-connected*

students' independence motivated them to ask for help, seek out resources, and keep asking

questions. If asking for help is considered a sign of weakness for low-income first-generation

college students, then it will be important for faculty and staff to target this group and dispel the

myth that attending office hours or working with a tutor is a sign of weakness, but rather fosters

a positive connection that will strengthen their experience. Additionally, when faculty or staff

reach out they might need to probe deeper for LIFG students or have a list of typical resources

that students utilize in order to be successful.

Whether it was resiliency, independence, or passion many of the attributes overlapped,

worked together, or against each other. The idea of how to bounce back and be resilient after a

faculty member gives you difficult feedback showcased differences in a student's independence.

*Deeply-connected* students would use it as a way to reach out to the faculty member and ask for

more feedback, help and support; while an *Under-connected* student would use it as motivation

to work harder independently without seeking out additional support. It was difficult to always

completely pull apart when a student was displaying specific attributes. This was also seen with

passion. For *Deeply-connected* students when they were passionate about a course, material, or

an organization they would exercise their independence and seek out more connections and

resources. For *Under-connected* students when they were passionate about a topic they struggled

to realize there were resources to help develop those passions  and often focused on how they

would personally find more information on a topic, course material, or organization.  The

implications of this are that even if a LIFG student is overcoming barriers in building

connections through their passion and independence attributes, their ability to be resilient might

slow them down.  It also can work as a benefit, when they are failing to take the initiative in one

area, their passion for a topic might be enough to push them to overcome obstacles in building

connections.  My recommendation is for LIFG to have conversations with advisors about these

three areas and the role they play in their ability to establish connections, in order for students to

reflect on how they are handling a situation and look for ways to step out of their comfort zone to

make necessary steps to get connected to important and valuable campus resources.

**Student's Attributes:  Passion**

Students in my study who became engaged on campus with things about which they were

passionate found that these passions produced more connections and opportunities. Participants'

consistently told stories about participating in an activity which then let to another opportunity.

Allison, from the *Deeply-connected* group, who joined the Residence Hall Association (RHA) as

a first year student, was introduced to the professional staff that oversaw RHA.  Through her

work with this organization, the professional staff member suggested that she apply for a student

staff position.  Lucia, a *Connected* student who began as an Engineering major, connected with

one faculty member who introduced her to an alternative spring break trip.  After going on the

alternative spring break, Lucia found her passion in helping others and made the decision to

change her major. This connection with faculty and other students who were passionate about the

same things opened doors for Lucia.  Engstrom and Tinto (2008) found that LIFG students who

were involved in learning communities felt that they had a safe place to learn, where they found

support and a sense of belonging and were learning deeply and making connections.  Students

who found communities of learners with a shared passion were more willing to make

connections, take risks, make friends in their major, and engage in conversations about

academics. Caring campus communities need to work with students to develop passion for their

education, major, and future career.  When students have a purpose they are more likely to take

educational risks, such as seeking out faculty members to converse with about more than just the

course material.  The implications of this are that when students become passionate about

learning, courses, future careers, or co-curricular activities they are more likely to add to the

conversation.  LIFG student's voices need to be part of the conversation and as such universities

need to spend time both exposing LIFG to a variety of opportunities, but also have one-on-one

conversations with students about their academic interests in and out of the classroom.  And once

an area of interest is developed, faculty and staff need to intentionally engage LIFG students on

these topics, as well as help them make build their network in their area of passion.

## Implications for Future Research and Practice

Utilizing Bourdieu's (1977) concept of capital, one can say that the participants in this

study struggled with the ways to gain the valued cultural capital of their university through the

connections they established.  Students indicated that having an environment that was both

understanding and caring was important to building strong and meaningful connections.

Additionally, students brought distinct attributes to the relationship that had the ability to

strengthen or hinder connections, such as resiliency, independence, and passion.  When

connections were established, students acquired numerous benefits that aided in their academic

and social engagement.  Based on my research university engagement practices need to be

meaningful and fully engage the students by introducing them to peers, faculty, and staff.  The

participants in this study indicated a need to have students, faculty, and staff who understood

their experience and the struggles they encountered.  These struggles include not having the

same familial support system as their upper and middle class peers, having stress from financial

struggles, and not being able to fully participate due to having to work to pay for their college

experience.

In addition to having an idea of ways to support students, it is beneficial to understand the

ways that students' attributes support their ability to connect or contribute to establishing walls.

When it came to resiliency, the *Deeply-connected* students were more likely than their peers to

look at obstacles as things meant to overcome, *Under-connected* students viewed obstacles as

negative experiences that were done to them and they did not feel that they had agency to

overcome.  For universities it is important to consider developing resiliency workshops for all

low-income first-generation college students to better establish coping mechanisms to overcome

university challenges.  The second attribute was independence.  Low-income first-generation

college students demonstrated that they have been independent in numerous ways throughout

their entire academic career.  For the *Deeply-connected* students this independence aided in their

willingness to go out and ask for support, find and connect to resources, and reach out to faculty

and staff to ask for help or start conversations.  For the *Under-connected* group, independence

often kept them from asking for help because they felt they could do it on their own or were too

embarrassed to admit what they did not know or understand.  It is especially important for

faculty to understand in a classroom setting that some low-income first-generation students

might not be asking for the help that they need because they believe they can do it on their own

or do not want to risk failure or embarrassment.  My recommendations would be to provide

training to faculty and staff to bring awareness on this topic.  Faculty interactions play an

important role in how the student perceives their ability to perform as a student.  It is important

to make faculty aware that one negative interaction with a faculty member, could have ripple

effects into how students interact with future faculty.  Faculty need to be made aware of their

power in and out of the classroom.  Faculty taking advantage of opportunities to interact outside

of the classroom can be very powerful for students, such examples were seen with students that

took part in research opportunities, casual conversations, or campus barbeques.  However, it is

equally important to work with LIFG students to reach out and get to know their faculty.  I

would suggest that employers that are working with Work Study students be given additional

training on the benefits that LIFG face, as well as ways to best support them. Part of the training

for faculty and staff should include the struggles that LIFG face, such as, students may be

unprepared for class because, due to cost, they do not have the necessary books and not because

they are unwilling to do the work.  Lastly, passion was an attribute that was demonstrated by

most of the *Deeply-connected* students.  Students indicated that there was a class, professor,

topic, or job that they got excited about and thus devoted more time and energy to that.  For

*Under-connected* students there was a lack of stories around passion, which could indicate the

need for institutions to spend more time with low-income first-generation college students

getting to know them, their interests, and exposing them to a variety of majors, options, and

future careers.  For higher education administrators it is important to understand the role of

interactions LIFG students have with faculty, staff, and other students to improve their college

experience.  Based on the experience of the participants in my study, students frequently

experience apprehension at reaching out to faculty about material outside of the course work due

to lack of confidence in their course knowledge and the perception that faculty are "experts".

Additionally, when students do reach out the experiences were only considered positive when

they felt that the faculty "cared" about them and their experience.  Campus cultures need to focus

on being more compassionate, caring, and look out for all members of the community.  This

could be implemented in a variety of ways to slowly change cultural expectations; including

summer book reads on the topic, encouragement of using compassionate resources such as the

counseling center, spiritual center, and attending workshops, such as, mindfulness or mediation.

The stories of the three female students who searched for faculty that looked like them is

important to the discussion and has implications for future research.  A student's identity cannot

be separated out into set boxes, resulting in specific ways that they need to be connected to the

institution.  Universities need to understand that being LIFG student of color and a female, that

student will have different needs than another LIFG student with a different identity.  This

research falls short in clearly understanding the intersectionality of these students' identities on

the roles that connections play in their college experience. However, research indicates that

otherness for students of color does not just include socio economic differences, but also

includes Whiteness, this is something that needs to be researched further to see the impacts for

specific racial and ethnic groups.  My research acknowledges differences between students of

color and White students, but falls short with looking at the differences and commonalities

between students from a variety of races and ethnicities with low-income first-generation

differences. As a result there is a call for additional research that is more focused on what role

being a LIFG student combined other identities functions in the connections that play into their

academic success.

Students who work on campus reap numerous benefits including higher GPAs and being

more fully engaged with their college experience (Tinto, 1983).  This is important to the work

that higher education professionals do, and emphasizes the need to have more positions on

campus that can double as both employment and internships or research.  Having opportunities

that will give students work or research experience will help them finance their college

experience and give them valuable experience for future careers.  Students in my study spent a

great deal of time focused on their finances, whether it was filling out paperwork, working with

financial aid, or finding jobs or working jobs to pay for their education.  The amount of time that

this population of students spends on these activities is time taken away from academics, course

work, other valuable experiences on campus and opportunities to connect in meaningful ways.

Using this need for financial support, such as, helping fill out paperwork, I would suggest could

be an opportunity for staff to build connections with students by assisting them in finding

meaningful jobs and better understand the financial paperwork needed for student loans.  Since

these students are invisible and cannot be identified as they enter a classroom, it is important for

colleges to establish methods to provide support to LIFG college students that is easy and does

not make them feel ashamed of what they lack compared to their middle class peers.

Suggestions to support LIFG student academic success are:  universities should build

communities for low-income first-generation college students that are caring and understanding

of their needs, and also understand how the attributes these students bring to the relationship

(resiliency, independence, and passion) and how it might aid in their success or create barriers.

Support programs similar to the Education Opportunity Fund (EOF) or a TRIO program, which

are structured programs for students in which they are assigned to counselors, are required to

attend summer programs, and are provided on-going support, would be beneficial to aid in their

success and acclimate them more quickly to the university quicker.  Additionally, required

support programs for LIFG students who have lower GPAs to meet with an advisor to discuss

building connections to resources, areas of struggle, passions, and take the necessary time to

build a caring and understanding resource. Mentorship programs that connect students who are low-income first-generation with upperclass peers from middle class backgrounds have the potential to build strong connections with students and provide great learning opportunities for both sets of students. Lastly it is important for universities to create more opportunities for low-income first-generation students to build meaningful connections with faculty, staff, and peers in a caring and understanding environment the more it will aid in their engagement in the university setting. When LIFG students feel connected to faculty, staff, and peers they are more likely to ask deeper questions about material, engage in educational conversations outside of the classroom, and see the connections between course material and other activities.

## Future Research:  Interaction between Cultures that Care and Student Attributes

In my study, I focused on connections from the LIFG students' perspective in regards to the environments that they thrived or fail in, as well as the attributes that they brought to each relationship. This research did not focus on the interplay during connections between attributes and university cultures. In one way it fails to completely understand how students like Denise, who knew she had faculty members that cared about her and understood the importance of reaching out to necessary connections, but still failed to capitalize on such connections. This interplay and the missing voices of those that represent the university play a key role to greater understanding of these relationships. In order for this to happen, further research needs to include the experiences and voices of those that the students are making or attempting to make connections with. This research would further explain expectations that students and faculty/staff might have and where communication in the connections is not allowing for real relationships to be established.

**Future Research:  Gender Differences**

In my study, I focused on the role and impact of connections students made to the college campus, but during the narratives the voices of the female experience resonated and needs further investigation.  For three women of color, they specifically focused on finding faculty that looked like them or had similar backgrounds.  Two of those women specifically stated that the faculty needed to be women.  Gaining a better understanding of the needs of LIFG students has potential to design future programs to enhance the experience for these students.  Two female students participated in the Women's College at the university, both did not mention specific relationships with female faculty or staff.  However, they both were from the *Deeply-connected* group and discussed many opportunities to develop strong relationships with faculty, staff, and deans.  Future research could create a targeted group that could be captured in a variety of ways; through support programs for LIFG students and with programs geared toward women.

**Future Research:  Family & Connections**

In my study, I focused on the role and impact of connections that students made to the college campus and community.  Connections and relationships that students had or did not have with their family were also very important in the student narratives.  These connections also merit further investigation.  Students discussed the idea of having to "sacrifice" old friends, family, and relationships when they started college because their old friends and family would not understand the college experience.  Students explained that family members would not understand their college experience so they found it easier to not talk about college and what they were doing in college.  Allison shared how her parents pushed her to get involved and pursue certain careers, but they did not know what these opportunities or jobs were.  They wanted Allison to take on the resident assistant position in the residence halls because it paid for her housing, but had no understanding of the job and its associated responsibilities.  Allison said

"they are always pushing. They don't know what it is. Oh, you're doing a program? Okay, what

does it give you? What do you do? You want to be an RA? That pays for your housing? Please

do that. They were so excited, they were like, oh, really. So, you're applying right? I said, yeah,

sure. It is great. I love being an RA. But… um, and then they were super excited about this but

had no idea of the time commitment."  Students indicated that family—specifically parents,

primary caregivers, and siblings—play a significant role in "encouraging" students in their

college experience, but they did not play a role in connecting students to resources and did not

have enough direct knowledge of the college experience to be able to advise students effectively

or advocate for them.  Students with older siblings who attended college too played the role of

parent in introducing cultural capital by explaining college, introducing college resources and

helping with financial aid issues (cultural capital citation).  This idea of family members not

understanding the college experience was articulated by nine different students.  Anthony said "I

don't know if it really relates, but sometimes I just wish they went to college too".  Anthony

discussed being in a better spot to help his future children navigate college because he went,

which would help them earn grades better than what he was earning.  Anthony explains that he

was learning in the classroom as well as through all the nuances of college life: financial aid,

buying books, signing up for courses, asking for help, and numerous other topics.  Ilena

explained her experience in a slightly different way, where her parents were able to support her

in ways of encouragement but they did not read mailings that came and, therefore, could not

provide guidance on additional resources that the university sent home directly to them.

Students described this lack of connection with family who are unfamiliar with college as a

hindrance and often they felt that they were living a double life.  This is worth researching how

academically-successful low-income first-generation students effectively navigate the university

system without having role models that have gone through the system themselves. Additionally, it would be helpful to study if there are ways that the university could better support both the students and the family members.

## Conclusion

My research study shared the stories of 22 low-income first-generation college students, raising questions that are salient for many students in higher education, and is a powerful call to action for those interested in pursuing the topic of student engagement and retention for this population.  My research sought to identify how connections were being established, what was happening in the connections LIFG students were establishing, and the role these connections played in low-income first-generation college student's experience.  The "two-way street" where caring and understanding connections accounting for participants attributes; resiliency, independence, and passion, created environments where participants could develop relationships that aided in their academic success. Gaining a better understanding of how low-income first-generation college student establish connections and what is needed to make these relationships the most effective will inform faculty and administrators of the best ways to fully engage these students in the college experience, in order to maximize their academic success.  This research suggests that it is not only the responsibility of students who attend a university to gain knowledge of the institutional cultural but also the responsibility of a university to create inclusive cultures (Tierney, 2000) for all students.

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## Appendix A:  Biographical Information Survey

If you are interested in participating in the study, please answer the brief questionnaire below.  Your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your participation at any time without penalty.  Please fill out the following questions by placing an X in the appropriate space.  Your responses will be coded, so that your information remains confidential.  All information is important to help create a full picture of you and your experiences.

Name (Last name, First name): _____ Gender: _____
Email Address: _____ Telephone Number: _____

    1.) What is your current Academic Year?
- ☐ First-Year
- ☐ Sophomore
- ☐ Junior
- ☐ Senior
- ☐ 5th Year, Other

    2.) What is your Anticipated Graduation Date?
- ☐ 2013
- ☐ 2014
- ☐ 2015
- ☐ 2016
- ☐ 2017
- ☐ 2018

    3.) What is your cumulative GPA?
- ☐ 0.0 to 1.99
- ☐ 2.0 to 2.49
- ☐ 2.5 to 2.99
- ☐ 3.0 to 3.49
- ☐ 3.5 to 3.99
- ☐ 4.0

    4.) Race:
- ☐ Black/African American
- ☐ Asian American
- ☐ American Indian/Alaskan Native
- ☐ Pacific Islander
- ☐ White/Caucasian
- ☐ Multi-racial
- ☐ Other

    5.) Ethnicity:
- ☐ Non-Hispanic
- ☐ Hispanic-Origins:  Country of birth/identity: _____

6.) Which of the following categories best describes your family income currently?
- ☐ $0 to 21,999
- ☐ $22,000 to 29,999
- ☐ $30,000 to 39,999
- ☐ $40,000 to 49,999
- ☐ $50,000 to 59,999
- ☐ $60,000 to 69,999
- ☐ $70,000 to 79,999
- ☐ $80,000 to 89,999
- ☐ $90,000 to 99,999
- ☐ $100,000 or more
- ☐ Unsure

7.) Number of people living in your household: _____
Please list individuals:

_____

_____

Example:  Self, Mother, Father, Sister, Sister, Brother = 6

8.) Has either of your parents or guardians received a four-year college degree?
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

9.) List your major/s:

_____

10.) Do you currently have a job?
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

11.) Do you work on campus?
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

12.) How many hours do you work per week?
- ☐ 0-20 hours
- ☐ More than 20 hours

13.) Where do you live during the academic year?
- ☐ On-campus
- ☐ Off-campus with friends
- ☐ Off-campus with family
- ☐ Other: _____

**Appendix B:  In-depth Interview Guide**

Opening Statement:  Hello and thank you again for agreeing to participate in my study. As you know I am conducting this interview as part of my doctoral research at [Mid-Atlantic University] and the purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the students' connections while in college.  I asked you to complete a Biographical Information Survey which has aided in designing some more focused questions around your experience.  The purpose of this interview to provide you an opportunity to discuss your experiences while at college.  I encourage you to respond to the best of your ability.  There are no wrong answers.  If at any point you become distressed, we can stop the interview process.  If any question makes you uncomfortable and you would rather not answer, just let me know and we'll skip over it.

Statement of Confidentiality:  Data that is collected via computer will be kept secure on my personal laptop computer that is password protected and kept in a secure place.  All participants will be assigned a pseudonym.  Handwritten data will be kept secure in a file cabinet located in my home.  Confidentiality will be maintained because data will not be disclosed to any individual not directly related to the study and/or identified on this form.  When three years have passed after the completion of the research, I plan to dispose of the data in the following manner:  Handwritten notes, drafts, lists, photos will be shredded and discarded.  Digital or computer generated data will be erased or deleted from any and all tape recorders, digital recorders, video recorders, digital cameras, and computer hard drives.  We will be taping the interview today in an effort to maintain a record of your exact words.  However, your identity will remain confidential and only I will have access to this tape.  This discussion is confidential and any information will be used for research purposes only.

Interview Guide:

Family
- Tell me about your family.  Who do you live with?
- What has been the role of your family in your college experience?
  - Can you define the family you are referencing?
  - Can you describe what your parent's expectations are of you in college?

Educational Experience Prior to College:
- Tell me a little about where you grew up.  What was your school like?

Peer Relationships
- Tell me about your friends at college.  Who have you become close to?  How did those friendships develop?
- What are some activities you participate in with your friends?
- What are some topics that are discussed with your friends?
- What has been the role of your peers in your college experience?
  - Can you explain the peers you are referring to?

College Educational Experience
- Tell me a little about your college experience.
- Which courses have you found the most challenging? Why?
- Describe any of the challenges you have faced during your college career.
  Potential follow up questions:
  - When did you face this challenge?
  - How did you overcome it?
  - Were there people or resources involved
  - Describe a time when you struggled academically.
  - When did you face this challenge?
  - How did you overcome it?
- What or who do you believe has helped you be a successful college student? Why?

Campus Involvement
- Describe your involvement on campus?
- What activities do you spend the most time participating in? Why?
- What role does your involvement have on your academic experience?
- Tell me about any learning communities you are involved in.

Residence (based on response on biographical questionnaire)
- Tell me about where you are currently living.
- What is the relationship like with the people you live with?

Employment (based on response on biographical questionnaire)
- Tell me about your job.
- What is the relationship with your supervisor (and co-workers) like?
- What role does that position play in your academic experience?

Internship
- Have you had an internship while at college?
- Tell me about your internship.
- What role does/did that internship have on your academic experience?

Faculty and Staff
- Tell me about your professors. Are you close with any of them? How did that relationship form? Do you have uncomfortable relationships with any professors? Who have you connected with the most while at college?
  - What role do these individuals or offices play in your experience?
- Tell me about your experiences with any administrative offices at [Mid-Atlantic University]. Which offices do you have frequent contact with?
- What has been the role of faculty in your college experience?
- What has been the role of college staff in your experience?

- Have you participated in any research projects while on campus?  Who oversaw your project?  What was your relationship like?  What role does that experience play in your academic experience?
- In general, how would you describe your relationship with college faculty and staff?

Last Question
- Has someone or something else played a significant role in your college experience that you have not directly talked about yet?  Who?  What was that role?


This concludes the interview.  Thank you for your participation.  All responses are confidential.  If I have additional questions, I will reach out via phone or email.  If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at 732.979.9281 or email me at hennessyrutgers@gmail.com.  Thank you for your time.

## Appendix C:  Letter for Study

Dear _____,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study that examines the roles connections play in a low-income first-generation college student's experience.  Although there is a lot of information about connections that students have on campus, there is less research that directly focuses on low-income first-generation students' experiences.  This research is attempting to fill that need.

What would participation entail?  Participants will be asked to fill out a Biographical Information Survey that will provide the researcher with detailed information about participants.  All information will be assigned a pseudonym in order to maintain the confidentiality of all participants.  Additionally, each participant will be asked to participate in an individual interview.  Interviews would take place at the beginning of the Spring 2013 semester on-campus at a time and location that is convenient to each participant and will include questions about the participant's experience and perceptions of how connections have played a role in their college experience.  Additionally, the researcher will provide all participants with transcripts of their interviews, in case there are points that participants would like to clarify.  All participants will receive a gift card at the end of their interview in appreciation for their time spent being interviewed.

The interviews will be confidential, as all participants will be given a pseudonym that only the researcher will have knowledge of.  The research records will include some information, but will be stored in such a manner that no link between participants' identity and the information provided will exist.  The researcher will keep this information confidential by limiting access to the research data and keeping it in a secure location.  If a report of this study is published, or the results are presented at a professional conference, only group results will be stated, or the use of individual results will only be given using the unique pseudonym assigned to each participant's data.  Participants will remain anonymous and can choose to withdraw from the study at any point during the data collection process.

This research is intended to provide higher education administrators and faculty additional research and suggestions for ways to help support students from low-income backgrounds and help them be more successful in college.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please email hennessyrutgers@gmail.com by _____.  Thank you in advance for your willingness to participate in this research.  Your help and support have the potential to make a difference to students with similar backgrounds as yourself in the future.

Sincerely,
Kelly Hennessy
Doctoral Candidate, Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University

## Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

**Description:** You are invited to participate in a research study that is being conducted by Kelly S. Hennessy, who is a Doctoral student in the Social and Philosophical Foundations Department at Rutgers University, Graduate School of Education. The purpose of this research is to explore the role connections play in a students' college success.  This study will involve the researcher conducting an interview about your personal experience at college and your views and perspectives regarding those connections.  Approximately 30 subjects will participate in the study which will be conducted from February 2013 to May 2014.  There will be a biographical information survey, an interview, and ability for participants to read transcripts of their interview and give clarifying statements.  The interview will be audio taped for the purpose of maintaining accurate records.

**Confidentiality:**  This research is confidential. The research records will include some information about you, such as basic demographic information but a pseudonym will be assigned to all transcripts, questionnaire, and responses. In addition, this information will be stored in such a manner that no linkage will exist in the research between your identity and your responses.  I will keep your personal information confidential by limiting individuals' access to the research data and keeping it in a secure location.  If a report of this study is published, or the results are presented at a professional conference, only group results will be stated, or the use of individual results will only be given using the unique pseudonym assigned to your data.

**Risks and benefits**:  There are no foreseeable risks to participation in this study.  The study may produce valuable data about support systems that enhance a students' academic success at the university level.   Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, and you may withdraw at any time during the study procedures without any penalty to you. In addition, you may choose not to answer any questions with which you are not comfortable.  You understand if you say anything that you believe may incriminate yourself, the interviewer will immediately rewind the tape and record over the potentially incriminating information.  The interviewer will then ask you if you would like to continue the interview.  The recording(s) will be used for my analysis.  The recording(s) will include identifiers that will be recorded but pseudonyms will be assigned upon transcription and will then be used in data analysis.  The recordings will be stored in a locked file cabinet with no link to subjects' identity and will be disposed 5 years after the analysis is complete.

**Time involvement:**  Your participation in this study will take no more than two hours.

**Payment and costs**:  For your participation you will receive a gift card  to Barnes and Noble in the amount of $15 for your time and assistance.

The research team and the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law.  Upon completion of this project, all data will be disposed after 5 years.

If you have any questions about the study procedures, you may contact Tanja Sargent in the Graduate School of Education. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (committee that reviews research studies in order to protect research participants) at [Mid-Atlantic University]  at:

[Mid-Atlantic University]  Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
3 Rutgers Plaza
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559

Tel: 732-932-0150 ext. 2104
Email: [humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu](mailto:humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu)
**Consent to Academic Transcripts:**  I consent to give the interviewer access to my academic transcripts.  ____ YES  ____ NO
You will be given a copy of this consent form and participant's rights form for your records.
Sign below if you agree to participate in this research study:
I have read and understood the informed consent form for the study undertaken by Kelly S. Hennessy. Your participation is voluntary.  You have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue at any time without penalty.  You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions.

I, _____ (print your name), agree to participate in this study.

 _____ Yes _____ No

Signature _____                 Date _____

I, _____ (print your name), agree to participate in an audio-taped interview for this study. I understand that the researcher will not use the recording for any other purposes other than this study.
_____ Yes _____ No

Signature _____                 Date _____

Researcher Signature _____                 Date _____

## Appendix E:  Participants' Rights Form

Principal Investigator:  Kelly S. Hennessy

Research Title:  Making Connections: The Role of Social Capital in College Success of Low-Income First-Generation Students

- I have read and discussed the Research Description with the researcher. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the purposes and procedures regarding this study.
- My participation in research is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw from participation at any time without jeopardy to future medical care, employment, student status or other entitlements.
- The researcher may withdraw me from the research at his/her professional discretion.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue to participate, the investigator will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research project that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- If at any time I have any questions regarding the research or my participation, I can contact the investigator, who will answer my questions. The investigator's phone number is 732.979.9281.
- If at any time I have comments, or concerns regarding the conduct of the research or questions about my rights as a research subject, I should contact:

  Rutgers University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
  Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
  3 Rutgers Plaza
  New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559
  Tel: 732-932-0150 ext. 2104
  Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu
- I should receive a copy of the Research Description and this Participant's Rights document.
- If video and/or audio taping is part of this research, I (     ) consent to be audio/video taped.     I (     ) do NOT consent to being video/audio taped. The written, video and/or audio taped materials will be viewed only by the principal investigator and members of the research team. Written, video and/or audio taped materials (     ) may be viewed in an educational setting outside the research  (     ) may NOT be viewed in an educational setting outside the research.
- My signature means that I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature: _____ Date:____/____/____

Name: _____

**Appendix F - Data Analysis Nodes (terms used for coding)**

| Title | Description |
|---|---|
| 1st College Impressions | Stories of students first impressions of their college experience |
| Academic Stories | Narratives of students' academic experience |
| Academic Stories:  Academic Probation | Narratives that included being placed on academic probation |
| Academic Stories:  Disinterested in academics | Narratives of students not being interested in course work, studying, major selection |
| Academic Stories:  Failing Courses | Narratives of students failing courses |
| Academic Stories:  Major selection | Narratives of students selecting majors |
| Academic Stories:  Passion for major | Narratives of students having "passion" or excitement about their majors |
| Administrative Staff | Stories about administrative and student affairs staff (non-faculty) |
| Administrative Staff: Career Goals | Staff discussing career goals with students |
| Administrative Staff:  Challenging | Staff encouraging and challenging students in their college experience (jobs, academics, or activities) |
| Administrative Staff:  Concerned about academics | Staff and stories about concern/interest in student's academic experiences and course work |
| Administrative Staff:  Course selection | Staff helping or discussing course selection with students |
| Administrative Staff:  Shared Experiences | Staff sharing stories of their college or life experiences that are similar to the students |
| Administrative Staff:  Staff initiated | Stories of staff initiating conversations and interactions with students |
| Administrative Staff:  Student first | Staff talking with students about being a student first |
| Administrative Staff:  Student initiated | Stories of students initiating conversations and interactions with staff |
| Career Services | Interactions with career services |
| Caring | Narratives where students felt others cared about them and their academic experience |
| Co-curricular Activities | Participation in activities outside of the classroom |
| Co-curricular Activities:  Confidence | Participating in activities outside the classroom increased confidence |
| Co-curricular Activities:  Does not participate | Does not participate in any outside of the classroom activities |
| Co-curricular Activities:  Learning | Learning occurred through participation in outside the classroom activities |
| Co-curricular Activities:  Stopped participating | Stopped participating in co-curricular activities due to meeting times, disorganization, and costs |

| | |
|---|---|
| Co-curricular Activities:  Student Organization | Participates in Student Organizations |
| Co-curricular Activities:  Student Organization: Academically related clubs | Participation in Student Organization related to academic field of study |
| Co-curricular Activities:  Student Organization: Community Service | Participated in Student Organization with a focus on community service |
| Co-curricular Activities:  Student Organization:  Eboard positions | Held an executive board position in a Student Organization |
| Co-curricular Activities:  Student Organization:  Focus | Participation in Student Organization made student more focused on academics |
| Co-curricular Activities:  Student Organization:  Future Careers | Participation in Student Organization made student more marketable in future career |
| Co-curricular Activities:  Student Organization: Jobs | Participation in Student Organization led to a job |
| Co-curricular Activities:  Student Organization: Leadership experiences | Leadership qualities gained through participation in Student Organizations |
| Co-curricular Activities:  Student Organization:  Made friends | Friendships developed through participation in Student Organizations |
| Co-curricular Activities:  Student Organization: Professional Club | Participation in Student Organization related to professional field |
| Co-curricular Activities:  Student Organization: Residence Hall Association | Participated in Residence Hall Association (student governing board for those that live on campus) |
| Co-curricular Activities:  Student Organization: Secondary | Participation in Student Organization was secondary to academics |
| Co-curricular Activities:  Student Organization:  Stress Release | Participation in Student Organization was a way to reduce academic stress |
| Co-curricular Activities:  Student Organization:  Time Management | Participation in Student Organization led to time management |
| Counseling | Students experience and stories with counseling services |
| Courses that struggled with | Stories of struggling in courses |
| Doing it on your own | Stories of students "doing it on my own" |
| Employment | Experiences of working at jobs while at college |
| Employment:  Does not currently have a job | Student does not have a job |
| Employment:  Exhausting work schedules | Employment that had long work hours |
| Employment:  Impacts on other activities | Stories of the impacts that jobs have on other activities and relationships |
| Employment:  No discussion about academics | Jobs where academics and the academic experience were not discussed |
| Employment:  No Studying | Jobs where you were not allowed to study during work hours |
| Employment:  Off-campus | Jobs off-campus |
| Employment:  On-campus | Working at jobs on-campus |

| | |
|---|---|
| Employment:  On-campus:  Financial | Financial information/stories from working at jobs on-campus |
| Employment:  On-campus:  Negatives | Stories that resulted from negative on-campus job experience |
| Employment:  On-campus:  Positives | Stories that resulted from positive on-campus job experience |
| Employment:  On-campus:  Relationships with co-workers | Relationships with co-workers during an on-campus job |
| Employment:  On-campus:  Skill training | Skills acquired from working at an on-campus job |
| Employment:  On-campus: Future job training/experience | Work experience during an on-campus job that provided future job training (ethics, related to major & course work) |
| Employment:  On-campus: Institution Knowledge | Working in an on-campus job and exposure to institutional knowledge |
| Employment:  On-campus: Made friends | Friendships developed through on-campus jobs |
| Employment:  On-campus: Network | Working in an on-campus job helped to establish a network (or lack of network established) |
| Employment:  On-campus: Relationships with supervisors | Relationships with supervisors during an on-campus job |
| Employment:  On-campus: Students first (academics), Job 2nd | Stories about on-campus jobs and being a student first (examples:  supervisor approving studying during job, supervisors telling students that they were a student first) |
| Employment:  On-campus: Supportive | Stories of students feeling supported during their on-campus job |
| Employment:  Too busy | No job due to being too busy |
| Employment:  Workstudy | Jobs that were workstudy funded |
| Employment:  Workstudy taken away | Stories of workstudy being removed, taken away, or FASFA was not filled out in time |
| Engagement | Tagged any time a student used the word "Engagement" |
| EOF:  Academic Support | Experiences with EOF around areas of academic support |
| EOF:  Advisor | Experiences with EOF Advisors |
| EOF:  Assumptions that EOF is for minority students | Stories of faculty, staff, and other students making assumptions that all EOF students are minorities |
| EOF:  Became family | Stories of becoming family with other EOF students and staff members |
| EOF:  Book Voucher | Utilizing EOF's book voucher to purchase books for classes |
| EOF:  Campus Knowledge | Stories of gaining campus knowledge by participating in EOF |

| EOF: Educational Opportunity Fund | Stories of participation in EOF |
|---|---|
| EOF: Email Opportunities | EOF advisors and staff emailing about opportunities on campus |
| EOF: Financial Support | EOF financial support (financial support, education, and loans) |
| EOF: Made friends | Making friends through participation in EOF |
| EOF: Networking | Building a network through EOF with other students and EOF Alumni |
| EOF: Social Support | Experiences with EOF around areas of social support |
| EOF: Student Organization | Participation in EOF student organizations (honor society or club) |
| EOF: Summer experience | Student's experience during their 6-week summer EOF program |
| EOF: Summer staff member | Job as an EOF summer staff member, who supported the 6-week summer EOF program |
| Faculty | Stories about faculty |
| Faculty: Approachable & Friendly | Stories of student's experiences with faculty that they termed as "approachable", "caring", "friendly" or other related words |
| Faculty: Challenged Intellectually | Stories of faculty that challenged students to think about material and challenged them on their thoughts |
| Faculty: Clear expectations | Examples of faculty setting up clear expectations with students |
| Faculty: Did not respond to emails | Faculty that did not respond to emails |
| Faculty: Extra help | Faculty offering extra help with classroom material |
| Faculty: Faculty apathy | Stories about faculty that were not engaged in the material, don't care about students or apathetic |
| Faculty: Faculty encourages participation | Stories about faculty members encouraging participation in course work, research, and campus activities |
| Faculty: Faculty expectations of students | Expectations that faculty set for course materials, interactions, or belief in students |
| Faculty: Faculty initiated | Stories of faculty initiating conversations and interactions with students |
| Faculty: Faculty talking down to students | Students sharing feelings of faculty putting them down, talking down to them, or acting intellectually superior |
| Faculty: Faculty that looked similar | Stories of faculty with similar life stories, looked similar to students, same race, or gender |

| | |
|---|---|
| Faculty:  Felt respected | Stories of interactions with faculty members where students felt respected |
| Faculty:  Knowledgeable | Faculty seen as knowledgeable or experts in field |
| Faculty:  Knows name | Students that discussed faculty members knowing their name |
| Faculty:  Lack of outside class experiences | Stories of students lacking outside the classroom interaction with faculty |
| Faculty:  Lack of relatable faculty members | Stories of a lack of faculty with similar life stories, looked similar to students, same race, or gender |
| Faculty:  Large lectures=don't know faculty | Classes in large lectures and not knowing faculty |
| Faculty:  Mentoring | Faculty serving as mentors |
| Faculty:  More invested in research | Stories where students felt faculty were more invested in their research than students |
| Faculty:  Negative | Negative experiences that students had with faculty |
| Faculty:  Networking | Stories about faculty building networks or connections:  introducing students to other faculty, staff, students |
| Faculty:  Not doing well in class/afraid to approach | Stories of students who knew that they were not doing well in the class but were afraid to approach faculty and ask for help |
| Faculty:  Office Hours | Students discussing attending or not attending office hours |
| Faculty:  Positive | Positive experiences that students had with faculty |
| Faculty:  Recommendation Letters | Students reaching out to faculty for recommendation letters |
| Faculty:  Research | Conducting research with faculty or discussing faculty's research |
| Faculty:  Seeking help | Stories about students seeking help from faculty |
| Faculty:  Select faculty and classes based on ease | Stories of students taking faculty or classes due to the ease of the course work or material |
| Faculty:  Smaller Classes | Discussion on class size and relationships developed with faculty members |
| Faculty:  Student Initiated | Stories of students initiating conversations and interactions with faculty members |
| Faculty:  Supportive | Stories of faculty who were labeled as supportive, caring, patient, listening to students, and exhibiting compassionate environments |
| Faculty:  Talking with faculty | Stories about conversations students had with faculty members |

| | |
|---|---|
| Faith-Based Organizations | Stories of participating in campus ministries, religious organizations, and faith-based organizations |
| Family | Discussion around family and the college experience |
| Family: Ability to attend college due to family decisions/sacrifices | Attending college due to family sacrifices |
| Family: Did not understand | Family lacked knowledge about college |
| Family: Disagree with decisions | Family did not agree with educational decisions students made |
| Family: Does not ask about school | Family did not ask about college, course work, or other college related concerns |
| Family: Does not give advice | Family does not give advice about college related situations |
| Family: Encouraged studying to not end up in manual labor job | Family encouragement was so that student did not end up in a manual labor job |
| Family: Encouragement | Family that acted as supported systems/encouragement/celebration |
| Family: Expectations | Expectations that family members have for students about education, jobs, responsibilities |
| Family: Family Issues | Family related issues |
| Family: Financial | Discussion of finances at home/money related topics |
| Family: Graduate, get job, make money | Family had expectations of students to graduate, get a job, and make money |
| Family: Home responsibilities | Responsibilities at home to family |
| Family: Huge role | Family play a significant role in college experience (finances, academics, supports, etc.) |
| Family: Lack of Support | Family lacked supporting student in college experience |
| Family: Living at home | Stories of living at home with family during college |
| Family: No relationship | No relationship with family |
| Family: Parents did not attend college | Parents did not attend college |
| Family: Parents do not work | Stories of experiences of attending college when parents do not work |
| Family: Role with Academics | Stories of family members roles with course work/major selection |
| Family: Siblings attended college | Siblings had attended at least 1 year of college (2 or 4 year) |
| Family: Stress | Situations between students and family that caused students stress |

| | |
|---|---|
| Family:  Unhealthy relationships | Stories of relationships with family members that students were struggling, felt were unhealthy, or had disagreements with family |
| Feeling unprepared | Narratives of students feeling unprepared for college |
| Friends | Stories of relationships with friends or close connections with other students |
| Friends:  Academic discussions | Discussions with friends about academic related topics:  course work, professors, projects, studying material |
| Friends:  Academic support | Discussions about friends providing support (encouragement, resources, studying, etc) towards academics |
| Friends: Class friends vs. outside of class friends | Stories where students describe the difference between class friends and friends outside class |
| Friends:  Common activities | Establishing relationships with students in common activities or joining activities with friends |
| Friends:  Common experiences | Establishing relationships with students who have had common experiences |
| Friends:  Common majors | Establishing relationships with students in major |
| Friends:  Difficult to make friends | Difficulties with establishing friendships |
| Friends:  Diverse Group of friends | Discussion of establishing relationships with friends from a variety of racial, ethic, class, major, etc. backgrounds |
| Friends:  Experiencing new | Establishing friendships in order to try new things together, attend new events together |
| Friends:  Friends were roommates | Stories of establishing relationships with roommates |
| Friends:  Importance of making friends | Narratives where students discussed the importance of making friends to their academic experience |
| Friends:  Less Diverse Group of friends | Discussion of establishing relationships with friends that have similar backgrounds and life experiences |
| Friends:  Motivated each other | Friends providing motivation, encouragement, and being strong academic role models |
| Friends:  No Money | Stories of having friends in similar financial situations |
| Friends:  Personal discussions | Discussions with friends about personal lives: family, significant others, finances |

| | |
|---|---|
| Friends:  Socializing | Socializing with friends:  staying up late, long conversations, going to parties, going to campus activities |
| Friends:  Studying with Friends | Studying with friends or working on course projects |
| Friends:  Support system | Friends providing a support system |
| Friends:  Take classes together | Taking classes with friends |
| Friends:  Trust | Establishing trust in friendships, importance of trust in friendships |
| Greatest Challenge | Stories about the greatest challenge that students encountered while at college |
| Greatest Challenge:  Course Work | Greatest challenge revolved around academics and course material |
| Greatest Challenge:  Family Issues | Greatest challenge revolved around family (not understanding college, finances, majors, etc.) |
| Greatest Challenge:  Finances/Financial Aid | Greatest challenge revolved around finances |
| Greatest Challenge:  Future planning | Greatest challenge encountered revolved around future planning |
| Greatest Challenge:  Maintaining relationships | Greatest challenge encountered revolved around maintaining relationships |
| Greatest Challenge:  Major decision | Greatest challenge encountered revolved around major decision |
| Greatest Challenge:  Making friends | Greatest challenge revolved around making friends while at college |
| Greatest Challenge:  Mental Health | Greatest challenge revolved around mental health/mental wellness |
| Greatest Challenge:  Money management | Greatest challenge encountered revolved around money management |
| Greatest Challenge:  Negatives | Discussion of the negatives of challenges/failing |
| Greatest Challenge:  Positives | Discussion of the positives of challenges/overcoming/resiliency |
| Greatest Challenge:  Size of institution | Greatest challenge revolved around size of institution |
| Greatest Challenge:  Studying | Greatest challenge revolved around studying |
| Greatest Challenge:  Time management | Greatest challenge encountered revolved around time management |
| Health Center | Stories of utilizing the health center on campus |
| Independence | Making decisions or taking action on your own (examples:  filling out FASPA paperwork, financially supporting oneself) |
| Independence:  Finances | Themes around independence and finances |
| Independence:  Relationships | Themes about independence in relationships |

| Internships | Experience with Internships |
|---|---|
| Internships:  Benefits | Benefits from participating in internships:  work experience, educational learning, presenting experience, understanding careers that students do not want to go into, administrative tasks, resume builder |
| Internships:  No internship | Do not participate in an internship |
| Invisible Group | Stories about being invisible, ignored, or not included |
| Involvement | Tagged any time a student used the word "Involvement" |
| Learning Communities | Formalized (by university) communities of students with an educational purpose |
| Learning Community:  Discovery Houses | Students living together in 1st Year with common focused academic topic |
| Learning Community:  Faculty Connections | Connections with faculty through/as part of participation in learning community |
| Learning Community:  Lead to Major | Major selection due participation in learning community |
| Learning Community:  Networking Opportunities | Connections established due to participation with a learning community |
| Learning Community:  Organizations & Clubs | Clubs and organizations with an educational purpose |
| Learning Community:  Service Learning | Community service with an educational component |
| Learning Community:  Things in common with peers | Finding commonalities with peers in learning communities |
| Learning Community:  Women's College | Educational experiences as part of the Women's College |
| Legal Services | Students experience and stories with legal services |
| Libraries | Students experience and stories with libraries |
| Live Off-Campus | Narratives of living off-campus |
| Live off-Campus:  Benefit academically | Benefits of living off-campus on academic experience |
| Live Off-Campus:  Commute | Discussion of the commute for off-campus students |
| Live Off-Campus:  Level of involvement | Discussion of the level of involvement for students that live off-campus |
| Live Off-Campus:  Money saving-living with family | Students' choice to live off-campus was to save money |

| Live Off-Campus:  Time between classes studying | Narratives of living off-campus and time usage between classes |
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| Major selection based on financial security | Narratives of students making major selection based on future financial security, regardless if they understood or wanted to enter a particular career |
| McNair | Stories of participating in the McNair Program:  A program focused on low-income, first-generation, and students of color who are considering doctoral or law schools |
| McNair:   Friends | Friendships established through participation in McNair program |
| McNair:  Caring Faculty | Faculty that participated in the McNair program were described as caring, compassionate, dedicated |
| McNair:  Confidence to engage with faculty | Stories of gaining confidence to speak with faculty gained through participation in McNair program |
| McNair:  Graduate School Fee Waivers | McNair scholars were given fee waivers to graduate programs |
| McNair:  Networking | Participating in McNair program allowed for networking with faculty, staff, and like-minded students |
| McNair:  Opportunities for research | McNair scholars were required to participate in research with a faculty member, opportunities to discuss research with peers |
| McNair:  Rigor and goal focused | Stories of rigor, expectations, and focus while participating in the McNair program |
| McNair:  Support | Stories of support through the McNair Program |
| McNair:  Time management | Participating in the McNair program; students focused on time management and goal setting |
| Mentoring | Stories of students having a mentor or working with a mentor |
| Money management | Stories about students' money management skills or experiences |
| Money management:  Applying for scholarships | Stories of applying for scholarships or finding additional funding |
| Money management:  FASFA | Students discussing experience with FASFA, including who completes it |
| Money management:  Paying bills | Stories of paying bills (tuition, car, apartment, credit card, etc.) |
| Money management:  Purchased books | Discussion about purchasing books for classes |
| Money management:  Purchases groceries | Stories of purchasing groceries |

| Money management:  Refund Check | Stories about refund checks |
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| Money management:  Surviving | Stories of "surviving" based on the small amount of money that they had access to |
| Money management:  Unable to do certain things | Students discussing not being able to attend, do, or purchase certain things due to lack of funds |
| Money Stress | Narratives of students' stress around financial related issues |
| Navigating System Challenges | Narratives of students navigating through system challenges at the university |
| ODASIS | Stories of participating in ODASIS |
| Orientation | Participation in Orientation:  pre-college experience to introduce students to university, university resources, and other students |
| Orientation:  Activities | Discussion of activities that students participated in during orientation |
| Orientation:  Bad Experience | Stories of bad experiences during orientation |
| Orientation:  Bonding | Stories of meeting other students during orientation and establishing connections |
| Orientation:  Made institution feel welcoming | Stories of how participating in orientation made students feel welcomed |
| Orientation:  Met roommate at Orientation | Met roommate through participation in orientation |
| Orientation:  Orientation Leader | The role the orientation leader (an upper-class student) played in college experience |
| Passion | Narratives where students discussed their excitement for participation and relationships |
| Quotes | Quotes that explained, the student's words, a meaningful experience |
| Research Opportunities | Experience with research opportunities |
| Research Opportunities:  Negative | Negative stories of research opportunities and experiences |
| Research Opportunities:  No opportunities | Has not done research or has not had been presented with an opportunity to do research |
| Research Opportunities:  Positive | Positive stories of research opportunities and experiences |
| Residence Life | Experiences while living on-campus |
| Residence Life:  Becoming a Student Staff Member | Stories of becoming a student staff member |
| Residence Life:  Becoming a Student Staff Member: Job experience | Becoming a staff member perks:  leadership experience, friendships, dealing with people, saves money, single, networking |
| Residence Life:  Negative:  Space | Living on-campus was challenging due to space issues:  size & cleanliness |

| Residence Life:  Negative: Caught violating policies | While living on-campus violated policies |
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| Residence Life:  Negative: Cost | Living on-campus and the expense |
| Residence Life:  Negative: Did not study | Living on-campus and stories of not studying/distraction |
| Residence Life:  Negative: Homesick | Living on-campus and stories of homesickness |
| Residence Life:  Negative: Living with the Other | Living with other students on-campus was a negative experience/not friends with roommate |
| Residence Life:  Negative: Roommates | Living on-campus and negative roommate stories |
| Residence Life:  Negatives | Negative experiences from living on-campus |
| Residence Life:  Negatives:  Different experiences | Living on-campus with "people from different experiences" challenges |
| Residence Life:  Negatives:  Meeting people | Living on-campus did not allow students to meet new people/lack of friends |
| Residence Life:  Positive | Positive experiences from living on-campus |
| Residence Life:  Positive:  Ability to get job on campus | Living on-campus allowed students to get a job on-campus |
| Residence Life:  Positive:  Affordability | Living on-campus was affordable |
| Residence Life:  Positive:  Attending events | Living on-campus allowed students to attend events |
| Residence Life:  Positive:  Development | Positive personal development that occurred from living on-campus |
| Residence Life:  Positive:  Familiar roommate | Knew roommate prior to living together on-campus |
| Residence Life:  Positive:  Friends with roommates | Living on-campus allowed students to become friends with roommate |
| Residence Life:  Positive:  Learning | Learning that occurred from living on-campus |
| Residence Life:  Positive:  Living with all First Years | Living on-campus allowed students to live with all first year students |
| Residence Life:  Positive:  Living with different people | Living on-campus allowed students to live with people that were different from them |
| Residence Life:  Positive:  Meeting people | Living on-campus allowed students to meet new people |
| Residence Life:  Positive:  Participation with roommate | Living on-campus allowed students to do activities with roommates (meals, classes, activities, study) |
| Residence Life:  Positive:  Safety | Living on-campus provided a safe place to live |
| Residence Life:  Positive:  Studying | Living on-campus allowed students to study |
| Residence Life:  Positive: Academically focused roommate | Living on-campus allowed students to live with a roommate that was academically focused |
| Residence Life:  Positive: Convenient | Living on-campus allowed students access to campus |
| Residence Life:  Positive: Other students close by | Living on-campus allowed students access to other students |

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| Residence Life:  Student Staff | Living on-campus and experience with student staff |
| Resiliency | Overcoming difficult circumstances, picking oneself up after failing or being told no |
| Sacrifice | Stories of the sacrifices that students or family members made |
| Sacrifice:  Family giving up for child's education | Stories of family members sacrificing so the student could get a college education |
| Sacrifice:  Old friends/family not understanding | Stories of others not understanding the college experience |
| Service Learning | Participating in service learning |
| Service Learning:  Alternative Break | Stories of going on an alternate break trip |
| Service Learning:  Helped with major selection | Participation in service learning activities helped in major selection |
| Student Support Services | Stories of participating in Student Support Services |
| Successful Paths | Stories of participating Successful Paths, a program for students who have been previously incarcerated |
| Successful Paths:  Student Organization/s | Participating in Successful Path's student organization |
| Support/Caring | Stories of support and caring that students received while in college |
| Support/Caring:  Academic Support | Stories about having academic or educational support |
| Support/Caring:  Become family | Support shown by becoming a family at college or having a college family |
| Support/Caring:  Common Experiences | Having people around that had common experiences |
| Support/Caring:  Emotional Support | Stories about having emotional support |
| Support/Caring:  Financial | Stories about having financial support |
| Support/Caring:  Guidance | Stories of having someone to guide them through an experience or was helpful to them |
| Support/Caring:  Lack social network | Stories of lack of support and lack of network |
| Support/Caring:  Listening | Support shown in the form of listening |
| Support/Caring:  Makes it easier | Stories of how having support or a caring environment made it "easier" |
| Support/Caring:  Never feel alone | Support shown always feeling that there are people around you |
| Support/Caring:  Reach out | Support shown by having faculty, staff, or other students reach out |
| Support/Caring:  Studying | Support shown by studying together or with others |

| Support/Caring:  Take classes together | Support shown by taking classes together or during taking classes together |
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| Support/Caring:  Talking | Support shown in the form of talking |
| The "Other" student | Stories about students who were not low-income first-generation and interview participants felt had more, several students termed these students "Other" |
| Time management | Stories about students' time management skills or experiences |
| Tutoring | Stories of utilizing tutoring services or knowledge of tutoring services |
| Understanding | Narratives where students felt understood by faculty, staff, and other students |