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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

AN EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE  
STUDENTS IN LASALLIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BY

KURT SCHACKMUTH

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2012

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In memory of Dr. Thomas G. Schackmuth (1940-1981)  
and in honor of Thomas Joseph Schackmuth.

God, who guides all things with wisdom and serenity and whose way it is not to force the inclinations of persons, willed to commit me entirely to the development of the schools. He did this in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time, so that one commitment led to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning.

– Saint John Baptist de La Salle

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

As higher education has become more accessible to traditionally underrepresented groups, more of these types of students – such as those who are the first in their family to attend college – have started to matriculate on campuses across the United States (Choy, 2001; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Strayhorn, 2006). First-generation college students are, along with minority and low-income students, considered “at-risk” student populations. Prone to performing poorly in college, or even dropping out, the risk factors for these groups of students are elevated by lack of parental support, low socio-economic status, and inadequate academic preparation (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Choy 2001; Oldfield, 2007).

#### Context of the Problem

First-generation college students comprise a significant portion of today’s entire college-going population. Data gathered during the 1995-96 academic year by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) showed that 53 percent of students enrolled at two-year colleges were first-generation college students, while those enrolled at four-year colleges and universities amounted to 34 percent (Choy, 2001). Data from the 2004 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, revealed that almost 24 percent of the overall undergraduate

population of students in the United States is first-generation and also considered “low income” (household income of \$25,000 or less) (Pell, 2008).

The percentage of first-generation college students entering four-year colleges and universities has decreased as compared to enrollment for all first-time, first-year students since 1971 (Pascarella, et al., 2004; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf & Yeung, 2007). Saenz, et al. (2007) found that first-generation college students accounted for 38.5 percent of all first-year students enrolled in four-year colleges in 1971. By 2005, that same figure dropped to 15.9 percent, but still represented a significant number of first-year students.

The problem, however, is that keeping first-generation college students enrolled in college has proven a challenge. Choy (2001) reported that first-generation college students were twice as likely to leave college prior to the start of their second academic year than students whose parents attended college. Her study also revealed several other factors that contributed to attrition among first-generation college students. These included receiving low grades during the first academic year, working a part-time job while attending college, not participating in campus activities, and not immediately enrolling in college after the conclusion of high school.

In response to first-generation college student attrition and retention concerns, colleges and universities have placed significant emphasis on first-generation college students and their unique needs for achieving academic success, maintaining enrollment, and meeting the requirements of graduation. Institutions have responded by enhancing existing support programs, developing new initiatives, and investing in additional

resources that can provide these promising students with a realistic opportunity to be successful in college (Cushman, 2007). Of particular note is the higher success rate that private colleges and universities have had retaining and graduating first-generation college students. Based on a six-year graduate rate, 61% of first-generation college students who graduated in the 1995-1996 academic year received their degrees from private institutions of higher education versus 41% at four-year state-sponsored institutions (National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, 2004).

Lasallian institutions of higher education are particularly suited to meet the needs of first-generation college students. Tidd (2001) defines Lasallian as “characterized by values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors or policies inspired by the educational methodology and spirituality of Saint John Baptist de La Salle” (p.18). De La Salle was a 17<sup>th</sup> century French priest who believed that all young people were deserving of a faith-based, high-quality, personalized and practical education that would prepare them for a meaningful life. He believed that economic circumstances, social status, and lack of prior schooling or educational experience should not prevent a student from having the opportunity to participate in the educational process.

In 1680 De La Salle founded the Brothers of the Christian Schools (known today in the United States as the De La Salle Christian Brothers), a lay religious order of men dedicated to teaching and administering schools based on his teachings. Christian Brothers express their commitment to their work through vows of association for the service of the poor through education, poverty, chastity, obedience, and stability of the order. Today, the De La Salle Christian Brothers and their colleagues operate private,

Catholic primary, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions around the world that remain dedicated to these principles and which strive to “provide a human and Christian education to the young, especially for the poor, in schools designed to spread the Gospel and to promote justice and peace” (Brothers of the Christian Schools, 1993). There are approximately 65 institutions of Lasallian higher education around the globe; six of these institutions are located in the United States.

Lasallian educational philosophy, pedagogy, and spirituality are best expressed through the mission statements of Lasallian institutions, as well as through the various programs, initiatives, and student-centered approaches these institutions and their employees incorporate into the educational process. Lasallian institutions believe strongly in the concept of “Association” – a sense that all faculty members, staff, administrators, board members – even alumni and parents – are united for the purpose of providing a values-based education to students. This sense of Association underlies all of the institution’s educational efforts and grounds the institution in a very real and visible student-centeredness. As a result, students understand that they are the focus of the institution that they are supported and encouraged to succeed.

Student-centered teaching and personalized support are also hallmarks of Lasallian education. In Lasallian institutions, students are not simply Social Security numbers. Class sizes are small and the faculty-student ratio is low, so faculty members learn their student’s names’ and strive to really *know* and understand them. Students build personal relationships with their faculty and with professional staff – and these relationships can often result in the student making a better connection to the institution.

These relationships can also result in faculty-student research projects conference presentations, internships, and employment opportunities after graduation.

Lasallian institutions strive to admit students of all academic backgrounds and most Lasallian colleges and universities have special programs which admit those students who are in need of academic assistance or who demonstrate high potential. Lasallian institutions believe strongly in offering financial assistance (scholarships and grants), to those students who without it, might not otherwise have the opportunity to attend college.

Because Lasallian institutions are sponsored by a Roman Catholic teaching order of men, Lasallian colleges and universities adhere to the values and teachings of the Catholic Church. As a result, themes of Catholic social teaching are woven into the curriculum, theology or religious studies courses are part of the general education requirement, and campus ministry programs which appeal to the faith development of young adults are present on the campus.

#### Purpose of this Study

Existing research on first-generation college students focuses on the characteristics that are common among these students and the strategies often implemented to foster their success in college. The literature describes and measures the effectiveness of various programs, policies, and interventions that have been developed to ensure student success and prevent attrition. The majority of these studies tend to be quantitative in nature. There is a lack of more detailed, in-depth, personalized accounts of the college experiences of first-generation college students.

The body of knowledge concerning first-generation college students could benefit from additional research on the impact that four-year institutions have in educating first-generation college students as the majority of existing research is primarily focused on first-generation populations in community/two-year colleges. Additionally, the role that private, faith-based colleges and universities play in the education of first-generation college students seems relatively unexplored.

This study was guided by the overarching research question: What are the experiences of first-generation college students at a Lasallian institution of higher education in the United States? More specifically, this study focused on two questions: (1) What experiences specific to Lasallian education do first-generation college students suggest enhance – as well as detract from – their learning and involvement on campus? And, (2) if experiences among these first-generation college students differ at this institution, how might they best be explained? Using a qualitative, phenomenological approach, this study describes the essence of the college experience for first-generation college students at a Lasallian institution and identifies the major themes that characterize that experience.

### Definition of Terms

#### *First-Generation College Students*

Billson and Terry (1982) define first-generation college students as “those [students] whose parents have had no college or university experience...in other words, the first generation in their famil[y] to continue education beyond high school...even if a sibling has attended college” (p.58). For the purposes of administering programs for first-

generation college students, the United States Department of Education considers a student “first-generation” when neither parent holds a college degree even though either parent may have attended college and completed some coursework without actually graduating (Nuñez, Cuccaro-Alamin, & Carroll, 1998). York-Anderson and Bowman’s (1991) definition also allows for parents to have taken some coursework in college for less than a year. London (1986) and Zwerling (1976), however, defined “first-generation college student” as students whose parents and grandparents are blue-collar workers.

Billson and Terry’s definition, which does not allow for the student’s parents to have any higher education experience whatsoever, is widely cited by other researchers (see, for example, Choy, 2001; Horn & Nuñez, 2000; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Saenz, et al., 2007; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001) and for this reason, was used for the purposes of defining first-generation college students in this study.

### *Lasallian*

Tidd (2001) defined Lasallian as “characterized by values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors or policies inspired by the educational methodology and spirituality of Saint John Baptist de La Salle” (p.18). Saint De La Salle was a 17<sup>th</sup> century French priest who believed that all young people were deserving of a faith-based, high-quality, personalized and practical education that would prepare them for a meaningful life. He believed that economic circumstances, social status, and lack of prior schooling or educational

experience should not prevent a student from having the opportunity to participate in the educational process. Sanderl (2004) expanded on Tidd's interpretation significantly:

The term "Lasallian" grows out of three integral perspectives: (a) the life and story of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, (b) the educational vision and mission of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, and (c) the manner in which that vision and mission are lived and expressed today as well as with whom and for whom it is shared. Lasallian culture, therefore, includes consideration about who is being served and educated by this education. Further, it articulates who is sharing in this mission and responsible for the education of these young people. Finally, it communicates the life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, the early Institute, and the principles of Lasallian education (p.118).

In his definition, Van Grieken (1999) adds "more recently [the term "Lasallian" is] also used as a noun to name those who share in the mission and heritage of the Institute" (p. 197).

#### Significance of this Study

This study contributes to the knowledgebase of higher education administrators, professors, professional staff and others who seek a more holistic understanding of first-generation college students enrolled in institutions of private higher education. In their study for the Pell Institute, *Moving Beyond Access*, the authors conclude, "...it is no longer enough to be concerned only about *whether* low-income and first-generation students go to college. We also must be concerned about *where* and *how* they go to college – and the experiences they have once enrolled..." (Pell, 2008).

As first-generation college students continue to enroll in higher education, it will be increasingly important for those who work with these students – in the classroom, in academic support centers, or elsewhere – to understand their particular needs and concerns, their backgrounds, and pre-college experiences in order to effectively support

and encourage them in managing their college experience. Studying the experiences of first-generation college students can help to inform decisions colleges make concerning policies and new programming, as well as retention strategies, freshman seminar courses and approaches to orientation. Additionally, this study contributes to the body of qualitative, phenomenological-based research on first-generation college students, as the majority of literature on this particular population appears to be primarily quantitative in nature.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

To provide context and depth to this study of first-generation college students in Catholic, Lasallian higher education, in this chapter I review the literature in three major areas: characteristics of first-generation college students, attrition and persistence, and support strategies. Taken together, these three categories of research provide an understanding of first-generation college students, the kinds of experiences they have in college, what contributes to their achievement or challenges in college, why they stay in college or drop out, and what can be done to make these students' college experiences more meaningful and successful.

#### Characteristics of First-Generation College Students

The first of three areas, this selection of literature responds to three guiding questions concerning the characteristics of first-generation college students: Who are these students? How prevalent is this group of students within public and private higher education? What do we know about their college experiences? A variety of studies have been conducted which attempt to answer these questions, to inform the higher education community about first-generation college students, and to paint a portrait of the first-generation college student for the benefit of those who want to better understand this unique population and their needs.

Billson and Terry (1982) define first-generation college students as “those [students] whose parents have had no college or university experience...in other words, the first generation in their famil[y] to continue education beyond high school...” (p.58). For the purposes of administering programs for first-generation college students, the United States Department of Education considers a student “first-generation” when neither parent holds a college degree even though either parent may have attended college and completed some coursework without actually graduating (Nuñez, Cuccaro-Alamin, & Carroll, 1998). York-Anderson & Bowman’s (1991) definition allows for parents to have taken some coursework in college for less than a year. In contrast, London (1986) and Zwerling (1976) defined “first-generation college student” more narrowly, limiting the definition to students whose parents and grandparents who were non-college-educated blue-collar workers.

Billson and Terry’s definition, which does not allow for the student’s parents to have any higher education *experience* whatsoever, is widely cited by other researchers (see, for example, Choy, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Saenz, et al., 2007; Terenzini, et al., 1996; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001) and for this reason, will be used for the purposes of defining first-generation college students in this study.

Generally speaking, first-generation college students hold an important place within the growing and diversifying higher education population (Pascarella, et al., 2004) and comprise a significant portion of today’s entire college-going population. Data gathered during the 1995-96 academic year by the National Center for Education

Statistics (NCES) showed that 53 percent of students enrolled at two-year colleges were first-generation college students, while those enrolled at four-year colleges and universities amounted to 34 percent (Choy, 2001). Data from the 2004 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, revealed that almost 24 percent of the overall undergraduate population of students in the United States is first-generation and also considered “low income,” meaning that household income was \$25,000 or less (Pell, 2008).

The percentage of first-generation college students entering four-year colleges and universities has decreased as compared to enrollment for all first-time, first-year students since 1971 (Pascarella, et al., 2004; Saenz, et al., 2007). Saenz, et al. (2007) found that first-generation college students accounted for 38.5 percent of all first-year students enrolled in four-year colleges in 1971. By 2005, that same figure dropped to 15.9 percent, but still represented a significant number of first-year students. According to *Moving Beyond Access*, which consulted data from the NPSAS study, low-income, first-generation college students are underrepresented in private, four-year institutions, comprising just 16 percent of the population (Pell, 2008).

In a report commissioned by the Foundation for Independent Higher Education (FIHE) and the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), Cooperative Institutional Research Project (CIRP) survey data from 2005 freshman were studied to learn more about first-generation college students who attended private institutions of higher education. The findings reveal that 60 percent of first-generation college students from the 2005 cohort attending private universities were female and 69 percent of the students

attending were Caucasian. The researchers found that almost 59 percent of first-generation college students attending private universities came from families with an annual income that exceeded \$40,000. The study also documented that first-generation college students who attended a private high school were more likely to attend a private college and achieved a higher high school GPA than their public school counterparts. In addition first-generation college students enrolled in private, faith-based educational institutions were more likely than their peers at public institutions to attend religious services, perform volunteer work, and discuss religion (2007). These data offer strong evidence that first-generation college students are a significant presence in higher education today.

Beyond these statistics, who are first-generation college students? What distinguishing characteristics, traits, or behaviors do they possess? What makes them unique? Existing research offers insight into these questions. As Saenz, et al. observe:

This is a critical population of students to study because of the general perception that, relative to their peers, such students have poorer academic preparation, different motivations for enrolling in college, varying levels of parental support and involvement, different expectations for their college experience, and significant obstacles in their path to retention and academic success (2007).

First-generation college students are, along with minority and low-income students, often considered “at-risk” student populations and, as a result, many scholars have begun to pay increasing attention to this group as a subject for further research (Billson & Terry, 1982). Prone to performing poorly in college, or even dropping out, the risk factors for these groups are elevated by lack of parental support, low socio-economic status, and inadequate academic preparation (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Choy 2001;

Oldfield, 2007). To evaluate how these risk factors operate independently, collectively, and in varying circumstances, researchers have used various lenses to enhance their “view” of the first-generation college student. Some have predicted how first-generation college students would succeed in college by evaluating factors believed to contribute to their success (Naumann, Bandalos, & Gutkin, 2003, Noble, Flynn, Lee & Hilton, 2007; Ting, 2003). Others, meanwhile, have identified the role support and mentorship programs play in contributing to that success (Pascarella et al., 2004; Pratt & Skaggs, 1989; Rodriguez, 2003; Strayhorn, 2006). Elements of the first-generation college student’s transition from high school to college have also been examined for indications of positive or negative impacts (Terenzini, et al., 1994).

Within this same body of research, researchers have also studied first-generation college students enrolled in college in order to assess self-esteem, their motivation for attending college, and their character and identity development (Alessandria & Nelson, 2005; Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). In the case of Phinney and Haas (2003), researchers pursued a more narrow focus by monitoring the coping strategies of minority first-generation college students, and London (1992) edited a volume that focused completely on first-generation college students within community colleges.

The majority of the literature reviewed addressed first-generation college students who were “traditional aged” – basically between 18 and 22 years old. However, the literature reveals that adults are an important segment of the first-generation college student population who are often the first in their families to attend college after having

worked for a number of years and raised families. The qualitative, interview-based approach that Zwerling (1992) followed in his research resulted in detailed descriptions of the experiences of adult students who attended college, straddling, he noted, two cultures: one of academia and the other of home, family, and work life. Zwerling found that the success of adult first-generation college students was dependent upon the ability to manage these two cultures. This attempt to balance two separate cultures is also noted in the work of Terenzini, et al. (1994), as well as that of Somers, Woodhouse, and Cofer (2004), and Phelan, Davidson, & Cao (1991). Furthermore, Zwerling encouraged educators to adapt the traditional structures of college in ways that would accommodate the “special status” of adult first-generation college students to best allow for their success. He suggested clustered curriculum that allows for students to take courses in a very organized and methodical approach modified teaching methods to cater to adult learners (emphasizing critical thinking and the intrinsic value of education), and enhanced advising processes for adult students.

Ethnicity has also been studied as a characteristic of first-generation students. Bui (2002) investigated the characteristics of first-generation college students who attended four-year universities and concluded that these first-generation college students were “more likely to be ethnic minority students, to come from a lower socioeconomic background, to speak a language other than English at home, and to score lower on the SAT than were other students” (p. 4).

Richardson and Skinner’s (1992) work considered the perspectives of Native American, African-American, and Hispanic first-generation college students in terms of

their beliefs about college, what the authors deem “opportunity orientation,” preparation for college, their status as traditional age students, or as adults already employed in the workplace. They concluded that among the larger population of first-generation college students, minority students need particular and additional support programs in order to persist towards graduation.

Bui’s identification of lower socioeconomic background as a common characteristic of first-generation college students is congruent with the observations made by York-Anderson and Bowman (1991) that first-generation college students often come from low-income, blue-collar families. Bui’s conclusions are also supported in studies by Terenzini, et al. (1996), as well as those by Oldfield (2007), Cushman (2007), Inman and Mayes (1999) and Choy (2001). In addition, the work of Horn and Nuñez (2000) noted, for example, that half of all first-generation college students matriculating in 1992 were from low-income households. Billson and Terry (1982) contributed to this notion when they found that first-generation college students often worked part-time jobs to support themselves and their families.

McGregor, Mayleben, Buzzanga, Davis, and Becker (1991) studied the personality characteristics of first-generation college students and found that they had lower self-esteem than those students whose parents had attended college. They also found that first-generation college students were more likely to perceive that they would have difficulty adapting to stressful environments, such as college, than did their non-first-generation college peers. Self-esteem issues and stress management are two characteristics that surface in other studies as well. In research by Phinney and Haas

(2003), first-generation college students of different ethnicities were studied to determine how they coped with stress in college. The findings indicated that ethnically diverse first-generation college students dealt with high levels of stress by seeking out support from peers and others.

Barry, Hudley, Kelly, and Cho (2009) studied how first-generation college students coped in college, which the researchers assert, is inherently stressful. Their study specifically focused on a student's need to disclose to others the kinds of stressful experiences they were having. These researchers determined that first-generation college students were less likely to disclose information about their college experience to others (parents, friends at school or at home, or professionals) than their non-first-generation peers.

Alessandria and Nelson (2005) applied Chickering's identity development model to an investigation of the self-esteem and identity development of first-generation college students. One distinction concerning this research is that the authors compared first-generation American college students with first-generation college students from other countries. The study found that the first-generation American college students had greater self-esteem levels than the international students and attributed this fact to the additional challenges of their cultural transition.

Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) conducted a study which responded to a lack of research that existed on the specific role motivation played on college outcomes of ethnic minority first-generation college students. Involving 100 students of various ethnic backgrounds, each the first in their families to attend college and all enrolled at the

same institution on the west coast, the survey-based study was conducted over the course of two academic years. The authors concluded that students who were motivated to attend college by intellectual curiosity, the desire to have a rewarding career, and personal academic interests showed successful adjustment to college. On the contrary, the likelihood of a positive adjustment to college for first-generation college students was poor when there was a lack of support among the group's peers and families.

Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) studied how motivation, integration and transition influence a first-generation college student's academic success, specifically focusing on ethnically diverse students attending community colleges. The study found that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and the degree to which the college transition was successful were more closely aligned for first-generation college students than for non-first-generation college students. For example, when first-generation college students were motivated for extrinsic reasons, such as high financial reward for getting a college degree, their GPAs tended to be lower; when they were motivated for intrinsic reasons, such as learning for the sake of learning, the GPAs trended upward.

Another characteristic associated with first-generation college students is the amount of parental support that they receive (Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; Saenz, et al., 2007; Terenzini, et al., 1996). Largely, parents' lack of support for their first-generation college students is attributed to the challenges they face in assisting their children with their college-level work (Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005) and this lack of familiarity with the stress and pressures students face in college (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) suggested that a parents' lack of experience with

higher education deprives first-generation college students of the “intergenerational benefits of information about college,” which, ultimately, makes college a potentially greater challenge for these students.

Billson and Terry (1982) found that non-first-generation students, who they also call “second-generation” students, were supported by their parents to a greater extent than first-generation college students. This coincides with the findings of Cushman (2007), Naumann, Bandalos, and Gutkin (2003), and Terenzini, et al. (1996), who determined that first-generation college students did not receive as much support from their parents because their parents did not have post-secondary school experience from which to draw upon.

Warburton, Bugarin & Nunez’s (2001) NCES report, *Bridging the Gap: Academic Preparation and Postsecondary Success of First-Generation Students*, is often cited by researchers of first-generation college students. Their study observed that parents’ education level was indicative of student retention in college – meaning that a student whose parents had bachelor’s degrees or higher was more likely to succeed in college and persist toward graduation than his or her first-generation counterpart. Similarly, McCarron and Inkelas (2006) examined how parental involvement impacted the educational aspirations of first-generation college students versus non-first-generation college students. Their analysis of longitudinal data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 1988 confirmed that parental involvement (defined, in this instance, as having discussions about college coursework, helping with homework, and discussing ACT and

SAT preparations) was a predictor of educational aspirations for first-generation college students.

Using data from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ), Pike and Kuh (2005) studied the relationships between background characteristics, engagement, and learning in both first-generation and non-first-generation college students. The authors found that first-generation college students were not as engaged in college as their non-first-generation counterparts. They also perceived their college experience as less supportive than their peers and believed that they did not make as much academic progress as students whose parents attended college. Furthermore, Pike and Kuh concluded that first-generation college students who lived in residence halls were more likely to experience diverse situations and be engaged in college than those who lived off-campus. They argued that students who lived on-campus were more likely to experience different people and ideas because they generally spent more time on campus.

York-Anderson and Bowman (1991) assessed the college-related knowledge of first-and second-generation college students in a study that involved 58 first-generation college students and 142 second-generation students. (It is important to note that although York-Anderson and Bowman's definition of first-generation college students is comprehensive and encompassing, they aligned their research with Billson and Terry's definition for this particular study.) Using a survey instrument that asked questions to assess knowledge about the activities and processes associated with college, family/parental support, and items concerning students' reasons for attending college, the

authors determined that second-generation students perceived greater support from their parents than first-generation college students. They also concluded that students who perceived greater support from their families, in this case second-generation or non-first-generation college students, also had greater knowledge about college in general.

For some first-generation college students, attending college is, as Terenzini, et al. (1994) and Somers, Woodhouse, and Cofer (2004) observed, a very stressful experience for a different reason – some first-generation students are breaking with “tradition” or going against the wishes and expectations of family members by attending college. Terenzini, et al. (1994) call this a “major disjunction” in the life of the student (p. 63).

Rodriguez (2003) studied first-generation college students who graduated and became activists in their communities. Among the number of factors that she defined as influencers of success among first-generation college students, one was a special status that some students held within their families. These students were singled out by family members to build confidence toward taking risks, one of which could be attending college. She also defined a complementary term, which she called positive naming, to describe the process by which a student was groomed by family members and others in an effort to assist them develop their potential interest and capacity for a particular vocation. As an example of this phenomenon, Rodriguez found that teachers and peer role models who encouraged first-generation college students positively influenced them and also contributed to their success during college and beyond. The unique terms coined by Rodriguez – special status and positive naming – are not found elsewhere in the literature about first-generation college students.

In the addition to the literature which addresses specifics such as age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, self-esteem, motivation, and parental support, another type of literature related to first-generation college students takes a more holistic approach to addressing the characteristics of this population. In his memoir, Rodriguez (1982) included an account of the role that education and culture played in his upbringing as a professor and author. He reflected specifically on his experience as a first-generation Hispanic student growing up in California. Rodriguez struggled with the role that affirmative action played in his admission to college and the opportunities he was afforded later as a young college professor. Also at issue was the way that his Hispanic culture and family impacted his decisions, viewpoints, and approaches to his education. The recounting of his experiences growing up, dealing with the challenges that first-generation students face (such as unsupportive parents, language/cultural barriers, and general lack of experience), and the ways that he personally coped with these challenges, contribute to a more holistic understanding of first-generation college students. Rodriguez's memoir is one of the few detailed accounts found in the literature that specifically addresses the general college experiences of a first-generation college student.

Suskind (1999) likewise focused on the detailed experiences of a first-generation college student in his book, *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from Inner City to the Ivy League*. Suskind recounts the life story and education of Cedric Jennings, an exceptionally bright, young African-American male who breaks out of his impoverished Washington, DC community and who later matriculates at Brown University. Cedric, a

first-generation college student, excels in high school despite the ridicule he faces from his peers about his intelligence and educational aspirations. He avoids the gangs and other bad influences of his neighborhood and allies himself with caring and motivating faculty who want him to succeed despite the odds they know he faces. Cedric receives minimal support from his mother, while barely having any contact at all with his imprisoned, drug-addicted father. Despite this lack of support and his family's low-income, Cedric perseveres. Following his high school graduation, he attends Brown University, only to struggle both academically and socially. After much hard work, however, Cedric fulfills his dream of graduating from college. The challenges and obstacles that Cedric Jennings faced as he transitioned from high school to college are lived out each day by many students across America, especially among those who are first-generation college students.

In addition to the demographic and descriptive studies described above, there are also a number of studies that identify college success factors of first-generation college students that are worth mentioning. Dennis, Phinney and Chuateco (2005) contend that identifying variables that may predict academic success for at-risk students (especially first-generation college students) is important and various researchers have endeavored to not only identify and describe these factors, but also to issue predictions based on their findings. The types of variables examined in these studies include: ACT/SAT scores and Grade Point Average (GPA), as well as non-cognitive variables (e.g. motivation, parental support, socioeconomic background, level of engagement, self-esteem, and ethnicity).

Naumann, Bandalos, and Gutkin (2003) compared variables of self-regulated learning (e.g., goal orientation, self-efficacy, and time management) with ACT scores in an attempt to predict the success of first-generation college students. They determined that ACT scores were considered valid predictors of academic success, but also argued that self-regulated learning variables should be considered when making admission decisions about first-generation college students. Among this student population, they contended self-regulated learning variables contributed to a broader and more holistic understanding of these students.

Strayhorn (2006) used longitudinal data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) *Baccalaureate and Beyond* study to determine the impact a student's status as a first-generation college student had on his or her academic achievement. Using cumulative GPA as a measurement of success, and controlling for numerous variables such as age, sex, academic major, employment, and educational goals and aspirations, Strayhorn concluded that first-generation status, along with race and gender, are often valid predictors of academic achievement. He determined that a high or low GPA is not the result of one or two variables, but is instead impacted by a combination of variables that fall into categories such as background demographics, pre-college experiences, and college experiences. Overall, Strayhorn concluded that first-generation status has a small, positive impact on GPA.

Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) measured motivation as a predictor of success for first-generation college students. In addition to motivating factors, college support mechanisms for ethnic minority first-generation students were also considered as

factors that may or may not influence academic success. Their study responded to a lack of research that existed on the specific role motivation played on influencing the college outcomes of ethnic minority first-generation college students. Involving 100 students of various ethnic backgrounds, each the first in their families to attend college and all enrolled at the same institution on the west coast, the survey-based study was conducted over the course of two academic years. Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco concluded that first-generation students who were motivated to attend college by intellectual curiosity, the desire to have a rewarding career, and personal academic interests showed successful adjustment to college. This research also found that the likelihood of a positive adjustment to college for first-generation college students was poor when there was a lack of support among the group's peers and families.

Motivation as a predictor of academic success was also studied by Cushman (2007) who conducted a large, qualitative study based on interviews with first-generation college students (current students or recent graduates) from around the United States. Through her conversations, she hoped to learn more about the transition experiences and the integration strategies first-generation college students used to navigate college, adapt to a higher education environment, and to achieve academic success. Cushman observed that first-generation college students experience an academic and social "cultural shift" that takes place as they transition from high school to college. The cultural shift, she concluded, had an impact on both how students handled their academic coursework and interactions with faculty as well as how they judged their self-esteem and understood their self-perception. Cushman emphasized that faculty and staff members need to be

positive, encouraging, and motivating forces in the lives of first-generation college students in order to make their transition and success in college possible.

Another factor that can determine the success of first-generation college students is the amount of parental support they receive (Saenz, et al., 2007; Terenzini, et al., 1996). Generally speaking, parents' lack of support for first-generation college students is attributed to their lack of knowledge on how to assist their children with college-level work (Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005) and their lack of familiarity with the stress and pressures faced in college (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) suggest that parents' lack of experience with higher education deprives first-generation college students of the "intergenerational benefits of information about college," which, ultimately, makes college a potentially greater challenge for them.

McCarron and Inkelas (2006) examined how parental involvement impacted the educational aspirations of first-generation college students versus non-first-generation college students. Their analysis of longitudinal data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 1988 confirmed that parental involvement (defined as having discussions about college coursework, helping with homework, and discussing ACT and SAT preparations) was a predictor of educational aspirations for first-generation college students.

Within the body of literature concerning the success factors of first-generation college students is a sub-set of research by Alessandria and Nelson (2005), Bui (2002),

McGregor, et al. (1991), Phinney and Haas (2003) and Richardson and Skinner (1992) that addresses self-esteem, stress, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background.

Ting (2003) studied Caucasian and minority first-generation college students' background and problems so as to predict their success in college and persistence from freshman to sophomore year. Focusing on first-generation college students enrolled at a public research university located in the southeast, Ting used student scores on the eight non-cognitive scales from the NCQ (Non-Cognitive Questionnaire) developed by Tracey & Sedlacek (1981) to predict the first-year GPAs of the 215 students who participated in the study. Ting discovered that community service was an indicator of academic success. Students who possessed long-term goals were also more likely to be successful. He found that minority students in the study were more likely to come from low-income backgrounds, work more, and require more financial aid. These students had lower scores related to demonstrated community service. They rated higher than their Caucasian peers when it came to understanding and coping with racism.

This literature reveals that numerous variables contribute to the success of a first-generation college student's higher education experience. These variables (both cognitive and non-cognitive) include, but are not limited to: high school academic record, ACT/SAT score, level of motivation, amount of parental support and involvement, self-esteem, personality characteristics, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and college-related knowledge. The authors of these studies demonstrate in their research that understanding these variables and developing appropriate responses is crucial to fostering the success of first-generation college students.

In summary, first-generation college students are students whose parents did not attend college and do not have any college experience. These students are a significant population of students enrolled in higher education today. First-generation college students are primarily traditional age, but can also be working adults returning to school. Research has demonstrated that parental support for first-generation college students is critical, as is an understanding of how they “process” and cope with their college experience (this has implications for self-esteem, identity development, and motivation). First-generation college students are often considered “at risk” and can sometimes enter college underprepared (both academically and socially). They often come from a lower socioeconomic background and are minorities. Studies have been conducted to determine what can lead to the success of first-generation college students in college, such as increased engagement, living in residence halls, or having attended a private high school. A handful of studies concerning first-generation college students have focused on their overall college experiences, while numerous others have focused on prediction of those factors that will lead to a successful college experience for first-generation college students.

#### Attrition and Persistence

What factors contribute to attrition and persistence of first-generation college students, as well as the retention and graduation rates of first-generation students enrolled in public and private institutions? The published discourse is rich on this topic. I briefly reviewed it in this section.

The literature reveals that first-generation students are twice as likely to dropout of college as compared to their peers whose parents attended college and, along with minority and low-income students, first-generation college students are often considered “at-risk” and prone to drop out or perform poorly in college due a to lack of parental support, low socioeconomic status, or poor academic preparation (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Choy, 2001; Martinez, et al., 2009; Oldfield, 2007).

In *Students Whose Parents Did Not Got to College: Postsecondary Access, Persistence, and Attainment*, Choy (2001) determined that first-generation status was a characteristic of students who left a four-year institution sometime during their first-year of college. Data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS), and the *Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study* were used in Choy’s report to show that first-generation college students were twice as likely to leave college prior to the start of their second academic year than students whose parents attended college. The report also discovered several other factors that contributed to attrition among first-generation college students. These included receiving low grades during the first academic year, working a part-time job while attending college, not participating in campus activities, and not immediately enrolling in college after the conclusion of high school.

Choy (2001) also studied the persistence of first-generation college students once they successfully completed the first two years of their post-secondary experience and concluded that they are just as likely as other students to persist after three years and achieve associate’s degrees or certificates. When it comes to four-year universities or

colleges, however, first-generation college students were less likely to achieve bachelor's degrees than their peers whose parents attended college.

Ishitani (2003) conducted a longitudinal study of first-generation college students and their behavior as it relates to attrition. The findings of this study, which were based on data from a sample of institutions from the Midwest, included 1,747 students. Ishitani found that first-generation college students were more at risk of leaving college than their non-first-generation counterparts. The study also documented that the risk of attrition was significantly higher for first-generation college students in their first year of college.

Three years later, Ishitani (2006) studied attrition of first-generation college students using "event history modeling," which addresses behaviors associated with leaving college. Using the 1988-2000 Postsecondary Education Transcript Study (PETS), Ishitani analyzed the attrition and degree completion behavior of 4,427 students and concluded that first-generation college students were at high risk for departure during their first year of college (more so than their non-first-generation counterparts) and were at even greater risk for attrition during their second year of college. This risk for departure declined once first-generation college students persisted through their second year. Ishitani's findings were congruent with Choy's (2001) in that both discovered high risk for attrition in the first and second years of college for first-generation college students that gradually abated once students made it to their junior and senior years.

Somer, Woodhouse and Cofer (2004) found that first-generation college students, in particular, are less likely to persist in college. They also found that first-generation college students who sought a bachelor's degree were twice as likely to attain the degree

as their non-first-generation peers. They also concluded from their study that first-generation college students must have academic and social support in order to persist toward graduation – and those first-generation students who attend college full-time or live on campus have a better chance of staying in school.

Billson and Terry (1982) studied the attrition of first-generation college students at a residential, private liberal arts college and at a public liberal arts college. The researchers collected survey data from currently enrolled students at these institutions, as well as those who had dropped out. This survey data were supplemented with personal interviews of both types of students. They found that first-generation and non-first-generation college students expected the same results from their higher education experience, noting intellectual enhancement and greater career opportunities as expected outcomes. Still, the research indicated key differences between the student populations. Most notably, Billson and Terry determined that first-generation college students lacked high levels of “structural integration” – feelings of strong connection to the campus environment. This notion strongly supports Tinto’s (1993) assertion that students must be comfortable with their college environment and make a connection to the campus in order to increase the likelihood of persistence. Billson and Terry reasoned that first-generation college students were less likely to achieve high levels of structural integration because they were also less likely to live on campus, get involved in activities and were more likely to work part-time jobs.

Finally, Billson and Terry also concluded that first-generation and non-first-generation students shared similarly high expectations for their academic success (i.e.

graduate with a degree). Their research also showed, however, that students who withdrew from college believed that college was not the only way to become successful. Billson and Terry observed that, due to their closer alignment with the working world, often gained through part-time jobs, first-generation college students were less inclined to view a college degree as the only qualification for making a living. As a result, leaving college, to them, appeared to be a viable option or alternative.

In their study of financially-motivated decisions by first-generation college students to depart from college, Somers, Woodhouse, and Cofer (2004) found that first-generation college students have a significant fear of accumulating debt, and are less likely to take out loans to finance college. They point out that as more emphasis is placed on using loans to pay for college (versus federal grants), there is an increasing likelihood that first-generation college students (many of whom are low-income) who have successfully gained admission into college may have to stop-out because of the financial burden placed on them and their families.

Pratt and Skaggs (1989) dedicated their research to determining whether or not first-generation college students were more likely to drop out of college than their non-first-generation peers. Using Tinto's model of attrition/student departure, with a specific focus on the four constructs of goal commitment, institutional commitment, academic integration, and social integration, Pratt and Skaggs analyzed data collected at the University of Maine as part of the UCLA Cooperative Institutional Research Project (CIRP) national survey of 1988. First-generation college students, they found, reported being more doubtful about their preparation for college; believed that they were more

unlikely than their non-first-generation counterparts to join a sorority or fraternity; anticipated that they were most likely to only obtain a bachelor's degree (and not an advanced degree); and indicated that they were less likely to transfer to another school at some point during their college experience.

Pratt and Skaggs did not find major reasons to believe that first-generation college students were more likely to leave college during their first-year, a conclusion that appeared to be in contrast to the findings of others, especially Billson and Terry (1982) and Choy (2001). Due to the limitations of Pratt and Skaggs's study, which focused only on students at the University of Maine, questions about generalizing these findings to all first-generation college students could be raised.

Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) explored the various determinants of first-to-second-year persistence among first-generation college students and what they term "continuing-generation" college students (also referred to as non-first-generation or second-generation college students). Through an analysis of a national sample of data from the *Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Survey, 1996-2001*, the authors found that first-generation college students who were Hispanic, had low incomes, or were female were more likely to be challenged in persisting from the first year to the second year of college. None of these particular variables impacted students whose parents had attended college. Not including the work of Pratt and Skaggs, the majority of findings outlined above were in line with the conclusions of larger, more encompassing studies conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, such as those by Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin, (1998) and Warburton, Bugarin, and Nuñez (2001). This research fully

supported the theory that first-generation college students were more likely to drop out of college than non-first-generation college students.

As for students who attend private institutions of higher education, Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) found that first-generation college students who attended private institutions were more likely to drop out than those who attended public institutions. This conclusion appears to contradict findings of several major studies concerning the retention and graduation rates at private versus public institutions.

Data collected in 2009 as part of the ACT Institutional Data Questionnaire (an annual survey of two- and four-year postsecondary schools) reveal that private institutions (which includes faith-based colleges and universities) granting bachelor's degrees retained students from their freshman to sophomore year at a higher rate (69.9 percent) than comparable public institutions (67.6 percent). The same can be said for those institutions granting master's degrees (72 percent at private institutions and 69.8 percent at public institutions) (ACT, 2009).

As for persistence towards degree, again, private institutions did a better job of moving students toward graduation. In those institutions granting bachelor's degrees, the average persistence rate was 55.9 percent in private institutions and 43 percent in public institutions. As for those institutions granting master's degrees, the average persistence rate was 54.8 percent at private institution versus 38.4 percent at public institutions (ACT, 2009).

According to data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) Study, low-income, first-generation college students were almost four times as likely to drop out of

college after their first year of studies than those of their peers who were not considered first-generation and low-income (Pell, 11). More specifically, 77 percent of low-income, first-generation students attending private, non-profit four-year institutions (the category into which private, faith-based colleges and universities falls) persisted to their second year of college. The comparable figure for those students attending a public, four-year institution was 76 percent (Pell, 11).

As for graduation rates, 43 percent of low-income, first-generation college students failed to graduate from college. The six-year graduation rate for this population of students enrolled at public, four-year institutions was 34 percent, while the graduation rate at private, four-year colleges and universities was 43 percent (a difference of 9 percent) (Pell, 12). It is important to note that the figures cited in the Pell Institute report refer to students who are both first-generation AND low-income. Although these two risk factors are very commonly linked, not all first-generation college students come from low-income households and not all low-income students are first-generation college students.

Although these statistics are useful and helpful, very little research has been conducted concerning persistence and retention at religiously affiliated institutions (Burks & Barrett, 2009, Vander Schee, 2009), with only a handful of studies emerging that address the intersection of religiously affiliated or faith-based higher education and retention and persistence. A review of this literature follows.

Vander Schee (2009) argues that because faith-based, private colleges and universities are tuition-dependent, effective and focused retention strategies are vitally

important for these types of institutions. Vander Schee's study, which focused on the 102 colleges and universities that comprise the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), revealed that an important retention strategy implemented by the majority of these institutions is the presence of a retention coordinator. Despite the position related to retention coordination, Vander Schee also found that 40 percent of the institutions studied did not have a formal, documented institutional-wide retention program in place. He attributes this lack of a formal program (despite an increase in the number of retention coordinator positions) to the fact that many institutions simply give an existing individual in the admission or enrollment unit additional responsibilities, but not adequate funding for a fully-developed, systematic process). Vander Schee concluded that a formal, coordinated series of retention initiatives was more beneficial than any one individual retention practice, such as orientation programs, exit interviews or early alert programs. He found that freshmen to sophomore retention rates increased the longer an institutional-wide retention program existed.

Burks and Barrett (2009) studied the factors that resulted in freshmen to sophomore persistence in religiously affiliated colleges and universities. Using data from HERI's Your First College Year (YFCY) survey from 27 religiously affiliated, four-year institutions, the authors sought out the student characteristics, institutional classification choices, and student activities that contributed to freshman to sophomore year persistence.

Burks and Barrett found that students who attended religious services frequently were more likely to persist to their sophomore year. In addition, students who lived on

campus and those who were engaged with faculty regularly or who joined a fraternity or sorority were also more likely to re-enroll for their sophomore year.

Morris, Smith, and Cejda (2003), analyzed data from two questionnaires (the Student Information Form developed by HERI and the Institutional Integration Scales developed by Pascarella & Terenzini) administered to freshman at a mid-sized Christian University located in the southwestern United States in order to test Tinto's Model of Student Attrition. The researchers added five questions to the Institutional Integration Scales to serve as a "spiritual integration" variable so that they could determine if spiritual integration into the university community is a predictor of freshman to sophomore year persistence. Morris, Smith and Cejda found that measuring a student's spiritual integration is indeed a valuable predictor of freshman to sophomore year persistence and suggested that a student's "spiritual fit" on a college campus has positive implications for persistence.

In summary, the literature concerning attrition and persistence of first-generation college students tells us that first-generation college students were 2 to 4 times as likely to dropout of college as compared to their peers. In addition, these students don't have the same level of parental support as those students whose parents attended college. As a result, additional academic support and assistance is required by first-generation college students in order for them to successfully pass their courses, flourish socially, and graduate. However, once first-generation college students persist through to their third year of college, they are just as likely to graduate as their non first-generation peers. Additionally, first-generation college students face other obstacles that often result in the

decreased likelihood of their graduating, such as fear of accumulating debt, having unreasonable expectations of what they can accomplish in college, working full time to pay for school, and not developing social support networks on campus.

First-generation college students attending private colleges and universities, however, are more likely to persist than their counterparts at public institutions. First-generation college students attending private institutions were also more likely to graduate from college. Several studies have been conducted which suggest that spiritual integration and participating in religious services were characteristics of first-generation college students who attended private universities and persisted to graduation.

Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) observed that, “a better understanding of differences in the first-to-second-year persistence behaviors of first-generation and continuing generation students could lead to targeted programs and policies to promote the success of first-generation students” (p.409). Bearing this mind, I now turn to a more in-depth view of support strategies and programs designed to assist first-generation colleges students succeed in college.

### Support Strategies

In this section, I focus on four popular strategies that colleges and universities have designed to support first-generation college students: bridge programs, freshman seminar courses, learning communities, and peer mentoring programs. Over the past ten years in particular, the number of these innovative approaches has expanded, in large measure because of their value in assisting students in their academic transition and performance (Engberg & Mayhew, 2007). Strategies such as bridge programs (Walpole,

Simmerman, Mills, Scales, & Albano, 2008), first-year success courses and seminars (Engberg & Mayhew, 2007), learning communities (Jehangir, 2009), and peer mentoring programs (Clark, 2005) use varying approaches to reconcile, as best as possible, some of the disadvantages first-generation college students often face when they enter college (Billson & Terry, 1982; Naumann, et al., 2003; Oldfield, 2007; Pratt & Skaggs, 1989; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991).

### *Bridge Programs*

Bridge programs (also known as pre-freshman summer programs), are examples of one type of transitional program that has been designed to assist at-risk students with their adjustment to college life by addressing academic deficiencies, fostering self-esteem and confidence, and demonstrating the institution's commitment to a successful transition from high school to college (Walpole, et al., 2008). Lasting anywhere from one week to several weeks, with a curriculum tailored to a specific student group, bridge programs can be especially important for first-generation college students because they provide an extended orientation to campus life, general education requirements, the expectations and responsibilities of college-level work, and learning and time management strategies (Kezar, 2000). More research concerning the impact bridge programs have on college adjustment and achievement is necessary, but several studies provide insight into the success of these programs (see Perna, 2003; Maggio, White, Molstad & Kher, 2005; Walpole, et al., 2008).

Walpole, et al. (2008) examined the impact of a bridge program by comparing bridge students to a control group of students who were part of the mainstream

population of the institution. The students admitted to the program were considered “at-risk” due to their low-income status or weak academic performance in high school. The majority of these students also reported being first-generation college students. The cohort of students in the summer bridge program was studied over the course of two years and utilized two data sources: a survey designed by the researchers that measured academic and social involvement over the period of the study and a collection of demographic data from the school’s institutional research office. The researchers found that the vast majority of bridge program students expected to complete the program and enroll in college that coming fall. During the second year of the study, analysis of retention data associated with the bridge group and the control group indicated that 72% of the bridge program students persisted compared to 69% of the mainstream or control group students. They also discovered that academically the only main difference between the two student groups was that bridge participants took fewer credit hours than the mainstream group.

Maggio, White, Molstad, & Kher (2005) studied how bridge program components impacted student achievement and retention. The study reviewed bridge programs at six institutions of diverse nature studying students for three years after completion of the program. Using program and student data from the institutions involved in the study, including program size, duration, and tutoring components as well as students’ high school GPA and age, the researchers found that larger bridge programs correlated with lower cumulative GPA for the participants and longer bridge programs were not likely to result in significantly higher college GPAs. They also found that student retention rates

were lower in programs that included tutoring as a voluntary “option” instead of a mandatory requirement.

Thelin and Taczak (2007) studied how at-risk students (such as first-generation college students) perceived their enrollment in a bridge program called Summit College at the University of Akron. Through journaling exercises, students were asked to reflect on why they believed they were in such a support program. The researchers found that most students did not understand why they were enrolled in the program, and many questioned if they should be in the program at all. The students eventually recognized the benefits of the program, citing enhanced opportunities to focus on success in college and greater understanding of the support services available to them. Thelin and Taczak’s research revealed that a student’s understanding of the bridge program (and the rationale for his or her placement in it) is vital to the student’s comfort and success in college.

Lack of clarity among students with regard to their placement in a bridge program is not the only drawback associated with these kinds of supports. Walpole, et al. (2008) also noted that because bridge students in their study earned fewer credit hours, students enrolled in the program were likely to attend college for a period longer than four years. The perspectives of Maggio, et al., (2005), Thelin and Taczak, (2007), and Walpole, et al., (2008) speak to the benefits bridge programs offer. The authors underscore the importance of the various characteristics of the programs and the need for their careful design and implementation to ensure an experience that contributes to a positive transition to college.

*Freshman Seminar Courses*

Freshman seminar courses have great appeal to colleges and universities. Since the late 1980s, thousands of these courses have been developed. Today, over 70 percent of higher education institutions offer freshman seminar courses, largely in an effort to retain college students (Barefoot, 2000). Freshman seminars enhance student-to-student and faculty-to-student interaction, increase the likelihood of student engagement on campus outside of the classroom, and provide a form of on-going orientation to college life that new students often need (Andrade, 2007; Barefoot, 2000). Engberg and Mayhew (2007) define a first-year success course, or freshman seminar, as:

...courses...designed to teach students how to successfully integrate into the college community by providing curricular content infused with issues germane to the first-year experience, such as effective time management and study and coping skills, and by providing students with the tools needed to access and navigate a variety of university services, ranging from those housed in the library to the counseling center. (p. 242)

Barefoot (2000), Engberg and Mayhew (2007), Potts and Schultz (2008), and Schnell and Doetkott (2003) all argue that a sound theoretical basis (namely, Astin's theory of student involvement, Tinto's theory of student departure, and social support theory) is vital to the success of these courses in their ability to ease students through their high school to college transition and help them adapt to college. Most first-year initiatives, including freshman seminars, have multiple outcomes and benefits, but, by far, the most sought after outcome is enhanced student retention (Andrade, 2007; Barefoot, 2000; Fidler, 1991; Murphy, 1989; Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999).

Schnell and Doetkott (2003) conducted a longitudinal study that measured the impact of a first-year seminar on retention rates. They found that although overall retention rates dropped over the course of four years for the students involved in the study, those who participated in a freshman seminar were retained at a greater rate than those students who opted out of participating in the same seminar. In another longitudinal study, Williford, Chapman and Kahrig (2001) studied the persistence and academic success of students who participated in a freshman seminar class over a ten-year period. They found that in eight of the ten years that the study was underway, students who participated in the “University Experience” course at Ohio University were retained at a higher rate than those students who did not take the course.

Freshman seminars also play a role in assisting at-risk students, as highlighted by Potts and Schultz (2008) in their study of the role the freshman seminar plays in the academic success of at-risk students. These researchers found that first-year business majors who participated in a freshman seminar and who exhibited certain “at risk” characteristics upon admission (e.g., commuter status, low high school GPA, and low ACT score) were retained at a higher rate than those students who were not at risk.

Freshman seminars can be used as stand-alone additions to the curriculum, or they can be scheduled along with other courses in a “block” of required classes for first year students. Blocks or connected courses are commonly referred to as learning communities (Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999) and are defined by Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith (1990) as:

Any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses – or actually restructure the material entirely – so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and interaction of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise (p. 19).

### *Learning Communities*

Learning communities, a third popular support strategy, usually include 20-25 students (Andrade, 2007) and can be designed for commuter students or for those living in residence halls (Barefoot, 2000; Pike, 1999). Learning communities are important forms of support for first-year students because they serve as catalysts for interaction among peers, classmates, faculty, and staff members. They also assist students in drawing connections between academic subject matter discussed in class and make for a more engaging learning experience (Soldner, Lee, & Duby, 1999). Andrade (2007) offers four goals for learning communities: retention, academic achievement, engagement, and student satisfaction. Indeed, learning communities have been found to positively enhance retention and improve grade point averages, as well as create cohesiveness for students around specific coursework (Barefoot, 2000; Habley & McClanahan, 2004). Engstrom & Tinto (2008) found that learning communities also contributed to students' sense of belonging in college and that they "...heightened students' sense of themselves as learners and increased [their] confidence in their ability to succeed" (p. 49). It is not uncommon to see learning communities structured around any number of topics, in residential settings, or designed for specific populations of first-year students (Barefoot, 2000).

A study conducted at Northern Michigan University by Soldner, Lee, and Duby (1999) suggests that students who participated in both a freshman learning community and an accompanying freshman seminar course were less likely (than those students not enrolled in a learning community) to be in poor academic standing at the end of their first semester. These students were also more likely to persist into their sophomore year and beyond. Qualitative results of an evaluation administered to participants revealed that students believed the learning community helped them form study groups, build social networks and out-of-class relationships, and become more connected to their instructors and the University as a whole.

Although the base of literature on learning communities is quite extensive, and a portion of the literature focuses on first-year student learning communities, research specific to learning communities for first-generation college students appears to be sparse. Jehangir (2009) addressed the lived experiences of first-generation college students who participated in a multicultural learning community at a large public research university. The author argues that the curriculum of three linked courses focused on identity, community and agency helped students appreciate their multicultural backgrounds and also alleviated or mitigated some of the loneliness or isolation that first-generation college students often feel during the first year of college. This qualitative study, done in conjunction with a federal TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) grant, was conducted with seven separate cohorts over a six-year period, and involved 128 students. Data was collected through use of weekly journals kept by the student participants. Journaling allowed for the students to document their experiences and

feelings throughout the study and not simply at the conclusion of the yearlong program. Jehangir concluded that the students demonstrated development of their self-identity, a stronger appreciation for their respective cultural backgrounds, and also found a sense of belonging and personal voice during the first year of college.

Inkelas, Daver, Vogt and Leonard (2007) conducted an analysis of National Study of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP) data to study the academic and social transition of first-generation college students. They found that first-generation college students enrolled in living-learning programs possessed a stronger belief that they would be more successful in their academic and social transition to college. Questions from the NSLLP survey that were singled out for review pertained to campus involvement, campus climate, support of the residence hall environment, anticipated confidence in handling college level work, sense of belonging on campus, and the academic/co-curricular environment. The authors found that that the actual impact of the living-learning program was not strong. They attributed this factor to the timing of the study, citing that the students surveyed were still in the actual transition process and experiencing the living-learning program. In general, the authors argued that living-learning programs are beneficial for first-generation college students insofar as they can ease the academic and social transition for these students.

As part of a study of learning community participants at colleges around the country, Engstrom and Tinto (2008) evaluated academically under-prepared students enrolled in learning communities. They discovered that learning community students who were at-risk or academically under-prepared were more engaged in campus activities than

their counterparts who were not enrolled in a learning community. The learning community students also reported feeling that they received greater support and encouragement than their peers elsewhere, and were more likely to persist to graduation. The authors concluded that, in this case, learning communities contributed to the academic engagement and social involvement of this specific population of students.

At Bowling Green State University (BGSU), learning communities have been developed for specific populations of students – for high achievers as well as those who were academically disadvantaged. Knight (2003) studied this program, known as the University Program for Academic Success (UPAS), to gain insight into the role learning communities played in helping under-prepared and academically challenged students transition from high school to college. The study found that the UPAS program promoted enhanced retention and yielded higher grades. Other learning communities which similarly address at-risk students have been studied by Yockey and George (1998) as well as Johnson (2000).

Despite the number of positive outcomes associated with learning communities, experts have identified some detriments to students who participate in these programs. Although they did not negate the usefulness of learning communities in retaining and integrating students, Jaffee (2007) identified several unintended outcomes of these initiatives that warrant concern and further exploration. By studying the sociological impact of first-year learning communities on their participants over a six-year period of time at one particular institution, Jaffee found that learning communities “re-create[d] a mutually reinforcing high school-like environment with the associated demeanors and

behaviors, characterized by excessive socializing, misconduct, disruptive behavior, and cliques” (p.67). Also, Jaffee found that learning communities fostered a sense of “groupthink” in which students began to assume that independent perspectives did not matter and all members of the group were in agreement, when in reality, they were not.

### *Peer Mentoring*

Peer mentoring is another intervention used to support at-risk students. If desired, peer mentoring can be incorporated into a learning community (Andrade, 2007) or it can remain a simple program that pairs first-year students with seniors for the purposes of improving retention, enhancing learning, and developing relationships among faculty, staff and other students (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003). Peer mentoring is not always synonymous with tutoring; often times it can simply be an opportunity for more experienced college students (juniors, seniors) to share their experiences with first-year students and to counsel them on what lies ahead (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003). Salinitri (2005) offers a comprehensive definition of peer mentoring:

Mentoring is about creating an enduring and meaningful relationship with another person, with the focus on the quality of that relationship including such factors as mutual respect, willingness to learn from each other, or the use of interpersonal skills. Mentoring is distinguishable from other retention activities because of the emphasis on learning in general and mutual learning in particular. Typically, student-mentoring programs match senior-level students or staff members with first-year students (p.858).

Among the small amount of research concerning the effectiveness of peer mentoring in higher education (Wells & Grabert, 2004), there are several studies that describe peer mentoring programs for first-year students and other at-risk populations.

At the University of Western Ontario, Rodger and Tremblay (2003) studied the effects of a first-year peer mentoring program in which upperclassmen served as peer mentors to first-year students over the course of a year. Among the findings of the study, the researchers discovered that students who were mentored by peers (as opposed to those exposed to other forms of intervention) reported lower levels of anxiety about grades and schoolwork. The authors asserted that this was because the mentors shared their personal and educational experiences and challenges with mentees, which helped them approach their own schoolwork with more confidence.

Hurte (2002) described a unique peer mentoring program employed at the University of Tennessee called Arranged Mentor for Instructional Guidance and Organizational Support (AMIGOS). This program deviated from a traditional peer mentoring approach and instead paired faculty members with minority first-year students in an effort to provide an at-risk population with supportive role models capable of offering direct academic assistance. Southern University in Louisiana uses a similar mentoring program, which pairs faculty, staff and local community professionals with at-risk students in an attempt to enhance persistence and graduation rates (Ross-Thomas & Bryant, 1994).

Peer mentoring programs positively impact the retention rates of at-risk students, as demonstrated by research conducted by Salinitri (2005). In this study, Salinitri compared the retention rates of low-achieving students (i.e. those with low high school GPAs in a peer-mentoring group) to those who had higher high school GPAs but did not participate in a peer-mentoring group. Salinitri concluded that peer mentoring contributed

significantly to the retention of students involved in the program, stating that none of the mentored students dropped out of their respective programs, compared to 4.3 percent of those students in the control group.

### Opportunities for Further Research

Based on the literature available, there is a significant opportunity (and a demand, really) for research that evaluates the effectiveness of support strategies and programs. Although many student support programs (both those sponsored by the government, such as TRIO and Upward Bound, and those created by individual educational institutions like those described above) have existed in some form or another for years, longitudinal research as it relates to their impact on undergraduate student retention is scarce (McElroy & Armesto, 1998; Schnell & Doetkott, 2003).

Based on available research, support strategies for first-generation college students and at-risk students center around four major areas: summer bridge programs, freshman seminar courses, learning communities and peer mentoring programs. According to the research, these supports have been largely successful and beneficial for first-generation collegians. In a national study for ACT, Habley and McClanahan (2004) determined that first year programs, including freshmen seminars and learning communities, made the greatest impact on retention. These programs are making a difference, but gaps in the literature concerning the depth and breadth of these kinds of support strategies and programs exist.

There does not appear to be much research concentrating on freshman seminar courses developed specifically for unique cohorts of students, such as first-generation

college students or underprepared students. Additionally, little research focuses on curricular innovations or interventions used in freshman seminar courses that will work specifically for first-generation college students.

Few comparison studies have been undertaken which draw out benefits or limitations of support programs for first-generation college students at private, faith-based institutions versus public institutions. Also, little or no research appears in the literature regarding the kinds of support programs that capitalize upon the unique benefits that a faith-based institution of higher education offers.

#### Limitations on Existing Research

Although much has been examined and studied about first-generation college students, three distinct limitations concerning this research exist. The first limitation is that much of the research on first-generation college students addresses quantitative measures, such as retention and graduation rates, high school and college GPA, or studies a more narrowly focused characteristic of first-generation college students such as ethnicity or socioeconomic background. Pascarella, et al. (2004) wrote “surprisingly little is known about their [first-generation college students] college experiences or their cognitive and psychosocial development during college.” While this type of research on the college experiences of first-generation students does exist, the quantity and depth of this research is lacking. In this literature review, the vast majority of research reviewed was quantitative in nature and does not specifically address personal narratives or offer in-depth opportunities to learn more about the college experiences and day-to-day life of first-generation college students.

A few good examples of this kind of research exist, but there are only a handful of these studies. For instance, Rood (2009) studied junior and senior first-generation college students at a private, liberal arts, Christian college located in the Northeast. His qualitative study specifically addressed why students chose to attend this particular institution and why they persisted. Using interviews and focus groups, Rood worked with 12 students in his study (75 percent of those who participated were female, half were transfer students, and most were traditional age college students). In addition, most of the students who participated in the study classified themselves as “independent” and not affiliated with a particular religious denomination.

Three key themes emerged from Rood’s study: family, faith, and faculty. Students interviewed in the study confirmed the important role that family members play in the college choice process and in the support that they give to the student during the college experience. Because the institution in question was a Christian college, faith played a role in some of the lives of the students who participated in the study. The role of faculty at the small institution played a significant role in the lives of the students who participated in the study and their interaction with the faculty, Rood argued, contributed to their persistence. Students appreciated out of class contact with faculty, the personal relationships that were formed, and the encouragement and support they received from caring faculty.

Another noteworthy qualitative study is London and Zwerling’s work; London studied first-generation college student experiences from a qualitative standpoint in *Breaking Away: A Study of First Generation College Students and Their Families* (1989)

and partnered with Zwerling (1992) to publish *First-Generation Students: Confronting the Cultural Issues*, a collection of essays and studies that used various qualitative approaches to study the experiences of first-generation students in community colleges. Both pieces of research describe student experiences from a number of standpoints so that the reader can better understand the students' transition from high school to college. These studies reveal the cultural differences impact that transition and that there are many family dynamics that often play a prominent role in shaping a first-generation college student's experience of gaining admission to and succeeding in college. At the same time, London and Zwerling's work also spotlights various initiatives and programs being implemented at higher education institutions that are helping to ease the transition for first-generation college students and contributing to their success in college. Another qualitative, experience-focused approach to studying first-generation college students was employed by London (1986), who used a case-study approach and conducted in-depth interviews with 15 first-generation college students to learn more about their personal histories, family responsibilities, and relationships. The resulting, detailed descriptions of student experiences paid particular attention to the challenges first-generation college students faced in college in an effort to assist administrators and college officials in understanding the personal situations and circumstances associated with the first-generation college student experience.

Bryan and Simmons (2009) studied the college experiences of 10 first-generation college students who grew up in Kentucky's Appalachian region. Their qualitative, interview-based research was focused specifically on the role and levels of influence that

families and parents played in the success of these college students. Their findings were congruent with the existing literature on first-generation college students, but suggested that more research is needed on students in the Appalachian region – especially as it relates to the role of parents and families in the educational experience of first-generation college students.

Olenchak and Hebert (2002) conducted qualitative, case study-based research to learn more about the experiences of gifted, underachieving male first-generation college students and how their experiences could inform the development of support and retention programs for gifted, first-generation students. Through two detailed case studies, the authors found that the need for first-generation college student transition and support programs in higher education are necessary in order for gifted, under-achieving males to be successful in college. They contend that these initiatives must feature intense, one-on-one attention, personalized mentoring and advising, and peer support programs. They believe that a “one size fits all” approach will not work with gifted, first-generation college students.

Torres, Reiser, LePeau, Davis, and Ruder (2006) investigated the college experiences of first-generation Latino/a college students specifically as they relate to relationships with those in positions of authority, such as academic advisors. In particular, this study focused on the a lack of trust some Latino/a students have in authority figures and how this can often lead to struggles in college. The authors offer suggestions to college student personnel and advisors to assist them in building positive relationships with Latino/a students that will lead to their success.

The second limitation related to the reviewed research on first-generation college students is that there are very few studies that address the effects that private, faith-based institutions of higher education have on the success and experiences of first-generation college students. As noted earlier in this chapter, one study in particular has been conducted which addressed the “narrative experience” of students in private, faith-based higher education (Rood, 2009), and another investigated the kinds of retention and intervention efforts pursued by faith-based institutions (Vander Schee, 2009). Burks and Barrett (2009) studied the persistence factors for students enrolled in religiously affiliated colleges and universities and Morris, Smith and Cejda (2003) studied the role that spiritual integration plays in the persistence of freshman to sophomore students at one particular Christian institution of higher education. The bottom line, though, is that the depth and breadth of this kind of research is lacking.

The third and final limitation is that there appears to be little scholarly research on how faith-based colleges and universities have used their unique missions as a framework for programs, policies, or approaches to recruit, support, and graduate first-generation college students. There is no mention in the literature of ways in which a specific religious sponsoring congregation, such as the Jesuits, Franciscans, Dominicans, or Lasallians (De La Salle Christian Brothers), have leveraged their unique identities, their dynamic charisms, or educational philosophies to support first-generation college students.

Through an understanding of the reviewed literature and an acknowledgment of the limitations of this literature, the higher education community could benefit from new

research that offers evidence-based glimpses into the college experiences of first-generation college students enrolled in private, faith-based institutions where a religious charism or educational philosophy plays a role in the lived experience of these students.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this study was to describe and better understand the experiences of first-generation college students in Lasallian higher education. The study was guided by the overarching research question: What are the experiences of first-generation college students at a Lasallian institution of higher education in the United States? More specifically, this study focused on two questions: (1) What experiences specific to Lasallian education do first-generation college students suggest enhance – as well as detract from – their learning and involvement on campus? And, (2) if experiences among these first-generation college students differ at this institution, how might they best be explained?

In this chapter, I discuss the design of the study and provide an overview of the aims of qualitative research, a description of the chosen type of qualitative approach (phenomenology) and explain why a qualitative, phenomenological approach was best suited for this particular study. Second, I describe the sampling method, the selection criteria and how participants were identified and invited to participate in the study. Next, I review the data collection methods as well as the process and steps involved in analyzing the data. I then address the topics of credibility, consistency, and transparency.

I conclude with a reflection on my personal connection and relationship to the topic being studied.

### Design of the Study

Although we appear to know much about first-generation college students with respect to their academic preparation, transition to postsecondary education, and progress toward degree attainment, surprisingly little is known about their college experiences (Pascarella, et al., 2004).

This study employed a qualitative, phenomenological approach to understanding first-generation students and their college experiences. In this first section, I describe the design of the study by examining the purpose and goals of qualitative research, what it means to approach this study through use of a phenomenological philosophy, and why this approach was best suited for the study.

#### *Purpose and Goals of Qualitative Research*

Qualitative research is focused on understanding and explaining the meaning that individuals have constructed out of their experiences and how individuals make sense of the world that surrounds them. As a result, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument and observes, collects, and interprets the data and uses this information inductively; that is, he or she processes the data in order to develop or construct a theory or explain a particular phenomenon (Merriam, 1997). Sherman and Webb (1988) believe that qualitative research “implies a direct concern with experience as it is ‘lived’ or ‘felt’ or ‘undergone’ (p. 7).

By choosing to study a topic using qualitative methodology, the researcher takes a particular stance toward the nature of what is to be studied. Creswell (2007) suggests that

there are five philosophical assumptions that researchers must take into account when determining how best to conduct their research: ontological, epistemological, axiological, rhetorical, and methodological. Each philosophical assumption asks a particular question about the kind of research that will be conducted and entails a specific approach or strategy that the researcher will employ to study the subject. Briefly described, the ontological assumption asks, “What is the nature of reality?” while the epistemological assumption asks, “What is the relationship between the researcher and that being researched?” The axiological assumption asks, “What is the role of values?” while the rhetorical assumption asks, “What is the language of research?” Finally, the methodological assumption asks, “What is the process of research?”

In this study, while all of the assumptions noted by Creswell were addressed, the two that demand explanation here focus on the ontology and methodology. According to Creswell (2007), an ontological stance implies that when researchers study individuals, they “conduct a study with the intent of reporting...multiple realities” – meaning that each individual studied has a different perspective on reality and these realities are then described by the researchers in detail and with evidence of those different perspectives (p.19).

In communicating these multiple realities, a methodology that stresses “thick description” is often employed. Merriam (1997) calls this “richly descriptive” (p.8) and explains that this detailed and thorough description could include vivid images of people, places, and context, and may include quotations, audio and video recordings, cited documents and photographs. This rich description is not possible to obtain through use

of simple surveys or brief contact with the subject being studied. Miles and Huberman (1994) add, “Qualitative research is conducted through an intense and/or prolonged contact with a ‘field’ or life situation. These situations are typically ‘banal’ or normal ones, reflective of the everyday life of individuals, groups, societies, and organizations” (p 6). This prolonged and intense contact results in a deeper understanding of the subject being studied. These particular ontological and methodological assumptions have influenced the approach that guided this study, which I discuss next.

### *Phenomenology*

The word *phenomenon* comes from the Greek *phaenesthai*, to flare up, to show itself, to appear. Constructed from *phaino*, phenomenon means to bring to light, to place in brightness, to show itself in itself (Moustakas, 1994).

Of the many approaches to qualitative research, this study employed a phenomenological approach. According to Creswell (2007), a phenomenological study “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 57) and the goal of this kind of approach is “to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (p. 58). Van Maanen (1990) described this universal essence as “a grasp of the very nature of the thing” (p. 177).

The description of the universal essence, according to Moustakas (1994), consists of an explanation of what those who were studied experienced, how they actually experienced it, and what they had in common. This description is extremely important

because, according to Patton (1990), “these essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced” (p. 70).

Creswell (2007) describes two types of phenomenology: *hermeneutical phenomenology*, which focuses specifically on interpretations by the researcher of a phenomenon of interest, and *transcendental phenomenology*, which is primarily focused on creating detailed descriptions of the study participants’ experiences and allowing the essence of the participant’s experiences to emerge. The type of phenomenology that best suits itself to this study is that of transcendental phenomenology because of its focus on specific, meaningful, individual experiences of a phenomenon; in this case, those narrated by first-generation college students enrolled at a Lasallian college or university. This particular philosophy of phenomenology has been called ‘transcendental’ because, as Moustakas (1994) explains, the phenomenon in question is “perceived freshly, as if for the first time” and “is described in its totality, in a fresh and open way...a complete description is given of its essential constituents, variations of perceptions, thoughts, feelings, sounds, colors, and shapes” (p. 34).

The goal of this study was to learn more about the lived experiences of a group of first-generation college students. As a result, efforts to collect information about and understand that lived experience were focused on capturing as much of the essence of what it means to be a first-generation college student as possible, rather than on measurements or statistics. In this kind of study, the researcher must speak with the student, spend time with him or her at the college or university, and engage with the student in a thorough way. As Miles and Huberman (1994) assert, the goal must be to

“gain a ‘holistic’ (systemic, encompassing, integrated) overview of the context under study: its logic, its arrangements, its explicit and implicit rules” (p. 6).

A qualitative, phenomenological approach was best suited for this study because it allowed for first-person accounts and detailed descriptions. As Merriam (1997) has observed, “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 6). Patton (1985) takes this notion a step further:

Qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting – what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what’s going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting – and in the analysis to be able to communicate that faithfully to others who are interested in that setting....The analysis strives for depth of understanding (p. 1).

An interest in understanding the experience and lived reality of these students as well as how they make meaning out of that experience and context was the primary reasoning for approaching this topic through a qualitative, phenomenological research methodology.

### Research Design and Method

#### *Study Approval*

Approval for the original study was obtained from the Loyola University Chicago Institutional Review Board (IRB) on February 14, 2011. Approval was received from the IRB at the research site (“Lasallian College”) on April 7, 2011.

*Selection of Research Site*

Participants selected for this study were chosen from one of the six Lasallian institutions of higher education in the United States. Each of these institutions offers different kinds of academic programs and meets the needs of different student populations. For example, Saint Mary's College of California places great emphasis on its liberal arts core curriculum, while Christian Brothers University has strong programs in the sciences and offers an engineering program. Saint Mary's University of Minnesota has a rather small undergraduate program, but enrolls large numbers of graduate students. Lewis University in Illinois is known for its strong aviation, nursing and pre-professional programs, while LaSalle University and Manhattan College serve primarily urban populations. One common element each institution shares is that they are each sponsored by the De La Salle Christian Brothers and are animated by a strong Lasallian charism and Catholic tradition.

Despite this common sponsorship element, these institutions serve different student populations – some are primarily residentially based, while others serve large numbers of commuter students. A few institutions are urban, while others are considered suburban. Some of these institutions have a higher percentage of Catholic students; a few others offer more financial aid or have higher annual tuition and room and board rates. Several of these institutions have large graduate student populations, while others enroll large numbers of undergraduate students.

The site selected for this study was an extreme case – meaning that the phenomenon being researched was highly likely to be present; additionally, the institution

is sponsored by the De La Salle Christian Brothers (i.e., it's described as "Lasallian"), serves primarily undergraduate students, and has programs or initiatives that support and address the needs of first-generation college students. For the purposes of this research project, I will call the site that was selected "Lasallian College."

### *Participant Selection*

As Creswell (1997) explains, the goal of a phenomenological study is to identify multiple individuals who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation. For this study, I planned to select a total of eight students to participate from one of the six above-mentioned institutions. After the sampling process was complete, thirteen students participated in the study.

The sampling strategy that lends itself best to qualitative research is what is called "purposeful" or "purposive" sampling (Merriam, 2009). This means that the researcher intentionally selects sites and subjects to study because they are known to fit certain criteria established by the researcher for best understanding the phenomenon in question (Creswell, 1997). Patton (2002) explains purposeful sampling in this way:

The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling (p. 230).

Miles and Huberman (1994) offer sixteen different purposeful sampling strategies, one of which is called "criterion sampling" or, as LeCompte and Preissle (1993) call it, "criterion-based selection." In criterion sampling, each case studied meets prescribed criteria defined by the researcher. This allows for sample consistency.

Each participant in this study was a first-generation college student. As defined by Billson and Terry (1982), first-generation college students are “those [students] whose parents have had no college or university experience...in other words, the first generation in their famil[y] to continue education beyond high school” (p.58). This particular definition does not allow for the student’s parents to have any higher education *experience* whatsoever. The following set of criteria was used selecting students to participate in this study:

- Participants must fit the definition of first-generation college students as delineated by Billson and Terry (1982).
- Participants must be full-time, undergraduate students of traditional age (approximately 18-23 years old)
- Participants must be in good academic standing (minimum 2.0 grade point average)

In addition, an effort was made to select a final pool of participants who reflected a diversity of backgrounds and experiences at the institution. This means that the composition of the final sample of interviewees/participants was developed with particular attention to Grade Point Average (GPA), residential/commuter status, faith tradition, gender, race/ethnicity, level of involvement in co-curricular activities, and socioeconomic background.

A faculty member from Lasallian College served as my primary contact at the study site. Creswell (2007) refers to this primary contact as a gatekeeper. In addition, a staff member from the site’s Office of Institutional Research Office assisted me in

identifying students who met the study's participant selection criteria using the College's student records database. My contact identified a pool of 628 first-generation college students at Lasallian College who met the study criteria. Using the College's e-mail system, an e-mail was sent to those 628 students featuring the faculty gatekeeper's return address (Appendix B) on April 11, 2011 introducing me as the researcher and explaining the purpose of the study. A reminder e-mail was sent on April 14, 2011. Students were given until midnight on April 19, 2011 to express their interest in participating in the study.

Students who were interested in participating in the study could express their interest by clicking a link in the e-mail. The link took the student directly to my student selection survey hosted by Loyola University Chicago's Opinio server (Appendix D). The information provided by the students in the survey assisted me in confirming the student's eligibility to participate in the study and was also used to ensure that a diverse pool of participants was selected.

A total of 65 students expressed an interest in participating in the study. Of those 65 students, 40 students indicated that they could be available for an interview on their campus between May 2-8, 2011. After I reviewed the survey results and identified students whose responses were in keeping with the goals of the study, I invited a pool of 22 students to participate in an interview through an e-mail invitation (Appendix E), which provided the students with detailed information about how the next steps of the study would be conducted. The Informed Consent document (Appendix F) was attached to the e-mail with instructions to the student to read and review it. The 18 students who

completed the brief survey but who were not selected to participate in the study received an e-mail from me explaining this (Appendix G).

Of the 22 students whom I invited, 13 students responded. Although the original research proposal called for a final pool of 8 students, I thought it was important to arrange interviews with all 13 students so that in the event any students canceled the interview, I would have “back-ups” ready to go. I also did not want to turn away students who wished to volunteer their time for the study. These additional participants would also enhance the diversity of the pool and provide more depth to the study.

The final pool of students who were interviewed for this study were comprised of one Freshman, two Sophomores, three Juniors, five Seniors, and two students who had been at the college five years. There were five commuter students and eight resident students. Participants ranged in age from 18-28 years old. There were four Hispanic students, one African American student, one Native American, five Caucasian students and two students who claimed two or more races. As for religious preference, there were three who described themselves as Christians, seven Roman Catholics, two agnostics, and one deist.

#### Data Collection Methods

It is the responsibility of the researcher to determine the best method of generating the data needed to address his or her study’s research question(s) appropriately (LeCompte, Millroy & Preissle, 1992). In qualitative studies, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument and observes, collects, and interprets the data and uses

this information to explain a particular phenomenon (Merriam, 1997). For this study, I chose to collect data through semi-structured interviews and photo elicitation.

### *Interviews*

DeMarrais (2004) describes an interview as “a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study” (p.55). In-depth, one-on-one interviews were employed as a means of learning more about the college experiences of the study participants. The interview is the best approach for collecting information from these students. Rossman and Rallis (2003) state that “interviewing takes you into the participants’ world, at least as far as they can (or choose to) verbally relate what is in their minds” (p. 180). Additionally, Merriam (2009) states, “Interviewing is also the best technique to use when conducting intensive case studies of a few selected individuals” (p. 88).

Of the three most common styles of interviews (highly structured, semistructured, and unstructured), semistructured interviews were used in this study. Semistructured interviews have numerous benefits that are congruent with the kinds of information that I endeavored to obtain and learn about in the data collection process. Interviewing in qualitative research studies tends to demand less structure and include more opportunities for detailed description, probing or investigating of subtopics and other references described by the participant (Merriam, 2009). As a result, a semistructured interview format that includes a blend of tightly structured questions and less structured, more open-ended questions was viewed as the best approach for this study. Interview questions

that I developed for a pilot project as part of an advanced qualitative research class were refined, expanded and updated for the creation of the interview protocol (Appendix H).

### *Photo Elicitation*

Individual interviews were supplemented by another data collection technique, that of photo elicitation. In photo elicitation, discussion is stimulated through the use of images, primarily photographs. As Harper describes it in Denzin and Lincoln (1998), photo elicitation is a “very simple variation on the theme of open-ended interviewing” (p. 144). The photo elicitation process helps the student convey his or her thoughts and feelings to the researcher about images that are directly linked to some element of the college experience. As a result, it leads to a more in-depth interview experience. Photo elicitation has an impact on both the researcher and the student. As Harper explains in Denzin and Lincoln (1998):

A dialogue is created in which the typical research roles are reversed. The researcher becomes a listener and one who encourages the dialogue to continue. The individual who describes the images must be convinced that his or her taken-for-granted understanding of the images is not shared by the researcher. (p. 145)

Two weeks prior to the interviews, I mailed a numerically-labeled disposable camera to each study participant along with usage instructions and a list of people, places, and things that the student should photograph in preparation for my interview (see Appendix J). (For example, in a previous research project, I invited the participant to lay out on a table all the items she carried with her during the course of day. I also asked her to take a photograph of her residence hall room, a favorite instructor, and a place where she commonly studied.)

Students were asked to send their “completed” cameras to an on-campus mailbox (a pre-addressed envelope was provided by the researcher along with instructions to not include “return address” information). Upon my arrival to campus, I arranged to have the photos on the cameras developed so that they could be used during the interviews to facilitate discussion. About halfway through the interview, I invited the participant to describe the photographs and explain what is pictured, why an image is significant, and why the image that we are looking at was important. Based on the student’s description, I probed and asked follow-up questions to get a better sense of the elements of the student’s college experience. A complete photo elicitation protocol outlines how this process worked (Appendix I). Photographs used in the photo elicitation exercise were only used to stimulate discussion during the interviews and served no other purpose.

Photo elicitation proved to be a very valuable approach for this study. The photos helped students describe aspects of the mission, identify certain professors who had been particularly helpful to them, and assisted the students in educating me more about the campus. For example, a student showed me a photo of a favorite faculty member and then went on to describe why that individual was so important to her and how this faculty member had been helpful during her time at Lasallian College. Another student took three photos and assembled them horizontally, creating a homemade “panoramic” shot to illustrate how the campus green was so expansive and lush. While another took a picture of a favorite classroom and explained why it was one of his favorite places to learn. Photo elicitation helped the students talk about their experiences and added depth to the interview process.

*Interview Setting and Procedures*

The interviews took place on the campus in a quiet, but familiar location – a conference room in an academic building where classrooms and faculty offices were located. Interviews were scheduled at times that were convenient for study participants and lasted no more than 90 minutes. Interviews were recorded using a digital data recorder.

Participation in this study was voluntary and students had the option to withdraw from the study at any time without any form of penalty, although no students withdrew their participation. There were no foreseeable risks or benefits involved in participating in this study beyond those experienced in everyday life. There were no direct benefits to the study participants for their participation.

All data collected during the interviews was kept in strictest confidence. Prior to the start of the interview, each participant was asked to sign the Informed Consent document (Appendix F), which was sent to them in advance of the interview for their review. Participants were also asked to complete a Summer Contact Form (Appendix K) so that I could make contact with each participant after the school year ended for the purpose of conducting member checks. Also, just prior to the start of the interview, I assured each participant that his or her identity would be kept anonymous and that a pseudonym would be assigned so that his/her identity would be protected. The pseudonym was used to reference the student's role throughout the data analysis and final report writing process.

The digital recordings of the interviews were transcribed several weeks after the interviews took place for use during the data analysis process. The interview transcripts, photographs used in the photo elicitation exercise, and the researcher's field notes were all used in the data analysis process.

### Data Analysis

The goal of the data analysis process is to make sense or meaning out of the data that have been collected as part of the study; it is what is done to answer the researcher's research questions (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) states, "Data analysis is a complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation" (p. 176). According to Merriam (2009), data collection and analysis take place simultaneously. She contends that the process is emergent and dynamic, and occurs both in and out of the research field. The analysis takes a more formal and complex approach once all the data have been collected.

Creswell (2007) observes that there are a variety of methods for analyzing data in phenomenology and that data analysis is "not off the shelf; rather, it is custom-built..." (p. 150) while Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that the data analysis process should be carefully choreographed and planned. Therefore, several steps and procedures were employed to analyze the data generated during this study in a way that best suits the kind of data collected and what is acceptable and recommended for a qualitative, research design using a phenomenological approach.

For this study, data analysis took place both during and after the data collection process. This early analysis took the form of extensive field notes and the creation of initial categories or themes (coding) that emerged in the interviews. Coding, according to Merriam (2009), is the process of assigning a word or “shorthand designation” (p. 173) to pieces of data that facilitates organization and quick recall of the data once the data collection process has been completed. She advocates coding as good means of organizing data so that a more formal analysis can be conducted with greater ease. Creswell (2007) suggests that the researcher begin by identifying 5-6 codes and then gradually expanding the number of codes, not to exceed 25-30 different codes. As the researcher reads and rereads the data, he suggests beginning to look for ways to reduce and combine the number of codes as well.

In addition to extensive field notes and coding, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) have developed ten tips for analyzing data while the data are being collected. A few such suggestions that were utilized during this study included asking participants their opinion about themes or categories that emerged in the interviews, and referring to my literature review during the interview process or in between interviews.

Finally, I maintained a research journal that included what Creswell calls “questions, musings, and speculations about the data and emerging theory” (2007). This journal, or notebook, was a means for me to record additional notes, information about the interview process, and my own reflections and observations immediately following the interviews. (After each interview I spent some time alone reflecting on my discussion with the student and making note of important thoughts and observations.) This process

is, in itself, a means of informal data analysis. I also made additional notes during the interview transcription process, since I transcribed each of the 13 interviews myself. Merriam (2009) suggests that “rather than hiring someone, transcribing your own interviews is another means of generating insights and hunches about what is going on in your data” (p. 174). The transcription process was time-consuming and laborious process, even with the assistance of software designed for this purpose.

Once the interview transcripts were complete and after reading them all thoroughly several times, I began one of the more formal, post-data collection data analysis processes - that of identifying segments of data that appear to be particularly meaningful in terms of responding to my research questions (Merriam, 2009). This process was repeated for each of the interview transcripts and then categories for these segments of data and my own notes were established in order to better organize the information *across* all the transcripts.

Soon, a master list of categories and subcategories emerged. According to Merriam (2009), “this master list constitutes a primitive outline or classification system reflecting the recurring regularities or patterns in your study” (p. 180). I refined and revised these categories and subcategories by returning to the transcripts and my notes and looking for ways to expand or contract the list of categories and determine what other information can be derived from the transcripts. My goal was to create the most concise categories as possible. I engaged in this process until I reached saturation, which is the point at which no new or additional information or understanding appears to be emerging from the data (Merriam, 2009).

The final step involved a review of the categories for the purpose of composing what Creswell (2007) describes as a textural description – what the participants experienced as part of the phenomenon and a structural description – how the experience played out or revealed itself to the study participants. The final step involved combining both the textural and structural descriptions of the participant experiences.

### Trustworthiness

According to Merriam (2009), “All research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner. Being able to trust research results is especially important to professionals in applied fields because practitioners intervene in people’s lives” (p. 209). This section describes the necessary measures to ensure trustworthiness or rigor in qualitative research through credibility, consistency, and transferability.

### *Credibility*

Validity addresses the congruency of a study’s findings with reality; in qualitative research this must be measured differently than in quantitative research (Merriam, 2009). Lincoln and Guba (1985), Eisner (1991), and others suggest that “credibility” is a better term to use in qualitative research. Credibility refers specifically to whether the findings of a study are plausible in light of the data that have been collected and presented. Creswell (2007) suggests that credibility can be confirmed through an audit or review of the processes involved in the research and that at least two procedures be implemented in a qualitative study to provide necessary assurance that the study findings are credible.

In this study three procedures were employed. First, data triangulation was used. According to Merriam (2009), triangulation occurs through the “comparing and crosschecking...of interview data collected from people with different perspectives or from follow-up interviews with the same people” (p. 216).

In order to ensure credibility, I used member checks, also called respondent validation (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) refers to member checks as a process by which “you solicit feedback on your emerging findings from some of the people that you interviewed” (p. 217). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking is “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). Additionally, Maxwell (2005) states that:

[Member checking] is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your own biases and misunderstanding of that you observed. (p.111)

I used two forms of member checks. Several weeks after the interviews were conducted, student participants were each invited to review the transcript of their respective interview and adjust or modify the transcript accordingly in order to portray the most accurate depiction of their thoughts and remarks during the interview (Appendix K). The second form of member checking that was employed is that of peer-review (Merriam, 2009). As part of this process, I gave a trusted colleague who is familiar with my area of research an opportunity to review my initial findings, themes, and ideas and allowed her to comment and offer constructive feedback. No identifiable participant information was revealed during this peer-review process.

The third and final way that I ensured the credibility of my study was by looking for evidence of saturation – meaning that I began to observe the same information repeatedly and it appeared that no new information was emerging in the data collection process (Merriam, 2009).

### *Consistency*

According to Creswell (2007), reliability “refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated” (p. 220). Qualitative research requires a different interpretation of reliability. Because no two people experience or interpret the world in the same way, no two studies will arrive at the same conclusions. As a result, in qualitative research the goal is not to replicate, but instead to ensure, that the results of the study are consistent with the data collected - what Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to as consistency.

Triangulation (described previously) helped to ensure consistency throughout the study, as was the use of an audit trail. An audit trail, according to Creswell (2009), “describes in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry” (p. 223). For this study, I kept a research journal (binder) that consisted of timelines, notes, and procedures as well as my thoughts and reflections regarding the data collection and analysis processes.

### *Transferability*

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that unlike in quantitative research, where the focus is on external validity and the need to generalize or apply the findings of a study to other situations, the qualitative researcher should be more concerned with transferability

– the sense that provided with enough information and context, the user or reader of the qualitative research study can make his or her own judgments concerning what is and what is not transferable concerning a particular study.

In fact, Merriam argues that generalizability goes against the primary purpose of qualitative research, stating “in qualitative research, a single case or small, nonrandom, purposeful sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular phenomenon in depth, not to find out what is generally true of many” (2009, p. 224).

The primary means by which I ensured the transferability of this study was to employ the use of rich, thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) argues “when rich, thick description is used as a strategy to enable transferability, it refers to a detailed description of the findings with adequate evidence presented in the form of quotes from participant interviews, field notes, and documents” (p.227).

### Ethical Considerations

Today’s society places great emphasis on and demands ethical behavior. Research requires the same, if not greater, attention to ethics. Stake (2005) notes, “Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict” (p.459). Merriam (2009) suggests that the two primary areas where ethical concerns or dilemmas are likely to surface are in the data collection process and in reporting the findings of the study.

In this research study, every effort was made to ensure very high standards of ethical behavior in all aspects of the study, but in particular, in these two special areas of focus. First, prior to the start of the data collection process, student participants were asked to review and sign an Informed Consent document (Appendix F) which describes in great detail the goals and procedures of the study and explains what the study will entail. Students had several weeks to review the Informed Consent document, to ask questions, and to discuss any element of the study with me to ensure that they were completely comfortable with how the study would be conducted. Only after this review period were students asked to sign the Informed Consent document just prior to the start of their interview with me.

In an effort to protect the identity of the student participants of this study, pseudonyms were used to reference the student's role throughout the data analysis and final report writing process. In addition, during the photo elicitation exercise, the identities of the student participants were not used in the labeling or developing of the cameras (see Appendix I). Moreover, participants were informed that photos that feature people would not be included as data in the dissertation or in any professional presentations that may result from the research. Digital and hard copies of the transcripts of the interviews as well as photographs were retained in a secure location in my home. These materials will be destroyed five years after the conclusion of the research project.

During the research process, the researcher first makes a good faith effort to "bracket" his or her prior beliefs about a phenomenon so as not to allow his or her previous knowledge or opinions interfere with what emerges during the data collection

and analysis concerning the phenomenon (Merriam, 1997). In an effort to be reflexive about my own position, I discuss some of these biases here and how I bracketed them during the course of this study.

Although this research is on first-generation college students, it is important to note that I am not a first-generation college student. Both of my parents are college-educated. My father held a Ph.D. in Sociology and my mother has an advanced nursing degree. My stepfather is an attorney and my only sibling has a law degree. In my family, not attending college was never an option.

I was first exposed to the term “first-generation college student” during my employment after college at a four-year, Catholic university. It had become clear to me that we, through our institutional mission and the priorities that stemmed from it, gave special attention to this population of students. This special attention was evident with regard to admission to the institution, awarding of financial aid, and in offering academic support services and remedial programs.

Perhaps the most noticeable or visible manifestation of the presence of first-generation college students on campus was their enrollment in our summer bridge program, which although wasn't exclusively for first-generation college students, had a reputation for comprising a majority of first-generation students. The presence of these students on campus two weeks during the summer in what all understood to be a pre-college remedial program sent the veiled message that first-generation college students were typically underprepared for college and often required this kind of extra assistance and orientation.

As I pursued my doctoral degree in Higher Education, I came to have a much more thorough and deeper understanding of first-generation college students through my coursework and instructors. At about the same time, I also had the wonderful experience of getting to know first-hand a first-generation work-study student employed in my office. He recast my image of a first-generation college student. Today, that student is an attorney at a well-known Chicago law firm.

Over the years, I have come to know many first-generation college students and graduates who did not fit the stereotype of being financially needy or academically underprepared for college. Although the literature confirms that these students often enroll in college with certain deficiencies, my own experience is that one also finds many high-achieving, successful first-generation college students in our classrooms who do not experience the same struggles and difficulties in college.

As the researcher, I understand that my own biases and experiences have the ability to impact how I conduct this study as well as how I conduct myself while learning about the lives of the students who participate in this study. One way in which I sought to remain aware of my own potential biases – to bracket them so not to allow them to interfere with my study – was to use the research journal referenced earlier. This journal allowed me to make note of important findings during the interviews; it also served as an opportunity for me to write a brief reflection about what I observed, felt, and experienced while dialoging with each student participant. I spent some time at the conclusion of each interview to jot down some thoughts in this journal before moving on to the next interview. A review of my thoughts and reflections, as recorded in the research journal

throughout the interview and data analysis process, helped me to remain an outside observer.

### Limitations

There are, of course, limitations associated with this study. One limitation is that the study only focuses on one Lasallian university in particular. There are six Lasallian institutions of higher education in the United States and each is very different. The research conducted as part of this study captured the essence of one Lasallian institution and its culture. Future research could include students at those other institutions.

A second limitation is that the study included only 13 students. Although the initial pool was quite high and the original goal of the study was to interview 8 students, a relatively small number of students were involved. In addition, those students who did participate in this study self-selected. As a result, the participants may have had a more positive or fulfilling experience and were excited or interested in telling their respective stories as part of this study. It will also be inappropriate to generalize – however, this study does provide us with a baseline of student experiences at an institution of Lasallian higher education that will be useful to researchers interested in further studying this topic.

### Summary

The purpose of this study was to describe and better understand the experiences of first-generation college students in Lasallian institutions of higher education. The study was guided by the overarching research question: What are the experiences of first-generation college students at a Lasallian institution of higher education in the United States? More specifically, this study focused on two questions: (1) What experiences

specific to Lasallian education do first-generation college students suggest enhance – as well as detract from – their learning and involvement on campus? And, (2) if experiences among these first-generation college students differ at this institution, how might they best be explained?

A qualitative approach was best suited for this study because it focuses on understanding and explaining the meaning that individuals have constructed out of their experiences and how the individual makes sense of the world that surrounds him or her. In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument and observes, collects, and interprets the data in order to explain a particular phenomenon.

This study employed a phenomenological approach. The type of phenomenology that best suits itself to this study is that of transcendental phenomenology because of its focus on specific, meaningful, individual experiences of those who experience the phenomenon. In this case, how first-generation college students make sense of their experience at a Lasallian college or university are the subjects of inquiry.

The first-generation college students selected for this study were chosen from one of the Lasallian institutions of higher education in the United States. In qualitative studies, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument and observes, collects, and interprets the data and uses this information to explain a particular phenomenon. Therefore, data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews, supplemented by photo elicitation.

Data collection and analysis took place according to standards that are acceptable and preferred for qualitative research studies. Various procedures were employed to

ensure credibility, transferability, and consistency of the study; various safeguards were employed to protect the participant's privacy and confidentiality and to ensure that the study was conducted in an ethical manner.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### STUDENT PORTRAITS

As part of this study, thirteen students participated in interviews about their experiences as first-generation college students while enrolled at a Lasallian university. In this chapter, I first provide a description of “Lasallian College” - a pseudonym – one of six Lasallian institutions of higher education in the United States from which all of this study’s participants were chosen. I then offer a series of brief vignettes about the participants. Each vignette focuses specifically on each student’s family background, college choice factors, challenges and successes in college, academic and co-curricular experiences, and career plans. These brief vignettes help place the research findings (Chapters Five and Six) in context.

#### Lasallian College

Lasallian College is one of six colleges and universities in the United States sponsored by the De La Salle Christian Brothers. Lasallian College enrolls approximately 4,000 students, the majority of whom are undergraduates. More than half of all undergraduate students live on campus, including almost all first-year students. The student to faculty ratio is 13:1 and the average class size is 20.

A mid-sized liberal-arts school, Lasallian College has a sizeable endowment and a beautiful sprawling campus. Undergraduate degrees offered include a Bachelor of Arts

and a Bachelor of Science. Graduate degrees include those in the areas of education, business administration, and leadership, among others. The institution participates in Division I athletics and features more than a dozen intercollegiate teams, as well as a club sports program.

Lasallian College prides itself on its core curriculum for undergraduates, which is taught “seminar style” in small groups. The College also prides itself on the way the institution's Lasallian mission is infused throughout the curriculum, especially through service learning and social justice education initiatives. Arts programs at Lasallian College are very popular and strongly emphasized on campus.

The average cost to attend Lasallian College for undergraduate students is approximately \$40,000 annually. Room and board expenses contribute an additional \$13,000 annually. Just over 70 percent of full-time undergraduates receive some sort of financial assistance, with the average financial aid package for full-time undergraduate students amounting to about \$28,000.

### Rebecca

Rebecca’s mom was 16 years old when Rebecca was born. Neither of her parents attended college and today, her dad is “no longer in the picture.” Rebecca is the oldest of four children and is currently a senior at Lasallian College.

Rebecca’s mom proved that she could be successful without a college degree working as a consultant; her father now runs the family business. Rebecca almost dropped out of high school during her junior year, but her mom encouraged her to finish, promising her a trip to Hawaii if she graduated. Rebecca did the bare minimum to

complete her studies and graduate, becoming the first in her family to complete high school. Both of Rebecca's parents have been relatively successful in life, so Rebecca didn't look at college as a logical next step after high school.

At the urging of her mother, and with a promise to assist with paying her tuition, Rebecca enrolled in a local vocational college. She worked full time as a warranty administrator for an auto manufacturer by day and attended school at night. She studied business software, among other subjects. As she progressed through her education at the vocational college, she realized that she wasn't getting the typical "college experience" for which she had hoped.

Rebecca graduated with an Associate Degree, satisfying her mother's interest in her getting a college degree. Soon after receiving her degree, Rebecca realized that she not only wanted the "true" college experience, but that she also needed a Bachelor's degree if she were really to excel. After being laid off from her position as a warranty administrator, Rebecca enrolled in Lasallian College at the age of 24 to study Accounting. She chose Lasallian College because it was one of only a handful of institutions in the area that took transfer credit from the vocational college from which she graduated. Thanks to her good college grades, Rebecca received scholarships that helped to make her dream of receiving a "real college experience" possible. Indeed, Rebecca admitted that because she was so intent on getting a "real" college education, she ignored somewhat the financial costs of pursuing her dream:

I kind of went into it blindly. I didn't really think about the price, and how much it's going to cost, and how in debt I was forever going to be and if I was going to be available for scholarships or financial aid...this is where I wanted to go and I was going to make it happen.

Rebecca sensed, from the start, that she was different from all the others at Lasallian College. She was older than most students, didn't live on campus, and found it hard to build connections with other students because she didn't participate in many campus activities, preferring to get a head start on her commute home instead. Interestingly, after a short time at Lasallian College, Rebecca recognized that she really did not want "the college experience" she had dreamed of during her time at the vocational school. "It wasn't about those experiences anymore, it was about going to college, getting awesome grades, and graduating from college. So my mindset had changed."

Her experiences at Lasallian College have been positive. Rebecca enjoys the small class sizes, the close connections with faculty, and the College's liberal arts core curriculum. She has found value and benefits in all the courses she has taken and believes her experiences at the College have prepared her well for her future profession. She has also enjoyed having the opportunity to be involved in several volunteer service experiences, which she believes reflect the mission of the College well.

As Rebecca prepares to graduate, her mindset has again changed. She and her husband, a police officer, are expecting their first child. Rebecca doesn't plan to seek a job after graduation, choosing instead to stay home to care for her newborn child. Reflecting on her experience, Rebecca now admits that her desire to attend Lasallian

college had much to do with satisfying her own interest in becoming the first in her family to earn a college degree and to have a “real” college experience. She also recognizes, in hindsight, that it was also her “backup” plan. As Rebecca explained, she "always knew" that she would have kids but her husband felt it was important for her to have a sense of security, should something ever happen to him. Rebecca now hopes that when her kids are in school she'll be able to do some part-time work or volunteer, but for the immediate future, her focus is on raising a family

#### Angela

Angela's parents are separated. She doesn't get along with her mother, and she describes her father as “kind of a deadbeat.” Angela moved out of her house at the age of 16 and currently lives with her seventy-eight year old grandmother, who serves as a primary source of support. Angela has two older brothers. She is the first in the family to attend college. She's committed to getting a college degree – both for herself but also as a matter of family pride:

The generations before me, my parent's generation, I don't feel like they did anything really with their lives – other than raise a family. I am really connected to my family heritage and I felt like my great grandfather came over here [from Italy] to do something more than to have his offspring sit around and do nothing.

Prior to enrolling at Lasallian College, Angela attended a large state school. She left after only one semester of classes because she didn't have the support and encouragement of her family. She then attended a local community college and spent the next two and half years working on general education coursework -- but without much direction. As she explained:

...I didn't have a real direction where I wanted to take my education. I don't really have any passions – I kind of like everything or could find good in everything. I had no direction in that, so I graduated...with a liberal arts [degree] in both Math/Science and Arts/Humanities. I had two AA's because I had so many classes!

Having run out of general education courses to take and still with no real sense of what interested her, Angela enrolled at another local junior college, this time focusing on business courses. She figured that business courses could benefit her in a number of ways, whether in a future job or even in her personal life. After two years of attending classes and working at a local bank as a teller, Angela studied abroad in Italy. When she returned to the States, she applied to several colleges, was granted admission to most, but settled on Lasallian College because she had heard good things about it from friends and she wanted to stay close to home. She applied with the intent of pursuing her Bachelor's degree through a program designed for working adults, only to find later that the program had been discontinued. Angela enrolled in classes through the traditional undergraduate program and completely rearranged her work schedule to make things work.

Angela attributed her roller coaster ride through postsecondary education to the lack of a good guide.

I mean, my family didn't have...they'd never gone through it, so they were like, "What the heck are you doing?"... Even today, my mom gives me shit... "I can't believe you left [that State school]"...I feel like it was for the best. I learned a lot along the way. But yeah, I didn't have the guidance, I guess. My mom and I have kind of a rocky relationship, so it was tough.

Applying for financial aid at Lasallian College was a hassle because Angela had difficulty obtaining tax returns from her separated parents. The lack of college-related

knowledge and support also surfaced as Angela tried to adjust to life at her fourth college. She didn't attend the traditional orientation program because she had to work, so her introduction to the campus was essentially a driving tour led by a staff member. In the classroom, she doubted her abilities, but after successfully passing her first few exams, her confidence grew. She realized that she was older (23) than most traditional-age students and her prior schooling and work experience benefited her in ways she hadn't expected. She simply felt more mature.

Angela attributed much of her success at Lasallian College to the support and guidance she received from her teachers – something she didn't have prior to attending this school:

One of my teachers – she's my advisor – she's been kind of helping me with getting my schedule together and stuff...with my mom, and that. She's been supportive. And I had one teacher, my first semester, who, I don't know, she just kind of helped transition me and gave me tools that I needed.

Angela is about to enter her final year at Lasallian College and will graduate in May 2012. She'd like to continue to work at the bank but may have to quit because her class schedule and work schedule are not likely to complement each other. Although Angela is not sure what kind of work she will pursue following graduation, she's recently taken an interest in human resources. "I'm flying by the seat of my pants right now," Angela admitted. Fortunately, Angela is considering working with counselors at Lasallian College for help with her job search. If all goes well, she plans to return to Italy someday and start learning Italian.

## Beth

Beth is a sophomore at Lasallian College. Both of her older brothers are also in college. Although neither of Beth's parents went to college, education has always been "a really big thing" for her parents and there was never any question whether Beth and her brothers would attend college – it was more a matter of *where* they would each enroll.

In choosing a college, Beth knew from the beginning that she wanted to attend a Catholic institution. She applied to a handful of small, Catholic schools close to home. Both her parents accompanied her on college visits and each parent took on specific roles in support of Beth's search process. Since Beth's interest was Business, her father focused a lot of his attention on the characteristics of each school's Business program. Beth's mother was more interested in making sure that each school the family visited was a good "fit" for Beth socially. In addition, Beth's dad handled the discussions concerning tuition, financial aid and how Beth and her family would cover the costs of college. Beth benefited from her parent's interest in and preparation for the college search process. As Beth observes, "Being the third child [in the family] to go through this, they were kind of old pro's at it."

Beth's first visit to the campus was for the overnight orientation program for first-year students. She made her college selection so late in the process that she picked Lasallian College sight unseen. Lasallian College was, according to Beth, "the only one that felt right for me when I walked on the campus."

Beth attended Catholic schools all her life, so Lasallian College has turned out to be a good fit for her. She attends Mass each week. She's surprised by the number of

students who don't regularly attend Mass at the College, despite it being a Catholic school. She considered one of her accounting professors to be "the epitome of the perfect professor," and described the teacher of her Bible course as "just amazing." Looking back, Beth has found her sophomore year more difficult than her freshman year. As a freshman, Beth focused heavily on academics, tried to choose a major, and worked hard at establishing a good academic record. Now, as a sophomore, she lives with five other girls and has redirected her focus to her living situation and social life. For fun, Beth attends all the Lasallian College home basketball games and works out everyday to clear her head.

As she enters her junior year, Beth is looking forward to studying abroad in Australia, a place that she has wanted to visit all her life because of family connections. Participating in study abroad programs is fairly common at Lasallian College. Beth's friends and roommates are all planning trips to places such as Italy, Spain, and France. Beth's parents are "pretty excited" about her traveling to Australia. She says that "they're all for study abroad." One of Beth's brothers also studied abroad during his junior year.

Beth's own college experience has been informed by the experiences of her two older brothers. Both obtained internships when in college and those experiences proved valuable to them in the job search process. Lasallian College encourages students to seek internships related to their area of study. Beth plans to find an internship during the summer between her sophomore and junior year. Although influenced by the college experiences of her brothers, Beth emphasized that she was intent on doing things her way. "I've learned to not compare life with theirs," she explained. "I've learned to say

‘this is mine and this is my experience’ ... I’ve tried not to compare or try to live up to their standards of how they went to college.”

As for graduation, which is still about two years away, Beth hasn’t really given the job market much thought. She knows that she will need to work. Although her parents are paying for some of her tuition, she also has loans and understands that paying them off will be a priority once she’s working. Beth’s college experience thus far has been, in a word, "exceptional." She credits her success at Lasallian College to her own hard work, the strong foundation provided by her high school experience, and her parent’s strong beliefs in the importance and value of education.

#### Pedro

Pedro is in his fifth semester at Lasallian College. He transferred to Lasallian College after attending a local community college for two years. His family is from Mexico. He has one brother who is also in college, a sister in junior high school, and a 20 year old mentally retarded sister whom Pedro affectionately refers to as “his special sister.” Pedro comes from a single parent household and credited his grandmother, with whom he had a very close relationship, for instilling in him the desire to attend college beginning when he was ten years old. Now a college senior, Pedro proudly recalled the promise he made to his grandmother when she passed away that he would attend college.

Pedro enrolled in the local community college after he graduated from high school and began taking Business courses based on a teacher’s recommendation. Once enrolled in community college, Pedro discovered that in order to obtain a bachelor’s degree, he would need to attend a four-year institution. Faculty began making

recommendations. Describing himself as a “super-active Catholic,” this dimension of Lasallian College’s mission strongly appealed to Pedro during his college search process. In fact, Lasallian College was the only school he applied to. It fit his criteria – it was close to home and it was Catholic. The financial aid that the College offered him also made him believe that he could afford to enroll at Lasallian College.

Although Pedro's first year in college was completely covered by financial aid, the financial award letter he received prior to his sophomore year left him feeling deeply troubled. He did not know how he could possibly make up the difference on his own and he began contemplating whether he might have to leave Lasallian College altogether. “[But then I] started talking to people, connecting with people, [and] they told me who to talk to, and by October there was a scholarship for that much money that I needed. So, I was like, this is great. Because I was ready to leave...to pack my bags and leave." This experience taught Pedro that he needed to self-advocate in order to solve some of his problems while in college.

Although Pedro is generally pleased with the education he has received at Lasallian College, he’s also been disappointed with some aspects of his experience, such as the orientation program he attended as a transfer student. He believed that freshman received a more in-depth introduction to the College and that transfer students simply weren’t given the same opportunities as freshmen. He was also disappointed with the College’s approach to overcrowding in the residence halls by converting double rooms to triple and even quadruple rooms. The most significant issue Pedro discussed, however, involved an instance of what he labeled as discrimination in the financial aid office.

Pedro intervened to assist a peer who he believed wasn't receiving the help he needed. Pedro was very vocal about his concerns, and expressed them to administrators. "I'm a very outspoken person," he said. "I'm someone who's been involved in...leadership roles...and they know who I am."

Very involved in campus ministry programs, Pedro has enjoyed contributing to efforts to strengthen the College's Catholic identity, which he did not believe was quite as strong as it could be. He would like Lasallian College to be more outwardly Catholic, but believes the administration downplays the College's Catholic identity in order to appear more attractive to students who are not necessarily looking for a strong Catholic presence. Pedro would like the College to be more deliberate concerning special services, programs, and Masses that celebrate the Catholic faith.

Despite grades that "haven't been the best" Pedro has had some fairly powerful experiences at Lasallian College. He recently returned from a semester abroad in Asia where he studied the culture and economy of Thailand. He also proudly discussed his contributions to the way the College celebrates Hispanic culture, such as the annual Our Lady of Guadalupe Mass. Pedro noted that he requested (and received) additional funding to develop a more formal celebration of this important commemorative celebration.

Pedro is enjoying his time at Lasallian College. He relishes being surround by the college's expert faculty members: "I am here because they are experts in their fields and hopefully they are also part of the mission as well." He emphasized that the education he has received so far at Lasallian College has helped him to see more clearly various

injustices in the world, such as the plight of illegal farm workers. Before attending college, Pedro related, "I saw them, but I was like, this is just how life is. This is just the way it is. But I didn't know that there was something I could do as a citizen to change it."

After graduation, Pedro plans to enter a yearlong post-graduation volunteer program. He's already fielding job offers, but won't start full-time work until the volunteer experience has ended. He's remaining as open as possible to the kind of work he will do, including the idea of returning to school and pursuing a master's degree.

### Shane

Shane first arrived as a freshman at Lasallian College in 2004 - seven years ago. He was uncertain about what he wanted to study, so he changed his major a few times and also took some time off to work for about a year and a half, and then returned.

Shane's mother has been divorced three times. He's never met his biological father. He has a half-brother and a half sister from the same father as well as a half-sister from a different father. The siblings range in age from seven to twenty-one. Shane has lived with his maternal grandparents half his life. His grandfather, who has moved in and out of retirement a few times, is 87 and supports the family. Besides Shane, his grandfather is the only other person in the family who has a college degree. It was Shane's grandfather who had the biggest influence on him and encouraged him to enroll at Lasallian College. "My grandpa is really successful," Shane related. "[In him] I saw a direct relationship between the college he went to and his success."

Shane said the good college preparation he received in high school helped make his college transition experience positive and uneventful. He selected Lasallian College

because it was close to home. As a Catholic school, it was also similar in mission to his high school, which was also Catholic.

Shane initially chose to major in Psychology. His family later encouraged him to switch to Business, which he did – only to learn that he didn't really enjoy it. He struggled with it for about a year and a half and then left school to become an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT). He served in that capacity for about a year and a half and then returned to Lasallian College, letting his EMT license expire. Reflecting on his time away from college, Shane said,

I think it was a way to escape. I was struggling with college and I didn't know where I wanted to go. I wasn't in to business and I didn't see myself having a business career. And my grades were falling and I just needed some time off to rethink.

He returned to Lasallian College, majoring again in Business and then eventually switched back to Psychology – his original major as a freshman.

Shane recalled that his freshman year transition was fairly easy, but he regretted that he didn't get more involved in extra-curricular opportunities. Instead, he spent time with friends outside of school. Looking back, Shane now believed that he wasn't really ready for college in 2004. He didn't know how to connect with faculty members and seek out assistance when necessary:

I didn't really understand how to learn... You know, I was just kind of taking it one step at a time and just doing it as work. So I think I didn't realize it until I became an adult the importance of education and how to apply it to the real world and how to think about learning in general.

In a sense, Shane is getting a second chance, having taken some time off and returned to college a bit more mature. He's now attempting to focus on the things that he neglected earlier in his college experience. He's involved in a club sport and he has built stronger relationships with his teachers. He says he's learned to "use them as resources to get through college" – something he didn't do as a freshman. His GPA is the highest it's ever been, a 3.7/4.0 and he's learned to apply himself much more.

Shane will graduate next year. He feels quite a bit of pressure to remain successful and to get his college diploma. Not only are his grandparents looking forward to the day he crosses that stage, but he knows that his mom will be proud of him as well – and that she will depend on him into the future.

Following graduation, Shane is considering graduate school. He's very interested in continuing to focus on Psychology. "I don't want to stop learning. So, perhaps [I would enjoy] teaching or some research." He understood that he would likely have to work for a few years to save up money for tuition, especially since it is was quite unlikely that his grandfather could continue to assist him financially like he did at Lasallian College. "I...need to learn the importance of supporting myself. My grandfather's been supporting my entire family my whole life. I think that's what he wants me to do, too."

#### Alex

Having attended Lasallian College for three years, Alex is now a junior looking forward to the start of his senior year. Alex is Hispanic and is the youngest of three children. He has an older brother who is 35 and has four children and a married sister who is 27 and has one child. Neither sibling attended college. His father, injured at work,

just returned to the job after a year devoted to rehabilitation and recovery. Alex's mother works at a high school part-time.

The only colleges that Alex was familiar with during the early part of high school were the big state schools with football or basketball teams that he recognized from television. Then he attended Lasallian College during the summer of his junior year of high school for a summer basketball camp.

When it came time to apply to colleges, Alex received assistance from a woman, recommended by a high school peer, who helps students navigate the college admission process from ACT/SAT preparation to completing college applications. She donated her services to Alex and his family, something for which Alex was very grateful. Although he applied to several Catholic schools, he was waitlisted for one and was denied entry to another. He was, however, admitted to Lasallian College through a program designed especially for first-generation and low-income students. Alex felt that this program was a good fit for him, and he appreciated that it also came with the promise of financial aid.

The special admission program that Alex became part of included a three-week "bridge" experience in which students lived on campus for three weeks prior to the formal start of fall classes. During this time, Alex participated in an in-depth orientation to college and college-level academics. The program featured a rigorous schedule, lots of reading, and various kinds of orientation activities. For Alex, the program was very stressful, but worth it. He stressed how much better prepared he felt for his freshman year as a result.

This special admission program lasted the duration of Alex's freshman year – and he did fairly well academically in school. But in his sophomore and junior years, Alex's focus started to blur. His biggest challenge, managing his time, became difficult and he began to procrastinate on coursework. Juggling readings for classes, preparing for tests, and studying for exams became more and more difficult for him to manage. Despite these challenges, Alex remained confident that he would graduate with his bachelor's degree.

Alex initially declared a Business major, but as he explained, “I just couldn’t pass accounting, for some reason.” Then he switched to Kinesiology because of his love of sports, but he encountered one of the toughest professors of his young college career and struggled with pop quizzes and the reading load. After retaking the Introduction to Kinesiology class (he earned a "D" in the course initially), Alex decided to switch majors again. Alex is now a Communications major and considers it a much better fit with his interests and talents. Deciding on a major was, according to Alex, his biggest challenge in college so far.

As he has grown as a student, Alex learned that working more closely with faculty members was critical to his college success. He regretted that he did not do this earlier in college, for it would have relieved some of the stress he experienced in his Kinesiology class and it would have made identifying the right major a bit easier. Now a junior, Alex has come to see that knowing your teachers and working with them closely can be very beneficial: “They . . . help you with your work, workload . . . get[ting] an internship . . . . I mean, you never know what they have to offer you if you don’t, you know, open up to them.”

Alex's experience at Lasallian College has been a good one thus far. He acknowledged that first-generation Hispanic college students often struggle with completing their college degrees, but he had every intention of defying the odds. As he entered his final year at Lasallian, Alex felt proud of what he had accomplished and was very much looking forward to life post-college. Sports are his passion, and he is especially interested in broadcasting. He recently landed an internship with an NBA team doing in-game promotions. He hopes this will result in making some front-office connections that may eventually serve as a pathway into a career.

#### Peter

Peter grew up in Medellin, Columbia and attended a high school there sponsored by the De La Salle Christian Brothers. He has dual citizenship. When his parents moved to the United States (he was 15), Peter attended a public high school in New Jersey where the majority of the students were Hispanic. Peter spoke very little English, so the coursework was aimed at strengthening his language skills. Peter has two older brothers, both of whom went to college. Neither of his parents went to college and Peter cited this as one of the reasons he and his brothers were encouraged to enroll in college – their parents wanted them to each have productive lives.

During his junior year of high school, while working as a lifeguard, Peter had a conversation with a graduate of a local college prep high school sponsored by the Benedictines. One thing led to another and Peter left his public high school to attend (and play water polo for) the Benedictine prep school at the start of his senior year. He received a significant amount of financial aid, which made it possible for him to make the

shift. He was particularly grateful for the education he received during his senior year, stressing that made it possible for him to later attend Lasallian College.

When it came time to search for a college, Peter searched for institutions that had water polo teams. He discovered Lasallian College – and immediately realized that, like his high school back in Colombia, the De La Salle Christian Brothers sponsored it. In addition to completing the formal application for Lasallian College, he also wrote a letter explaining his Lasallian connections in Medellin. Peter was accepted to Lasallian College pending his willingness to participate in the special admission program that included a three-week “bridge” program. Peter agreed, without having actually set foot on campus for a tour. He was unable to afford the airfare and other expenses involved.

Peter credited the Bridge program with helping him to feel more comfortable when classes started in the fall. Because of it, he “knew what to expect from my professors for the first day of classes, so that helped me a lot. I see the faces of some freshmen who are scared, but we took these classes and we know what’s up, you know?” This did not mean that Peter coasted through his freshman year. He received low grades that first year, including a “C” in Spanish, his native language. Peter wrote that grade off to an “ideological” difference with the professor.

As a student from a low-income family, Peter benefitted both from a healthy financial aid package and the generosity of several friends whose families were well off financially. He took spring break trips with friends and traveled to popular vacation destinations and resorts with them, all expenses paid. Reflecting on his time at Lasallian College, Peter spoke with deep gratitude for the kinds of opportunities he had

experienced. But during spring break of his junior year, Peter opted not to take a trip to Los Angeles with a friend and instead stayed home to work and tutor grade school children at an urban educational center operated by the De La Salle Christian Brothers. Peter had come to the realization that these kids needed him more than he needed a vacation. He cited this development as an example of his changing attitude about life and his interest in addressing problems that need solving.

Peter is a Finance major and finds classes related to business the most enjoyable. He has strong words of praise for many of the faculty, noting that some of his favorite teachers have kindled his love for business and have helped him to make connections between coursework and his personal life. As Peter put it: “[In] Strategic Management...he [the teacher] taught us that in a company, if we are trying to achieve a goal, it has to be desirable and feasible. I was living the fantasy life...thinking...I’m going to go to college and make so much money.” Peter found that setting operational goals in a company is a lot like setting goals in his personal life and finding ways to achieve those goals.

Peter plans to pursue an MBA after graduation. He knows that before he can start graduate school he needs to go to work and save some money. The loans he took out during college will need to be repaid and that’s his priority. He hopes that his two older brothers will assist him in finding a job in one of the industries in which they are involved.

## Kelly

Kelly described the area where she's from as "affluent" and, as a result, emphasized that she and her peers were raised to go to college, period. Kelly has two twin half-sisters from her mom's second marriage. Her mother and stepfather recently divorced, and she has limited contact with both her father and stepfather. Growing up, Kelly said that her mom and stepfather always emphasized the importance of achieving good grades in high school as a necessary step to getting into a good college. They were fairly strict about her studying and completing homework.

Kelly "applied everywhere" during her college search process, but she chose to attend Lasallian College because she was familiar with the school. It was close to home and she had been on campus many times while in grade school attending summer sports camps there. The school's mission was also comfortable for Kelly since she had attended Catholic schools her entire life. Kelly was quick to point out that although she appreciated that the school was Catholic, it was the beauty of the campus, the small class sizes, and its overall "culture and feel" that won her over and "pulled me toward it."

When she was a freshman, Kelly noted that that she didn't have to study too much and, similar to her experience in high school, she was able to "skate by with As and Bs." When she started taking courses related to her major, this changed; Kelly had to study more and be more attentive to her coursework, but she also became much more interested and invested in getting excellent grades and achieving more. She also developed great relationships with the faculty in the process. She especially appreciated the personal

attention she received from Lasallian College's faculty which, for Kelly, helped her to feel that she wasn't "just a number in a crowd... not just a student ID."

Now a senior, Kelly wishes that she had more assistance with "understanding all the little things" that she needed to know about being in college, such as the importance of having a good advisor, financing college, and building personal networks for her future career plans. "I didn't have a parent or someone above me who had gone to college to ask... I kind of had to seek it out and it was hard to find the correct person to give the right advice." Finding this kind of guidance was Kelly's biggest challenge as a first-generation college student at Lasallian College.

Kelly's attributed her biggest success in college to all the hard work she put into her studies. She was successful in gaining entry to the honor's program associated with her major, which focuses on business administration as it relates to financial services. She really enjoyed the hands-on out of class experiences the program afforded her and the opportunity to be involved with the financial services industry. She also enjoyed the chance to study abroad in Rome during her sophomore year.

Kelly has enjoyed offering guidance to her cousin, who's in high school and currently engaged in the college search process. As someone who didn't have the benefit of an older brother or sister to offer her advice when visiting colleges and reviewing all the options, Kelly has offered suggestions and advice to her cousin and stepsisters. She said she was proud of her first-generation college student status and enjoyed "starting a trend" for her cousins, sisters, and even her own children some day.

Regarding her future plans, Kelly was proud to report that she already had a full-time position lined up at a technology firm doing marketing and public relations upon graduation. She said she was looking forward to the many opportunities this new position had to offer and was excited to put her education from Lasallian College to good use.

#### Marie

Marie is a sophomore at Lasallian College. Her mother is Native American Indian and her father is Italian. Marie is an only child and reaps the benefits of the full and undivided attention of her parents. As Marie put it, they “focus all their energy on trying to give me the best life possible.” She attended private schools all her life and graduated from an all-girls private, Catholic high school. Marie was one of 230 girls who comprised her graduating class. She says that it was always the wish of her parents that she go to college after high school and that they “sort of pushed me in that direction without me knowing.” Her parents explained to her at an early age that if she wanted to do big things in life and have the kind of lifestyle that she desired, that these things wouldn’t come without lots of hard work and a college education.

Neither of Marie’s parents went to college. Her mother works in a bank and her father is a heavy equipment operator. Marie said that her parents have done well despite having not attended college, but observed that her mother's lack of a college degree prevented her from advancing in her position. Her father now has more managerial responsibilities and has done very well in his position, but he has told Marie that he doubted he could do the same thing if he were just entering the workplace today without

a college degree. Proud of her parents, Marie was very grateful for all they have done to make it possible for her to attend Lasallian College.

Marie chose Lasallian College for a number of reasons, but it wasn't her first choice. She initially wanted to attend Stanford, but was placed on a wait list. She said that she chose Lasallian College because it simply "stood out" to her. She attended a visit day and toured the campus and liked the small community and the enclosed and secure feeling of the campus. Marie doesn't regret her decision; having attended Lasallian College for two years now, she has been "thrilled with the academics" and her experience thus far.

Marie observed that having come from an all-girls high school, the "dynamic of teaching is a little different." From her perspective, although the institution offers an education "from a more masculine point of view," the teaching "happens to be far more gentle" than what she experienced in high school "because of the very strict, really mean nuns." This new environment, Marie explained, had encouraged her to think about the opposite gender's point of view more often.

Marie was fairly critical of the orientation experience she had at Lasallian College. She found the material and topics covered "tiresome" and "tedious" and was surprised that students weren't familiar with some of the concepts included in the orientation presentations. The most exciting aspect of the orientation was meeting her roommate, who happened to be from Marie's same rural hometown.

Marie considered herself fairly well prepared by her high school teachers and credited that experience with getting her ready for college. She didn't experience too

many problems in the classroom, although she did disagree with a particular faculty member's remarks and comments in one course, which she found to be insulting and condescending.

After graduation, Marie has her sights fixed on working in the financial planning industry. She also wants to attend graduate school. Marie explained "...hopefully, I can build up a salary to the point where I can pay back the debt of education so that my parents can retire, and then I'll feel a sense of pride because I will have given back what they have given me."

#### Christina

Christina is a first year student at Lasallian College. The youngest of five siblings, her father died when she was 11 years old. Neither of her parents went to college nor have any of Christina's siblings. College was never really discussed at home and Christina said she didn't consider it an option until a teacher in high school encouraged her to think about it. Thanks to this teacher and the support of a small group of friends, Christina applied to Lasallian College and enrolled in its Nursing program. When she opened the acceptance letter from Lasallian College, Christina remembered that her mother said, "No way, that's not going to happen. It's way too expensive." Other family members and friends, however, "were excited and shocked" that she was planning to attend college.

Thanks to a scholarship and a student loan co-signed by her grandmother, Christina enrolled at Lasallian College. Shortly after classes started, Christina's grandmother passed away from a rapidly developing cancer that had only recently been

diagnosed. Fortunately, Christina was allowed to keep the loan. This financial aid covered all her college tuition and room/board expenses for the first year of college. Reflecting back on this experience, Christina singled out the Financial Aid office as one of the features of Lasallian College that contributed strongly to its Lasallian identity.

Losing her grandmother at the start of the academic year made Christina's transition to Lasallian College more difficult and stressful. She was distracted by shock and sadness, but managed to do fairly well. Despite these emotional challenges, Christina found her adjustment to college a positive experience. She took AP classes in high school and this helped Christina to feel better prepared for college level work. She entered college fairly confident of her study skills, and this also helped her to succeed in her coursework. Christina admitted that her classes were "a tad more challenging" than what she was used to in high school, but "friends actually helped me to make...flash cards and we work together. Especially in the Nursing program, all the girls get together to study once a week."

Christina found living in a residence hall more of a challenge than her coursework, but she attributed this to moving away from home and simultaneously dealing with the death of her grandmother. She coped with this by going home to visit her family once or twice a month. She also looked at this experience in a positive way, noting that living in a residence hall on campus helped to enhance her social skills. Christina's focus on academics was also strengthened by her residence hall living experience, since she lived in the Honors and Science Dorm. Here Christina lived with other like-minded students in a quieter, study-focused residence hall removed from the main cluster of

student housing on campus. Most of the students in this dorm had chosen to major in the Sciences or were enrolled in the College's honors program. Christina noted that students regularly gathered on one of the upper floors of the building to meet in "the study," which included tables, comfortable seating, and whiteboards. Junior and senior level tutors often spent time working with younger students who requested extra assistance with their studies.

Christina felt like she was really flourishing at Lasallian College. Her high school experience, her interest in Nursing as a field of study, and her love of learning have all come together in ways that she has found very fulfilling. Christina said that she especially enjoyed the class discussions, small group projects, and personal attention she receives from the faculty. She also appreciated the "hands-on" orientation of her professors, many of who make a real effort to "relate [coursework] to real life. So it's not always just words in a book, it's how it's going to apply to your life later."

Although she's just concluded her freshman year, Christina already knows what she would like to do after graduation. She plans to complete her second year of studies at Lasallian College and then, as part of the "2+2" program at the College, enroll in the Nursing school at another local university. She would like to specialize in neonatal intensive care and "get a good, fast-paced job in the ICU or Emergency [department] and get some good experience and just kind of start my own path from there."

#### Ellen

Ellen is a junior at Lasallian College and describes her background as lower-middle class. She has 7 siblings – an older brother, a younger sister, three stepsisters, and

two stepbrothers. Her parents got divorced when Ellen was five years old. Her mom has been divorced twice and her biological father has since remarried. Ellen is the first person in her large family to attend college. She's known since the second grade, however, that she wanted to go to college because of the references her teacher used to make in class to her own college experience. Even more impactful was the encouragement she later received from her parents –especially her mother. According to Ellen, her mother made "a deal with me that if I had straight A's up until I was 16, I would get a car." Ellen kept up her part of the bargain and got the car.

From that point forward, Ellen's mother began encouraging her to go to college. This encouragement became especially poignant when Ellen told her mom that she wanted to get a waitressing job. Waitressing had a long history in her family. Ellen's mother was a waitress and so were her aunt and grandmother. Ellen's mom told her that the only way she would allow her daughter to wait tables was if it was a side job while she was in college. Ellen said, "it was really encouraging to hear my mom tell me that she wanted me to have the better life."

Ellen blindly chose Lasallian College. She didn't have an opportunity to visit the campus during high school. She based her decision to attend on the recommendation of a friend who described how the classes were small and professors knew students well. Her financial aid package from Lasallian College also had a significant impact on her decision to enroll there. She received approximately \$40,000 in scholarship funding - \$37,000 more than what she was offered at a public state university she was also considering. The money, combined with the institution's reputation, sealed the deal for

Ellen. "I saw that financial aid letter and I knew I had to come here. Just because...I mean it's such an amazing education." Ellen decided to participate in a two-day overnight orientation program because her home is several hours away. She remembered taking tours of campus, meeting other students, and getting situated in her residence hall. She also recalled receiving a copy of the common reader, Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. All first-year students were expected to read it during the summer prior to the start of classes. She wasn't quite prepared for this kind of reading. As she explained:

I had never had to read anything like that. In high school if we read a book, it was like a short story or it was something that had a plot to it with characters and all that. To read something from a... just a factual basis was different.

Ellen's first year at Lasallian College was difficult. She simply wasn't prepared for college level work. She often found that the conversations in her courses were intellectually challenging and she regularly needed assistance with unfamiliar vocabulary. She was surprised by the amount of homework that was assigned as well. Her high school classes were primarily lecture-based and she wasn't used to participating in class as often as she was being expected to do so in college. In due course she was able to overcome her shyness and get more involved in class but not without first almost failing her Political Theory class.

Aside from these obstacles, Ellen's biggest challenge as a first-generation college student has been not having a family member from whom she can seek assistance on a regular basis. "Most students I knew here," Ellen related, "had a brother who went to school, or their parents went to school and they had all that help and I didn't. I didn't have anybody to go to." To compensate for this lack of support, Ellen sought out friends

for advice. She even received advice from the parents of her friends back home who were college graduates. Ellen also said one of her professors at Lasallian College helped her through some difficult personal issues by checking up on her regularly.

Ellen took an interest in study abroad opportunities after hearing students and staff talk about the benefits of this experience. After learning more about the opportunities and costs involved, Ellen made a decision to study in Melbourne, Australia during her senior year. She's very much looking forward to the experience. She's also making plans for the future. After living on campus her first two years, she decided to move off campus and live in an apartment with some friends as a way to save money.

After graduation, Ellen plans to put her Psychology and Women's Studies degrees to good work. She would like to be a rape crisis counselor. She plans to take a year off to work and then enroll in graduate school. She also sees herself with a Ph.D. some day. She is looking forward to seeing her little sister, who she's been encouraging to attend college some day, enroll at Lasallian College so that she too, will have better opportunities.

### Shelly

Shelly is an African American student in her junior year at Lasallian College. Her immediate family includes her mother, her brother, and her grandmother who lives nearby; her father is "not in the picture" at this time. Shelly attended a public high school that subscribed to a program called AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination). Active in the program since seventh grade, Shelly said her involvement with AVID prepared her well for Lasallian College. Shelly described AVID as "like a college prep class" that prepares students for visiting colleges, enhances test-taking strategies, and

exposes students to college level work and experiences. In fact, Shelly believed AVID prepared her more for college than her high school coursework. She visited Lasallian College in high school as part of the AVID program. Ultimately, she chose Lasallian College because of its proximity to her home and the size of the campus. She wanted a college where she wouldn't be a number and where faculty would know her name. She believes she chose wisely.

The summer between high school and college was a period of great anticipation and excitement for Shelly. She really looked forward to realizing her dream of beginning college. Despite her excitement, it was still a huge step for her. Shelly recounted how nerve-wracking a day she had when she left home and moved her belongings to campus:

I just stalled and waited and was antsy, and we didn't end up leaving until seven at night because I wasn't ready to go. So even though I knew I was going and I knew it was going to be OK, it was just that transition phase was a little difficult – but then getting here and being here – that was fun.

It was on this day, in particular, that Shelly's mom demonstrated her support for her daughter. She "didn't want to rush" her out the door and as Shelly put it, "it probably felt good for her because I was there a little bit longer."

Shelly's mom continues to play an important role in supporting her in college, even though she doesn't have the direct experience of being a college graduate herself. Shelly explained that she regularly receives support from her mom when she calls to vent or describe the kinds of stress that she's under as a college student and that's been very helpful to her. But Shelly also said that one of her biggest challenges in college has been that her mom can't contextualize the stress that Shelly experiences as a student. Her mom

will often give her generic words of encouragement, but Shelly knows that she really doesn't understand the stress of midterms and finals. To cope, Shelly said that she speaks regularly with her high school basketball coach, whom she describes as "her second family."

Shelly started out as a Biology major but has since switched to Psychology. She discovered that this major didn't quite align itself with her career goals of becoming a developmental psychologist and working with children, which is her passion. She has really enjoyed her coursework and, as a college student, has balanced academics with involvement in an intramural basketball league. She's taken the approach that although it's important to socialize, work and have fun, her priority is her coursework and that's the primary reason she's in college. That determination has paid off. Shelly has made the Dean's List three times.

Her academic experience at Lasallian College has "opened her eyes" to different perspectives. She participated in a service internship last January in Mexico where she worked in a daycare center. Shelly described this as a "great experience" that also very much aligned with her career interests.

Shelly has benefitted from the support of others who have experienced the ups and downs of college. Desiring to pay some of what she has received forward, Shelly recently started serving as a "big buddy" to other first-generation college students enrolled at Lasallian College. Though not a tutoring program, "Big Buddies" helps connect new students with resources, register for classes, and make connections on

campus. In addition to this program, Shelly has also served as a host for students who visit campus as part of the overnight visit program.

A year away from graduation, Shelly has begun to explore options for graduate school. She has also started working at a crisis line during the summer in an effort to gain some new experiences and “get some more things on my resume.” Although a volunteer position, Shelly felt affirmed by the faculty member who recommended this opportunity to her. Her desire is to do all that she can to prepare for her future.

#### Justin

Justin is a senior at Lasallian College. He’s the oldest of four boys. His father is a union laborer and his mother is a teacher’s aide for disabled students at a middle school. Justin didn’t initially intend on enrolling at Lasallian College. In fact, going to college was more or less a back-up plan for him. He wanted to be a U.S. Navy SEAL, but he broke his ankle during his junior year of high school. He also had some “ear issues” his entire life that precluded him from making it beyond the application stage. He didn’t really consider other military-related options. As Justin put it, "It was either SEAL or nothing for me. So I decided to come to college."

Justin’s mom was really the force behind his decision to go to college. As a teacher, “she was really the one pressuring me to go to college, more than anybody, more than myself, more than most of my teachers, more than my girlfriend at the time."

Justin applied to a number of colleges, but ultimately, chose to attend Lasallian College because it was close to his home – and the home of his then girlfriend. He received some scholarship money and his parents also took out a loan to help him pay for

college. But he says that finances didn't play a huge role in his decision to attend Lasallian College. "Money has never been a factor in any of my family's decisions. If something costs something, then they're going to come up with a way to meet that price in order to get what they want."

Justin's transition from high school to college was a bit rough. Justin thought that he was having a nervous breakdown on his orientation day. As the session came to a conclusion and students lined up to register for classes, Justin related:

It suddenly took hold of me...like...imagine you're snowboarding and it's a nice sky and there's an avalanche that just takes you out...it was like that. I was so just... I broke down. I was crying. I was nervous, I was shaking, I locked my keys in my car... like all these things and we had to sign up for classes.

Later that summer, Justin skipped the majority of campus activities on the weekend prior to the start of classes. He explained that he didn't want to leave home and that he was scared to go to college. According to Justin, going to college challenged him to grow up:

I still watch cartoons, eat cereal. I don't think anyone wants to really grow up as much as they claim they want to...you enjoy your youth... for me, that's what it was, it was like... I was comfortable at home, and if you're comfortable, why would you move? But society has a way of, you know, putting your rear in check and saying, no, come on, keep moving.

Justin initially majored in Chemistry because he wanted to be a doctor and he knew that he needed a strong science background. He also considered being a music major because he considers music one of his passions, but he also understood that it was unlikely he'd get the kind of highly paid professional contract that he'd need to be

successful in the music industry. Justin has since changed his major to Sociology with a minor in Spanish.

Justin's biggest challenge as a first-generation college student at Lasallian College has been time management. He said that sometimes he struggles with simply deciding what's more important to do in his free time: eat, sleep, or study. In addition to taking classes, Justin also works two jobs and volunteers. His work-study job at the College is in the Women's Center. He also just landed an off campus job as a gardener for a property owner. Having two jobs has been a necessity because, as Justin put it, being a first-generation college student has been an "economic struggle." Justin said he wants an internship, but cannot afford to work without pay and, as a result, this experience will be missing from his resume when he graduates. Justin seemed all right with this, however, because what he enjoys most is tutoring kids as part of a program at a local middle school.

Looking back over his four years as a college student, Justin related how college had really changed him. As he explained, college has provided him with "cultural capital" while also helping him to understand how the world works. It's also challenged him to learn how to juggle multiple responsibilities, interact with a variety of different kinds of people, and see how "structures intersect with each other." He's enjoyed his coursework, especially statistics. He attributed his interest in statistics, despite his fear of mathematics, to an outstanding and dynamic teacher he had at Lasallian College. Justin was very proud of himself that he managed to get through college in only four and a half years. He considered this to be one of his biggest accomplishments.

After graduation, Justin plans to attend graduate school and hasn't yet decided if he wants to focus on health administration or public administration. He's trying to remain as open as possible.

### Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided thirteen brief vignettes that offer a glimpse into the family background and college experiences of the students who participated in this study. In the next chapter, I explore the key research questions that animated this study, describing the major themes that emerged from the data in response to those questions.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### STUDENT EXPERIENCES

In this chapter, I interpret and analyze the data collected from 13 student interviews in light of the three research questions that guided this study: (1) What are the experiences of first-generation college students at a Lasallian institution of higher education in the United States? (2) What experiences specific to Lasallian education do first-generation college students suggest enhance – as well as detract from – their learning and involvement on campus? (3) If experiences among these first-generation college students differ at this institution, how might they best be explained?

In this chapter, I make sense of the study's findings through two primary lenses. The first explores varying "pre-collegiate experiences" that surfaced in my interviews with students. Specifically, I discuss early influences and first thoughts about attending college; the influence and role of parents; reasons for choosing Lasallian College; and students' understanding of being a first-generation college student. The second lens focuses on students' "experiences at Lasallian College." Here I direct my attention toward describing students' relationships with faculty, learning experiences that evoked significant meaning for learners, various student stresses and pressures, and participants' understandings of institutional mission.

### The Back-story: Pre-Collegiate Experiences

What motivated the 13 participants in this study to attend college, let alone a Lasallian one? What, if anything, did they find challenging about being a first generation college student? Who was influential in their decision to pursue a college degree? In this section, I address these questions in an attempt to paint a picture of the pre-college experiences of students in this study. Specifically, I focus on early influences and first thoughts about attending college; the early influence and role of parents; reasons for attending Lasallian College; and each student's understanding of what it means to be a first-generation college student. This "big picture" perspective is intended to provide the necessary context and background to understand the core experiences or "essence" of study participants' collegiate experiences, which are described in the second section of this chapter.

#### *Early Influences/First Thoughts Concerning College*

The students interviewed for this study first started thinking about college for different reasons. A handful of students, for instance, were raised by parents or family members with an understanding that college was simply the logical next step after high school. Another group learned about the importance of a college education while in middle or high school and set their sights then on pursuing a college education. Still other students were influenced by other factors.

I spoke with several students who were raised by parents or family members knowing they would attend college some day. For example, Beth said that she "always knew" growing up that she would attend college immediately after finishing high school:

It was always like kind of assumed that we would go to school and I think the people that we were friends with... you know, family friends, like their parents went to college and we saw their lives – so we saw the benefits that it had with people I was friends with. So, I think that it was just expected.

As an only child, Marie believed her parents had always envisioned her attending college.

For them, a college education represented a ticket to a far better life for their daughter:

So from the time I was conceived there was already a plan of what was going to happen in my life because they didn't want me living in some type of slum... And so it's always been planned that I would go to college, go through an excellent education.

In Pedro's case, it was his grandmother, a strong believer in the value of education, who encouraged him to pursue college. Pedro recalled that his grandmother taught him to “pursue our education or do something with our lives.” He relayed a particularly poignant story about how he honored his grandmother's wishes: “I was ten years old and it was when we were about to close my grandma’s casket . . . [at that time] I promised [her] that I would go to college.”

Another group of students said that experiences they had in middle and high school spurred their interest in attending college. Shelly, for instance, participated in a college preparation program in middle school that allowed her and other students to visit college campuses, learn test-taking strategies, and develop writing skills. In fact, Shelly believed that this program prepared her better for college than her middle and high school coursework. In a similar vein, Angela shared how her initial interest in college was fueled by a high school teacher who recommended she complete college prep courses in an organized “academy” focused on first-generation college students. “Most of the

students in the academy were first-generation, " Angela explained. "Their parents hadn't gone to college and so they were trying to prep and give skills to students that their parents couldn't provide." Rather than finding inspiration in a program, Christina told me that she found it in a person: one of her high school teachers. As she recalled:

In the middle of high school, I met a teacher who really inspired me to go to college. It had never really been an option at home. Nobody had ever gone to college, none of my siblings. She really nudged me to go ahead and go to college.

A third group of students said they were influenced to attend college by other factors. Justin, for example, enrolled in college because he wasn't able to enter the military. Rebecca enrolled because her mother promised to pay for half of her college tuition:

My mom was like . . . "You graduate from high school, be the first in your family to do it, and I'll take you to Hawaii." All right, fine, so I finished high school - barely. I did the absolute bare minimum. Didn't care. The weekend of high school graduation she says, "So now you're going to college right?" And I go, "no I'm not" . . . she goes, "Well, what if you try [the local vocational school] . . . it's two years - 18 months, if you do day time, you can have a college degree that nobody in your family has . . . I'll even pay for half."

While each student first began thinking about college for different reasons, parent and family expectations, supportive teachers, and special middle school and high school programs were especially significant influences for the majority of participants involved in this study.

### *Influence and Role of Parents*

What role did parents play, despite their own lack of college experience, in influencing and motivating participants in this study to attend college? Of the 13

interviewees, six came from households in which their parents were divorced at least once. Three students had experienced the death of a parent and were raised by a single parent. The remaining participants were raised in married, two-parent families. Regardless of these circumstances, students reported that their parents strongly influenced them to attend college, with only a few exceptions.

The majority of study participants believed that their parents understood the value of a college education despite their lack of college experience. Marie recalled a story that underscored this point:

We were actually going on a drive one day... and I saw a particular area of housing and I thought the houses were really nice and my parents said that all those people who live in those really nice houses...went to college, were very successful business people...it's just the automatic assumption that they went to college. They got really good jobs, paid a lot of attention in school, and that's how they got where they are. So pretty much, if you want anything, you're going to have to do it yourself. And that means, to get it by yourself, first you have to have an excellent education.

Marie's parents were very deliberate about preparing their daughter for college and were very active in Marie's college search process. Marie explained that early on in her upbringing, her parents "exposed [her] to learning about college and higher education" to instill in her a desire and appreciation for college. They did this by "showing me brochures, introducing me to certain people, backgrounds, and literature." Marie's parents were very intentional, careful, and deliberate about making sure that she got into college and could stay there. As she put it:

You know my dad always tells me...whenever I'm sitting in a crane and I have to do the dirty work myself, I have nothing to do all day for eleven hours straight [but] think about you and how to promote your life and make it better.

Kelly's parents encouraged college because it would allow her to explore all her options:

My grades have always been stressed for me. I grew up going to a private, Catholic school and my parents were very strict on homework. I would come home, I would have set homework times, if I didn't do things right, I would have to redo my homework, so that was always stressed for me because they wanted me to get into the best college that I could and have the most options that I could for my future.

Ellen's mother encouraged her to attend college because she wanted her to lead a better life than she did. Her mother, aunt and grandmother were all waitresses and Ellen seriously considered following the family tradition. According to Ellen, she told her mom when she was sixteen that she wanted to get a waitressing job and her mom told her "it better be a side job, because school came first and I needed to go to college. It was really encouraging to hear my mom tell me that she wanted me to have [a] better life."

Although most students who participated in this study received support and encouragement to enroll in college from their parents, two students, Christina and Angela, didn't initially have that same support. For example, college was never talked about in Christina's household. One of Christina's high school teachers and several of her friends played a considerable role in encouraging her to apply to colleges after she graduated. Later, when Christina opened the acceptance letter from Lasallian College, she remembers her mother saying, "no way, that's not going to happen. It's way too expensive" It wasn't until after Christina secured a loan co-signed by her grandmother that her mother became more supportive of her interests. In retrospect, Christina says that "I think because I'm the youngest, she's always [been] scared to let me go."

The struggle that Angela faced manifested itself when it was time to complete the FASFA form during the admission process. Angela's "on and off again" relationship with her mother made the process of completing this important form more stressful for her. As she recalled:

It's actually been hell with it...my mom and I aren't on good terms, my father hasn't done his taxes in some years, so I need her information and she was not cooperative...and she kept saying, "I'm getting it, I'm getting it," but never did. And so I had to do an appeal and show my financial stability and get letters from friends and family who have experienced our relationship and then they finally gave me a \$10,000 need-based scholarship...and the rest has been through government grants...I [also] had to pull out a personal loan.

Clearly, the majority of the students who participated in this study had the support and encouragement of their parents to attend college, with some students receiving a higher level of assistance and guidance than others.

#### *Reasons for Choosing Lasallian College*

Study participants chose to attend Lasallian College for a variety of reasons. While a handful of participants chose the College specifically because it was Catholic, others elected to attend because it was geographically close to home. It was a second choice to two participants and a few others decided to attend because they had attended summer camps or visited in other contexts and were generally familiar with the College. Exploring some of the reasons why study participants chose Lasallian College can shed light on what was important to them personally and what they valued in an educational institution.

Some students chose Lasallian College for very pragmatic reasons. For example, Christina chose the College specifically because of its nursing program and the “2 plus 2” agreement the College offers with a local nursing school; Rebecca chose it because it was one of only two institutions that would accept her transfer credits. Numerous students found, however, that the institution was simply a good “fit” for them. Beth explained:

I wanted to be in a Catholic environment. I knew a big state school...wasn't the choice for me. I didn't want that and I didn't want to be a number in a room. So, I applied to all small, Catholic schools and when it came down to it, [Lasallian College] was the only one that felt right when I walked on the campus.

Shane found Lasallian College comfortable because it was similar to his high school. “My high school was a Catholic high school – small, really good teacher to student ratio, and so this is just like...exactly like my high school – but at the college level.”

Although their reasons varied for choosing Lasallian College, almost every student I interviewed noted the key role that financial assistance played in their college selection process. Just over 70 percent of full-time undergraduate students attending Lasallian College receive some form of financial assistance, with the average financial aid package totaling about \$28,000. All but two of the students who participated in this study received some form of financial assistance (besides personal loans) when applying to Lasallian College. About half of the participants stressed that receiving this financial assistance solidified their decision to attend Lasallian College; indeed, these students said that if they hadn't received this aid, they probably would have enrolled elsewhere. This is

revealing information since Lasallian institutions consider financial assistance for students in need a vital component of the mission.

In Beth's case, attending Lasallian College was a family decision, with her father taking an active role in the financial aid application process. Beth explained how it happened:

Originally, we had kind of crossed [Lasallian College] off the list because it was so expensive, and once it came down to it, once I visited and I fell in love with the school, my dad made an appointment with the financial aid office and kind of negotiated with them and worked out some numbers, so that definitely helped because if they didn't give us the financial aid I probably wouldn't be here. Ellen received grants and scholarships from Lasallian College totaling \$40,000

compared to the \$3,000 she was promised by a public, state university. There was no doubt in her mind that she would attend Lasallian College after her award letter arrived. "Since my family can't afford to send me to college," she explained, "I saw the financial aid letter and I knew I had to come here. Just because... I mean it's such an amazing education – for free!" Financial aid also made it possible for Peter to attend – something that he believed had considerable impact on his decision to attend Lasallian College at a time when the economy was in a recession. As he told me:

My mom is working for low pay and she cannot afford college. The financial aid actually made a huge impact and the [Bridge Program] gave me another scholarship. It was a big factor... this is a really great opportunity to invest in my education and I did it.

For a few students, financial aid played a far less decisive role. Take Rebecca's situation, for example. Although she received financial aid and also took out personal

loans in order to pay for her tuition, financial matters were not as critical to her decision to attend Lasallian College:

I'd like to say that I'm smarter than [this], but I kind of went into it blindly. I didn't really think about the price, and how much it's going to cost, and how much in debt I was forever going to be and if I was going to be available for scholarships or financial aid. They did mention that there will be a chance for scholarships and I was like, OK, that's cool. Price was never an issue for me. This is where I wanted to go and I was going to make it happen.

Rebecca's comment is not surprising. Because first-generation college students often don't have the kind of assistance (financial and otherwise) from parents that other non-first-generation college students have, it is easy to see how she could have made an uninformed decision such as this one (Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; Saenz, et al., 2007; Terenzini, et al., 1996).

Justin received some scholarship money and his parents took out a loan in order to send him to Lasallian College, but the cost of tuition wasn't a deterrent. "Money has never been a factor in any of my family's decisions," he told me. "If something costs something, then they're going to come up with a way to meet that price in order to get what they want." For Justin, the proximity of Lasallian College to his home and family trumped cost.

Students chose to attend Lasallian College for numerous reasons – its Catholic identity, its proximity to home, or because they were already quite familiar with the College. But financial assistance emerged as one of the most significant college choice factors for the study participants. The majority of the students benefited from this aid,

while others who were unable to obtain it were able to pay for college through other means.

*Student's Understanding of Being a First-Generation College Student*

When asked at what point in their lives they first understood that they were a first-generation college student, all but three study participants said they first grasped this distinction either during the Lasallian College admission process or their first semester at the school. The majority also considered being the first in their respective families to attend college very positive.

Several participants saw themselves as trailblazers of sorts – and were particularly motivated by an interest in being a good example for younger siblings or relatives.

Rebecca explained the meaning that being a first generation college student had for her:

For me, it's more or less stopping the tradition...the tradition of not going to school, not graduating. Being the first to graduate high school, the first to attend college, being the first to graduate college...it's breaking those things that have meant the most to me. And being able to bring my little brothers and sisters into it and say, hey, you know, this is fun, you should want to do it when you grow up. So it's encouraging them to want to do it...that's been my whole excitement of being first-generation. Breaking the trend.

Pedro offered a similar reflection. “I say that I’m setting the bar for the rest of my younger cousins and for my brother and sister. It’s not should we go to college? It’s where are we going to college?” Justin articulated well his feelings about serving as an example for others. He observed, “It’s cool in the sense that I’m paving the road and I can help my brothers and help their kids and my kids and anybody else.”

Only a handful of students felt that being first-generation sometimes or always carried a negative connotation or believed that their status as a first-generation student worked against them. During the college search process, Christina's high school guidance counselor told her that, after reviewing her grades and family background, Lasallian College "would never accept me and that I would never make it through the nursing program." Christina viewed the guidance counselor's remarks about her abilities as directly tied to her status as a first-generation college student. After Christina was admitted to Lasallian College, she began to see her status more positively, especially when the Lasallian College nursing director, "made it a point at the beginning [of class] to point out all of us who were first-generation in nursing and we all stood up and everybody clapped."

Of all the students I interviewed, Marie was the most vocal and emphatic about her standing as a first-generation college student. In comparison to the other students in the study, she also looked upon her status as first-generation in the most negative terms. Marie described how she felt:

I first started hearing it when I started to go to college and it really kind of bothered me because, oh my...am I an outsider? Am I some sort of an outcast? Is it socially unacceptable to announce...to people that you are a first-generation college student and that you're something less and that you really need to work and compensate for what you're lacking and work harder to catch up with everybody else? I thought, you know, I'm going to be labeled as this person who's already fighting against the odds, who's already going to have problems, so, you know, I associated it with being a problem student...

Marie's account notwithstanding, a majority of participants in this study saw their first-generation status as a positive distinction and one they were excited and pleased to

claim. A handful struggled with being identified as first-generation, but overcame setbacks associated with the status.

In this section, I have discussed findings related to the pre-collegiate experiences of students in this study. With this context now established, in the next section I focus on analyzing the core experiences that interviewees had during their time as students at Lasallian College.

### The Story: Exploring the First-Generation College Student's Experience at Lasallian College

How did study participants describe the various experiences they had as first-generation college students while at Lasallian College? In this section, I explore this question, focusing specifically on (1) relationships with faculty, (2) learning experiences that evoked significant meaning, (3) stresses and pressures students experienced in college, and (4) participants' understandings of the College's mission.

#### *It's All About Relationships*

A majority of participants in this study underscored their concern that they would not find a personal mentor who could assist them during their college journey. This fear of a lack of direction and of a mentor or source of reliable college information is not uncommon among first-generation college students (Pascarella et al., 2004; Pratt & Skaggs, 1989; Rodriguez, 2003; Strayhorn, 2006). Their situation is an especially tenuous one since they cannot rely on their parents for experience-based assistance or advice.

In most cases, students in this study turned to faculty members at Lasallian College for course-related, as well as personal guidance. As a result, students came to appreciate the role faculty members played in their college experience, the level of teaching expertise faculty brought to the classroom, their own enhanced understanding of the course material, and the valuable relationships that resulted from close interaction with faculty members. In most instances, students cited competent, caring faculty and the relationships that they formed with these individuals as prominent evidence of what makes the College Lasallian.

In taking a closer look at the ways in which study participants relied on faculty for assistance, it became clear how crucial these individuals and the relationships they formed were to the overall success of the participants in this study.

Several of these relationships developed out of necessity. Rebecca, for example, explained how she could not simply approach her mother when she required guidance or assistance with her coursework. She offered a hypothetical example:

If I had a question on homework, don't ask mom - it goes right over her head. She has really good life experience, but not educational experience. So if I was asking, "Hey mom, how do you get Y out of X for this math problem," she would look at me and go, "I know how to do 1+1 and some division, but I can't help you." So I definitely turn to the teachers and that's why I speak very highly of them being able to be there for us because if I have any problems, they are the only people I could go to.

Rebecca was certainly not alone. Others also found faculty assistance a vital component of their Lasallian College experience. Shelly told me that in addition to her "great sense of humor," her favorite professor is "always willing to make sure everyone

understands the material before moving on. She takes the time to review and go over it and it's just really nice and so she's always available.”

The personal dedication that faculty exhibited made a strong impact on these first-generation college students. Kelly thoughtfully described how valuable this one-on-one attention was for her, observing that,

You aren't just a number in a crowd. You're not just a student ID. You actually have interactions with your faculty that can go further than just the classroom and I think that allows you to kind of further your education.

Christina appreciated the one-on-one relationships she developed with faculty. She pointed out that students “can speak to any professors you want anytime. You know them by the first name and you can call their cell phone number. They are really that helpful.” Ellen described how one professor’s actions, in particular, made a positive difference in her life during a particularly difficult year:

She's one of those professors that I can email at 11:00 p.m. at night and she'll shoot me an email right back if I need help. She's always there. She's one of the professors after my father got sick, she pulled me aside to make sure I was OK. She's just been there throughout everything this year. And she's really...she's the sweetest lady I know.

A few students saw a direct association between well-prepared faculty who make an effort to build relationships with students and the Lasallian mission of the College.

Beth articulated this well, explaining that professors are

Obviously all very educated and they really... all want to help you. You're never going to find a professor at [Lasallian College] who doesn't want to help you or doesn't want the best for you. [These] are the people who are teaching you now who want you to go on and do better, so they're serving you. I mean, so to go along with the Lasallian principles, they are giving back to their community by teaching us.

In much the same spirit, Pedro appreciated the faculty's commitment to excellence and the mission of the College. He said:

Ninety percent of our professors here have their doctorate or are working on that - or have the terminal degree. I am here because they are the experts in their fields and hopefully they are also part of the mission as well.

It was perhaps Peter who best summarized the important role that faculty at Lasallian College play in the lives of students – especially first-generation college students, when he said, “these are the professors that change your life.”

The students in this study underscored that relationships with faculty at Lasallian College were a significant aspect of their experience at the College. Faculty did more than simply teach. They served as mentors and guides to students who needed them and fulfilled this role in the spirit of the mission of the College. As a result, students felt more successful and confident.

#### *Learning Experiences That Evoke Significant Meaning*

The first-generation college students I interviewed at Lasallian College frequently highlighted the nature of the academic experiences they had on campus, underscoring that they consistently evoked significant meaning and positively affected their growth and development. In addition to regular coursework, students stressed three types of experiences in particular, that really "made a difference": Lasallian College's "Seminar Program;" January Term (or "Jan Term") course experiences; and traditional study abroad trips. Students found that these experiences challenged them intellectually, often encouraging them to think critically. They also helped students see the perspectives of

others and appreciate new subject matter to which they were not previously accustomed. Although many of the students I interviewed said they felt underprepared for college, most ended up excelling in the classroom. They attributed their positive experiences at Lasallian College to the aforementioned intellectually engaging learning opportunities.

Students spoke very highly of their experience with the College's "Seminar Program," which is a key component of the core curriculum. As part of this program, students are required to complete four courses with a specific liberal arts focus, such as art and science; history and government; or philosophy and literature. Two electives are also offered which relate to diversity and international topics. The Seminar Program features reading-intensive courses. Classic works of literature regularly serve as the foundation of these courses and the basis for class discussion. Faculty usually don't prepare formal lectures for Seminar courses, instead, they facilitate student discussion in the style of the Socratic Method, engaging students through questioning. Students learn from classroom dialogue with peers.

Rebecca described the Seminar Program as one of the "most amazing" series of classes that she took at Lasallian College. She had this to say about the impact of the program:

Seminar forces you to read. The only way to get graded in seminar is participation and to participate you need to know what...you are talking about. It is basically a class that you just sit in a big circle and the teacher comes and doesn't say anything and it's just discussion amongst the students.... what they interpreted the text to be [and] questions that might have arisen during it. It teaches you how to read between the lines and really get down to the meaning of the book.

Shane developed a similar appreciation for texts used in the program, such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. "They [the classics] expand your knowledge to a wide variety of things." Shane's experience was so positive that he told me that he felt "everyone should read those books."

In addition to reading classic literature, students also appreciated the new perspectives, points of view, and previously unexplored content they addressed while in Seminar discussions. Shelly attributed much of her learning to the group dynamics of the courses:

I mean I have classes with roughly nineteen to twenty people, and so just to hear diverse viewpoints on the same passage is interesting for me...because, I mean, OK, I didn't look at it that way. I understand what you're saying, but I feel this way.

Seminar also taught new skills. Christina said that the Seminar experience, for her, "helps you to be more confident in what you say and your beliefs because you have to present them in front of a classroom of peers and a professor and I just think that's helped a lot." Ellen explained how one of the Seminar courses in which she was enrolled challenged her, especially in relation to her understanding of her own faith, the study of religion, and the predominance of Catholic students enrolled at the College. She recalled:

Like...right now, [in] my final Seminar class, it's constantly being brought up about the Catholic background and it throws me off still and I do have hard times where...I don't understand. I've never read the Bible. I've never been into that, I've never understood any of it. They'll bring it up like it's just everyday language and it strikes me and it throws me off guard, but I do honestly feel like I've grown more spiritually here - not religious, but spiritually.

Alex believed that his experience in the summer Bridge program helped him prepare for the challenging work he would have to do as part of the Seminar program. As part of Bridge, Alex and his classmates read Homer's *Illiad* to prepare them for what they would experience in a Seminar class focused on Homer's *Odyssey*. He explained that "it helped me a lot with understanding texts, what to expect, how to analyze quotes."

The Seminar Program is only one of several means by which these first-generation college students experienced meaningful learning opportunities while at Lasallian College. Another impactful program was the January Term or "Jan Term" program (as it is called by students). Lasallian College's academic calendar is structured such that students have the opportunity each January, in between academic semesters, to pursue a single topic of study at an accelerated pace. Students enroll in four classes each fall, one Jan Term course, and four classes each spring. Jan Term allows for students to study a topic intensively in the form of travel study or a campus-based course. Dozens of options are offered each January. Many of the students I spoke with raved about their Jan Term experience. Pedro, for example, described it as an opportunity "to take something outside your major... You're exploring something different. I think it's a fabulous program." In much the same way, Rebecca noted how she spent a Jan Term in Wisconsin volunteering at a middle school, and how grateful she was for the experience.

Like Rebecca, Kelly stayed within the country for one of her Jan Term experiences. It was, however, geographically and theoretically quite different from Rebecca's – which offers some insight into how diverse these courses can be. As Kelly said of her Jan Term experience:

Jan Term allows you to kind of go out of your comfort zone and try something new. I took a railroads course and learned about the history of the railroads and trains... it ended up being this crazy experience because it was in the middle of winter [and] we got stuck and had to take a bus...

Several students participated in international travel-related Jan Terms. Pedro, for instance, traveled out of the country for two of his Jan Term experiences.

I went to Mexico City to work at a [Christian] Brothers' orphanage in Mexico.... Although I'm Mexican and I've been to Mexico many times, I've never lived in Mexico for that amount of time. It was without family, so it was a whole different atmosphere.

Prior to that, Pedro traveled to Asia. "We were in three countries and we saw the culture for what it was and how people are just more mellow about a lot of things," he said.

Lasallian College's mission and its focus on social justice provided a lens through which Pedro was able to interpret and understand his experiences in Mexico. As a result, it has motivated him to act closer to home:

I'm able to see more of the injustices that are happening today... especially in my community back home and how people who are underserved are taken advantage of, especially like in the fields, [such as] people who are illegal immigrants... we went to the [U.S./Mexico] border this past Easter break. It's just like, so many things are happening all around my community and this is just something that I have to go back and help change.

Although not a Jan Term offering, Kelly took advantage of what students termed another powerful learning experience for them at the College: study abroad opportunities. Enthusiastic about her experience, Kelly told me how she studied abroad in Rome, Italy during her sophomore year. This was an important trip for her, since she saw it as a means of exploring majors and a possible career. Kelly explained that,

I didn't know what [I wanted] to do and I thought I wanted to do international business. And it was probably one of the best experiences that I have had in college. I think that it... I mean talk about taking you out of your comfort zone. You're thrown into a completely different country. I didn't go with friends. I... had to figure out everything for myself there.

The experience, for Kelly, was profound. "I think I have a broader view of the world and on people and their behaviors and interactions...I'm more educated and I...think it's changed me as a person in a lot of ways."

In fact, traditional, semester-long study abroad trips were quite popular among the students I interviewed at Lasallian College. Kelly, Pedro, and Angela have already had such experiences. Others, such as Beth and Ellen, told me they planned to study in Australia in the future. Beth spoke about how many of her friends at Lasallian College are also planning to study abroad:

Bethany is going to Italy for the year, my other friend Mary is going to France and Italy for a whole year, my other friend Susan is going to Spain or Italy - she hasn't made up her mind yet - and my other friend Emily is going to Barcelona, so there's a lot of people... I mean in my core group of friends, that's five of the six.

It was clear among study participants that meaningful learning experiences were not limited to Seminar courses, Jan Term experiences, or study abroad excursions. Students consistently encountered challenging and engaging learning experiences and opportunities on a daily basis that left a meaningful imprint on their growth and development as college students.

To illustrate, Marie, who attended a single gender high school, told me that her class discussions and everyday experiences helped her to develop a deeper appreciation for a broader range of perspectives:

One of the things that I really think about every once in a while is the opposite gender's point of view. Now that I'm sitting in the classroom, I get to understand what the boys think and how they think and it's quite a drastic change because the last time boys were in an academic setting with me was when they were playing with teenage mutant ninja turtles in eighth grade. So it's interesting to hear their point of view and really it's influenced a lot of my personal choices and views on life and politics and world problems and things like that.

Ellen, who described herself as “not exactly open-minded” as a freshman, said she now knows how to “form my own ideas.” She really appreciated gaining the skills to “sit down and have an intellectual conversation with my friends” and, as a result of her Lasallian College experience, she said that,

I've been able to further develop my political ideals and stuff like that. It's difficult with my family because they don't have the background I do, so I'll get in debates with my father and he'll spit out his emotional arguments, and yet I like to have the evidence... I have been able to grow so much that I know what I believe in.

As a result of taking an ethics class, Rebecca learned about America's correctional system. In an effort to share the facts and theories that she learned, she started a dialogue with her husband, a police officer. The dialogue turned into a debate. “I was telling him about [what I learned] and oh boy, did that not go over too well,” she exclaimed. Rebecca felt strongly that what she has learned in her classes has profoundly changed her approach to learning, thinking, and decision-making. As she put it:

I'm a much deeper thinker... I have arguments that I definitely wouldn't have if I didn't come here... I am able to teach my mom all kinds of points and views from things that I'm learning in class... It's definitely enhanced my thinking...it's definitely changed me the most. I'm smarter and more well rounded to where I can back arguments up with facts; before I was kind of b-s'ing my way through it.

Rebecca also appreciated that Lasallian College offered a variety of religion courses, which are required as part of the College's curriculum. She valued new perspectives they offered:

I took Bib Lit, which is an introduction to the Bible and the reading between the lines of the Bible with one of the Brothers.... I took Intro to Judaism - which is a whole different religion which we got to talk about. I took a class... on religions of India...we're getting completely different types of religions.

Religion and ethics courses, as well as the incorporation of social justice principles in other courses, likewise challenged Justin to see the world in a new light:

Having learned what I have through my major, I look at where I was in my life... high school years, middle school years... early college years... and I don't like that guy. And now that I know all these oppressions, struggles and structures and all these things and the way it works... I don't know...it has made me a better person, it has made me...it's really opened my eyes to the world, you know, outside of my little cocoon that I was raised in.

Various learning experiences evoked meaning for the students in this study. These included the College's "Seminar Program," "Jan Term" experiences, traditional study abroad trips, and even many of the College's regular academic courses. Students described these as pivotal learning experiences that made their educational journey at Lasallian College memorable and meaning-filled.

### *Stress and Pressures*

In addition to positive and thought-provoking learning experiences, students in this study also described a range of pressures and stressors associated with being first-generation college students. To be sure, most college students experience pressure and stress of some kind – whether it is related to academics, finances, relationships, or other

issues (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009). During the course of this study, it became clear that these first-generation college students were challenged by a variety of stressful situations and pressures that are commonly identified among those who are the first in their family to go to college.

Justin experienced significant stress during his orientation program. When it came time to sign up for classes, he suddenly realized how important college was. “It hit me like a ton of bricks,” he said. “It wasn’t like a fearful thing, it was more like an anxiety thing. It was a big step.” Justin said that he “must have had a nervous breakdown or something” while standing in line waiting to register because

when I actually came down to sign up for those classes, I was so nervous... it just suddenly took hold of me... like... imagine you're snow boarding and it's a nice sky and there's an avalanche that just takes you out... it was like that. I was so just... I broke down... I was crying, I was nervous, I was shaking, I locked my keys in my car.

For Angela, the greatest stress occurred upon entering Lasallian College as a transfer student and not knowing if she was adequately prepared to handle what was expected of her in the classroom. “It was nerve-racking,” she explained, because “I didn't know...if my classes up until that point had prepared me for the coursework here. I don't know... I just thought maybe I wasn't smart enough...there was a lot of anxiety in the transition.”

Ellen described numerous challenges she experienced as a first-generation student and how, over time, she learned to address them. One of the more difficult challenges was vocabulary. As she told me:

They [the faculty] would be saying things and...they would just confuse me. I would have to write them down and look them up later. I was not prepared for the intellectual level coming in. I mean we hear all those stories that college is partying, and that's what I was thinking and I was wrong. It was difficult. It was really difficult my first semester.

The situation was somewhat similar for Kelly. She also felt that she lacked basic college-related knowledge, and that had she known more, she might have fared better academically during her freshman year. Kelly also felt that she was a victim of poor advising. Trying to remedy that poor advising resulted in a rather stressful few years:

I didn't have a good advisor... so I had to switch my advisor because they would just kind of be like, "Oh, what classes do you need to take" and I would tell them and they would just sign [the form] and would never kind of tell me "If you want to do this, you need to take these classes," and so I ended up having to overload classes for the past four semesters to make up for ones that I didn't take and they had told me different directions.

Pedro indicated that time management was a source of stress for him. "I've been too involved. It's a challenge because I would say 'yes' to a lot of things, not knowing exactly what I was getting into. It got kind of out of control. At first, I was going crazy. I didn't even know what to do." Pedro's over-involvement resulted in some negative consequences. "My grades haven't been the best here at [Lasallian College]. But then like, I don't mind that at the same time. OK, I'm not an 'A' student, I never have been. I'm OK with that."

Scholars have identified and studied a variety of stressors and pressures from which first-generation college students often suffer. These can include low self-esteem, a lack of self-confidence, and a fear of failure (McGregor, Mayleben, Buzzanga, Davis, and Becker, 1991; Alessandria and Nelson, 2005). Marie suffered from all three, but also

demonstrated a well-developed understanding of these conditions and tried her best to cope. She framed her comments in this way:

Most of my lack of confidence comes from a lack of knowledge, so I try to ask somebody for help and more information, read a certain type of literature on how to do, a, b, and c; and pretty much learn the tricks on my own and try to do the best with what I have and use as little resources as possible and try to maximize the outcome. That's pretty much what I do and when I find an answer to a problem, that's when the confidence comes back. So the lack of confidence is basically, I would have to say, fear. Fear of failure. Which after, like I said, working so hard to get here, I wouldn't want to fail because I can't afford to fail. Now at this point, it's life and death. That's really what this is for me. I mean, if I don't succeed, and I don't meet the standard, my own standard, first of all, then the standard of society or the environment in which I want to live, you know, I'll feel a sense of failure, start to lose my confidence, and not to mention everybody I feel I have let down, like my parents, most of all, and then my main one goal of trying to pay back what I have received.

Some first-generation college students struggle to balance the demands of college with family expectations and parents' lack of understanding of what they are experiencing as college students. Christina, like Marie, placed a lot of pressure on herself – pressure related to her status as a resident student at the College. Christina explained this in the following way:

I think not being at home and not being a helping hand [has been stressful]... sometimes it's a pull that I want to be at home because that's kind of what all of my brothers and sisters have done - stayed at home for a few years and helped my mom and gone straight into a job and it's hard ... to be here and not there to help her.

Shane says that “my family has a lot of expectations of me” and that this is a major source of pressure in his life. The stress is related to the fact that he is trying to accomplish something that hasn't been done before; he's also likely to be the sole breadwinner in his family when he graduates.

There's... stress because you know, my grandfather is supporting us, but he's also 87...but you know, he's not going to be able to support us for ever. I feel that I have to graduate college to support my family and my mom's not going to be able to do it. So it's a lot of pressure. Thinking on it, I feel like it's probably a lot of pressure for a lot of first-generation college students.

Peter, a Latino, said that his stress is related to race. He feels pressured to be part of race-related cliques that he doesn't feel comfortable joining. As he put it:

The problem with Latinos here is that they isolate each other. Some of them go to different groups; some of them are just not open-minded. Blacks hang out with blacks, Latinos with Latinos, the whites with the whites. I wasn't like that. I was one of the persons who was raised with a lot of people and it's the first time I was faced with a lot of white kids.

These first-generation students, like most college students, had to cope with various stressors and pressures. Most of what they faced are fairly common, but some students, in particular, were challenged by pressures specifically associated with their status as the first in their respective families to attend college.

### *Mission Matters*

The first-generation college students I interviewed at Lasallian College had a basic understanding of the role that the institution's mission played in making their college experience distinctive. They also had a sense of the value that the College's mission contributed to their education. That said, no universal or uniform definition emerged among participants about what it meant for the institution to be Lasallian; rather, it became clear that students identified with the institution's Lasallian identity differently and, as a result, they described a variety of ways in which the mission contributed to their educational experience.

Although its identity as a Catholic and Lasallian institution of higher learning was not the sole reason study participants chose to attend Lasallian College, participants grasped that the Catholic and Lasallian identity of the College was, indeed, important. Many students were familiar with the College's "Core Principles" and referenced them collectively or in part while describing the mission of the institution. These include: "Concern for the poor and social justice;" "faith in the presence of God;" "quality education;" "inclusive community;" and "respect for all persons." For instance, Beth explained that the College "puts up those pictures of De La Salle and the Core Principles" to communicate the mission of the institution. Similarly, Kelly explained that the Lasallian identity of the institution was often represented "through visual things and interactions." Students commonly said that actions, such as volunteering, were representative of the core principles and mission of the College.

Kelly's description of "visual things" (or visual representations of the Core Principles) and "interaction" (or the act of doing something with or for others in the spirit of these Core Principles) summed up well how students described the College's mission. It was this combination of visual symbolism and the mission-based call to action that spoke most deeply to these students.

To illustrate the symbolic transmission of mission, students often referenced the beautiful chapel and bell tower that stand near the entrance to Lasallian College. Pedro described the structure as a symbol of "our Catholic identity, as well as our coming together as community." The entrance also features a statue of Saint John Baptist De La Salle and a great lawn with seating areas. Taken together, these landmark features offered

a powerful symbol of the mission. During the process of selecting a college, Beth described the “breathtaking view” that this area afforded and how it immediately evoked, for her, a sense of community. Marie described the entrance of the campus and these symbols as

the particular part of campus that everybody calls home because the chapel is there, the clock tower is there, and the statue is there. It's kind of at the center and the heart of everything. It kind of represents your foundation, what you stand for as a human being. It's kind of at the center of all our classrooms because of the location of this tower, it's in the middle of campus, and we have classrooms on the right and on the left. So at the center of everything [are] your morals and grounds and what you stand for and believe in.

Almost every student I interviewed referenced the chapel as a symbol of Lasallian College’s mission. A few of the students indicated that they attended services in the Chapel on a regular basis. Alex said that the option to participate in religious services was deeply attractive to him and said much about the College’s identity:

It's a small school, it helps you not only get in touch with your mind intellectually, but also to your faith, and to your soul. There's a chapel here. You can go and pray whenever you want. I think it's perfect.

Although most students believe that the Catholic identity of Lasallian College is strong, Pedro, who described himself as “a super active Catholic,” opined that “although we say we are fifty percent Catholic I would say we are more like about 5-10 percent on a good day,” referencing the institution’s claim that fifty percent of its students are of Roman Catholic background. He lamented: “I don't see [Lasallian College] as a very Catholic institution. We're Lasallian. But within Lasallian, the Catholic doesn't fit into it sometimes.” He would like the College to require student participation in Catholic

religious services and to play a more active role in encouraging non-Catholics to attend those services so that they could learn more about and experience the Catholic faith. “I feel that sometimes we are being so inclusive [of other faith practices] that we are being exclusive of our own religion just because we want to be fair with other people,” he warned.

Students also referenced other symbols representing the mission of the institution. These included a phrase painted near the entrance of each residence hall that proclaimed, “Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God” and the presence of crucifixes in classrooms. Many of the students also indicated that the Christian Brothers themselves, who wear distinctive black suits or robes with white collars, serve as important symbols of Lasallian College’s mission. Pedro, however, said “Just seeing the Brothers doesn't do it for me. Just because I see Brothers, I don't care.” Instead, he preferred to see the mission put into action. “I believe that we have a heritage as Catholics to proclaim the Gospel.”

Volunteer service emerged among the students as another prevalent characteristic of Lasallian College’s mission – a call to action associated with the College’s Core Principles, specifically “Concern for the poor and social justice.” Rebecca described her take on this particular core principle as “car[ing] about your community and want[ing] to help, you know, those who can't help themselves.” This principle fit well with her own values, and influenced her desire to attend Lasallian College: “When I came here [and found out] they had the Habitat [for Humanity] program, I was super excited!”

Volunteer service opportunities weren't limited, however, to just co-curricular activities. Rebecca told me that one of the classes she completed "actually required you to spend 30 community service hours...probably not what a normal school would have done. It's those kinds of things that I see the school doing to stay with their principles." This focus on giving back to the community was introduced to the students early on in their matriculation at Lasallian College. Beth recalled "hearing it over orientation." In particular, she noted this was the first time she heard the phrase, "Enter to Learn, Leave to Serve." Christina, a Nursing major, offered a similar perspective:

I think that most of us who chose to come to [Lasallian College] really kind of want to live by the term, "Enter to Learn, Leave to Serve." The professors and faculty...present to us opportunities for community service and helping others.

This chance to serve, Christina elaborated, attracted her to Lasallian College. "I've always wanted to serve others, so I think ... it was naturally in my personality and what I wanted to do." Another interviewee, Shelly, believed that students' participation in volunteer service opportunities instilled in them the desire to "leave [Lasallian College] with a purpose, [to] live with a mission in mind, not changing the world, but [having] an impact on the world."

All of this said, some students in this study struggled with how to capture in formal terms some aspects of the institution's mission. Rebecca said that she had "never looked at myself as being Lasallian...I don't know." And when Angela first saw the word Lasallian referenced she thought it was the word 'liaison' spelled incorrectly. She later admitted, "I don't really have any idea what it means." Justin also expressed some

concerns about the difference between institutions sponsored by the Christian Brothers (Lasallian) and those institutions sponsored by the Jesuits (Ignation). “To be honest with you, I don’t think Jesuit Lasallian schools exist, do they?” he asked. “To me, they’re both forms of education, however one has a Catholic approach and one has a Jesuit approach.”

Students most often referenced symbols of the mission and actions or behaviors congruent with it when asked to comment about Lasallian College’s Catholic and Lasallian identity. In many cases, students saw the mission of the institution as a call to action, and usually to volunteer service.

In the next chapter, and building upon findings in chapters four and five, I draw out several overarching conclusions from this study. I discuss how these findings both contribute new learning to the existing literature about first-generation college students as well as how they confirm and contradict what we already understand and know about first-generation college students.

CHAPTER SIX

MAJOR CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR  
PRACTITIONERS AND RESEARCHERS

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of first-generation college students enrolled at a Lasallian institution of higher education in the United States. Using a phenomenological approach, I sought to find the “essence” of the college experience for 13 students enrolled at Lasallian College. Three questions guided this research: (1) What are the experiences of first-generation college students at a Lasallian institution of higher education in the United States? (2) What experiences specific to Lasallian education do first-generation college students suggest enhance – as well as detract from – their learning and involvement on campus? (3) If experiences among these first-generation college students differ at this institution, how might they best be explained?

After stating my research objectives in chapter one, I provided an overview of the literature related to first-generation college students in chapter two and offered an explanation of the study's methodology in chapter three. In chapter four, I provided brief vignettes of the research participants in an effort to offer the reader background information and other details about the life stories and experiences of these students. In chapter five, I interpreted and analyzed the data collected from the interviews, organizing

it into two different kinds of experiences: “pre-collegiate experiences” and “experiences at Lasallian College.”

Here, in the first part of chapter six, I offer several major conclusions that are grounded in findings from this study. These conclusions reveal new information or learning gleaned from my research. I also discuss several examples of how these findings confirm and question what we know about first-generation college students from previous studies. In the second part of this chapter, I draw out various implications that this study's findings have for practitioners before offering several recommendations for future research.

### Major Conclusions

The major conclusions of this study are divided into three categories: (1) findings not previously identified in the literature; (2) findings that were confirmed by the literature; and (3) findings that raise questions about the literature. In the first category, I focus on how faculty members at Lasallian College serve as an embodiment of the institution's mission and how a vibrant, lived mission adds value to a first-generation college student's experience at Lasallian College. In the second category, I focus on students' preparedness for college and the stresses and pressures they experienced before and during college. In the third category, I explore the descriptors of first-generation college students as “at-risk” and under supported by their parents and how these labels run counter to this study's findings.

## Findings Not Previously Identified in the Literature

### *Faculty Members Embody the Mission for First-Generation College Students*

Students believe that faculty members embody the values and characteristics of the mission and are a significant presence in the fabric of their collegiate experience. Students repeatedly connected the caring presence of faculty with the Catholic and Lasallian mission of the College. Faculty served as mentors and guides to these students – something they were concerned they might not have in college because they were first-generation college students. In addition to being experts in their respective disciplines, students felt that faculty members were demonstrating their commitment to the Catholic and Lasallian values of the College by building relationships with students, going “above and beyond” what was required of them as faculty members, and always being available to assist students with personal or family matters. Students especially appreciated that faculty made an effort to get to know them by name and understand their personal stories and family situations.

Essentially, faculty members at Lasallian institutions are called to be more than experts in their academic fields or outstanding classroom teachers. Lasallian institutions, by virtue of their mission statements, pride themselves on their accessibility to, encouragement of and support for first-generation college students. As a result, in Lasallian institutions, faculty must take on an added set of responsibilities – they must be mentors, advisors, success coaches, and personal counselors who accompany first-generation college students on their journey through college. Faculty must make a

commitment to taking on this additional responsibility or risk being seen by students as not living the mission or demonstrating a commitment to it.

*A Vibrant Mission Adds Value to the First-Generation College Student's Experience*

The mission of Lasallian College contributes to an environment that is welcoming for first-generation college students and which adds value to their college experience. Although students identified differently with the ways that the mission affected their educational experience, it was clear that mission mattered to them. It's not surprising that students identified with the mission in different ways; with such a diverse student body and with no concrete set of "procedures" through which students were expected to engage the college's mission, each student made sense of its core mission-based principles through the lens of his or her own college experience.

One way that students identified and appreciated the mission was through their recognition of various physical symbols, such as statues, plaques, slogans, and buildings. These symbols played an important role in communicating that the values of the institution are physically present on the campus and are not just talking points in the recruiting literature. For example, the great lawn and statue of De La Salle conveyed a welcoming, community-based atmosphere that first-generation college students enjoyed. Slogans painted near the entrances to residence halls ("Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God") along with a beautiful chapel and worship services reinforced the Catholic identity of the College, something that numerous study participants said they specifically sought in their college search process.

Of even greater value, students emphasized how they appreciated being challenged and encouraged to make the mission a lived reality – to act upon or “do” the mission through volunteer service. One of the College’s slogans, “Enter to Learn, Leave to Serve,” aptly described the transformational effect that the mission had on the students who participated in this study. Academic experiences such as Jan Term, Study Abroad, and the Seminar Program model the kinds of actions and values that naturally flow from the core principles of the mission, such as concern for the poor and social justice, quality education, and respect for all persons. Through these initiatives, the students were able to make the mission tangible in their college experience.

This “added value” from the mission is important because first-generation college students arrive on college campuses categorized as “at-risk” and especially vulnerable to the stresses and pressures of college life. One might conclude that the mission eases the transition for students and contributes to a value-filled community atmosphere. First-generation college students make personal connections with faculty, feel that they are surrounded by a welcoming and caring environment, and are supported by and engaged in academic and co-curricular programs led by professional staff who want them to succeed. Collectively, these elements reaffirm that the student’s particular choice of college was the correct one, and, as a result, these students may find themselves less likely to leave college or drop out.

### Findings That Were Confirmed by the Literature

#### *First-Generation College Students Often Feel Underprepared and Unsure of their Capabilities in College*

The literature concerning first-generation college students describes these students as often underprepared for college and unsure of their capabilities (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Choy 2001; Oldfield, 2007). During the course of my discussions with students in this study, it was clear that the majority felt ill prepared for college level work and responsibilities.

To wit, although Marie said she was academically prepared for college, she felt woefully unprepared for some of the social elements of college life because she attended an all-female high school. Ellen wasn't ready for the intellectual level of college, citing struggles with vocabulary, and Alex didn't know how to critically read a text until he participated in the College's Bridge program. Other students, like Shelly, participated in an "academy" program designed for first-generation college students prior to college that she felt prepared her to address the challenges of college life. Angela, who transferred from another college, wasn't sure if coursework taken elsewhere had adequately prepared her for the demands of Lasallian College's faculty. And finally, Shane "stopped out" for a few years and worked for a while before returning to Lasallian College. He wasn't sure what kind of impact this would have on his matriculation at the College.

*First-Generation College Students Experience a Range of Stresses and Pressures During their Pre-Collegiate and College Experiences*

As much of the existing literature on first-generation college students concludes, my research confirmed that first-generation college students experience stresses and pressures that are due primarily to their status as the first in their family to attend college. Among others, these include parental expectations, financial stressors, and pressures to perform well academically

The first wave of stress was evident in the pre-collegiate experiences of study participants. Parents strongly encouraged their students to attend college and placed strong expectations upon them in this regard. These students also placed fairly high expectations upon themselves to be successful because they saw themselves as trailblazers who served as a positive example for younger siblings and relatives. These findings support the conclusions of other scholars who have found that first generation college students often struggle with juggling the expectations of their parents and other important role models/mentors in their lives (Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; Saenz, et al., 2007; Terenzini, et al., 1996).

Students also expressed concern over their ability to afford college. This feeling was especially profound because many students (and their parents) recognized that tuition for Lasallian College was quite expensive. This concern was often mitigated by the fact that Lasallian College offers students considerable financial aid in the form of scholarships and grants. However, financial concerns resurfaced in the form of anxiety about repaying loans and finding a good paying job after graduation. This is congruent

with prior research that suggests that first-generation college students come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and that financial obligations are often a source of stress for these students (Bui, 2002; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991; Horn & Nuñez, 2000).

Once enrolled, a second wave of stressors emerged. Students expressed anxiety about how ready they were to handle college level work and if they could meet the demands of the curriculum and the expectations of the faculty. Whereas family members first placed expectations on students to gain entry to college, now they had expectations that their son or daughter would also be successful in college. Some students suffered from low self-esteem and a lack of confidence, while others dealt with poor advising or race-related cliques. The existing literature on first-generation college students supports this notion concerning low self-esteem and a lack of self-confidence (McGregor, Mayleben, Buzzanga, Davis, & Becker, 1991; Phinney & Haas, 2003, Alessandria & Nelson, 2005).

#### Findings That Raise Questions About the Literature

##### *At-Risk Behaviors Not as Pronounced*

Although first-generation college students are considered “at-risk” and more prone to dropping out of college, very few of the students in this study demonstrated a preponderance of “at-risk” behaviors during their interviews. This finding questions much of what has been reported in the literature about first-generation college students being noticeably "at-risk" (Billson & Terry, 1982; Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Choy 2001; Oldfield, 2007).

Although many felt underprepared for college, once enrolled the students in this study demonstrated a strong connection to the College and began to flourish. Evidence of this connection came in the form of various references made during the interviews. Students explained that they had posted acceptable grades, made friends, were involved in co-curricular and social activities, got along well with roommates and had developed one or more meaningful relationships with faculty members. In most cases, students were on good terms with family members and enjoyed their encouragement and support while enrolled at Lasallian College.

Those students who mentioned difficulty in their coursework often referenced the tutoring center, spending time in the library, or making an effort to address any deficiencies. Students did experience struggles – such as not agreeing with a teacher’s viewpoint, finding a course difficult or challenging, and managing time improperly. These struggles didn’t appear to impact these first-generation college students any more than a student whose parents had attended college. If anything, these students seemed to use their self-referential knowledge as first-generation college students as a positive, seeking out additional assistance when necessary.

#### *Role of Parental Support Stronger than Expected*

The literature suggests that first-generation college students are less likely to be successful because they do not benefit from the same level of support that their non first-generation college students peers receive from their own parents (Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Phinney & Haas, 2003). Despite these

findings, students in this study received a significant amount of support from their parents – especially during, but not limited to, their college discernment process. The support was primarily evident in the encouragement and guidance parents provided students as they considered what to do after high school. Despite not having attended college, parents of the students in this study were fairly influential in their son or daughter’s decision concerning which college to attend. Parents understood the value of college and why it was important for their son or daughter to enroll – in most cases so that the student could lead a better life and have good opportunities for employment.

Parents played a supportive role in numerous ways. They provided college-related literature, accompanied the students on college visits, assisted with financial aid paperwork, and in some cases provided tuition dollars. In this small study, then, although the parents of these first-generation college students had not attended college, almost all offered a considerable amount of support for their daughter or son.

How can these contradictions perhaps be explained? First, because this study was quite small, its findings do not offer major rebuttals of previous studies, but instead, suggest that there is likely more *variation* in first generation college students than what has been previously described in the literature. First, the students in this study were not completely free of “at-risk” behaviors – many were still vulnerable in several ways because of their status as first-generation - but they didn’t appear to exhibit the same types of “at-risk” behaviors (e.g., lack of friends, poor academic performance, lack of involvement in co-curricular activities, severe financial struggles) that are often discussed in the literature. Second, few students in this study lacked parental support. To be sure,

parental support is a broad term and likely needs to be described differently. Parents may not be able to be supportive in *academic* situations (assist with calculus homework, interpret a professor's lecture, or be familiar with classical literature) but they certainly can be supportive in a variety of other ways that can positively affect a student's college experience (e.g., through offering encouragement, financial assistance, accompany the student on campus tours, provide a welcoming and safe place to study). To be certain, this was not always the case with the students in my study – one student was fairly estranged from her mother – but grandparents or guardians usually played a supporting role when parents were not in the picture.

I also believe that it is quite possible that certain aspects of the Lasallian College experience helped to mitigate the traditional obstacles or barriers to success that are often associated with first-generation college students. The strong faculty-student relationships and welcoming, supportive environment of the campus (both strongly influenced by the Catholic and Lasallian mission values of the College) appeared to have added value or contributed to a more positive and successful college experience for participants in this study.

Finally, these discrepancies may be explained in yet another way. It may well be that the students who truly demonstrated more traditional and pronounced “at-risk” behaviors and who had less supportive parents simply didn't volunteer to participate in this study. Given this study's small sample size, this explanation is highly plausible. Nonetheless, the more important point is that findings from this study suggest that there

is more to the story than has been previously told about first-generation college students. Continuing research is necessary to capture more of those stories.

Having elaborated on these six major study conclusions, I now discuss their various implications for practitioners in Lasallian education. I conclude by describing several areas for additional research to extend knowledge of first generation college students, especially in Lasallian colleges.

### Implications for Practitioners and Researchers

In this section, I offer several concrete suggestions for how those working in Lasallian higher education and Lasallian secondary schools could benefit from this study.

#### *Implications for Faculty and Staff in Lasallian Higher Education*

This study sheds light on an understanding of the role that the Lasallian mission has on first-generation college students. Specifically, this research revealed that relationships with faculty were a crucial element of the first-generation college student's experience at Lasallian College. These findings suggest that the mission is more than simply represented on the campus in the form of statues and artwork – it is also a lived reality in the lives of students. Accordingly, this study has several implications for faculty and staff who work in Lasallian higher education.

New employees – especially faculty – need to participate in orientation programs which emphasize the importance and value of understanding, appreciating, and living the Lasallian mission in their teaching and in their dealings with students. Healthy faculty-student relationships should be emphasized as a means of helping first-generation college

students feel welcome and comfortable at the institution. This regular contact with faculty may also serve as a retention measure. The result is that the mission becomes a lived reality on the campus. It is important, therefore, that faculty members at Lasallian colleges and universities understand that their roles at these institutions call for the added responsibility to understand and model the mission in ways that might not be as pronounced at a secular institution. This acculturation or orientation to the mission can also take place in faculty development workshops or formal “formation” programs that seek to engage faculty and staff in a deeper dialogue about the mission and the ways that it can be integrated into teaching and the curriculum. Certainly, findings from this study could help faculty see concretely how certain curricular and pedagogical initiatives -- such as service learning, basic undergraduate research, or travel study, are mission-inspired activities that often enrich the collegiate experiences of first generation students.

The concept of building relationships with students and making a personal connection with them is also relevant for staff and administrators who work in Lasallian higher education. Modeling the mission through personalized attention that could lead to meaningful relationships with students can take place at the very start of the admission and recruiting process. First-generation college students are unfamiliar with what to expect when they engage recruiters, discuss academic programs and tour campuses. Admission counselors, support staff, and others who interact with first-generation college students during this crucial time -- including those who plan first-year orientation programs, bridge programs, and freshman seminar courses -- could all benefit from training or orientation that helps them to see the important responsibility that they have to

model the mission and add value to the collegiate experience of first-generation college students. Given the Lasallian mission to first generation students, this training should be mandatory for staff in these areas.

*Implications for Lasallian Mission and Identity Officers*

This study's major conclusions focus on the added value that the Catholic and Lasallian mission has on the collegiate experience of first-generation students. These findings may be especially valuable for Mission and Identity Officers at other Lasallian institutions of higher education because of their ongoing efforts to integrate their respective mission and core values into all aspects of campus life.

This study underscores, for example, the value of having physical representations or symbols of the mission and its core values on campus. Concrete reminders of the mission -- such as statues, crucifixes, framed mission statements, slogans, signage, and dedicated chapel or campus ministry office space -- communicate the primacy of the organization's mission and the presence of its values to students. Mission and identity officers, therefore, are encouraged to make the mission of their campuses come alive, using creative ways to make it real and present in the lives of students. This could be done by inviting students to talk at campus visit days or orientation programs to prospective students and their parents about the positive impact that volunteer service initiatives or campus ministry programs have had on their college experience. These student testimonials could also be in the form of brief website videos – or even admission website blogs written by current students.

Findings from this study also suggest that Mission and Identity officers would do well to conduct an “audit” of the campus to determine just how well they are communicating their mission to students (and others). The audit could address several questions, such as: If someone didn’t know the mission of the organization prior to visiting campus, would it be evident to them after spending an hour touring the campus and its buildings? Would it be obvious after having a conversation with an admission counselor, faculty member, or group of enrolled students? An exploration of the verbal and non-verbal ways that the college communicates its mission could lead to improvements or enhancements that result in a more welcoming campus for first-generation college students as well as non-first-generation students. It is easy to take physical and other "living" (human!) symbols that represent those values for granted, but there should be a deliberate effort to emphasize them in ways that will make an impact on students.

*Implication for Lasallian Secondary School Administrators and Faculty*

Many of the students in this study explained that enrolling in college immediately after high school was a natural expectation for them. They also discussed some revealing information in their interviews about their middle and high school experiences and the impact that those experiences had on their college search process and their transition from high school to college.

Secondary school administrators and faculty members can benefit from the findings of this study insofar as this information can shape and develop planning for

transition programs and academic support initiatives. High school programs that focus on building skills that students will rely upon in college, such as test-taking, stress relief, reading and understanding challenging texts, and note taking all appear likely to make the transition easier for first-generation college students. Longer-term programs, such as “academies” that provide sustained encouragement and support over a longer period of time (such as through the entire high school experience), would also provide students with a level of preparedness and confidence that may lead to success in college.

The vast majority of students in this study believed that they were not prepared for college-level work. Efforts could be made to offer additional courses in high school (similar to Advanced Placement courses) which are taught by college professors in a college setting to give first-generation college students an opportunity to experience what it is like to take a college course first-hand. College-bound first-generation college students may also require extra encouragement from high school counselors to build their self-confidence concerning college. These college counselors could participate in summer training or other kinds of professional development offered by Lasallian colleges to help them understand what first-generation college students are experiencing and the kinds of support that they could benefit from the most.

#### Future Research Recommendations

This study of first-generation college students in Lasallian higher education offers a glimpse into the lives and experiences of 13 students enrolled at Lasallian College. Using a phenomenological approach, the study captured the essence of the pre-collegiate

and collegiate experiences of this diverse group of young men and women. The findings of this study contribute to the literature in a number of ways and have implications for several different groups of practitioners, as described in the previous pages. There are, however, several opportunities for additional research that stem from this study. In this section I offer two particular recommendations: a multi-case, qualitative study and an adaptation of this study's methodology for different constituencies or audiences.

#### *Multi-Case, Qualitative Study*

This study explored the experiences of 13 students enrolled at one particular institution of Lasallian higher education. There appears to be great potential in expanding the breadth and depth of the study by including a sample of students from other Lasallian universities in the United States (there are six total). Each of these institutions (described briefly in chapter three) is located in a different part of the country and serves a distinct population of students through a diversity of academic programs.

One potential avenue for future research could include a multi-case, qualitative study that builds upon the methodology used in this investigation. A sample of first-generation college students from each of the Lasallian institutions in the United States could be interviewed using a modified interview protocol that takes into account the uniqueness of each of the student populations and programs offered at these institutions. The experiences of these students could then be examined across the six Lasallian universities to gain a better perspective on how Lasallian institutions, writ large, serve first-generation college students. Down the road, the qualitative findings gleaned from

this study could then provide an informed basis for the development of a survey instrument that could be distributed to an even larger group of first generation college students at the nation's six Lasallian universities.

The findings of these studies could result in a national initiative to address the needs of first-generation college students in Lasallian higher education or, at a more local level, findings could be used to enhance or learn more about how best to serve first-generation college students at each of these universities. It appears that nothing like this kind of study has been conducted before specifically for Lasallian institutions, and because those in Lasallian higher education believe that serving first-generation college students is a primary aspect of the mission, it is likely that many administrators and faculty would benefit from such a study.

#### *Adaptation of Methodology for Different Constituencies*

Another possible area for research primarily builds upon the exploratory design and methodology of this study and would be focused on learning more about the experiences of specific groups of students in Lasallian higher education. Instead of focusing on first-generation college students, a study could address student-athletes, international students, or returning adult students to learn more about the essence of their experience in a Lasallian institution. A study such as this could result in findings that would aid administrators, staff and faculty in developing particular programs or initiatives to address the very specific needs of these groups of students.

## Final Comments

Very little research has been conducted on the experiences of first-generation college students in Lasallian higher education. This study focused on exploring the experiences of a small group of students at one particular Lasallian institution in an effort to fill a void in the literature on first-generation college students at Lasallian universities.

Lasallian schools have existed for over 325 years and can be found in over 80 countries worldwide. Approximately one million students from a variety of cultures and backgrounds matriculate at these institutions. Although this study focused only on first-generation college students at one institution, it underscores the importance of understanding these students and the impact that the Lasallian mission has on their educational experiences.

It is commonly understood in Lasallian education that all who work in these institutions are “Lasallian educators.” This term is not limited to only those who serve as classroom teachers. All who work in Lasallian schools are educators – they each contribute in a variety of ways to the educational experience of the students entrusted to their care. As a result, students in Lasallian schools benefit from outstanding, high-quality education, but they also benefit from the personal attention of caring faculty and staff, many of whom see their work as a vocation and not simply a means of making a living.

Saint John Baptist De La Salle founded the Brothers of the Christian Schools in 16<sup>th</sup> century France to serve students in need through an education that was high-quality, practical in nature, and which would make a difference in the lives of students so that

they could live faith-filled lives and be productive members of society. Today, those who work in Lasallian schools attempt to follow in the footsteps of De La Salle and provide that same kind of education in a rapidly changing world.

First-generation college students are a segment of the college-going population that Lasallian schools are honored and privileged to serve. Each of these students has a remarkable story to tell. This study served as an invitation for 13 students to share their stories so that we in higher education could learn more about the essence of their college experience. These students inspired me, encouraged me in my own vocation, and reminded me that, truly, there is a story behind every face – a story that is worth getting to know, understand, and honor.

APPENDIX A  
INTRODUCTORY LETTER TO PRIMARY CONTACT AT SELECTED  
INSTITUTION

[Date and Address]

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education program at Loyola University Chicago. In order to complete the requirements of my degree program, I am conducting an original research study to learn about the experiences of first-generation college students in Lasallian higher education. I am writing to ask your assistance with arranging interviews of students on your campus.

With the appropriate permissions from officials at your institution, during an onsite visit I plan to interview eight first-generation college students who can discuss with me their experiences of attending a Lasallian college/university. This study is grounded in the following research questions: What are the experiences of first-generation college students in Lasallian higher education in the United States? More specifically, (1) What experiences specific to Lasallian education do first-generation college students suggest enhance – as well as detract – from their learning and involvement on campus? (2) If the experiences among these first-generation college students differ, how might they be explained?

Each of the interviews will take approximately 60-90 minutes. All project-related data and information will be safeguarded and personal and institutional identities will be kept in confidence. Participation is voluntary and participants may choose to end their participation at any time.

I hope you will be willing to offer your college/university as a site for this project as well as your assistance in helping me identify student participants in this study. Participation of your institution in this project will help to establish greater understandings of the impact the Lasallian mission has on first-generation college students, an area that has yet to be fully explored. If you have any questions about this study or for further information, please contact me at [Contact Information]. Dr. Jennifer Haworth, who serves as my dissertation advisor, can be reached at [Contact Information]. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,  
Kurt Schackmuth  
Ph.D. Candidate, Loyola University Chicago

APPENDIX B  
DRAFT OF E-MAIL FROM PRIMARY CONTACT TO POTENTIAL STUDENT  
PARTICIPANTS

Dear:

I am writing on behalf of a colleague of mine, Kurt Schackmuth, who is conducting a study on first-generation college students enrolled in Lasallian higher education as a degree requirement for a Ph.D. in higher education at Loyola University Chicago. He has selected our institution as the site for his study. I am contacting you because I think you would be a good fit for this study.

His research will consist of interviewing eight students about their experiences as first-generation college students enrolled at a Lasallian institution, such as ours. These interviews will be conducted at \_\_\_\_\_ (location) and take 60-90 minutes. They will be recorded and transcribed by Mr. Schackmuth. Individual student names and the name of our institution will all be disguised with pseudonyms. In addition, he will be providing the eight students with disposable cameras and asking them to take some photographs so that these photos can be discussed during the interview. Your participation and any information provided to Mr. Schackmuth will be kept confidential.

Participation in the study is completely voluntary and will have no effect on any of your activities here and will not impact your course grades. Your willingness to participate in this research will help those of us who work with first-generation college students to better understand how our Lasallian mission impacts them.

If you are willing to participate, please respond directly to Mr. Schackmuth via e-mail by \_\_\_\_\_ (date). His e-mail address is: \_\_\_\_\_. He will begin by sending you a link to a short online survey for you to complete to gather some basic information.

Thank you for considering this opportunity.

Sincerely,

PRIMARY CONTACT NAME/TITLE  
INSTITUTION NAME

APPENDIX C  
RECRUITMENT E-MAIL FROM RESEARCHER TO STUDENTS WHO  
EXPRESSED INTEREST IN THE STUDY

Dear [Student Name]:

Thank you for expressing interest in participating in this research project. As you noted in the description of the research study attached to the e-mail that you received from \_\_\_\_\_ (primary contact). This is a research study examining the experiences of first-generation college students enrolled in Lasallian institutions of higher education. I am conducting this study as a doctoral student in the Higher Education program at Loyola University Chicago.

The first step in the study is the completion of the short online survey – a link can be found below. Upon review of the surveys, I will select eight students to interview for this study. In addition, I will be providing those eight students with disposable cameras and asking them to take some photographs so that these photos can be discussed during the interview.

Interviews will be conducted on campus, at \_\_\_\_\_ (location). The 60-90 minute interviews will be recorded and later transcribed by myself. A transcript will be sent to participants to review for accuracy. Information collected will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms will be used for participants and for the institution. Your participation will in no way affect any of your grades, academic standing or your role as a student on campus.

A more thorough description of the study and your rights as a research participant is outlined in the attached Informed Consent document, which I would ask you to sign if you were selected to participate in the study.

If you would like to be considered for this study, please click on the survey link below and respond to the very brief set of survey questions. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions. My e-mail address is: \_\_\_\_\_. Thank you for your consideration.

SURVEY LINK: \_\_\_\_\_

Sincerely,  
Kurt Schackmuth  
[Contact Information]

APPENDIX D  
STUDENT SELECTION SURVEY (ONLINE)



**Race/Ethnicity**

- \_\_\_\_\_ White/Caucasian  
\_\_\_\_\_ Black or African American  
\_\_\_\_\_ Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander  
\_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic or Latino  
\_\_\_\_\_ Asian  
\_\_\_\_\_ American Indian or Alaskan Native  
\_\_\_\_\_ Two or More Races

Have you ever received a Federal Pell Grant while enrolled at this institution? Yes / No  
(please select one)

What kind of activities (outside of regular coursework) are you involved in?

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Would you be willing to make yourself available to participate in a 90-minute interview  
on campus on one of the following days: \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_?  
Yes or No (please select one)

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

PREFERRED MAILING ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

---

PHONE #: \_\_\_\_\_ E-MAIL ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX E

E-MAIL INVITATION FROM RESEARCHER TO POOL OF STUDENTS SELECTED  
TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

Dear [Student Name]:

Thank you for taking time to complete the short online survey concerning my research related to the experiences of first-generation college students enrolled in Lasallian higher education.

The purpose of this e-mail is to formally invite you to participate in the research study. This involves two components:

- a) Providing you with a disposable camera and a list of people, places, and things to photograph in preparation for a discussion of those photos as part of an interview; and
- b) Scheduling an interview (which will last no longer than 90 minutes) sometime during the week of April \_\_\_\_\_, 2011.

A more thorough description of the study and your rights as a research participant are attached in the form of the Informed Consent document. Please review it carefully. If you have any questions about what is contained in the form, please don't hesitate to ask. At the time our interview takes place, I will ask you to sign the Informed Consent document. I will also sign it and provide you with a copy for your records.

If you would like to participate in the next phase of this research effort, please e-mail me directly so that we can set a time for the interview and I can arrange to provide you with a disposable camera and instructions concerning use of the camera.

My e-mail address is: \_\_\_\_\_. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions. Thank you.

Kurt Schackmuth  
[Contact Information]

APPENDIX F  
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE DOCUMENT

### **Consent to Participate Document**

**Project Title:** An Exploration of the Experiences First-Generation College Students in Lasallian Higher Education  
**Researcher:** Kurt Schackmuth  
**Faculty Sponsor:** Jennifer Haworth, Ph.D.

You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted for a doctoral dissertation by Kurt Schackmuth under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer Haworth in the School of Education at Loyola University Chicago. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to participate in the study.

#### **Purpose**

I am conducting an original research study to learn about the experiences of first-generation college students enrolled in Lasallian institutions of higher education. As a participant in this study you would provide information to me about your experiences as a student at this institution.

During an onsite visit, I plan to interview eight first-generation college students. Additionally, I will ask participants to take photographs that are related to their college experiences to use as a point of discussion during the interviews. The study will ask the following questions:

What are the experiences of first-generation college students in Lasallian higher education in the United States? More specifically, this study will focus on two questions:  
(1) What experiences specific to Lasallian education do first-generation college students suggest enhance – as well as detract – from their learning and involvement on campus?  
(2) If the experiences among these first-generation college students differ, how might they be explained?

#### **Procedure**

Participants who will take part in this study agree to a 60-90 minute recorded interview, consisting of open-ended questions related to the above questions, which will be conducted on your campus in a private office or conference room at an agreed upon time. Recorded interviews will be transcribed by myself, the researcher. You will be sent a transcript of your interview to review for accuracy. If you do not respond within one

week, I will assume that your transcript is accurate and that no further changes are necessary.

### **Confidentiality and Voluntary Participation**

All data obtained in the study will be safeguarded, personally identifiable information will be removed, and pseudonyms will be used. Interviews will be digitally recorded, stored in a safe location, and destroyed five years after the conclusion of the project. Photographs (digital and print) will also be stored in a safe location and destroyed five years after the conclusion of the project. Participation in this study is voluntary. In addition, photos that feature people will not be included as data in the dissertation or in any professional presentations that may result from the research. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you agree to participate, you are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty. Your participation will in no way affect any of your grades, academic standing, or your role as a student on campus.

### **Risks and Benefits of Participating**

There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life.

### **Contacts and Questions:**

If you have any questions about this study or for further information, please contact me at [Contact Information]. Dr. Jennifer Haworth serves as my dissertation advisor and can be reached at [Contact Information]. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University's Office of Research Services at [Contact Information].

### **Statement of Consent:**

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understood the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

---

Participant's Signature

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Date

---

Researcher's Signature

---

Date

APPENDIX G

E-MAIL TO STUDENTS NOT SELECTED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

Dear:

I'd like to thank you for your interest in my research and your willingness to participate in my study on first-generation college students in Lasallian higher education. Thank you, also, for completing the brief online survey. Many students responded to my request and completed the survey.

The purpose of this e-mail is to inform you that you were not selected to participate in this study.

Again, thank you for your interest and your willingness to participate. My best wishes to you as you continue your studies.

Sincerely,

Kurt Schackmuth  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Loyola University Chicago

APPENDIX H  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

## Interview Protocol

### Greeting and Introduction

- Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study, I appreciate your time.
- *Review the purpose of the study:* I am interested in learning more about the experiences of first-generation college students in Lasallian higher education.
- *Review of procedures:* I will ask you several open-ended questions related to your experiences here and ask you to answer as fully as you can. I will digitally record the interview and also make my own notes. If you wish to state something that you do not want recorded, simply tell me and I will turn off the recorder for that particular segment of our discussion. I will later transcribe the interview and send you a copy for you to review for accuracy. All personally identifiable information will be safeguarded and altered to protect your identity and privacy.
- Do you have any questions before we begin? May I clarify anything for you?
- Review with student Informed Consent document and obtain signatures; study participant is invited to select pseudonym.
- Review the basic content of the Student Selection Survey (Appendix D) with the student before beginning the questions.

### General Questions

1. How long have you attended this institution?
2. Please tell me a little about your family.

### College Selection/Enrollment Process

1. At what point in your life did you know you would be going to college? What led you to enroll? What factored into this decision?
2. Tell me a story about any encouragement you received to attend college.
3. Why did you choose to attend *this* institution? What in particular about it was appealing to you?
4. Describe what your experiences with family and friends have been like since you decided to become a college student.
5. Did you receive any financial aid (scholarships, grants, loans) when you enrolled here? Did the amount of financial aid you received have an impact on your decision to attend this institution?

### **College Experiences**

1. Please describe your transition from high school to college. What was it like? Were there any particular moments that stood out for you in particular?
2. Did you attend any orientation programs? If so, please tell me more about this experience.
3. Describe your experiences with faculty, staff, and students in college. Are there any particular moments or stories that stand out for you?
4. What is the biggest challenge you have faced as a first-generation college student?
5. Did you use any particular strategies to overcome this challenge or any other challenges that you faced in college?
6. What has been your biggest success as a college student? Of what are you most proud?
7. Has college changed you? How? To what do you attribute the change?
8. What are your plans after graduation?

### **Photo Elicitation Component**

- Refer to separate Photo Elicitation Interview Protocol (Appendix I).

### **First-Generation Status**

1. At what point did you first hear the term “first-generation college student”?
2. What has it meant for you to be a first-generation college student?
3. Tell me a story about any experiences you had during the transition to college when you were reminded of being a first-generation college student.
4. Describe any experiences you have had during your time here as an enrolled student at (institution name) when you were reminded of being a first-generation college student.
5. What kinds of college advice would you offer other first-generation college students based upon your own college experiences here?

### **Lasallian Education**

1. Did the faith-based nature of the institution or the religious order that sponsors this institution influence your decision?
2. Were you familiar with the De La Salle Christian Brothers prior to enrolling here? Do you know any Christian Brothers on campus?
3. What makes this institution “Lasallian” in your opinion?
4. What does it mean for one to be Lasallian? How did you come to learn about what it means to be Lasallian?
5. Tell me about the teachers here at (institution name).

6. Tell me about the education you are receiving here.
7. Would you recommend this institution to other students? If you were to do so, how would you describe this institution to them?

**Wrap-Up**

1. Is there anything you think I should have asked but did not ask you?
2. Is there anything you would like to add to your comments or clarify from earlier?

**Closing**

- Thank you for your time today. In a few weeks, I will send you a copy of the transcript of this conversation via e-mail and ask you to review it for accuracy.
- If you have any questions at all, please do not hesitate to contact me.
- Thank you again.

APPENDIX I

PHOTO ELICITATION INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

## **Photo Elicitation Interview Protocol**

[The photo elicitation component of the interview will take place half way through the interview process, as indicated in the formal interview protocol.]

### **Introduction**

- I would now like to ask you to take a look at some of the photographs that you captured using that disposable camera a few weeks ago.

### **Discussion of the Photographs**

- As I show you the photos, I would like you to describe for me what we are looking at.
- The researcher will walk the study participant through each of the photographs.
- As the photos are discussed, the researcher will verbally identify the photos that are being discussed, either by content “that’s the Theatre” or by the identifier on the back of the image “photo C”. This will allow the photos to be referenced later by the researcher during the interview transcription process.
- The researcher will ask the student to discuss the photos and elaborate on the picture and why the person, place or thing contained in the photograph is significant or important to the student.
- At the conclusion of the photo elicitation interview, the researcher will invite the study participant to include any other additional comments or feedback on any of the photos.
- The researcher will then close the interview with the study participant.

APPENDIX J

PHOTO ELICITATION INSTRUCTIONS FOR STUDENTS

### **Photo Elicitation Instructions for Students**

[Students who agree to participate in this study and who complete the online survey, and who are selected by the researcher to be interviewed, will be mailed a packet containing a disposable camera at their preferred address two weeks prior to the scheduled interview. A return envelope pre-addressed to an on campus mailbox to which the researcher will have access will also be included in the packet along with instructions concerning what kinds of photos to take (see below). The instructions will also feature a deadline date and will direct the student not to put their name or return address on the envelope.

Prior to being mailed, each camera will be assigned to one of the study participants along with a tracking number. Each number will correspond to a list of the names of the eight study participants. In order to associate each camera with a tracking number, that number will be written on the camera itself and the researcher will take a photo of a piece of paper that includes the tracking number for that particular camera. This numbering system will also be used on the processing envelopes when the researcher submits the cameras for processing. When submitting the cameras for processing, the researcher will use his name, along with the number of each respective camera, and not the name of the student who used the camera. This system will ensure that each of the 8 cameras stays associated with student who used them.

Prior to the interviews, the developed photos will be matched with the researcher's list of study participants so that the images can be used during the photo elicitation segment of the interviews. In addition, for each set of photographs, the researcher will label the back of each photograph with a letter (A-Z) so that the photos can be easily referred to during photo elicitation interview.]

The instructions below will be included in the packet sent to the study participants by the researcher.

#### **Instructions**

Using the disposable camera that has been provided, please take some photographs, as instructed below, over the course of the next 7-10 days. There are a total of 26 exposures on the camera. Feel free to use all the available exposures. *When finished, please place the camera in the pre-addressed envelope that was provided and drop the envelope into campus mail. Do not print your name or return address on the envelope. Please return to your camera by \_\_\_\_\_.* Thank you!

1. Please take a picture of the items that you regularly carry with you while on campus.
2. Please take pictures of your favorite classroom(s) on campus.
3. Please photograph a group of friends.
4. Please take several photographs of the places you “hang out” on campus or places where you enjoy spending time with friends, by yourself, or with others.
5. Please take pictures of “fun” or social activities you enjoy on campus.
6. Please take photos of where you study best – or enjoy studying the most.
7. If you live in a residence hall/dormitory, please take a photo of your residence hall, your room, and of things/events/activities that occur in your particular residence hall.
8. Please take a picture of your favorite teacher.
9. Please take a photo of the materials you use to study or prepare for classes.
10. Please take a photo of something that is memorable from your college orientation experience.
11. Please take a photo of a person, place and a thing (one of each) that represents what it means to be “Lasallian” for you.

Use the remaining exposures on the camera to take pictures of anything else that represents your experience at this institution.

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## VITA

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