5-2010

First-Generation College Seniors: A Phenomenological Exploration of the Transitional Experience of the Final College Year

Julia Overton-Healy
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE SENIORS:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF THE TRANSITIONAL EXPERIENCE OF THE FINAL COLLEGE YEAR

A Dissertation Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Education

Julia Overton-Healy

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

May 2010

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

The School of Graduate Studies and Research

Professional Studies in Education

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Julia Overton-Healy

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Education

March 24, 2010 — Signature on file
Cathy Kaufman, Ph.D.
Professor of Professional Studies, Advisor

March 24, 2010 — Signature on file
Valeri Helterbran, Ph.D.
Professor of Professional Studies

March 24, 2010 — Signature on file
Jennifer Rotigel, Ed.D.
Professor of Professional Studies

ACCEPTED

Timothy Mack, Ph.D.
Dean
The School of Graduate Studies and Research

Title: First-generation College Seniors: A Phenomenological Exploration of the Transitional Experience of the Final College Year

Author: Julia Overton-Healy

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Cathy Kaufman

Dissertation Committee members: Dr. Valeri Helterbran

Dr. Jennifer Rotigel

Abstract:

This study investigated the transitional experience of college seniors who are also first-generation status. This topic merits investigation because there is an increasing interest in various demographics of college students, and because college seniors represent an important retention demographic for American higher education, where the retention includes the cultivation of engaged alumni. This study breaks ground on a topic—first-generation college seniors—about which there is almost no literature. The Adult Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1984) was used as the theoretical framework, and an operational definition of transition was developed. A phenomenological approach was used, and the data collection incorporated individual and dyadic (two-interviewee) interviews. Data were analyzed using horizontalization, semantic repetitions, and frequency counting, resulting in the identification of organizing themes. Results indicate that certain archetypal experiences exist which help to define the transitional experience for this population and included (1) receiving institutional and formal communications regarding commencement; (2) engaging in focused post-college pursuits; and (3) changing personal relationships. It was also discovered certain mechanisms were used to make meaning of the phenomenon, such as (1)

closure behaviors, (2) acknowledging emotions, (3) changing self label or identity, and (4) assuming a leadership role in the family.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This degree, and this dissertation, would never have been realized without a lot of help from my family, friends, and colleagues. I began this journey looking for a way to offset some intellectual boredom and to open some professional opportunities. I expected to finish this degree in about five or six years; such was the estimate given to my cohort on our first day. I worked a full time job, and commuted two hours a day. I switched jobs half way through my doctoral program. I tried to be the spouse my wonderful husband deserves, a good friend, a decent boss, and I managed to take care of myself, too. In the end, I completed this degree—with a qualitative dissertation—in *four* years. I beat the clock, and I am proud of my achievement.

There were many times during this journey where I experienced new highs (or lows, depending on your view) of frustration, fear, and fatigue. Still, all along I knew this was a goal I would reach. But on those days when I got a little 'wobbly', I surely am thankful to the people who kept me moving forward.

First, to my husband Kelly James Healy. From the beginning, you have always said you are deeply proud of me, and consider me one of the smartest people you know. There were days when I doubted myself and my abilities, but you never did. And for all those hours when I buried myself at "writing camp" either upstairs or on the front porch while you took care of hearth and home, thank you. But more, thank you for cheering me on, every step of the way. This is your achievement as much as mine.

Second, to the women of Cohort 8: We started this ride as strangers, but ended as friends. And while we may not be in steady contact with each other, I will always count you among my friends, and my heroes.

Third, to my committee members, Dr. Valeri Helterbran and Dr. Jennifer Rotigel: There is little glory in serving on a dissertation committee. Please know that you have my deep appreciation for your wisdom and encouragement. You made me a better scholar, thinker and writer.

Fourth, to my chair, Dr. Cathy Kaufman: From the first course with you, I trusted your judgment. You never steered me wrong, and always found the right words to keep me optimistic. That was your greatest gift to me. I doubt I will ever find a way to reciprocate, but I will keep looking.

Fifth, to the students: My dissertation studied first-generation college seniors. I am not first-generation (I am actually third-generation), and so this study opened my eyes to a world I would never otherwise know. I am grateful to the seniors who talked with me.

And finally, but not least, to my parents, Lyle and Pam Overton. My father was the first in his family to graduate from high school; an achievement of great pride and honor for him, as it should be. His is a life lived in the values of hard work, integrity, business savvy, and family. His belief in me, in what I could do with my mind, has been unfailing. His pride in me has been the greatest gift he has ever given. My mother is a tremendous role model: she attended college while raising four daughters and helping my father build their business. And she did this not because she 'needed' a degree, but because she loved learning and wanted the promise of self-reliance. Their clear and constant message to me, and to my

sisters, was this: If you are educated, you will never be dependent on anyone, and you can achieve whatever you wish.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Figures

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

America's Expectations of Higher Education

This phenomenological study will focus on how a specific student sub-set—college seniors, and particularly first-generation seniors—experience the transition of the final year of undergraduate study. Although a substantial body of literature addresses the first generation student and commensurate support programs, this study will concentrate on first-generation seniors, and include a discussion on first-year issues to provide context. This chapter will introduce a brief history of American higher education, the significance of college seniors to colleges and universities, and the importance of investigating the unique experience of college seniors who are first-generation.

For over two-hundred years, American higher education has produced captains of industry, banking and politics. Since the founding of Harvard in 1636 to today, the graduates of America's higher education system have been expected to contribute to society, advance knowledge and situate America to compete globally. Our higher education system has a rich history, a vast inventory of institutional types, myriad missions, and ever-changing student populations.

The first American college students were the sons (and a few daughters) of the wealthy and privileged. College prepared them for professions, usually as clergy, bankers, lawyers or physicians. Through the decades, colleges and universities responded to social movements, global changes and more diverse student bodies. Student demographics changed to include more women, non-white, disabled, international, older, and first-generation students. Colleges and universities implemented programs to support new types of students,

like the returning GI or the English-as-second-language learner. American higher education became more egalitarian in its purpose and more nimble in its approaches toward different populations of students.

Geiger's treatment of the "ten generations of higher education" provides an excellent summary of the historical arc of American universities (in Altbach, Berdahl & Gumport, 2005, p. 38). The earliest colleges were established as arms of various religious denominations, but by the mid 1700's, higher education had expanded to include fields which reflected the Enlightenment period. The 1800's saw a resurgence of the classical curriculum (i.e. Greek, Latin, theology) added to existing schools of medicine and law. Until 1862, the vast majority of American college students were the progeny of the upper classes and from families of professional occupations, such as attorneys and physicians. With the passing of The Morrill Land-Grant Act, which established land-grant institutions, higher education began to provide instruction to the industrial classes, particularly in fields of agriculture and the mechanical arts. By the late 1890's, women were strongly assimilated into the college environment, albeit mostly at women's colleges, which were generally deemed inferior (Geiger, in Altbach, Berdahl & Gumport, 2005). By the first decade of the 1900's the general structure of an American higher education reflected a standardized curriculum of general and specialized coursework. Admission was restricted to only those with high school diplomas.

Since the end of World War II American colleges have become more access-oriented, welcoming students of non-white ethnicity, from lower-income brackets, and those who were academically and socially disadvantaged (Geiger, in Altbach, Berdahl & Gumport, 2005). The access mission of many of today's colleges operates on the belief that an advanced

education should be available to those who qualify. Harvey and Immerwahr (1995) found that the American public believes one of the most important tasks of society is to help its citizens achieve a higher education. A college education is more attainable now than just a few generations ago, and the prevailing opinion is that a college education should be made within the reach of everyone.

Colleges now welcome students from vastly different experiences. Higher education strives to balance different student demands while meeting the essential goal of educating and preparing students for lives of productivity. On any university campus, support services meet specific student needs, ranging from academic tutoring to social assimilation to lifestyle interests. Specialized curricula are offered along with traditional programs of study. New technologies challenge traditional methods of teaching and learning. Online universities provide an immediately responsive platform to deliver knowledge. As Friedman suggested in *The Flat World* (2006), a horizontal network of information impacts every aspect of human enterprise, including education. Students can access information and education in ways that don't always require formal instruction. Collectively, the variety of student backgrounds, learning strategies, interests and expectations combine to produce a very complicated environment in which higher education must operate.

Significance of the Problem

The higher education industry is fiercely competitive. Recruiting students is important, and retaining them is an imperative to ensure fiscal stability. For public and state-related universities, performance funding and increased budget appropriations are often dependent on retention of first-year students and degree completion rates. For example, the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education uses persistence and retention rates as

performance benchmarks in its budgeting and appropriations formulas (Piwinsky, personal communication, February 6, 2009). The Ohio legislature recently established a funding formula linked to retention and graduation measures (Moltz, 2009).

Retained students are, to use nomenclature of the business world, 'return customers'. Satisfied customers are less costly to retain, and they are steady sources of revenue. To that end, higher education has implemented many programs to retain students, particularly during the transitional first year. Programs such as living/learning communities and special academic advisors address the substantial emotional, social, psychological and intellectual transitions that occur within the early years of college. One example of an institutional program is The First-Year Experience program, created to assist entering students with transitional adjustments. The University of South Carolina is generally recognized as the campus of origin for this now-nationwide effort (History of FYE website, 2007).

Within the first-year demographic lies a sub-set of first-generation students. First-generation students are defined for this study as those students for whom neither parent has achieved a four-year college degree. Research by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) shows first-generation students often face more significant adjustment issues than their legacy counterparts. (Legacy students are defined for this study as those students coming from family units with at least one parent having achieved a four-year degree.) In addition to typical adjustments to college, first-generation students may have conflicts with family traditions and expectations, suffer from inadequate academic preparation, and often are from disadvantaged minority environments where the pursuit of a college education is an unknown and apprehensive experience (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). For these students, being first-year is compounded by also being first-generation. With appropriate interventions, first-

generation students in their first year derive the greatest benefit, compared to other students, in terms of academic development. But the first year isn't the only year of a college experience.

On the face of it, there is an assumption that the first year of college, or in some cases only the first semester, is sufficient to equip new students to successfully navigate their remaining undergraduate years. However, the ACT 2004 report *What Works in Student Retention* recommends establishing multi-year progression benchmarks to measure retention, rather than devoting retention initiatives exclusively to first-to-second year efforts alone:

> Progression rates for the third and subsequent years should also be studied. And the final benchmark is degree completion rate. If a campus is to improve on these three benchmarks, it is necessary that retention interventions be sustained throughout a student's enrollment (p. 24).

This suggests a need for more interventions that are strategic and tactically designed to sustain student retention during the first year, into the middle years and through the final year of a college education.

Statement of the Problem

What of the senior year of college? As the first year was a transition *into* college, the final year is a transition *out* of college. Yet, seniors' transitional issues differ substantially from those of first-year. Seniors' concerns relate to a lifetime of professional enterprise, while first-year students face their largest and most complex transition issues during the critical six weeks into the first academic term (Noel-Levitz, 2006). Seniors must juggle the end of academic work, the onset of professional pursuits, changes in significant personal relationships, manage personal finances, etc. (Gardner, 1999). Some may need to return to

their parents' homes, which forces adjustments to new roles within the family dynamic. Others may be torn between moving out into the world to pursue professional goals and returning to home to meet familial expectations. Seniors may also face self-concept transitions, from the label of undergraduate student to college-educated person. This change carries new connotations and expectations. Senior year interventions, such as capstone courses, resume writing workshops, and on-campus interviewing opportunities support seniors through transitions, and build confidence as they assume new roles and identities (Gardner et al., 1998).

While it is undoubtedly important to offer services to seniors for their personal development, universities can also benefit. Nolden, Kim and Sedlacek (2000) report overall higher levels of academic achievement in colleges that offer interventions for entering freshmen and for graduating seniors. Curricular programs can also promote deeper learning when seniors experience the integration of general education to their academic discipline, or in capstone courses (Gardner et al., 1998). These help seniors sharpen critical thinking and develop cognitive synthesis skills, both of which are in demand by employers. Gardner et al. (1998) report that employers "identified specific competencies that employees should have, including teamwork, oral and written expression, interpersonal communication…" (p. 61). Equipping seniors with pre-professional skills and information, such as job search techniques, interviewing skills, new job etiquette, financial management, and understanding employment benefits, enhances employability. This affects institutional placement rates which are often used in annual rankings and periodic accreditation cycles.

College seniors are rising alumni; the reputation of a university is deeply connected to the achievements of its alumni and the integrity of its academic programs. Successful alumni

who have strong affiliations to their alma mater typically demonstrate high giving rates (Colla, personal communication, March 5, 2009). The popularity of annual college rankings such as *U. S. News and World Report* is an obvious example of how placement, giving rates and academic quality combine to impact reputation, and by extension, recruitment of students and donors. The senior year of college is a small window of opportunity for colleges to deepen their support services while reinforcing the basis of a potentially life-long relationship with new alumni. It makes sense to create positive experiences for seniors so they have positive memories with their alma maters. Memory and emotion are linked, and how a person feels about an experience colors the memory associated with it. Levine and Bluck (2004) found that emotions enhance memory, and memory affects actions.

Colleges want alumni to remember their undergraduate experiences with positive emotions to create a sense of affinity. Improving positive experiences during the senior year in particular may be an important strategy in creating strong alumni relations. Gardner contends that seniors present the last chance for institutions to foster affection and loyalty (1999) and suggests that colleges should do more to encourage positive affiliation during the senior year to set the stage for stronger alumni relations. Engaged alumni contribute in a variety of ways, such as financially, recruiting new students, volunteering on university governance boards, and hiring future graduates (Gardner, 1999). In an environment of dwindling endowments, economic downturns and decreasing public funding, alumni are an increasingly important source of support for higher education. Investigating the relationship between senior year experiences and overall satisfaction may yield important clues toward fostering highly beneficial relationships with emerging alumni.

The research literature on college seniors does not, as does the literature on freshmen students, discriminate between first generation and legacy (or non-first) status. In fact, there is almost no reference in the literature to first-generation college seniors. Colleges invest a great deal in freshmen, and particularly first-generation students, but have not, as yet, considered possible complications of first-generation status beyond the entering year. It is a reasonable assumption that the experiences associated with being first-generation might carry on through the senior year. By paying more attention to college seniors, and specifically those of first-generation status, universities could foster a new type of retention relationship, that is, with the emerging alumni. Cultivating senior-year experiences for first-generation students that are as rewarding and transformational as those of their first-year may be an important 'bookend' opportunity.

If for no other reason than first-generation seniors are future alumni, they are an important segment of the student population. It might be advantageous to study the unique nature of first-generation college seniors' experiences during the last year of college in order to identify opportunities to better serve them and to make their senior year experience more noteworthy. This study seeks to identify and illuminate the particular concerns and experiences of first-generation seniors as they prepare to move into a new phase of their lives. It is hoped this study will assist college and university administrators is creating effective intervention and assistance programs for this population.

Research Questions

The purposes of this study were to explore how traditional age first-generation college seniors experience their final year of undergraduate study and how they ascribe meaning to these experiences. This study examined how first-generation college seniors

experience their final college year transition as interpreted through the 4-S System: Situation, Self, Support, Strategies (Schlossberg, 1984). The 4-S System provides a relevant framework to organize a lived experience, and is particularly appropriate for use with young adults in transition.

The research questions are:

(1) What archetypal experiences during the final year of college have noteworthy influence on first-generation college seniors' transition into adulthood? and (2) What, if any, mechanisms (personal and institutional) do first-generation college seniors use to make meaning and create understanding of this experience?

A phenomenological approach was used for this study, and the qualitative data was collected through interviews with first-generation seniors. Data was authenticated through the use of subsequent interviews conducted via phone and email. Participants were purposively selected to meet the criteria of first-generation status, traditional age, non-transfer, and within a time frame prior to graduation of less than one year.

Key terms in this study are operationally defined as follows: *college seniors* are those students of traditional age (21-23) completing their final year of coursework required by their undergraduate program and by institutional policy; *senior year* is defined as the academic year coinciding with concluding coursework and immediately prior to commencement; *transition*, as both noun and verb, is defined as the behavioral, emotional, cognitive, social and practical changes occurring; *first-generation* refers to seniors for whom neither parent has attained a four-year college degree; *legacy* refers to seniors for whom at least one parent has achieved a four-year degree. In addition, the term TRIO is used to refer to the federal program which provides supportive services to students who are low-income, first-

generation, learning or physically disabled. TRIO is not an acronym, but instead refers to the three criteria as described in detail in chapter two of this dissertation. The setting was a large public university in a rural setting.

Summary

This phenomenological research effort explored transition for first-generation college seniors and how they make meaning of this experience. The assumptions were: (1) senior-year concerns compliment first-year concerns, in that both reflect retention and persistence success, and therefore merit institutional attention; (2) seniors' experiences influence reported satisfaction, institutional affinity, and strength of alumni relations (i.e. sustained retention); (3) first-generation seniors experience significant transitions, which is an understudied phenomenon; and (4) understanding and creating appropriate interventions to support first-generation seniors benefits colleges and universities in creating better-prepared graduates. It is proposed that this dissertation will compliment previous studies related to special student populations, and may inform the literature on retention, persistence, and institutional interventions.

CHAPTER TWO

A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter operationally defines the concept of transition as it applies to traditional-age college seniors and provides a discussion of Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory, which serves as the theoretical framework. Included in this chapter is a broad overview of the literature related to first-year college students, first-generation college students, and college seniors in general. This provides a context toward examining the felt experiences for first-generation college seniors as they approach end-of-college transitions. This study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) What archetypal experiences during the final year of college have noteworthy influence on first-generation college seniors' transition into adulthood? and (2) What, if any, mechanisms (personal and institutional) do first-generation college seniors use to make meaning and create understanding of this experience?

Transition Defined

Despite individuality, humans share universal life transitions. For example, high school graduation, college, marriage or partner-hood, career changes, retirement, and relationship dissolution are shared human experiences. Within this universality, we respond individually to these life events in unique, precise and personal ways. Our socioeconomic status, educational background, familial structures, ethnicity, gender and other variables affect our personal peaks, plateaus and valleys. Living generates change, and understanding change is integral to managing successful transitions.

Hudson (1999) provides a metaphorical description of change and transition: "(they) … characterize life for adults as being on a raft floating down a commanding river…" and

"as the white waters of the river… that test every skill we have as we slide over the rocks… and swirl about in unforeseen directions" (p. 51). Other writers (Levinson, 1986; Brown & Lent, 2000) have presented transition as *turning points* or as a period of stasis between two periods of stability. Transitions promote self assessment and encourage us to redefine our goals and strategies. Some transitions may be frightening, stressful or traumatic, while others may bring joy, resolution, or invigoration. They are significant life events where growth and new potential may be realized.

Despite individuals' differences in response to transitions, and despite the wide variety and diversity of human transitional experience, the basic structure of change is relatively constant. From psychosocial developmental theories such as Ericson's Stages, Havinghurst's Developmental Tasks, Levinson's Seasons of Life (Lemme, 2006) we know that people pass through various stages of development and maturation. These create new cognitive, affective, attitudinal and behavioral constructs. Simply: experiencing change changes us.

Across the literature, transition is variously defined by using the elements of time, ritual, identity change, and perception shifts. These are the fundamental elements of the structure of change.

Time

Time is a central component to most transition theories. Change requires separation from the *previous*, to acceptance of the *now*, and anticipation of the *next*. These are chronological phases of transition. For many people in transition, there is a gap, or neutral period, where there is a suspension of purpose between old and new phases. Such movement

from awareness to integration takes time; deep and fundamental personal change is not instantaneous.

Hudson's (1999) Cycle of Renewal describes transition-as-time as a four phase process including "getting ready, launching, plateauing, and sorting things out" (p. 98). People, where possible, prepare themselves for change, move into it, steady themselves as they assess and re-negotiate strategy, then evaluate and continue on. This process suggests a constant change and doubling-back on itself, creating meta-transitions occurring over time.

Ritual

Ritual and rites of passage are also fundamental to transition. In human culture, rites of passage are instrumental transitions: biological changes, such as birth, puberty, childbearing and death would be examples. Sociological and anthropological transitions are seen through marriage, a spiritual quest, or achievement of independence from parental figures (Molla, personal communication, March 18, 2008). Such rites reflect movement from one status to another. Van Gennep (1960) points to ceremonial events coinciding with social markers of achievement, which in turn create memories and a sense of connectedness with others who have these shared experiences. College graduation is an obvious example of a ceremonial rite of passage.

Change on Identity

Transitions may have important influences on self-identity and a sense of meaningfulness (Schlossberg, 1984). Identity is formed and transformed by relationships with others, by experiences (good and bad), and by achievements and failures. Identity itself is constantly transforming with every new noteworthy experience. Bridges suggests that transitions "first begin with endings where there is disengagement and disidentification…"

from the old self (2004, p.92). There must be a separation of old roles, routines and patterns which then leads to renewal and growth. Lipman-Blumen and Leavitt (1976) suggest that transitions move from pervasive awareness to boundedness, or to integrating the change into self-concept. In other words, simple awareness of the change leads to incorporating the change into daily life, which feeds into an adjusted self-identity. Meaningfulness, or 'how I matter to this place and to others', changes whenever identity is altered. Interpersonal relationships reinforce our sense of importance, worth and status in relation to others. When our perceived meaningfulness is changed, our identities change with it. For example, a college senior with an identity of student and who is surrounded by close friends with whom there is shared meaningfulness experiences deep transition when these elements change. After college, the student-identity disappears to be replaced by one of employee, for example. In a work environment, new employees have not yet established status, bonds or supportive relationships. This transition moves from the identity and status of college senior to underling in the pecking order.

Perception

Our perceptions and world views change as we move through transition. Moos and Tsu (1976) detail two perception phases: acute, where energy "is directed at minimizing the stress response to change" and reorganization, where "individuals redirect attention into practical matters of getting on with things" (in Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006, p. 41). Our abilities to reflect, think, judge, and respond to change impact how we anticipate, experience and tolerate transition. When we are equipped with flexible world views, transition is less disruptive and less potentially damaging.

To summarize, transition is integral to the human experience; it is defined using concepts of time, ritual, identity change and perception. Transition may be understood as moving *out*, moving *through* and moving *in*. Moving out includes separation from the old, the beginning of the end, and disengagement (as seen by leaving-taking rituals, such as commencement). Moving through involves liminality, or a space of non-action; a neutral time where we pause to consider what is happening, how it is changing us, and how we are integrating this change into our self-concepts. Moving in might suggest learning new roles, creating new assumptions, accommodating new opinions and values, and assimilating to a new environment (i.e. college graduate who must learn office etiquette). Transition is dynamic change occurring over time, in fairly identifiable stages, with positive and negative associations; it affects and is affected by our identities, relationships, values, behaviors and contexts. It is, ultimately, a deeply human experience.

Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory

Despite the personal and unique attributes of each American undergraduate, from familial background, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, academic preparedness, and personality elements (e.g. temperament, persistence, or extroversion), the transitions experienced during college are remarkably similar. College students undergo significant changes in a relatively short time frame of (typically) four years during early adulthood. These years are a time of considerable psychological upheaval and socio-emotional adjustment (Lemme, 2006). Arnett defines the ages of traditional collegiate undergraduate years as "a transitional period with great freedom and few responsibilities; a time full of options to explore" (in Lemme, 2006, p. 231). Understanding these deep transitions and

developmental opportunities may help colleges and universities better serve senior-level students as they embark on their last collegiate transition (i.e. graduation).

In 1984, Nancy K. Schlossberg proposed the Adult Transition Theory (ATT) to study and understand adults approaching momentous life events. Her theory "integrates several other theoretical perspectives, and is responsive to both commonalities and idiosyncrasies" of human experience (McCoy, 2003, p. 49). ATT is built on two key assumptions. First, adults in transition are often confused, but if counseled and helped appropriately, the transition is more readily and easily resolved, thereby resulting in positive psychosocial development. Second, 'helpers', Schlossberg's term to refer to any supportive person including friends, coworkers, professional and paraprofessional therapists, provide a framework for the transitioning person to better understand, move out, through and into their next phase. These assumptions make this theory particularly appropriate when examining the senior year transition: a time of potentially great confusion but within an environment populated by many helpers.

Schlossberg originally defined *transition* as an "event or nonevent resulting in change" (1984, p. 43). This includes any impact on relationships, routines, assumptions and roles in a variety of settings. They may be subtle or large; expected or not. They are turning points for individuals, and are predicated on the individual's perception of the change. Schlossberg specifically rejected the term *crises* with its negative connotations, preferring instead to acknowledge that transition may also be neutral or positive.

The ATT model is outlined as follows (Schlossberg, 1984; Goodman, Schlossberg, Anderson, 2006):

I. Phase One: Approaching transition

A. Identification (type, context, impact)

B. Process

II. Phase Two: Taking Stock of Coping Resources (The 4 S System)

A. Situation

B. Self

C. Support

D. Strategies

Each element of this theory will be presented.

Approaching Transition: Identifying Type and Process

Approaching Transition includes (1) identifying the transition type, context and impact; and (2) understanding the process of the transition. In her original work, Schlossberg named four types of transitions: "anticipated, unanticipated, chronic 'hassles' and nonevent" (1984, p. 45). Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995) eliminated chronic hassles, explaining that relativity (or a person's perception of change) defines the event as transition or not. Essentially, if a chronic persistent hassle (i.e. a bothersome co-worker) forces a change of work environment for one person, this would constitute a change. For another person, simply tolerating that co-worker does not compel any change. Therefore, the daily hassle is not defined as a transition due to an individual's tolerance for the situation.

Anticipated events allow us to predict the change, anticipate our options, and plan (Schlossberg, 1984). They are normal gains and losses which are predictable in a life cycle. Anticipated events may be positive (getting married) or negative (the imminent death of an ill parent). For college students, anticipated events might include getting to know a roommate, serving an internship, or pledging a fraternity. College seniors share anticipated events, such as graduating, searching for a job, or applying to graduate school.

Unanticipated events are defined as "nonscheduled events" (Goodman, et al., 2006) which are unpredicted or viewed as highly improbable. They often result in chaos and upheaval. Hurricane Katrina serves an example of a nonscheduled event which caused untold life changes for people in that experience. Not all unanticipated events are as destructive or appraised as negative. Winning a multi-million dollar lottery, statistically highly improbable, would result in significant life changes, many of which could be productive and advantageous for the winner. As applied to college seniors, examples of unanticipated events might be a campus tragedy (i.e. the Virginia Tech shooting tragedy of 2007).

A *non-occurring event*, which is when anticipated change does not occur, can alter a life trajectory. We hope and prepare for a desired transition, and when it fails to materialize, the ensuing emotional, financial, personal and intellectual adjustments can be quite significant. A marriage proposal that never occurs, or failure to earn a promotion are obvious examples. Conversely, non-occurring events can be positive. For example, a worker may anticipate a lay off due to economic downturns, but instead receives a raise. For college seniors, they expect to start a job, build a career, and find a life mate. For some, these life events never occur the way they hoped but other options are made available which result in satisfying livelihoods.

Anticipating Transition is important to first identify the type of transition being experienced. These types are categorized according to predictability: anticipated, unanticipated, and non-occurring. Any of these may result in positive or negative outcomes; defining the type of transition is essential to managing it.

Identifying transition also requires defining the *context and impact.* Context is the "relationship of person to the transition (personal, interpersonal, community); and the setting of transition (family, work, health, friends)" (Schlossberg, 1984, p. 47). There is an intersection between the relationship and setting. For example, a personal/work context might be failing to achieve a promotion, or an interpersonal/health context example might be a child diagnosed with leukemia. The psychological, emotional and pragmatic context provides important definition for the transition. The boundaries of the transition are drawn.

Impact is the "degree to which a transition alters daily life" (Schlossberg, 1984, p. 52). The greater the impact, there is a higher need for complex coping methods and diverse resources. How much psychological, emotional, and chronological "space" the transition occupies is the impact. For example, relocating is more than simply hiring a moving company. It includes finding new living space, sorting and packing belongings, managing financial resources, and changing pragmatic issues such as utilities and mailing address. The impact becomes cumulative and larger.

Being able to place the transition according to context (i.e. professional, family, health) and also to account for its impact in daily life generates a sense of control. Understanding context and impact helps gain perspective and increases confidence in approaching the turning point. Add to this a clear identification of type (anticipated, unanticipated or non-occurring), the transition can be met with a stronger sense of confidence and ability.

It is important to understand that transitions are experienced as a process. People go through "continuing and changing reactions" toward the situation (Schlossberg, 1984, p. 56) and these occur over time and to varying degrees on intensity. The process of transition may

be viewed as stages or phases, and people in transition first acknowledge the changes and then try to assimilate them into their lives. They also appraise the transition and its effect: is it a positive experience or a painful one? Does the experience bring a deeper sense of self, confidence, capability? Do I have adequate coping mechanisms at my disposal? Am I invigorated or diminished by the change? Depending on consequences and a continuous circle of awareness, identification, assimilation and appraisal, the process of transition folds back onto itself, deepening in meaning and complexity.

To summarize, Approaching Transitions is the first phase of the Adult Transition Theory. In this phase, transitions must first be identified by type, context and impact. Then the transition process cycles with assimilation and appraisal. Schlossberg maintains that if this phase, Approaching Transitions is comprehensive and systematic, the greater the likelihood of successful transition.

Taking Stock of Coping Resources: The 4-S System

Phase Two of ATT is Taking Stock of Coping Resources and introduces the 4-S System: Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies. These factors influence how transitions are experienced, combining as potential assets and/or liabilities (Goodman, et al., 2006). The 4-S System is a useful organizing tool to understand how various elements influence successful transition.

Situation includes the trigger event(s), the timing in the larger context of life-plan, sense of control over the situation, role changes, duration of transition, familiarity or previous experience with similar transition(s), concurrent stressors, and the appraisal of transition as positive, negative or benign (Goodman, et al., 2006). For example, a college senior may perceive the trigger event to be course registration for the final semester; the timing is

expected and appropriate but compounds other life issues such as renewing an apartment lease. The student might feel in control, knowing it is the last semester, but also sense a change of self-identity from student to pre-graduate. The duration is only a few months, but it has significant resonance for the next several months, or even years. If the student is first-generation, the 'final year' is unknown; there is no previous experience in the family to consult. Concurrent stressors might be completing a senior thesis, or changes in personal relationships. Seniors may be bombarded with well-meant but troubling inquiries, such as "Are you interviewing yet? Have you found a job yet?" There may be a sense of excitement mingled with regret, fear and anxiety merging with a sense of accomplishment. Collectively, the elements provide a rich, complex and thick experience of the situation.

Self includes personal and demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status, gender, age, health, ethnicity/culture, psychological resources, outlook, values, and spirituality/resiliency (Goodman, et al., 2006). Unique characteristics, experiences, perceptions and world views combine with tremendous impact on how a person transitions from one life-phase to another. Specific assets and liabilities unite and then influence the transition process. For example, a graduating student who has performed reasonably well in college, acquired marketable skills, sharpened leadership abilities, and has experienced a values shift different from their home environment will inevitably experience a personal transition in redefining who they are. First-generation seniors in particular have new 'selves' which must be introduced to family; their roles and responsibilities in the family dynamic alter because they are different people: college changed them. For some, there may be a clash of values between who they were before college (and who their families expect them to remain), and who they are now.

Support includes 'helpers' such a friends, family, mentors, professional counselors, and available institutional structures. Goodman, et al. (2006, p. 75) state "… support is often said to be the key to handling stress" during transition. Intimate relationships are particularly powerful support sources; friends ease the sense of isolation and calm fears. Institutional mechanisms, such as group sessions, workshops, seminars, and self-help materials, can also serve as important resources, particularly for individuals without personal support systems, like some first-generation students. As an example, a graduating senior may disclose feelings of uncertainty to close friends, attend workshops on campus to prepare for a job search, and ask an academic advisor for assistance in applying to graduate school. Support buoys seniors through the changes, equipping them with emotional reinforcement and helpful information.

Strategies are coping choices and behaviors which may modify the situation, control the meaning of the situation, and/or manage post-event stress (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006). Related to psychological resiliency, coping strategies help people manage stress, redefine the situation, and identify actions that will resolve it. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified two modes of strategies: instrumental, which is problem-focused to change the situation, and palliative, which minimize emotional pain. An instrumental strategy might be making an action plan to attend three job fairs and job shadow four professionals as part of the job search. A palliative strategy might be joining a knitting club to find a new social outlet. Strategies allow a person to control perceptions, respond appropriately and manage stress while undergoing change.

Lazarus and Folkman's work bears strong similarity to Heifetz's and Linsky's (1994) orientation toward technical and adaptive leadership. Palliative methods are similar to

technical leadership in that both serve short-term needs and immediate concerns. Instrumental techniques are like adaptive leadership in that these create substantive and deep-rooted and meaningful change that lasts. Instrumental/adaptive is transformational; palliative/technical is immediate and transitory. Applying this to graduating seniors, it may be useful to identify the competing strategies at work as students move through transition. College seniors, as evolving adults, may confuse palliative with instrumental; they may believe a short term stress reduction equates with problem resolution. Helpers assist seniors choose between strategies.

To summarize, the 4-S System combines Situational understanding, Self, Support and Strategies. Individuals in transition progress through these inter-related elements in order to move into, through and out of life changing events. The 4 S's may be both assets and liabilities. They are highly variable, depending on the unique situation, person, resources and coping skills at work. For college seniors, these elements are particularly in flux, given the nature of college graduation. The Situation is multi-layered, the Self is evolving from one identity to another, the Supports may be strong, weak, plentiful or scarce, and the Strategies might be easily accessed or wholly mysterious. Using the 4-S System helps organize the sense of control, impact, context and type of transition even while experiencing the process of change.

In review, the Adult Transition Theory includes two phases of transition-resolution. In Phase One, Approaching Transition, transition is identified by type, context and impact; assimilation and appraisal are active. Schlossberg's first phase provides a method to approach transition reflectively and coherently. The second phase of ATT is the 4-S System, with Situation, Self, Support and Strategies as essential tools with which adults cope.

Understanding the alchemy of these four systems provides adults, and their helpers, with a simple yet powerful tool to navigate transition. Figure 1 illustrates the Adult Transition Theory and The 4-S System Process, with a hypothetical example.

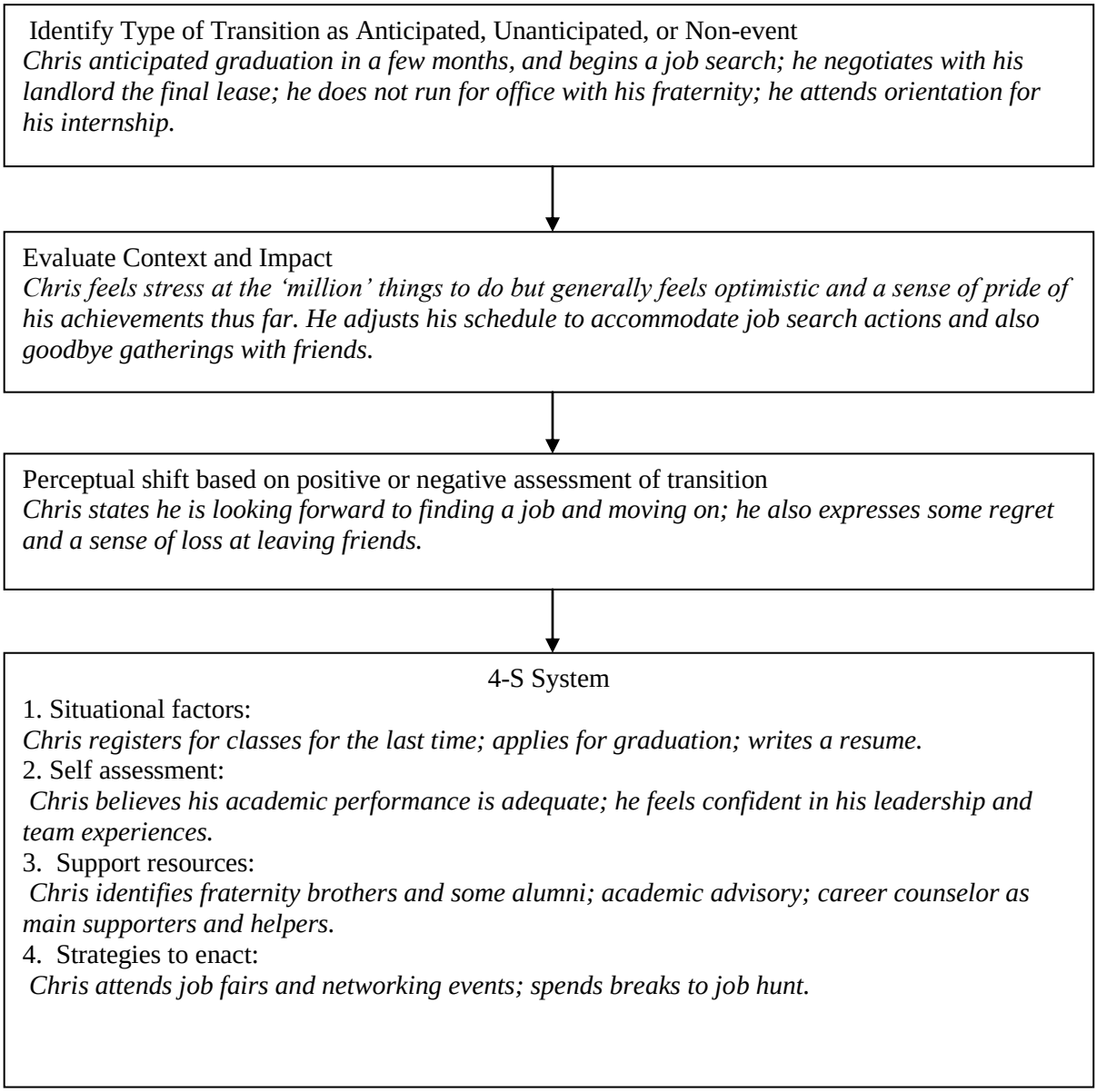

Figure 1. Depiction of Adult Transition Theory and The 4-S System Process.

First-year Students

This chapter section on traditional-age first-year students provides a background against which the senior year will be emphasized. In this study first-year students are assumed to be first-time college attendees. While there may be some similarities with transfer students, particularly those of the same approximate chronological age, transfer students are external to the concerns of this study.

There is, and has been for many years, a good deal of research concerning first year-level students. There is a national resource center to support the "first year experience", several corresponding annual conferences are held, and extensive scholarly literature exists. Much of the research concerns transitional issues for entering students, or on first-generation freshmen (e.g., Astin, Parrott, Korn & Sax [1997]; Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, [2005]). Levine & Cureton (1998), Pascarella & Terenzini (1991), Tinto (1975), Upcraft & Associates (1989) provide an excellent summary and anthology treatment of the subject. The preponderance of research focuses on three topics: (1) students' perceptions and expectations, (2) campus involvement issues, and (3) institutional interventions.

What do first-year students expect college will be? The 2006 National Freshman Attitudes Report (Noel-Levitz) reports that first-year students express a very high desire to finish college, but less than half will do so. Nearly half (48.8%) of all surveyed first-years are concerned and confused about the financial aspects of higher education, and over 20% worry about their ability to keep up with the rigors of college-level academics. Many entering students are highly receptive to getting information and assistance related to test taking, financial management, and tutoring. This suggests they enter college aware of their own deficiencies.

Campus involvement is critical factor in first-year success. Astin (1993) has demonstrated that campus involvement and engagement boosts retention of first-year students. Those who join groups and establish strong peer networks score higher on developmental constructs (i.e. defining life purpose, academic skills and time management) than those who do not engage in campus life opportunities (Cooper, Healy & Simpson, 1994). Fenzel (2001) found that early engagement in campus activities resulted in better classroom attendance, less binge drinking and drug abuse, and increased involvement in community service. Pike, Kuh and Gonyea (2002) found that when high expectations are coupled with adequate support deep learning is more likely. Interestingly, grades do not necessarily represent how much students believe they have learned.

Institutional interventions for first-year students are vitally important. Two typical mechanisms are learning communities and First-Year Experience courses. Learning communities, the first of which was established in the 1920's (Smith, 2001), are identified by common elements, including co-enrollment in two or more courses, the classroom as community building, shared residential living spaces, and programming designed explicitly for first-year students (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). Learning communities have a demonstrably positive effect on academic success as well as personal outcomes such as tolerance, diversity and interpersonal competence (Kuh, 1996). Zhao and Kuh found that learning communities have an "overwhelmingly positive effect on academic engagement for first-year students" (2004, p. 130). Learning/living communities for new students help them merge into the campus culture and develop a sense of belonging. They are important supportive structures for managing transition.

First-year courses and special seminars also increase academic performance and retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2006). Introduced by John Gardner in 1972, First Year Experience (FYE) courses have been adopted and refined by nearly 95% of American colleges (Barefoot, 2002). Often provided for 'at risk' students FYE courses promote academic performance and institutional integration. Hyers and Joslin (1998) report FYE programs consistently improve persistence to the second year. The National Survey of First-Year Seminars (2006) reported findings that first-year seminars increased persistence to second year, improved peer connections, increased overall student satisfaction with institution, increased use of support services, increased out-of-class interaction with faculty, and improved level of student participation in campus activities. This research leaves little room for doubt that FYE programs support the transition of first-year students toward an active and successful integration into campus life.

To summarize key findings related to first-year students: they are optimistic, but must be given tools and support to succeed; they expect to finish their degree, but need assistance to find appropriate ways to integrate into the college culture. Learning communities and FYE courses help them adjust to college, boosting academic success and social development.

First-generation Students

A first-generation student will be defined here as a student for whom neither parent has attained a four-year college degree. Although it is common that first-generation students enter college slightly later than their first-year legacy counterparts, over 60% enroll in college within a year or two after their age-cohort (Choy, 2001), leaving them well within the traditional-age definition of graduating by age 23. This section will focus on first-generation students: their motivation to attend college, their entering deficiencies, the cultural clash

between family and college, their demographic profile, and how the institutional interventions may influence their adjustment to college and their likelihood to persist to graduation. As with the previous discussion on entering first-time students, this section will focus on traditional-age college students, rather than an older population.

Generally speaking, first-generation students are disadvantaged in many ways, as compared to legacy peers. Gibbons and Shoffner (2004) synthesized important points regarding first-generation students. First, these students face a significant challenge when they apply to college because they lack parental experience with the process. Second, they are more likely to leave college than their peers, not for academic reasons, but for family or financial reasons. Third, they begin college with diminished preparation, particularly in mathematics. Fourth, they perceive college primarily as a means to gain a good job, viewing the overall educational experience as secondary, which may compromise the perceived value of a broad range of educational exposures. Finally, first-generation students exhibit some essential personality differences, especially in perceived social acceptance (which affects campus involvement), humor and creativity. Collectively, these factors suggest the likelihood of first-generation students facing significant transitional challenges as they enter college.

Motivation to Attend College

Motivations for attending college are significantly different for first-generation students than for legacy students. (A legacy student is defined has having at least one parent with an earned four-year college degree.) Bui (2002) found first-generation students reported the strongest reasons for attending college were, in rank order, to gain respect/status, to bring honor to the family, and to provide financial assistance to the family. Simply enjoying

learning and wanting to learn was ranked ten out of sixteen. This suggests first-generation students are more keenly motivated by career interests rather than an intrinsic desire to learn.

Experiential and Cultural Deficiencies

Being first-generation carries significant experiential disadvantages. These students enter college with decidedly different experiences than their legacy peers. Many, in fact over 70%, will never even attempt college (NCES, 2005). Tym, McMillion, Barone and Webster explain that those who do:

> … are more likely than not to have less knowledge of how to apply for financial aid, and have more difficulty acclimating to college. They are more at risk to complete a degree because they delay enrollment after high school and often work full time while enrolled (2004, p.1).

Family norms have substantial effect on college success for first-generation vs. legacy students. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concluded that having parents who attended college creates "learning capital", and establishes a family norm where higher education is valued. Legacy students were twice as likely as first-generation students to persist to graduation; legacy students whose parents held a master's degree or higher were five times more likely to earn a bachelor's degree than first-generation students. In addition, "having college-educated parents modestly enhances a person's educational attainment, job status, early career earnings, and for women, the likelihood of entering a financially lucrative, male dominated occupation" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 589-90). Legacy students have significant advantages in entering college, during college and in long-term career trajectories.

Thayer writes that first-generation students are less academically prepared as they enter college and they have "limited access to information about the college experience"

(2000, p. 4). They are usually deficient in time management, managing college finances, and the bureaucratic operations of higher education (Thayer, 2000). They lack a sense of familiarity with the higher education system and are intimidated by administrative procedures. Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian and Miller (2007) refer to this as "cultural capital" and for first-generation students, this deficiency equates to diminished access to important information to smooth the entry into college. Experientially, then, first-generation students are far more likely to avoid college, but those who do try will enter a world where change is everywhere. They must learn a new culture, new procedures, and new nomenclature while also learning disciplinary content. The transition can be staggering.

Family Expectations in Conflict

First-generation students may also bear complex family issues. Some are likely to receive less emotional and financial support from family members who do not share the perceived socioeconomic value of higher education. Others may break with long-held family traditions which are labor-based. Still others may find the family's expectations to "elevate the family status" a heavy burden. London expresses in this compelling statement: "first-generation students live on the margin of two cultures, having to renegotiate relationships at college and at home to manage the tension between the two" (in Thayer, 2000, p. 5). Families sometimes strongly discourage students from going to college. This can lead to fractured personal relationships. Without family encouragement, these students may doubt their own abilities to succeed (Striplin, 1999). Delong (2003) studied parents of first-generation students and found that many parents felt college did not bring social or economic advantages to outpace "community capital" already held by the family. Family norms and expectations obliged the students to remain close to home even after degree attainment.

Even if the parents acknowledged that a degree would provide improved career options and job mobility, disruption of the family unit was a serious conflict. Hsaio writes:

> Going to college may be a rite of passage for any student, but it marks a significant separation from the past for those who are first in their families to do so. First-generation students may be criticized for devoting time to school rather than to family responsibilities" (1992, p. 2).

Even for those from supportive families, most first-generation students do not deeply engage in the campus culture initially, and sometimes they never engage meaningfully at all. Their perceptions of college depend heavily on academics, and not on the social and personal development opportunities. This distance threatens their academic success, psychosocial development, and likelihood to persist to graduation (Astin, 1984).

For first-generation students, the costs of college may strain already-stretched financial resources of the family. Maltzan (2006) found that family economic status and first-generation status combined to act as a significant barrier against college enrollment and persistence. Financial hardship limits their campus involvement, because many first-generation students are forced to work significant hours (over twenty hours per week). Their first-generation status also limits their understanding of the financial aid process, and results in a reluctance to apply for aid (Lundberg, et al., 2007). In some instances, first-generation students will assume credit card debt at much higher interest rates than traditional student loans simply because they don't know how to navigate the application process (Valentine, personal communication, April 10, 2009).

Despite the sociological, psychological, economic, and intellectual advantages brought by a college education, first-generation students often face significant resistance

from and conflict with their families. These conflicts are often rooted in a clash of values, expectations and misunderstandings.

Demographic Profile and Implications

Demographic profiles of first-generation students suggest that attaining success is much harder for them than for their legacy counterparts. Choy (2001) investigated first-generation students' demographics and the implications for success. In general, first-generation college students are likely to be older (31% are over age 24), and they come from lower income homes (42% in lowest family income quartile). First-generation students are more likely to begin college at a two-year institution. Nunez and Cucarro-Alamin (1998) reported that the proportion of first-generation students decreases as the level of institution increases; that is, for two-year colleges, 53% of students were first-generation, whereas for four-year colleges, the proportion dropped to 34%. This might cause limited peer relationships for first-generation students at four-year colleges, which in turn, might produce a weakened cohort/peer support system.

Academically, first-generation students start college under-prepared. They tend to enroll in more remedial college coursework than their legacy peers, lag behind in credit accumulation, and a full one-third report difficulty in selecting an academic major (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Further, they have lower first-year grade averages than their peers (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Retention research by Wyckoff (1999) suggests that student commitment to educational and career goals is perhaps the strongest factor associated with persistence to degree completion. But first-generation students often delay making such commitment, due to unfamiliarity with the major selection process and an insufficient understanding of the relationship between academic major and career. Selecting an academic major is difficult for

many first-generation students because of their parents' uncertainty and inability to provide guidance (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2005). For those who do select a major, most first-generation students select business (14%) or health sciences (15%); legacy students choose programs from a broader spectrum of fields such as science, mathematics, engineering, humanities, arts and communication by significant margins (NCES, 2005). This indicates that poor academic preparation may limit the likelihood of first-generation students to choose "high skill" fields, such as mathematics, engineering and science. The low salary ranges of certain fields may also deter them from entering humanities, arts and social sciences (Montmarquette, Cannings, & Mahseredjian, 2002; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Given that many first-generation students attend college primarily intending to find a good job and make good money, selecting a major believed to have low-paying job options conflicts with their career goals. Research by Ayala and Striplen (2002) demonstrated that, for first-generation students, the motivation to enroll in college is a deliberate attempt to improve their social, economic, and occupational standing. First-generation students do not have the exposure to consider how learning—in a broad sense—prepares them for a wide array of career options. A liberal arts training, for example, teaching critical thinking, problem solving and team orientation, all of which are useful for career growth. First-generation students may be more likely to pursue skills-based fields such as nursing or accounting, because these are concretely related to clear career paths. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) demonstrated that first-generation college students choose the academic programs most popular at their college and among peer reference group. This becomes a modified self-fulfilling prophecy: first-generation students enter majors that other first-

generation students enter, and assume a career trajectory modeled by other first-generation students. These choices may be self-limiting.

Gender plays a role in the success of first-generation students. Vianden (2006) investigated self-helping strategies among first year, first-generation males and found these students tend to have unclear expectations about college, and struggle with how to initiate and sustain helping relationships with faculty. They also lacked social skills needed to develop supportive peer relations. Interestingly, the males in this study did not feel that their first-generation status adversely affected them, but they did acknowledge their parents' inability to help them succeed played a role in the problems they encountered during their first year.

Research on persistence rates of first-generation students shows a large difference compared to legacy students. At four-year institutions, first-generation students were twice as likely to leave before their second year (Choy, 2001), and only 13% of all first-generation students starting college in 1990 had completed their bachelors degree by 1994, compared to 33% of legacy students (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Chen and Carroll (2005) reported that from 1992 to 2000, 43% of first-generation students failed to persist to graduation. Even when they do attain a bachelor's degree, 7% fewer than legacy peers continue to graduate-level study (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

Despite the cautionary tone in the literature on first-generation students, one study by Rios (2001) identified key factors that explain academic persistence among this population. Comparing a variety of quantitative and qualitative evidence, Rios found that highly successful first-generation students actively sought out positive influences among faculty and peers, regularly attended class, had high personal motivation, and positive self esteem. These

students also had more far-reaching goals, (i.e. to graduate from college, not just to attend college) than did their legacy peers. This suggests that attitudes and personality characteristics such as higher motivation and setting more lofty goals may trump demographically-based predictions for first-generation students. In another study, Hightower (2007) found that first-generation students who use supportive institutional environments with specifically-designed programs for them compare equally well and sometimes outperform their legacy peers. With appropriate support mechanisms in place, most academic achievement measures of first-generation students were equal to legacy students.

Institutional Interventions: TRIO and Campus Climate

Colleges continuously seek effective mechanisms to increase retention and academic achievement. One such effort is TRIO. The word TRIO is not an acronym, but instead alludes to the original organizational structure of three federal programs, and later to criteria for eligibility for services. TRIO programs began in the mid-1960's with these programs: Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Services for Disadvantaged Students (TRIO History, http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/triohistory.html). TRIO programs, funded by the federal government and monitored by the US Department of Education, are designed to motivate, serve and support students who represent at least one of three criterion: low-income, first-generation, learning or physically disabled (Zhang & Chen, 2007). A sub-category of TRIO is the Educational Opportunity Centers which provide counseling and information on college admissions and applying for financial aid. During college, TRIO students receive support through specialized workshops on understanding the bureaucracy of a college campus, or activities like campus scavenger hunts to locate important student support offices such as counseling, career services, and health centers. The typical TRIO

student comes from a family (or culture) that does not prepare the student to navigate the world of college; the academic jargon alone creates a sense of "visiting a foreign country" (Walsh, 2000, p. 5). TRIO programs go well beyond the typical orientation programs offered to freshmen, because they are developed with sensitivity to the needs of low income, first-generation and/or disabled students. Tutoring and other academic assistance is made available through TRIO offices on campus. In addition, the Ronald E. McNair post-baccalaureate program, another sub-set of federal TRIO programs, prepares participants who are from disadvantaged backgrounds and have demonstrated strong academic potential are helped to pursue doctoral study.

Notably, first-generation students represent a sizable population of TRIO students. In 2003-04, 17% of TRIO participants at two-year colleges were first-generation students; 17.6% of TRIO participants at four-year institutions were first-generation (Zhang & Chen, 2007). First-generation TRIO participants demonstrated increasing persistence rates over three years from 1999 to 2002, growing from 51.4% to 60.2% for two-year institutions. For four-year institutions, the persistence rates were even higher; from 64.1% to 67.8% across the same span of years (Zhang & Chen, 2007).

TRIO also positively affects students' self-reported gains and their levels of interaction with faculty, peers, and active learning practices (Filkins & Doyle, 2002). First-generation TRIO students demonstrated greater academic benefit from such experiences than did their legacy/non-TRIO peers. Further, self reported gains on affective and cognitive development were substantial. This suggests that demographically-targeted support programs, such as TRIO, provide important strategies for first-generation students during their transition as they begin college.

In addition to a positive attitude, supportive families and focused services, the overall college environment is particularly important for first-generation students. Environmental factors that "maximize persistence and educational attainment such as peers, close friendships, and engagement in college-sponsored activities are nonnegotiable" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 599). The campus climate must foster a sense of confidence—an expectation—that these students can and will succeed. First-generation students need to believe that their college is concerned about their individual achievement and that their school provides support services to ensure success. The college itself must be a place where messages of expected success are consistent and constant. The odds are stacked against first-generation students; therefore the campus climate must become a strongly optimistic force.

In summary, a great deal of research has been done on the special challenges facing first-generation students. We know that first-generation students must cope with variety of negative elements: potential dissonance with family, challenging socioeconomic and other demographic influences, inadequate academic preparation, deficient help-seeking behaviors, and pre-existing misperceptions about college systems and processes. First-generation freshmen face the same concerns and obstacles of entering legacy students, but their transitions are compounded by being first-generation. The college transition is difficult enough: new environments, rhythms, expectations, skills and people combine to create a combustible world. First-*year* students require help to achieve; first-*generation* students require even more.

Interestingly, there is not much research available on the transitions affecting sophomores and juniors; and there is almost nothing available to determine if the first-

generation challenges persist beyond the first year into the second, third and final college year. This study is an attempt to address this void in the literature.

What is Known about College Seniors?

There has been an active and sustained interest in transitional issues facing freshmen students and first-generation students for two decades (Upcraft, Gardner & Associates, 1989), but there has been less robust research effort on adjustment issues for graduating college seniors. One book by Gardner, Van der Veer and Associates (1998) presents the seminal existing work on the senior year. Fewer than five major conferences have been held on the topic since the mid 1990's. A survey of articles between 1993 and 2006 in the *Journal of the First-Year Experience and Student in Transition* revealed that only two articles specifically on the "senior experience" were published, but over thirty-five articles dealing with freshmen and/or first-year concerns were published (National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2007). Notably, articles relating to freshman concerns cover a spectrum of issues, from academic preparation, to achievement strategies, to socialization, to campus assimilation, to character education.

In contrast, the articles on college seniors focus almost entirely on career transition and preparation and senior capstone programs with less attention paid to developmental or transitional concerns. Some research addresses developmental or socio-emotional issues, such as personal/family dynamic changes, emotional grief and anxiety associated with leaving college (Vickio, 1990), and pragmatic issues, such as finances and relocation (Schilling & Schilling, 1998). Additional research focuses on transition into the workplace (Dahlgren, Hult, Dahlgren, Segerstad & Johanssen, 2006), or marriage and family (Barnett, Gareis, James & Steel, 2003). A study by Pistilli, Taub and Bennett (2003) identified four

core concerns or anxieties for college seniors: Career Related Concerns, Change and Loss Related Concerns, Graduate/Professional School Related Concerns, and Support Related Concerns. A study by Taub, Servaty-Seib and Cousins (2006) extended the work of Pistilli, et al. and established further evidence that seniors' worries go well beyond the relatively narrow subject of career preparation. This chapter section will provide information about seniors' emotional responses to transition, the actions typically taken during the transition, and institutional interventions developed on some college campuses designed to assist this particular student population.

Thoughts and Feelings

Seniors' worries are focused on a potential careers, marriage, family and similar "adulthood" life tasks, which are substantially different from freshmen students, who face their largest and most complex transitions issues during the critical six weeks of the first academic term (Noel-Levitz, 2006). The 1998 dissertation by Saginak investigated perceptions and emotions of seniors during their final year transition. Saginak identified five central issues for seniors: (1) role change, (2) practical considerations (finishing coursework, relocation), (3) time demands, (4) pressure to create an action plan for post-college activities, and (5) assessing their own educational experience. Saginak also found that seniors experience anxiety and anticipation; their emotions are mixed and they vary considerably through the final year. This research uncovered the very real pressure cooker experienced by seniors, one that is often overlooked or ignored by academic services and faculty. The senior year transition encompasses much more than finishing class assignments and getting to graduation; it finishes one phase of life and while preparing for another.

Seniors' transition issues include finishing coursework, starting professional pursuits, terminating or changing significant personal relationships, establishing an independent residence, and independently managing personal finances (Gardner, 1999). Some face returning to their parents' homes and navigating shifting roles within a new family dynamic. Others may be torn between moving out into the world or staying close to home to meet familial expectations. Seniors may also face identity transitions, moving from the label of undergraduate student to college-educated person, a change which carries new connotations and expectations (Chickering & Schlossberg in Gardner, et al., 1998).

What about seniors who want to pursue more education? Ridgwell (2002) found that seniors were most influenced by caring and supportive campus mentors, active campus involvement, supportive personal relationships, and their own pride in academic achievement which translated into confidence to compete at the graduate level. Negative factors included a sense of academic 'burn out', the sacrifice of romantic relationships to pursue an advanced degree, and the ambiguity of choices resulting from an undergraduate liberal arts college experience. For seniors considering two paths, career or graduate school, the decision is mired in conflicting emotions and confounding options.

How do seniors assess their own developmental journey through their undergraduate years? Whitbourne and Tesch (1985) explored the psychosocial development of seniors and early alumni and discovered that the graduation process tests their identity status (Erikson, 1963). Adopting new roles forces a crisis which can only be resolved through restructuring identity. For example, a college senior assumes the role of employee while abandoning the role of student. Similarly, many must start financial independence separating from family support. Young alumni (within five years of graduation) resolved the identity change more

rapidly after graduation. Whitbourne and Tesch attributed this accelerated response to real-life pressures which forced a restructured identity. The authors concluded that "leaving college and making transition to the adult occupational and social world stimulated growth beyond that achieved prior to graduation" (Whitbourne & Tesch, 1985, p. 1043). Still, currently enrolled seniors feel a shift of identity and a commensurate heightened anxiety.

Seniors' concerns are complex; they transcend simply finding a job (as if that weren't worry enough, especially in sluggish economic times). Seniors themselves sense a very dense and thick transition, multi-layered, and heavy with significant implications which can affect the path of their adult lives. The final year goes well beyond meeting academic requirements and writing a resume; it becomes a re-imagining of self, identity and purpose. Colleges and universities are awakening to this, but slowly.

Preparing for Transition

As seniors prepare to graduate, they act in ways which may delay, neutralize or accelerate their transitions. In 2003, McCoy found that seniors' themselves believed their primary and most urgent challenges were securing employment and relocation. Further, McCoy reported that academic effort is less urgent than practical changes, such as finding a job, and where to live. Seniors also felt that the final year is, for many, a time of suspension and inaction; moving from one structured experience (college) to an unknown (post-college). For some students, a phase of limbo, of making no decisions until necessary, is quite attractive. The ability to move out of the neutral state was strongly influenced by friends and by friends' successes in the job search. Peer pressure, so prevalent in adolescence, remains an obvious presence into early adulthood.

Wood (2004) investigated the sense of confidence expressed by seniors as they enter the workforce. Concentrating on the semester prior to graduation, Wood found that some seniors experience a "crisis of imagination" (p. 73) typified by an uncertainty of what to do, so they do nothing. Unable to resolve their changing identities, many seniors enter a mode of mental paralysis and stagnation. Wood suggests that career counselors, mentors and other influential helpers exert pressure to force seniors into proactive change. Such pressure may include requiring writing a resume, completing a self-assessment essay to indentify strengths, weaknesses and concrete career plans, or crafting a plan of action including a schedule of anticipated benchmarks of achievement (i.e. a three-year plan).

Breaking the crisis of imagination may focus attention on taking needed career steps, such as resume writing and job search strategies. Lambert (1999) found that creating a resume and beginning a focused job search triggered anxieties about competence and ability to move into the working world. Sagen (1990) identified stages of this transition including (1) awareness and initial preparation, (2) job seeking behaviors, (3) graduation, and (4) employment. Seniors for whom graduation preceded job seeking expressed higher levels of difficulty. Concurrent with these stages, seniors adjust from a well-ordered life with structure imposed by faculty (i.e. assignments and due dates) to establishing a self-ordered life, to redefining relationships with peers. Sagen's work reinforces the idea that seniors undergo layered changes and experience these changes using only sophisticated guesswork.

Takeda, White and Helms (2005) explored how seniors' anticipation of graduation was effected by larger socio-political factors, such as the Iraq war, or the national economy. Takeda, et al., suggested that "influences beyond a person's control impact career-making decisions nonetheless" (p. 38), and that seniors who were aware of world events generally

expressed career anxiety, a "heightened sense of urgency to make a choice" (p. 39) and therefore took assertive measures. Seniors who did not focus on national or world events demonstrated career apathy; they withdrew from making decisions about the future and expressed strong feelings helplessness. This suggests that higher anxiety levels produce more urgent and purposeful action but higher apathy levels produced inaction or procrastination. This echoes the concept of the "crisis of imagination" discussed earlier.

Transitional activities are also affected by labor market and employability expectations. Employers who recruit and hire college seniors are consistent in their expectations, and yet there is sometimes an incongruity between employer's requirements and what colleges stress as important. Colleges emphasize academic achievement as the overarching goal and objective. The message is simple: without high grades, employability is compromised. However, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2008) reported for the fifth straight year that employers seek communication skills as their top quality in new hires, followed (in rank order) by work ethic, teamwork, initiative, and interpersonal skills. These are dispositions and personal attributes which cannot, as an academic discipline can, be taught. They can, however, be improved and refined by experiential opportunities. Technical or discipline-based knowledge is at the mid-point on the employers' rankings; and excepting the manufacturing sector, grades are not a strong determining factor in likelihood of hire. Further, this survey asked employers about measurable qualifications, such as degree type, GPA, relevant experience and leadership training. Leadership ranked first, followed by academic major and high GPA. Recent documents such as the Spellings Report (2006) and the American Association of Colleges and & Universities' *College Learning for New Global Century* (2007) clearly articulate the

gaps between higher education's intentions and actual achievements. Essential learning outcomes of American college graduates must meet the challenges of "dramatic forces—physical, cultural, economic, technological—that directly affect the ... world in which they live" (AACU, 2007, p. 13).

Kuh (1995) and Foubert and Grainger (2006) studied out-of-class experiences, such as volunteering, student government, or on-campus employment, and found involvement has a cumulative effect on the development of coping skills and confidence levels of the college senior, with important increases in overall satisfaction with the college experience. Further, participation in extracurricular activities has been shown to be an accurate predictor of workplace competence (Howard, 1986). Engagement in campus life, volunteer service and other co-curricular experiences contribute to the emerging professional identity. Being "only" an academic high achiever is insufficient; well roundedness continues to matter a great deal to employers.

This is an ideological and practical clash: colleges impress on students that learning and GPA are essential for gainful employment, yet employers themselves place higher preference on leadership and interpersonal skills, which cannot be graded in conventional ways. As seniors conduct job searches, they meet confounding and conflicting information. A college degree with a high GPA does not guarantee a good job; seniors who have leadership and social management skills may be preferred, and hired, over those who worked hard for high grades in challenging academic disciplines. Unsuccessful job searches add to the anxiety of the senior year. For some seniors they face a harsh lesson: it is too late to develop the leadership and interpersonal skills employers want, but the high grades they earned don't seem to matter much.

Institutional Interventions: Coursework and Senior Year Experience

As with freshmen year interventions, some campuses provide culminating senior year programs which provide a sense of closure. Such programs may include academic courses such as capstone, field work, directed research, independent study or internships. A unique academic experience is the senior colloquia, in which all graduating seniors explore a singular topic of concern from varied academic perspectives. Many institutions have rituals for their seniors, such as Senior Walks, Commencement dinners and Senior Trips. These efforts provide a capping experience for seniors. The zenith of it all, of course, is commencement. The majesty, ritual and ceremony of commencement is, for many people, a life-moment rivaled only by a wedding or the birth of child in importance.

Siegal (1990) studied a variety of senior year capstone courses and found common topics included achieving personal independence, preparing for marriage and family, sustaining lifelong learning skills, planning career, serving community, developing ethical constructs, and managing personal finances. Very little attention was paid on the emotional upheaval associated with transitioning away from a familiar and comfortable environment--college.

Despite this shortcoming, some senior year interventions can be very effective in supporting seniors through transitions, and in fostering confidence as they assume new roles and identities (Gardner et al., 1998). The "Senior Year Experience" (SYE), a term and concept first coined by John N. Gardner, is designed to organize a "variety of initiatives in the academic and co-curricular domains that serve to promote and enhance greater learning and satisfaction and a more successful transition for the college student in the final quarter of the baccalaureate experience" (1998, p. 12). Senior Year Experiences may include seminars

and workshops on varied topics, such as connecting liberal arts and career options, leadership development, job search activities, alumni networking, preparation for graduate study, and civic engagement. Colleges can benefit enormously from SYE efforts in two ways: seniors are cultivated into alumni roles more readily, and seniors report higher overall satisfaction with institution than those who do not have the benefit of senior year experience programs (Baade & Sundberg, 1993). Further, SYE programs can provide essential assessment data for institutional research purposes. This data can be used to refine curricula, broaden co-curricular experiences, or target developmental needs more effectively (Schilling & Schilling in Gardner, et al., 1998).

At the University of Maryland, the Senior Experience Project (SEP) was offered to graduating students as a chance to reflect on their years at college (Meyers, La Voy, Shipley & Mainella, 2000). The results indicated that seniors felt their academic advising was significantly deficient, but relationships with faculty were mostly positive. They largely felt unready to transition to post-college activities, and this raised issues of anxiety. Seniors reported a high need for "structured help specifically related to capstone courses, topical seminars, and career development courses" (p. 1). Ultimately, this research suggested that seniors seek and appreciate strong relationships with their faculty, but when faced with leaving college, expect and need programs to confidently launch them out of college.

Eckel (1994) explored how First Year Experience programs aligned with Senior Year Experience programs may create psychological closure. He found three main similarities: first, freshman and seniors alike express concern about leaving one familiar environment for one unknown. Second, their inability to make this transition results in high rates of attrition; they fail to find solutions and consequently leave college. Third, both groups recognize they

are under-prepared to succeed in a new environment. Both groups face loss, change and upheaval; both groups have members who quit rather than find coping mechanisms; and both groups recognize the need to learn new behaviors and strategies to succeed. For freshmen, the development of a peer community is an important factor in persistence. Developing a sense of community may be an equally important goal of the senior year in order to convert satisfied graduates into supportive alumni.

The impact of SYE programs is important: seniors need a structure to make connections between academic learning and real world applications; they need to learn skills for practical needs such as financial management; they need a forum to explore their own perceptions of how college has changed them, and what college should have done for them. Senior year programs provide important data for colleges and universities in assessing achievement of mission, and in producing marketable graduates.

To summarize this chapter section, what, then, do we know in general about college seniors? First, their transitions are highly complicated, blending academic work, personal challenges, highly charged emotions and career pressures. These transitions have long-lasting implications, and seniors are very aware of the importance of their decisions and the potential consequences. Some become frozen in a neutral zone, unable to move forward; others assertively take action to move into the next phase of adulthood. Mentors and peers play significant roles in shifting from apathy and inaction to anxiety and activity. Their worries and concerns are deeply personal and practical; they go well beyond the sphere of finding gainful employment. Institutional interventions, such as capstone courses or senior year programs, have some proven value in supporting seniors through this complex, confusing and exciting phase. Seniors must find successful strategies for reconciling conflicting messages

about academic achievement and employers' expectations. To be a graduating senior is to confront an opportunity to (again) invent oneself anew, to enter a unfamiliar environment (work or graduate study), and to meet the challenges of ending one life chapter to begin another. As De Rodriquez (2007) found: Many college seniors face the realization that there are more questions at the end of college than when they began their journeys as undergraduate students.

Summary

This chapter has presented an operational definition of "transition", a distillation of Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory, a discussion regarding three populations of college students (first year/time, first generation, and seniors) and how transitions impact each population.

Transition is defined as a life event occurring over time and resulting in significant change which must be accommodated psychologically, emotionally, socially, behaviorally, and attitudinally by the individual. In metaphorical terms, transitions might be understood as riding a white-water river, or drawing a map to an unknown destination. All humans experience transitions; transition *is* change and to be human is to change.

The Adult Transition Theory by Nancy Schlossberg (1984) is a conceptual framework to view transition as experienced by college students, particularly seniors. Transitions may be identified by type, as in anticipated, unanticipated or non-events and they are understood through assimilation and appraisal. Individuals in transition may be more successful by using the 4-S System of situation, self, supports and strategies. Understanding the situation provides context and perspective. A clear sense of self, including identity, values, strengths and weaknesses, is essential in successfully managing the transition.

Support and strategies combine to identify resources and methods to work through the transition. As a whole, the Adult Transition Theory is a strategic map to assist people through life changes. It is especially apt for college seniors as they end one phase of life and begin another.

This chapter included a brief discussion on first-year/time college students because of the significant nature of the transition of starting college. Such an experience has definite markers of transition, and provides a backdrop against which we may look at college seniors' exiting experiences. For first-year students, many begin college with high expectations and eagerness but the rigors of college often exceed the best intentions and effort. First-year students need orientation information and campus engagement opportunities to succeed. Programs such as First Year Experience and residence hall learning communities have been effective in supporting freshmen through the first year of change and in persisting to the second year.

Along with the challenges of the first year of college, the status of first-generation compounds the experience. Many first-generation students enter college with significant disadvantages, such as weak academic preparation, deficient help-seeking behaviors, increased disengagement from campus, and family dissonance. There is ample evidence to demonstrate that interventions for first-generation students, such as TRIO, a program specially designed to assist college students who are first-generation, economically disadvantaged and/or learning or physically disabled, help equalize the disparity first-generation students face when they start college. Still, the high attrition rates of first-generation students are due mostly to their detachment from college activities and the financial burdens forcing them to work. Most telling is their lack of "cultural capital" which

compromises their ability to ask the right questions of the right people to navigate byzantine bureaucracies of college. This lack of cultural capital may re-introduce itself in the senior year, when first-generation seniors face another life-turn: becoming a college graduate and pursuing a career. These students may experience the closure of college with feelings that echo the start of college.

College seniors' worries are multifaceted. They must balance academic and personal endings with onset of a career. Some research suggests that most seniors experience high levels of confusion, anxiety and stress prior to graduation. College seniors must prepare themselves by taking stock of their previous four years: their academic development, their personal journeys, and their newly-refined sense of self. Graduation brings a new sense of urgency to "get on with life", but this mingles with anxiety about the unknown. Some institutional interventions, such as senior capstone courses, and field experiences (internships) have shown strongly positive effects on seniors. On some campuses, a "Senior Year Experience" (SYE) course is used, which incorporates life-skills development while providing academic closure. Much like the '"First Year Experience" courses, these SYE programs support tactical needs, and to a lesser degree developmental or adaptive needs. Most SYE programs emphasize career-readiness and job search tactics, but very few provide opportunities for discussing the emotional, interpersonal, and psychological changes seniors face. SYE classes undoubtedly help some seniors, and they may be particularly useful for first-generation seniors, for whom becoming a college graduate may carry different emotional, social and psychological weight.

In sum, first-year students experience significant transitions when they enter college. These transitions may be more sharply experienced by first-generation freshmen than by

legacy freshmen. First-generation students may lack cultural capital to develop clear images and expectations of what a college student should look like, feel like and be like. They enter college with potentially naïve or unsophisticated expectations. Colleges and universities have developed supportive programs for freshmen, and particularly for first-generation freshmen, but for seniors, such institutional interventions have lagged behind.

For most college seniors, the transition into adulthood is complex; and for first-generation seniors who lack familial resources, the change may be more deeply and profoundly challenging. The problems of being first-generation may permeate throughout beyond the first year, and well into the final year of college, compounding the experience. There is a gap in the research related to how first-generation seniors approach transition, understand it, and work through it toward a new phase of adulthood and identity. This study explored how traditional age first-generation college seniors experience their final year of undergraduate study and how they ascribe meaning to these experiences. It attempted to answer these questions: (1) What archetypal experiences during the final year of college have noteworthy influence on first-generation college seniors' transition into adulthood? and (2) What, if any, mechanisms (personal and institutional) do first-generation college seniors use to make meaning and create understanding of this experience? It is expected that this research may serve institutions of higher education to better prepare graduating seniors for successful transition to post-college endeavors.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This phenomenological study explored the experience of first-generation college seniors during their transitional final undergraduate year. A significant body of research exists on first-generation students: their demographics, deficiencies, and the demands they place on their colleges to support their success (Tym, McMillion, Barone & Webster, 2004). The research on senior-year issues concentrates mostly on career preparation and placement, and is framed around career counseling theory (McCoy, 2003). However, research on the unique concerns of first-generation college seniors as they move from their undergraduate lives into post-college activities is limited. An institution's quality is, to some extent, judged on the success of its graduates (Gardner, 1998). It is therefore reasonable to pursue research on senior-level students and how well they transition from college to the "real world".

Transitioning to post-college life is a complex process, with unique psycho-emotional shifts, identity changes, and adjustments to events. This is true for most college seniors, but for those who are first-generation, the transition may be more significantly felt. This study explored how traditional age first-generation college seniors experience their final year of undergraduate study and how they ascribe meaning to these experiences. Key terms in this study are operationally defined as follows: *college seniors* are those students of traditional age (21-23) completing their final year of coursework required by their undergraduate program and by institutional policy; *senior year* is defined as the academic year coinciding with concluding coursework and immediately prior to commencement; *transition*, as both noun and verb, is defined as the behavioral, emotional, cognitive, social and practical

changes occurring; *first-generation* refers to seniors for whom neither parent has attained a four-year college degree; *legacy* refers to seniors for whom at least one parent has achieved a four-year degree. Identifying the signature motifs and experience themes associated with first-generation college seniors transitions may prove useful for colleges seeking to ensure a high quality educational and personal development experience for their rising alumni.

This chapter discusses the use of phenomenology as the research orientation for this study. The research questions and the methodology is presented.

Phenomenological Approach

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study for a variety of reasons. First, it enables the researcher to investigate the senior-year transitional experience in a naturalistic context. Second, qualitative research best suits topics about which little is known, and topics for which quantitative measurement is not likely to produce desired results. Third, qualitative data is rich and complex, and allows the reader a more complete understanding of the phenomenon studied. Patton (1990) promotes qualitative methods as useful when the inquiry embraces meanings, personal responses, or values. Finally, qualitative techniques are also appropriate to discover or open new avenues of inquiry. Creswell synthesizes the usefulness of qualitative approaches (2007):

> We conduct qualitative research because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue. This detail can only be established by talking directly with people ... and allowing them to tell their stories unencumbered by what we expect to find ... We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to tell their stories, hear their voices. We cannot separate what people say from the context in which they say it (p. 40).

A phenomenological study was used for "describing the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 007, p. 57). It is frequently used in studies which explore human experiences, structures and perceptions of meaning (May, 2002). Moustakas (1994) describes phenomenology as the system by which a phenomenon-as-lived is explained and expressed. Phenomenological researchers seek to identify, describe and present a lived experience in such a way that readers can 'feel' the phenomenon themselves. Phenomenology was selected as appropriate for this study because it enables the researcher to explore both experience and meaning as expressed by the participants in the most natural and organic way; in life situations as lived during the senior year of college. Phenomenology is a well-used approach in human and social science disciplines, including sociology, education and psychology.

This phenomenological study sought to answer the following research questions:

(1) What archetypal experiences during the final year of college have significant effect on first-generation college seniors' sense of moving forward into adulthood? and (2) What mechanisms (personal and institutional), if any, do first-generation college seniors use to make meaning and create understanding of this experience?

The Research Instrument

As the research instrument itself, a phenomenological researcher must be aware of individualized presuppositions and interpretation biases. Subjectivity is inherent in phenomenology, as is a strong orientation toward the subject while being careful to avoid introducing biases especially during the data interpretation phase (van Manen, 1997). By its nature, qualitative research invites some subjectivity through the close relationship between researcher and subject. This is not to suggest a violation or misinterpretation of the data, but

rather to acknowledge the researcher *as measuring instrument*. Where possible and reasonable, the researcher must address potential biases and unwarranted subjectivity. To guard against complicating biases, phenomenological researchers must make use of the Epoche or bracketing phase (Moustakas, 1994).

Bracketing (Moustakas, 1994) requires the researcher to set aside prejudgment and open oneself. Unlike quantitative research where very particular results are expected and hence tested for, in phenomenology, the research is to identify the essence of the phenomenon as it is (not as expected). When bracketing, the researcher identifies particular biases or expectations and sets them aside as much as possible. Moustakas writes:

> "the researcher ... engages in disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments...in order to launch the study as far as possible free of preconceptions, beliefs, and knowledge of the phenomenon from prior experience and professional studies—to be completely open, receptive and naïve..." (1994, p. 22).

This bracketing should be fairly straightforward with this study in that the phenomenon itself—the transition out of college as experienced by first-generation college seniors—has almost no affiliated literature and the researcher herself was not a first-generation college student.

Setting

The setting for this study was a large public university in Pennsylvania. The institution serves a large and rural geographic region. First-generation students comprise 35.6% of the total undergraduate student population, with 34.1% first-generation at the senior level, as self-reported on FAFSA applications (Kitas, personal communication, April 21,

2009). The curriculum at the research site includes traditional liberal arts disciplines and professional programs, and confers degrees ranging from baccalaureate through doctorate.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

The researcher requested from university enrollment management the names and campus email addresses of students who met the following criteria: (1) in their final year of coursework and therefore on schedule for graduation; (2) who were not transfer students; and (3) within ages 21-23. An email was sent to these students explaining the scope of the research and inviting them to participate. An incentive, in the form of drawing for a $50.00 gift certificate to iTunes or Amazon, was offered. Only students who actually participated in the interviews were eligible for the incentive. Respondents to the recruiting email were required to complete a participant demographic questionnaire to capture information related to academic degree, generational status, age, etc. (See Appendix A). Replies to the recruiting email were sorted according to generational status. The participants for this study were college seniors scheduled to graduate within the current academic year, thus controlling for time. There was no discrimination based on sex, however only participants within traditional age (21-23) were included. Legacy students were specifically excluded. Respondents who self reported as first-generation were specifically included. Participants were purposefully chosen to ensure the researcher had access to the information most desired, that is, regarding the felt experience of transition in the final year by first-generation senior college students. Participants, as purposefully chosen, were not considered statistically representative of the entire graduating class.

The number of respondents to the recruiting email was much lower than anticipated. The first round of group interviews resulted in four participants; the second round of group

interviews resulted in three qualifying respondents, but only two actually participated. Follow-up phone calls and emails were conducted with participants to gather richer and more complex data. Because of the low number of qualifying respondents, the focus group methodology was abandoned and individual or dyadic (two-interviewee) interviews were selected as the mechanism by which data was captured.

Risks and Benefits to Participants

There were no risks to participants. Effort was made to ensure the setting was comfortable and reasonably private to encourage self-disclosure and open communication. Participants were allowed to leave at any time. Interviews were scheduled as conveniently as possible for the participants and subsequent communications were conducted efficiently and non-intrusively. Participants may have received benefits from (A) winning the gift certificate, (B) establishing a greater clarity of their own transitional experience via discussion with peers in the case of dyadic interviews; or (C) gathering information about supportive resources and useful strategies to manage their transition.

Data Collection: Interview Methodology

Although focus groups were ultimately not used as a data collection method for this study due to low participant response, certain aspects of them are relevant to dyadic (two-interviewee) interviews, and therefore this discussion is included.

Focus groups are an appropriate method for data collection as they are "commonly prescribed for research that is exploratory...and/or phenomenological" (Calder, as cited in Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007, p. 9). Focus groups are believed to generate more information than individual interviews, due to the synergistic nature of them. Beebe and Masterson (2008) support group communication as producing more complex and richer

information, discussions and dynamic interchanges. Focus groups are among the most commonly used methods in conducting research in the social and behavioral sciences (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). Merton (1987) asserts that focus groups have a singular purpose to collect qualitative data from people who have experienced a particular concrete situation. This suggests a sharp focus of conversation, and greater likelihood to sustain attention on the topic.

Using the language of Merton (1987), the dyadic interviews used qualify as analogous to "authentic" focus groups because the participants share common identity, goals and experiences, as opposed to marketing focus groups which Merton asserts should be referred to as *groupings*. Although it was possible that some interviewees may have been acquainted with each other, this proved to be non-problematic. If, in a dyadic interview, either participant had a relationship with the other interviewee which may have substantially interfered with the purpose of the discussion, the composition would have been adjusted. This was not required.

Information generated by and collected from focus groups is *emic*; that is, natural and indigenous. Emic data results from a research approach that allows participants to respond using their own words and perceived understandings of a situation. The researcher has little impact on the form of the data. Contrast this with *etic* data, which can be structured by the researcher's orientation to the subject (Krippendorf, 2004). Etic data uses prescribed categories of data responses, thus framing the information according to anticipated and expected constructions. In phenomenological inquiry, emic data, more organic and unconstructed, is much more appropriately suited and sought.

Data was initially collected using individual and dyadic interviews; phone calls and email correspondence were used as follow-up efforts to increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the data gathered from the initial interview process. It was the original intention that three focus groups would be created, each comprised of two to five members, which falls within generally accepted bounds (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook 2007). However, an insufficient number of participants forced a modification in the data collection method. The total number of participants was six individuals.

The 4-S System (Schlossberg, 1984) was used as an organizing framework to provide structure and consistency in data collection. The 4-S System, detailed in chapter two of this dissertation, concentrates on elements of transitional management: Situational understanding, Self assessment, Support available, and Strategies of choice. To review, the 4-S System acts as structure to organize various levels of understanding transition. Understanding the Situation provides context and perspective. A clear sense of Self, including identity, values, strengths and weaknesses, is essential in successfully managing the transition. Support and Strategies combine to identify resources and methods to work through the transition. The protocols for using the 4-S System during the interviews are provided in Appendices B and C. Audio recording was used to record sequencing of speakers during the meetings and ensured attribution accuracy in the use of direct quotes to illuminate or exemplify particularly strong themes.

The use of the 4-S System as the organizing framework for the interview questions was submitted to an expert panel for review to ensure comprehensiveness and appropriateness. Phrasing and specificity of questions was refined and adapted based on recommendations of the panel. The interview questions are presented in Appendix C.

Each interview meeting was begun by the researcher using a consistent opening script (See script, Appendix B) and participants signed a voluntary consent form (Appendix D). The discussion prompts are provided, but it is noted that the researcher altered the wording to reflect and pursue the natural flow of conversation. Rather than adhere strictly to standardized questions, it was deemed more important that the interviewer engage the participants in an organic and natural reflection on each of the overarching elements of the 4-S System, and that the discussion produces authentic information related to the experience of transition. The researcher assumed some latitude during the interviews as the organic and unscripted flow of conversation dictated. In phenomenological inquiry, capturing the essence of the felt experience takes precedence over regimented methods of data collection. Therefore, some flexibility and variability is expected and acceptable.

To support credibility and authenticity of the data collected from the initial individual and dyad interviews, additional communication via phone calls and emails transpired. This was determined to be an appropriate step in data collection, given the small number of participants, and supported the potential for deeper exploration of the phenomenon. Follow-up interviews were semi-structured, and allowing participants the freedom to express and explore their unique senior-year transitions beyond the initial interview.

All audio recording and interview notes will be safe housed for three years, according to IUP Institutional Research Board guidelines (http://www.iup.edu/page.aspx?id=6641). Replies to recruiting email, participants questionnaires, and all email correspondence with participants before, during and after data collection will be safe housed. After three years, all records will be destroyed.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data were analyzed according to a general orientation of thematic analysis whereby significant statements and motifs were identified. First, data were interpreted using horizontalization—the identification of discrete topical themes and non-repeated statements—to create a list of distinct meaning units. This process generated a broad understanding of the overarching themes of the studied experience. These meaning units then became the archetypal characteristics or the crystallizing markers of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Second, the meaning units guided the development of a written description—a thematic and semantic analysis—which synthesized the experience as expressed. Krippendorf (2004) and Janis (1965) provide guidelines in using semantic content analysis, and relying on frequency designations (counting) and attribution of positivity and negativity. Repeated statements and alikeness of language (semantic mirroring) were grouped into categories and compared to meaning units derived from horizontalization. Data which was markedly different from classified themes and motifs was classified as hyper-personalized to particular participants.

Summary

This chapter presented the methodology for a phenomenological inquiry of the transitional concerns as uniquely experienced by first-generation college seniors. The qualitative purpose of this study was to explore, illuminate and describe the experience. As a qualitative approach, phenomenology was explained as the preferred method to capture, understand and synthesize felt experience among a group of persons who share an experience. Criteria for the use of phenomenology were presented, as was an explanation of the role researcher-as-instrument and the importance of bracketing or Epoche phase prior to

data collection. The process for data collection was detailed. A broad thematic analysis was used to identify significant phenomenological elements of their experiences. In addition, multiple approaches to data interpretation, including horizontalization, semantic analysis, frequency designations, and meaning unit clustering was used to verify the authenticity, credibility and trustworthiness of the results.

It is hoped this study will advance the understanding of how first-generation college seniors experience and make meaning of their senior-year transition. This study employed a phenomenological approach, and used the 4-S System in an applied manner to elicit meaning-making data. This study may uncover new opportunities for higher education to support and assist first-generation college seniors, as they move from a collegiate environment to the "real world", and as they assume a new relationship with their alma maters, that of alumni.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION OF DATA AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

Using a phenomenological approach, this study used the Adult Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1984) as a framework to investigate the transitional experience of being a first-generation college student in the final year of undergraduate study. This chapter presents a review of the methodology as detailed in the previous chapter, and the central themes as identified via data analysis. The research questions were: (1) What archetypal experiences during the final year of college have noteworthy influence on first-generation college seniors' transition into adulthood? and (2) What, if any, mechanisms (personal and institutional) do first-generation college seniors use to make meaning and create understanding of this experience?

Participants in this study were recruited via campus email to graduating seniors who met the following criteria: (1) in their final year of coursework and therefore on schedule for graduation; (2) who were not transfer students; and (3) within ages 21-23, and (4) self identified as first-generation. The total number of participants was six. Their academic majors spanned liberal arts, business, education and science.

Individual and dyadic (two-participant) interviews were conducted to collect data; the interviews were semi-structured using the 4-S System (Schlossberg, 1984), explained in chapter two of this dissertation. Interview questions were organized on four inquiry topics: Situation (identifying triggering events that may contribute to a heightened sense of awareness of transition), Self (transitional issues of changing self-concept, identity and ego), Support (sources of help used to make the transition feel more manageable) and Strategies

(mechanisms and tactics used to ameliorate anxiety). Appendix C provides the interview questions. By using this structure, participants were guided to focus on the specific elements of transition, thereby deepening their awareness of the phenomenon. As with qualitative research, the interviews were conducted in manner that allowed a natural progression of conversation while maintaining topic focus. There was some diversion from the scripted questions, in order to probe a response more completely.

Interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and were audio taped; note-taking was also used to record the responses. Participants were contacted later via telephone and email to further explore themes or responses. Participants were assured of their anonymity; all documents related to identity of participants and their recorded responses are safe-housed for three years in accordance with university policy.

Interview recordings and notes were transcribed. The researcher repeatedly referred to the transcriptions during analysis. Data were analyzed using two steps. First, horizontalization—the identification of discrete topics and non-repeated statements—created a list general themes. The list was then analyzed using semantic mirroring (like wording and synonym identification), frequency counting and attribution of positivity or negativity. This created clusters of themes which were compared to elements of the 4-S System, where such comparison was obviously evident. This two-step analysis revealed sub-topics within each theme. Data which was markedly different from classified themes and motifs was classified as hyper-personalized to particular participants and as such, were not included in the frequency analysis step.

Results

This chapter section is organized using the 4-S System (see chapter two) and themes are aligned with elements of the 4-S System. Where appropriate, direct quotes are used here to illuminate themes, and these quotes are attributed to pseudonyms.

Situation Themes

The first element of the 4-S System is Situation and refers to the trigger event(s), the timing in the larger context of life-plan, sense of control over the situation, role changes, duration of transition, familiarity or previous experience with similar transition(s), concurrent stressors, and the appraisal of transition as positive, negative or benign (Goodman, et al., 2006). Key themes which highlighted this as a time of situational transition were (1) emotional confusion, (2) post-college actions, (3) clashing family norms, and (4) acknowledging the end of college years. Within these overarching themes, sub-topics emerged and these sub-topics included: not wanting to 'waste' the degree or take a job beneath credentials, concern about having to return to their parents' homes, relocation issues, conducting a successful job hunt, handling a romantic break up, and honoring family expectations.

"A Happy Mess": Emotional Confusion

Participants expressed a deep sense of expectation and of pressure during their final year of undergraduate study. All participants felt this a time of uncertainty but felt upbeat about their options. This theme was marked by mixed emotional tones of optimism, pride, and impatience as well as concern and anxiety.

Kate: Wow. I mean really. I think about what I've done, and what I have ahead of me. My parents are just way excited and proud. I am too. I mean, there's a lot to do,

like find a job, move, start paying bills. I'll probably have to relocate, but that's ok. Well, my mom won't like it. But it's my life you know? I'm all over the place. I feel good. I'm a little scared. I'm a happy mess.

Adam: There are just so many questions I'm dealing with right now. I'm getting ready to move on with my life... I'm ready. I'm really proud of myself, but a little worried too about what's next. I'm not sure what will happen, but I do know what I don't want. I am not going to just take some minimum wage job. I am not moving back home. I know that much at least.

Dan: I've got a lot to deal with right now. Where to live, finding a job, figuring out all the student loan stuff. And I'm gonna (sic) break up with my girlfriend. There's just too much to deal with right now. It's not like we were real serious, but still, it's hard. I'll be sad. But I just can't deal with all this and a romance, too, you know?

Post-College Actions

Students consistently reflected on their need to find a good job, thereby honoring their own expectations of starting a career and using their education. Only one indicated an interest in graduate study. All felt their campus involvement and leadership experience was of more value to potential employers than their academic performance. They felt pressure to become fully independent adults, and were particularly resistant to moving back home with parents. Areas of uncertainty revolved around handling relocation, understanding career issues, and dealing with changes in personal relationships.

Jackie: My friends think I've got it all figured out. Just move to be with my boyfriend, and get married. But he's in (City X), and I don't know that it's the right

place for me. We've been together a couple years, so I guess that's the next step, but I just don't know. I don't have a job lined up there, and I'm not moving just to be with him if I can't find a career, too.

Dan: One thing that I have no clue about is all that benefit stuff. You know... the medical and such. I mean, I know I'll find a good job, but I don't know if I'll understand all the other stuff about getting a real job, you know?

Kate: My parents are proud of me, but I think I'm more proud of me. I know the job hunt will be tough. I've got a cousin who graduated last year and she still hasn't found a job using her degree. What a waste of time and money. She had to move back (home to her parents'). That is not gonna (sic) be me. I don't know what else I'm sure about, but I'm sure about that.

Family as Support and as Strain

Family has a pervasive impact on how senior-level first-generation students' sense of the changing situation. On the positive side, student reflected that their families had been their "greatest source of support—financially, emotionally, just helping me figure things out as best they could" (Dan). Parents particularly provided motivation, encouragement and assistance. These graduating students were keenly aware of the important role their parents played in their own academic success. One student emphasized that even though neither parent had a college degree, "they went out of their way to try to understand all the ins and outs of college. It's like they had to learn a whole new language just to help me" (Kate).

Family was also the source of negative impact on their transitions, mostly in a clash of expectations for their post-college activities. One contradiction involved meeting career expectations. Dan's explanation was particularly illuminating:

> My family are (sic) laborers. You know, mechanics, working in the oil fields, in the timber industry. A long day of break-your-back-work is valued. But when I explain I'm not going to do that, they think I'm not going to have a real job. Like being a boss isn't hard work. They dismiss the mental work. My grandparents belittle my plans to work in an office, to be the boss of the guys in the field. But that's their way and this is mine.

Additionally, family norms are a source of conflict. Clashing gender roles and expectations were illuminated by Kate:

> My uncles are all professionals, like engineers, a computer programmer, a doctor. No one in my family expects me to actually go to work. They expect me to come back home, get married and have kids... like that's not work? (laughs). No, seriously, they think I should do what all the women have done because that's 'easier' or something. They think choosing to work is harder, and they don't understand why I would choose harder.

Some students reflected on how little their parents understood about college, particularly the bureaucracy and how college differs from high school. This was a source of conflict and embarrassment for some participants. Key comments included "The language of college is all different for them", "My mom tried, but doesn't really know what's going on", "They would ask me for my report card and they don't understand why I don't have one, or

how I can just access my grades online", "Just little stuff, like I have an advisor, not a guidance counselor. Or how I don't have math class five times a week. It's just that kind of stuff they didn't know, and never will." Dan remarked:

> They've sort of stopped asking me, because I get annoyed trying to explain it all. I feel bad, because I know they are interested, but it just takes a lot to explain if you haven't done it. And they haven't. I have and that makes me different from them.

Marking the End

Several participants identified certain events which triggered their awareness of the entire transitional situation, such as receiving email communications about mandatory graduation meetings, or departmental gatherings to celebrate graduating seniors. There was a reflective quality in their comments, notably on the sense of their lives changing and their perceptions were changing, too. Representative statements were: "That was weird. I was like, expecting it or something, and then when I didn't get it but some of my friends did... I don't know. I sort of felt left out" and "I got an email from my department secretary about some paperwork. And then it hit me. It's all ending. I really am graduating."

More in-depth comments were offered, such as:

> **Adam**: You know what I just realized? I'm not hanging out with my friends as much as I used to. It's like we're all just too busy moving on, taking care of stuff... we can't find the time to kill now. I mean we still get together, play ball or whatever, but it's not like before. I guess that's part of it all, right? Just moving on.

> **Kate**: I am so ready to be done. It's like every assignment I think 'It's the last time I'll have to do this.' It's funny... my classes are just in the way now. I just want to get

> on with things. It's over, you know? There's an edginess now I feel. I spend like over 10 hours a week in class, and I just think 'I need this time to job hunt'. All the papers and other stuff. I could be spending my time in better ways.

To summarize the themes surrounding the Situation, participants' reflections indicate that the senior year transition is marked by mixed emotions, ranging from positive feelings of achievement, pride and optimism, to negative feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Family expectations and norms acted as sources of anxiety and pressure. Certain triggering events, such as official email communications and the cessation of routine activities (i.e. registration for next semester), elevated their sense of transition and change. Adding to their sense of change was how to manage competing demands on time and energy, including conducting a job hunt, finishing coursework, and juggling family expectations against personal aspirations.

Self Themes

The second element of the 4-S System, Self, includes personal and demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status, gender, age, health, ethnicity/culture, psychological resources, outlook, values, and spirituality/resiliency (Goodman, et al., 2006). Unique characteristics, experiences, perceptions and world views combine with tremendous impact on how a person transitions from one life-phase to another.

Perhaps the most resonant motif of this study involved the changes in self identity. These self-concept adjustments were categorized into four main topics: (1) intellectual growth, (2) adulthood status, (3) separateness from family and 'back home' friends, and (4) first-generation pride and pressure to excel.

"How to be a Different Person": Intellectual Growth

Participants noted how college affected their intellectual world views and skills. Students noted how they feel better equipped to engage in conversation on a wide variety of topics, with a wide variety of people. Dan particularly expressed this change:

> I know how to keep a conversation going, how to talk with different people. What interests me now is different from what it was just a few years ago. I think more deeply, too. I can analyze better, you know, look at a topic from different sides.

Similarly, Adam expressed his sense of intellectual growth: "I feel smarter. Really. Maybe I shouldn't say that, but I do. I won't feel guilty about it though. I've worked hard to be more intelligent. I've learned how to be a different person."

One sub-topic within this theme was that of differences in critical thinking skills. Adam's experience reflected a clash on political ideology:

> Growing up, my parents, well, my whole family really, were black-and-white on politics. There was no middle ground, no shades of gray. My parents voted the party line no matter what. The issues weren't of interest to them. But I've learned there are shades of gray; college taught me how to see them. So I don't think there's only one way to deal with society's issues. Last year during the presidential campaign, things got a little heated between me and my parents. They just couldn't see any middle ground. They don't know how to analyze and think about the issues, but I've learned how to do that.

Adulthood Status

Participants also expressed a new sense of adult identity and commented on the persona of 'student' as being behind them now. This suggests a turning point in the self-labeling process of identity. Jackie stated: "I'm not a kid anymore. I'm older, but still young; I have dreams but I have responsibilities, too, now. They (responsibilities) are everywhere. I don't think of myself as a kid anymore... I'm an adult." Dan echoed that experience: "I don't even think about being a student now. I refer to myself as a December graduate. That's different from being a senior, you know? The identity of being a student is gone." Mandy noted: "My parents didn't always agree with my choices, like to go so far away to school. But they see now that I make good decisions. We don't argue as much anymore."

Separateness

The concept of separateness from family and friends was strongly expressed. Participants remarked on how different they feel from their lives "back home" and how they now recognize the changes they've experienced in themselves especially when home on semester breaks. Sub-topics included acknowledging how the 'old' (pre-college) self differed from the 'new' (college) self; serving as a role model for younger relatives; and embracing new values.

Some participants expressed a sense of self-protection and of enjoying their new identity. For Dan, friends back home threaten his life plans. He stated:

> They are a danger to my future. They don't get why I wanted to go to college, to go away to college. When I go home to visit, they are still where they always were, but I've gone on. They expect me to be who they are, but I won't. They're going nowhere.

Adam's comment reinforced the need to protect a new self identity:

> When I started college I didn't know how to fit in. My parents didn't bring me to college, and when I saw my friends getting care packages and stuff, I realized my folks didn't even know enough to do that. Now, though, I fit in more at college. I go home and if feels weird. I'm different there than I am here. I have to be.

The lack of shared experiences and opinions, a hallmark of separation, became clear during this transition. As Kate noted:

> My high school friends and I just aren't on the same page anymore. I don't even know how to talk to them sometimes. I mean, I know stuff that they don't. So, what is there to talk about?

Another sub-topic of this theme of separateness was the sense of setting an example for younger siblings and cousins. Participants had a very real sense of setting a new family tradition, of helping younger relatives realize they had options. Jackie stated: "They look at me for what to do. I feel that now. They ask me about college and stuff. I'm their source of information. That's a responsibility." Dan's comment harmonizes: "I am my family's biggest source of pride now. And that means I have to make it." Mandy's reflections supported this sub-theme: "I am setting big example for my little brothers. For a lot of people in my family. It makes me nervous, but it also keeps me motivated."

One sub-topic within this theme was the clash of family values against new personal values. Kate's remarks provide insight on how racial attitudes can be a point of divergence:

> I come from a very small town. I mean, really small. Like, there's only a handful of black families there. Here at college, though, I've made friends with a lot of non-

white people. I've learned about other cultures and it's cool. But when I was home a few weeks ago, my mom was going on about how all the blacks in town are just useless, all on welfare and all that. Then she started on about blacks in general. My little cousins were there, there're in high school. I felt embarrassed. My mom isn't a racist, but she's just ignorant. I told her that she should be more careful about how she talks in front of my cousins. She didn't have a clue about what I meant. For her, that's just her reality. It's not being racist, in her opinion. But I explained it to her, using some stuff I learned in Sociology classes or whatever. She still doesn't get it, but I do. It matters to me.

Family norms and values on gay and lesbian lifestyles are also a potential point of contention, as expressed by Dan:

> The big shift for me was on gays and lesbians. My parents will say things that are just wrong. I mean wrong like inaccurate, but also just wrong, you know? At college, you learn about tolerance and diversity, and that being gay isn't a disease or something. But my parents are just nowhere near that. It's difficult too, because I think my one cousin is gay, but there's no way he'll come out, at least at home. And that's wrong, because he shouldn't have to be someone he isn't with family.

First-Generation Pride and Pressure

One of the most illuminating motifs related to self was how first-generation seniors perceived themselves as different from their legacy peers. (Legacy is defined for this study as being from a family where one or both parents have an earned college degree.) All participants reflected that they felt their sense of accomplishment and pride was greater and

deeper than that of their legacy peers. Dan expressed: "Being first-generation is a really point of pride for me. For my friends who aren't (first-generation), they are just following a pattern. But for me, I'm setting a new path for my family. That's huge." Kate echoed: "Legacy students are just doing the normal for them. But for me, I'm doing more. And that makes me happy." Jackie stated a very clear and pointed comment:

> I am so proud of myself. Sometimes I get pissed off at my friends who aren't first-generation, because they just seem to float on through, you know? They just don't seem to work as hard, or take it as seriously. It doesn't matter as much to them.

Participants also noted how they valued their education more than their legacy peers, and that they felt a very real need to put their degree to use. Adam's comments were emblematic:

> A lot of people go to college, so for them it's not something to brag about. But in my family, it's a big deal. It's about a better life, about getting ahead. I feel the pressure. I'm afraid of disappointing them, but more disappointing myself. My friends here who aren't first-generation just don't seem to care. That it's harder on me than on them. They're families get it, but mine doesn't. They've been through it. I haven't. I'm still not sure what comes next. But I know I can't go home. That would be such a waste of these four years.

Mandy confirmed this sensibility:

> I think for some who don't have a job lined up, that's ok for them. Their parents will bring them back home, support them, whatever. I need to be ready and on the move. They can sit back and reflect, but I need to get on. My parents expect that.

Taking the degree for granted was a sub-topic of intense attention. For participants, recognizing the sacrifices made by their families, and themselves, to earn to a degree

was important. They also felt their legacy peers didn't have a similar sense of sacrifice. As Jackie stated:

> My friends just blow stuff off because a late fee or whatever isn't a big deal to them. For me, that's half my paycheck. They don't have the stress I do, and their parents don't either. It's like they just came to college for something to do. I came because I want something better. They've already had it. I'm earning it.

Another sub-topic was the weight of importance that decisions take on during college. Every choice matters, from which elective courses to take, to how much student loan money to get, to where to live to save rent money, to which groups to join. Adam stated:

> They've (the legacy students) have had a pretty easy life compared to mine. They don't really have to step up all that much. But I had to work hard to get accepted. I work my way through school to pay for it. I don't go out and get hammered, because that money might be textbooks next semester. I get a B and it kills me, but my friends—who don't study—get a C and they're cool with that. The impact of the work, the effort, matters more to me, because it all matters more to me. Everything matters.

To summarize this section, the major themes related to the Self dimension of transition were: intellectual growth, emerging sense of adulthood, sense of separateness from personal past, and conflicting feelings about first-generation status. Participants reflected on new aspects of their self concepts, and generally felt deep pride about their achievements. Students were cognizant of how their intellectual and affective (values-based) world-views diverged from that of their parents'. They acknowledged a sense of being 'apart' from their

previous lives, and expressed a sense of wanting to protect their achievements, and their futures, from potentially negative influences. Family norms and values were noted as sources of conflict for their emerging selves. Participants were ready to abandon the label of 'student' in favor of 'adult' and noted they don't refer to themselves as college students at this point. Finally, and of particular interest to this study, was how these students felt they differed from their legacy peers in that they felt their own success, as first-generation students, was harder-earned and therefore more highly prized, than what their legacy peers experienced.

Support Themes

Support, the third element of the 4-System, includes 'helpers' such a friends, family, mentors, professional counselors, and available institutional structures. Goodman, et al. (2006, p. 75) state "… support is often said to be the key to handling stress" during transition. Themes related to support included (1) typical sources of support and (2) identifying topics on which more information was needed.

The Helpers: Family, Faculty and Friends

First-generation students, by their very experience, enter college with little *a priori* information about college. Despite this, all participants referred to their family as a primary source of emotional and financial support during all four years of undergraduate study, and particularly during first and senior years. Kate said: "They (parents) may not have gone to college, but they still help me whenever I need it. Money, encouragement, whatever. And knowing how proud they are helps, too."

Academic sources, such as favorite professors, department secretaries and official university communication, were also named frequently as sources of informational support.

Academic advisors, however, were not. Notably, all but one participant had a strongly negative associations with their assigned academic advisor, and felt they received much more relevant and accurate help from their instructional faculty. On topics related to graduate school or navigating campus bureaucracy, professors were named the primary helpers. Dan noted: "I go to my department and they point me in the right direction. Especially the secretary... she's knows it all. Probably better than the profs." Kate's experience supported this: "I used to email my advisor, but he never wrote back. So I just quit bothering and went to my favorite teachers. I'd ask their opinion or advice. They came through every time." Graduate teaching assistants were also mentioned as a source of information. Finally, four years of college taught them that official email communications would come, or they could call the Registrar with specific questions. Department websites were not used as the information on them was not updated and the sites themselves were not easy to navigate.

For emotional issues friends were named as a strong source of support. Kate noted however, that friends can only do so much when it comes to information: "I talk to my friends, but what they know is not much more than what I do. I use them to blow off steam or just vent. That helps, though."

When asked about campus offices that provide support services, such as the campus career center or the counseling office, participants' reactions ranged from ignorance to indifference. Kate said: "There's probably someone in Student Affairs, but I wouldn't know for sure. And since I don't live on campus, I just don't know who to ask." As Dan stated: "There's that office that helps with resumes, but I've never used it. It just doesn't occur to me to do that. I've figured it out on my own so far."

Only one student, Mandy, discussed the role of spirituality or a religious organization as a source of support. She stated: "I turn to my church. There are a lot of trustworthy people and there's nothing like a person of God to help you through the rough time."

What I Really Need to Know is...

Because managing transition requires a clear understanding of the type of support needed, participants were asked about topics on which they lacked important information. Their replies reflected curiosity about personal financial stability, professional networking skills, and relocation. They expressed little concern about how to conduct a job hunt, crediting their academic departments with preparing them. However, they did recognize the job market is weak, and they expected to have a difficult time finding work in their fields. Still, they felt they were as prepared as their legacy peers who, "are just as confused as we are. Everyone is a mess. The difference though is they can ask their parents. I can't."

Understanding personal budgeting, fringe benefits and handling debt were topics about which participants felt the least prepared. All participants reflected that they weren't sure how to negotiate for a salary, how to understand fringe benefits ("All that medical and retirement stuff has me completely messed up") and living within a budget. They would have appreciated practical and common-sense workshops on setting a "real-world" budget, managing credit card and student loan debt more effectively.

Professional networking was a skill they wished they had learned. They felt this was important to their career success, but didn't know how to do it. They felt comfortable with dinner etiquette, but the standard business networking skills had them nonplussed. They expressed a high level of anxiety about how to conduct appropriate small talk, introduce themselves in a business setting, and establish important career-based relationships. Mandy

noted a particular networking skill: “How to network not just with alumni or peers, but with faculty too. I need to learn how to talk with faculty who aren’t my teachers anymore.” When it was suggested they could attend a seminar or workshop on this topic, one participant said: “Really? Who does that? I’d go in a flash.”

Relocation was a topic which loomed large for participants. They understood that to pursue a career they dreamed of would require them to relocate away from home. Kate remarked:

> It’s one thing to move an hour away to college. That’s no big deal. But I think my career will take me to a city, and I have no idea how to do that. Do I get a moving company? What about transferring all my accounts and stuff? I’ve lived here my whole life. It’s scary to think about going where I don’t know anyone.

When asked how they would like to receive information related to these various topics, participants suggested a series of workshops open only to first-generation students would be welcome. “As a senior, I’m looking for whatever I can find to learn. I didn’t do that as a freshman or sophomore, but I’m like to go to that stuff now.” “Just for first-generation? Yeah, that would be cool. We wouldn’t feel so weird asking questions that legacy students probably already know.” Booklets would also be useful as a source to use when they had a question. Booklets, however, need to “be available at the start of the senior year, like in a capstone course or something. We got a lot of stuff at freshman orientation... I didn’t keep any of it.”

This section presented the major themes related to Support, as an element of transition for first generation college seniors. One theme which emerged from the data was that students indentified key sources of support in the form of family, faculty and friends.

These sources provided helpful advice and information, as well as emotional assistance, but notably, faculty members were relied upon for college-specific information. Family provided financial and emotional assistance, and friends provided emotional help, and only marginally informational help. The other theme identified topics of information on which students felt under-prepared, such as personal money management, relocation and professional networking. These participants would welcome special seminars on these topics, open only to first-generation students, and would also find useful a resource booklet made available to them at the start of their senior year. Participants did not initially indicate a high level of awareness of campus resources such as career services or a counseling center, and felt their academic departments adequately prepared them for a successful job hunt. However, in follow-up communications, two participants indicated they sought the help of the campus career center and felt their experience was positive. "I got great advice on how to make my resume stronger, and I signed up for a mock interview. I think that will take the edge off when I go out there for real."

Strategies Themes

The fourth and final element of the 4-S System is Strategies, or the coping choices and behaviors which may modify the situation, control the meaning of the situation, and/or manage post-event stress (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006). Related to psychological resiliency, coping strategies help people manage stress, redefine the situation, and identify actions that will resolve it. In this study, two strategy themes emerged: (1) healthy diversions to relieve stress and (2) organizing actions.

Healthy Diversions

Healthy diversions took significant priority over the more stereotypical behavior of binge partying. Engaging in physical activity, such as intramural sports, regular workouts, walking, yoga, etc. was used by all participants as a stress management tool. “I box, run, play pick up basketball... just get the sweat going. I sleep better. It gives me a sense of release.”

Participants also noted that finding ways to distract themselves was a common stress reduction tool. Surfing the Internet to find amusing videos on YouTube, playing online games, watching television, reading for pleasure, and listening to music were typical activities.

Socializing with friends, such as playing cards or watching a movie, was the most prominent stress-reliever. Participants were quick to point out that getting drunk or using recreational drugs was not a preferred stress relief tactic. “Getting drunk, being hung over... what a waste of time and money. It makes me feel worse, anyway, so why do it?” “I’ll have a beer or two when my friends and I go out, but I don’t get drunk anymore. Why add to my own stress by wasting money, or the whole next day in recovery?”

Compared to their legacy peers, first-generation students felt they dealt with their stress more effectively. “My (legacy) friends get drunk a lot... they don’t feel the pressure to excel like I do. They can just blow it off but my family’s watching. I don’t want to mess up now by partying.” Jackie stated: “My (legacy) friends know they can go back (home). They can drink and party and blow it off because it doesn’t matter to them like it does to me.”

Organizing Actions

As seniors, participants acknowledged the multitude of tasks they needed to complete. Ranging from coursework assignments, to internships duties, to athletic

competitions, to writing resumes and applying for jobs, to scheduling time with friends, to ordering academic regalia and attending mandatory department meetings, seniors felt a great need to keep track of it all, thereby managing their stress.

All participants discussed the use of time-management strategies, such as a personal planner. One student detailed how she uses lists to make sure she doesn't forget anything: "I make a list for that day's stuff, and then I have another list for the week's stuff. I have a white board in my room and I keep my to-do list there, so I see it everyday." Another student talked about how he uses a time-line for big projects, projecting backward from the due date and setting task benchmarks. Another participant said:

> Sundays used to be recovery day, you know. From Saturday. But now, Sundays are get organized days. I do my laundry, I clean my apartment, gas up the car, do my grocery shopping, my homework, and set my plan for the week. I hit Mondays feeling in control.

To summarize the section, for first-generation seniors, coping strategies such as healthy diversions and organizing actions were critically important to their sense of control and avoiding unwieldy levels of stress. The final year, particularly the final semester, "piles on the stuff" that requires attention. Academics, job hunts, personal relationships, daily mundane chores add up to a stressful time. As compared to legacy students, first-generation students seem to be more cautious about how they de-stress, preferring to use positive stress reduction techniques and avoid the more stereotypical senior burn-out and binge partying.

Summary

This chapter has presented the data gathered using individual and dyadic interviews to explore the experiences of first-generation college seniors during their final year of undergraduate study. Working within the framework of phenomenology, and following accepted protocols for analyzing phenomenological data, key themes emerged as they reflect and illuminate the subject of this dissertation. The data were presented using the 4-S System of the Adult Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1984) as an organizing tool. Emblematic quotes were used to represent meaning clusters and illustrate overarching themes.

The 4-S System is comprised of four elements, Situation, Self, Support and Strategies, which taken together, provide a tool for people to analyze and understand their transitional experiences. Themes emerged for each element, thusly:

Situation: Emotional Confusion, Post-College Actions, Family Conflicts, and Marking the End

Self: Intellectual Growth, Emerging Adulthood, Separateness, and First-Generation Pride and Pressure

Support: The Helpers (Family, Faculty, Friends), and Needed Information

Strategies: Healthy Diversions, and Organizing Actions

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This chapter will present an interpretation of the data, as analyzed (see previous chapter), and in the context of the research questions and the theoretical framework (see chapter two). This study was a phenomenological investigation into the transitional experience as felt and expressed by first-generation college seniors during their final year of undergraduate study. The research questions were: (1) What archetypal experiences during the final year of college have noteworthy influence on first-generation college seniors' transition into adulthood? and (2) What, if any, mechanisms (personal and institutional) do first-generation college seniors use to make meaning and create understanding of this experience?

A brief summary of the theoretical framework used, including the operational definition of transition, and the Adult Transition Theory, will be presented. In addition, salient points related to current literature regarding first-generation students and senior-level undergraduates will be reviewed, to provide context.

Review of the Study

Chapter two of this dissertation presented a detailed treatment of the concept of transition. Various definitions were presented, ranging from the metaphorical (as a river) to those based in psychosocial human development theory. For purposes of this study, *transition* was operationally defined as dynamic change occurring over time, in fairly identifiable stages, with positive and negative associations; it affects and is affected by our identities, relationships, values, behaviors and contexts. Transition is what marks human

experience: the changes we experience and how those changes affect who we are, the choices we make, and the lives we lead. Four universal motifs help delineate transition: Time, where we sense a shift or demarcations of before-within-and-after changes; Ritual, where particular social/cultural events are used to identify shifts in status; Self-identity changes during which we re-label or modify our sense of who we are as a result of the transition; and Perception, or how our world-views are altered because of experiencing the transition. For college seniors on the cusp of graduation, their experience meets these definitional elements.

The theoretical framework for this study first referred to general adult development theories. Particularly the work of Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory (ATT) (1984) was used to organize the cognitive, affective and psychosocial developmental considerations of adults in transition. Schlossberg posed a protocol for understanding and managing transition which included two phases, reviewed below.

Phase One, Approaching Transition, requires a clear identification of the type of transition being experienced (expected, unexpected or non-occurring), context (the scope within which the transition occurs, be it personal, professional, social, etc.), and impact (the sense of size/importance the transition demands of resources, such as time, attention, emotional output, etc.). Phase one is vitally important to successful management of transition. Schlossberg (1984) emphasized that a comprehensive understanding of what the change is, how it is occurring, and the affect of the change on other aspects of life must be in place before any actions toward resolution or assimilation can be fully implemented.

Phase Two, Coping, or the 4-S System, presents a structure for adults to use in order to more deeply understand their unique transitional experience, and to identify options to successfully manage it. Schlossberg (1984) noted that using the 4-S System with adults

undergoing unexpected and highly negative transitions provided them with a better sense of control and a diminished sense of being victimized. The 4-S System outlines four elements: Situation (identifying the particular context and events which create a sense of change), Self (identifying how self-concept, ego, esteem and image are affected by the transition), Support (naming helpers or other resources which provide assistance to move through the transition) and Strategies (pinpointing actions that will alleviate the stress and move toward goal).

Working from the backdrop of Adult Transition Theory, this study considered what is known regarding first-generation college students and college seniors, in an effort to establish linked experiences for these two student populations. First-generation college students have obvious differences from legacy students, ranging from motivation to attend college, to academic preparation, to clashing family norms and expectations. They face a significant challenge simply understanding the bureaucracy of college and navigating the system. They are more likely to drop out, usually due to financial hardship and not for academic performance. They are less likely to engage fully in the campus culture, which can compromise the entirety of their college experience. However, first-generation students are more likely to seek help and assistance than their legacy peers, particularly if the campus provides services such as TRIO or other population-specific support. (TRIO is a federal program which provides supportive services to students who are low-income, first-generation, learning or physically disabled.)

Current knowledge on college seniors suggests that well beyond the worries and concerns of finding a job, these students experience a complex transition, involving emotional changes, establishing independence (a source of potential conflict with parents), handling increased demands on time, completing coursework and making adjustments to

personal relationships. Seniors express conflicting feelings about graduating, and for some, indulge in a period of non-activity which stems from a pervasive sense of uncertainty and fear of making a mistake. Saginak (1998) identified five discrete areas of significant change and challenge for college seniors: (1) changing roles and identities; (2) managing practicalities (relocation, finances); (3) dealing with demands on time and attention; (4) establishing an action plan for job hunting; (5) reflecting on self and assessing personal achievements. Pistilli, Taub and Bennett (2003) found four areas of concern with which college seniors grappled: Career, Change and Loss, Graduate/Professional School, and Support (spiritual, emotional and financial).

This study sought to explore how college seniors of first-generation status experienced their transition during the final year of undergraduate study. Layering the complexity of the senior year with issues related to first-generation status suggested an area of rich transitional experience. A phenomenological approach was used as the research approach; the topic is experiential in nature and does not lend itself to quantitative inquiry. Chapter three of this dissertation details the phenomenological approach and methodology used. As a brief review: participants who were senior-level, first-generation and within traditional age (21-23), and who were not transfer students into the study campus were recruited. Personal interviews were used to gather data related to the phenomenon of the transitional issues experienced by first-generation college seniors in their final year of undergraduate study. Where needed, additional interviews, conducted via email and phone conversations, were used to gather more data.

Using horizontalization, meaning clusters, frequency, attribution and semantic mirroring as data analysis methods, general themes emerged from the data. These themes

were then compared against elements of the 4-S System, where such comparison was obvious and natural. Chapter four of this dissertation presents a detailed discussion of the results, however, a general review is offered here.

Situation themes included emotional confusion, post-college actions, family conflict, and marking the end. Self themes included intellectual growth, emerging adulthood, sense of separateness, and first-generational pride. Support themes included identifying essential helpers, and gathering information on essential post-college topics. Strategy themes included healthy diversions, and organizing tactics. The remaining content of this chapter will revisit these themes as they relate to the central research questions of this study, the conceptualization of transition, and to Adult Transition Theory. Also included is a discussion of methodological cautions and problems, general implications and interpretations relevant to the literature on first-generation college students, and suggestions for further inquiry.

Answering the Research Questions

The central research questions to this study were: (1) What archetypal experiences during the final year of college have noteworthy influence on first-generation college seniors' transition into adulthood?; and (2) What, if any, mechanisms (personal and institutional) do first-generation college seniors use to make meaning and create understanding of this experience? This chapter section will discuss the answers discovered.

Research Question One: Archetypal Experiences

The first question, focusing on archetypal experiences sought to identify signature events which shaped the felt experience of being a first-generation college student on the cusp of graduation. Based on the data and the interpreted themes derived from conventional

data analysis methods, first-generation college students identified (1) receiving institutional communications regarding commencement and other formalized mechanisms; (2) activities which supported securing employment, relocation, and/or establishing full independence; and (3) leave-taking behaviors to alter or sever friendships and romantic relationships. These align with elements of the 4-S System, particularly defining the Situation and taking Strategies to effect outcome. Understanding transition is based first in defining the Situation, which may be unanticipated, anticipated or non-occurring, and also framing the transition in terms of impact. All participants readily viewed their senior year as a time of change: one they anticipated, but also one fraught with a lot of unknowns. All the changes during their final year of college, academic and non-academic, had impact. But the largest issue at least for these participants was finding employment. This singular unknown weighed most heavily on them all. Because of this, they actively sought out ways to alleviate the stress and to control the situation. These strategic behaviors included managing time more effectively, launching a job search, and talking with supportive helpers (friends, family, and faculty in preferential order). In this way, then, Adult Transition Theory was generally validated as a useful theoretical framework for this study.

Institutional Communications

Participants commented to a very high level that receiving communication from the campus registrar or from their own academic college was a key trigger in raising awareness about the final year transition (the Situation). Completing paperwork for graduation, attending department meetings for graduating seniors, participating in various institutional assessments, and ordering academic regalia were named as archetypal events. One student noted that a close friend received a reminder to pre-register for next semester, and he felt

somewhat left out, as if he was being "forgotten already". Another student noted that she was receiving notices from the Alumni office, and felt that this was "pushy" and premature. Also of note was the reflection from a participant who was anxious about not receiving expected confirmation that she really was approved for graduation. It seems that being a part of an educational system, a mechanism, for four or five years trained these students to rely on institutional messages to confirm for them their status, and their realities. When the messages took on a tone of leave-making, of closure and ending, the sense of transition became much more apparent and immediate. This heightened the impact of the Situation and making it take on more psychological space, or context impact, for the students. In transition theory, one component of transition is how time is used to mark ends and beginnings. Clearly, completing paperwork which officially marks the end of the college years amplifies the sense of time ending. Certain ritual markers, also elemental to the concept of transition, are at play, such at academic regalia and practice for commencement. Thus, messages *from the institution itself* reinforced the sense of transition, from the standpoints of time and ritual.

Post-college Achievement Activities

All but one participant, who had already located an entry level position, was actively involved in a job search, and concerned about corresponding issues, such as relocation, learning how to budget money, understanding employment benefits, etc. In addition, some students reflected that they were spending a great deal less time on academic enterprises than on activities related to a job search. No participants were seeking graduate school, although one indicated that if the job search proved unsuccessful, graduate school would be an option. A strongly recurrent theme among all participants was the commitment to establish independence away from parents. Returning home was an anathema to many students,

feeling that to do so would mark them as failures and that their college experience, and earned degree, was wasted. Again, referring back to definitional elements of transition, changes in world-view (perception) is at play here. Determining new priorities (job search over homework) demonstrates a fundamental shift in perception. Further, recognizing the need to enter the world as an independent and self-reliant person shows a strong shift in perception.

Changing Personal Relationships

The third set of archetypal markers or events was identified as behaviors which significantly altered personal relationships. Participants reported an awareness of diminished time spent with friends, and a sense of finality approaching. Several students reflected that close friendships were taking on a tone of goodbye; there were fewer efforts to get together to socialize, and when they did, conversation sometimes focused on remembrances. A few participants noted that when among friends who were not graduating this year, they felt a detachment from their friends' conversations about course selection, lease negotiation, etc. One student remarked that he realized he wasn't expecting to spend time with his friends any more, "as if I've already left and moved on, knowing I won't see them unless I make a real effort to." All of these activities and reflections strongly align with transitional elements of perception, and sense of creating leave-taking rituals.

Romantic relationships also changed, and in two instances, were terminated. Decisions about intimate friends were weighted heavily with regret and confusion. One participant felt torn between sustaining the relationship and choosing a career path, believing that the two were not compatible outcomes. For young adults, the deeply interpersonal relationships with a boy- or girlfriend worked to define their sense of adulthood; to terminate

these relationships to pursue career paths was a difficult choice. A female participant expressed it thusly:

> I worked hard for my degree, and while I love my boyfriend, I'm not moving to where he is just to stay together. I want what I went to school for, and that's not where he is. So, I'll break it off with him, soon.

Such relationship changes can be substantial elements to transition. Although this particular archetypal experience does not have clear connection to any conventional definitional element of transition, it does align with efforts to the Self and with Support, as components of the 4-S System. Regarding the Self, changing important personal relationships inevitably alters one's sense of self. For example, to move from another's intimate/lover to the status of "ex" requires adjustments to self identity. Some interpersonal scholars (Adler, Towne & Proctor, 2006) suggest that the termination of an intimate or romantic relationship is akin to experiencing grief after the death of a cherished other. Choosing to change important personal relationships also involves the Support structures. If the choice is to sustain or deepen the relationship, the Support is maintained. If, however, the choice is to terminate, the Support provided by that important relational partner is removed, thereby introducing another transition which requires assimilation.

In sum, the first research question of this study tried to identify what archetypal experiences were involved in the final year of undergraduate study as experienced by first-generation students. The results suggest three answers: receiving institutional communications which heightened awareness to the transition, engaging in independence-driven activities to facilitate full adulthood, and altering personal relationships. These events correspond with varying elements of transition definitions and with certain aspects of the 4-S

System. Unfortunately, most of these archetypal experiences were not identified as unique to first-generation students. It seems that these 'marking' events are not special or distinct for first-generation students; they are universally shared, regardless of generational status. The participants themselves were clear on this point: their own sense of impending transition was not markedly different from that of their legacy peers with one possible exception: the urgency with which they (first-generation) felt mandated to establish an independent life away from their parents. This alone stood as a clear archetype marker unique to first-generation students.

Research Question Two: Making Meaning

The second research question of this study asked: What, if any, mechanisms (personal and institutional) do first-generation college seniors use to make meaning and create understanding of this experience? Making meaning and creating understanding of an experience is essentially the point of reflective phenomenology. This study tried to identify how college seniors who are first-generation status make sense of the transition during their final year of college. Chapter four of this dissertation presents a detailed discussion of general themes extracted from the data gathered in interviews. This chapter section will focus on selected refinements of those themes which have the most direct application to the research question, and include (1) closure behaviors, (2) acknowledging emotions, (3) changing self label or identity, and (4) assuming a leadership role in the family.

Closure Behaviors

Students reported they gained greater understanding of their transitional experiences by taking closure behaviors. Students were very aware of certain activities related to 'the end of college'. Resisting parental requests and invitations to return home were tantamount.

Actively seeking employment was the single most obvious closure behavior (although it could be argued that this action reflects a new beginning rather than an end). In addition, arranging closure events, such as graduation parties, or holding yard sales to jettison belongings, also reinforced the sense of closure of the college experience. All students expressed a need to act in ways that reinforced their career goals; that is, to find a job, be a self-reliant adult, and live their chosen lives. In some sense, these actions became something of rituals, and they also relate to coping Strategies from the 4-S System.

Acknowledging Emotions

Acknowledging the emotional turmoil of the transition is essential to making meaning of it. Sensing and thinking about mixed emotions, such as worry, anxiety, eagerness, pride, anticipation, happiness and nostalgia, help define and clarify the transition. Articulating emotions during the interviews helped some students more concretely identify this transitional period. As one student noted: "Until I talked with you I didn't really realize that I was feeling this. This sense of sadness at leaving, but also excitement of what's coming next." This aspect of meaning making was not initially realized by participants, but gradually presented itself. This is typical of transitional experiences, where a distancing and perspective is sometimes required before full understanding occurs.

Creating New Self-labels and Identities

Revised self-labels were also central to making meaning and understanding the transitions. Achieving new status (from student to employee, for example), provided a way of understanding themselves under a new label: graduate. Thinking of themselves as new professionals, as alumni, as independent entities gave them a new dimension to their self concepts.

The importance of being first-generation was quite fluid with these participants, with some claiming they felt greater pride *because* of this status, while others feeling they had shed that label and that it had little resonance now. All participants remarked that the label of student was no longer a strong part of their sense of self. How they understood who they were now, and who they were preparing themselves to be, was a significant discussion point. Many students commented on how they had changed intellectually and attitudinally. These changes were made meaningful particularly when they considered how different they were from their family and peers "back home".

Family Leadership

Because this study focused on issues related to first-generation status, it is particularly illuminating to discuss the weight of pride on meaning making. With the exception of one participant, every student expressed a strong sense of pride in being first in their families to graduate, and readily accepted the identity of being a role model for others in their families, immediate and extended. The sense of becoming a leader, an inspiration, a helper, to family members was strongly apparent as participants talked about the impact of being a college graduate. They understood, very clearly and in deeply personal ways, the importance of being a change-maker in their families. Two students talked at length about a sense of obligation to 'show the way' for their younger relatives, and to encourage others in the family to improve themselves through education. This reflected a sense of making meaning of the entire college experience, and how the transition from student to role model carries with it some leadership obligations.

Interestingly, participants felt that they had not fully considered the importance nor the impact of their senior year of college as first-generation students until they interviewed

with the researcher. The conversations provided them with a venue to sort through, identify, reflect and frame their experiences in a way that they had not previously experienced. One student, during a follow up phone conversation stated,

> I had no clue about all this going on inside me. I was just trying to finish classes and find a job. But I think now that this last year, and especially this last semester, may be the biggest part of who I am now. So, thanks for helping me sort it out.

In sum, the second research question of this dissertation asked how first-generation college seniors make meaning and understand the transition of their final year of college. What was discovered was this: closure behaviors, acknowledging emotions, revision of self identity, and assuming a leadership role in the family add nuance and depth to their transitional experience. Unlike legacy peers, first-generation seniors suggested that they more acutely feel the end of college and the beginning of the next phase of their lives. They are very clear about the demarcation from college life to adulthood. These students reflect more mindfully about the changes they have experienced, and their new self concepts as a result of college. They acknowledge the mixed emotions and welcome the confusion as just another part of the experience. And finally, because they have taken a different path from any one in their families, they recognize their responsibilities to set a new standard, to live up to the expectations, to honor the sacrifices made by family members, and to not waste their education. For first-generation students, at least ones affiliated with this study, the meaning they derived from their final year of college came from embracing the changes—emotional, intellectual, attitudinal, and behavioral—wrought by a college education.

Methodological Cautions and Problems

As with any research endeavor, much is learned in the process of inquiry, as well as the results discovered. There are weaknesses in this study, and must be acknowledged as a caution to other researchers.

First, and probably foremost, the number of participants in this study is low. Despite the researcher's best efforts to recruit student participants which met the parameters of the subject, only six actively engaged in this project. The planned methodology was to conduct several focus groups, and use follow up individual interviews to strengthen the credibility of the data. Unfortunately, an insufficient number of respondents to recruiting emails forced a change in methodology. Rather than conduct focus groups, individual or dyadic interviews were conducted with each qualified respondent. In addition, subsequent phone calls and email correspondence served to gather additional information and to probe responses which were previously vague or unclear. The deficiency in this adapted methodology is that the organic synergy of conversation, which occurs in focus groups, was missing. For this study, it proved impossible to identify other areas of untapped transitional awareness and management. Focus group discussion may very well have yielded unexpected topics; topics which would likely have invited further discussion or opened up new lines of conversation. As it is, the data generated from these individual and dyadic interviews is rich and textured, but is limited by the small number of conversational participants immediate in the moment of inquiry.

Alternatively, the fact that the researcher was able to, and did, conduct significant subsequent communication with each participant suggests that the data collected was possibly richer, denser and more evocative than what might have been captured in focus

groups. In essence, what was lost in breadth of topical range may have been gained in depth through subject-interviewer contact. Despite the limitations inherent with only a few participants, the scope of the themes which were teased from the data provides ample encouragement to continue in this vein of inquiry.

The design of this study imposed restrictions on what participants 'naturally' moved toward discussing. Many times, students reflected on the totality of their college experience as a four-year transition, rather than staying focused on only their senior year experience. The researcher repeatedly had to refocus participant responses to questions to stay on topic. This was not difficult, but it did highlight the need for vigilance in interviewing and hyper-aware listening skills.

General Implications and Interpretations

This study explored how first-generation college seniors perceived and managed the transition of graduating from college. The literature on first-generation students provided important context for this study, and it is interesting to note how participants in this study reinforced and also contradicted what is known about this population. It is important to remember that the small number of participants in this study necessarily means that no findings should be extrapolated generally.

First-generation students share certain traits, demographic profiles, and propensities which make them distinct from legacy students. Chapter two of this dissertation presented a full treatment of this. The participants reinforced some of the 'conventional wisdom' in that they attended college to pursue a true career path, and the educational growth was secondary. Interestingly, when asked to reflect on this, a few students admitted that their academic and intellectual growth was as satisfying as knowing they could get a good job. As with other

first-generation students, these respondents did not indicate a desire or expectation to pursue graduate study, thereby possibly limiting their career options in favor of immediate career entry. Like other first-generation students, they did not actively seek assistance or support from institutional sources, preferring to rely on their own capabilities to "figure it out". The self-reliance ethos, common and highly valued among blue collar families, restricted the students' likelihood to seek help. Also in accord with the literature, these participants did not engage in traditional campus activities as much as did their legacy peers, choosing instead to be more selective about the clubs and organizations they joined, opting to live off campus or with family, and working to pay for school. Only one student reported she got very involved during her first year, "because they said I should" (referring to orientation personnel) but by her junior year had dropped out of most organizations to focus on finding internships to serve during semester breaks.

These participants contradicted the first-generation literature in some very interesting ways. These students did not engage in 'limbo' or in the 'crisis of imagination' (Wood, 2004) that afflicts many seniors prior to graduation. For these individuals, they felt an urgency to re-prioritize how they spent their time, shifting energies from academics to job hunts. Most expressed an impatience to be finished. There was no inertia with these students. They were also very aware that while grades were important for graduate school applications, they understood that for their purposes—career—gaining leadership experience was far more crucial. They were quite clear about the contradictory messages: faculty tell them that high grades equal success, but there own experiences tell them that real world performance is what matters.

One of the great surprises and pleasures of this study was the realization that, at least for these participants, a college education still matters. They consistently expressed deep pride and sense of achievement. They were optimistic about their futures, believing that their college degree would prepare them for a better life than what their parents have. They have no illusions about how challenging it will be, coming from blue-collar backgrounds, they are aware they will have to work hard to get what they want. Most of them held jobs while in college to pay for textbooks, rent, tuition and entertainment. Two of them had full time jobs while attending school full time: they are masters of time management. They all had a purpose when they started college: they wanted to give themselves more options than what they saw their parents having. Going to college was a choice for them, not a family norm. They were deeply cognizant of the opportunity in front of them when they started and they remain highly aware of the expectations to "make it matter."

This researcher was also impressed by the maturity with which these students—young adults—approached ways to manage stress. Unlike the conventional and perhaps stereotypical college senior, these students did not engage is reckless and excessive party behaviors as a stress reduction strategy. While they did acknowledge previous over-indulgences as underclassmen, as seniors they have, for the most part, recognized that excessive drinking or taking drugs does not mitigate the stress of the senior year. They have all developed strongly positive and effective stress adaptors.

An additional aspect this study revealed was how appreciative first-generation seniors were to their families. Every single participant in this study recognized, repeatedly, the sacrifices family members made for them. Every single participant reflected deep gratitude and assumed a strong willingness to find a way to help another family member go to college.

It was truly inspirational to hear these students talk about the respect and affection they held for parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents who helped them in the college quest. We hear a great deal about how self absorbed and self indulgent the 'millennial' generation is; and to a very large extent, much of those accusations are undoubtedly true. The increase in so-called helicopter parents, the advent of more and more personalized and 'spa'-like campus environments, the efforts of campuses nationwide to cater to the whims of contemporary students all attest to the narcissism of college students. But for this study, for this researcher, the students in this study proved to be the exception. They are other-focused, they are grateful and they are ready to give back.

In addition to the essential thrust of this study—to explore the transitional experience of first-generation college seniors—a tangential aim was to identify what colleges and universities could do to enhance the senior year experience for this population. Participants indicated they would like detailed information about personal money management, relocation, understanding employment benefits, and basic professional etiquette. As seniors, they recognized that they had ignored much of their first-year orientation information. They were unapologetic about this, but recognized now, as seniors, that they should have at least kept the materials they received during those first few weeks of college. Except for one student, they all felt uncertain about where to go for information about these subjects. All of them would welcome special workshops and seminars offered just for seniors to help with transitioning out of college. Senior-year capstone courses helped somewhat but tended to be discipline specific. These students, recognizing that their parents couldn't help them with some things, were hungry for their college to provide important post-college information.

Still, their independence and self-reliance gave them the attitudinal disposition to hunt out important helpers.

This leads to a discussion about how universities could address the need to establish recognizable institutional helpers. Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory is very explicit on the necessity of having well prepared helpers to assist those going through transition. The students in this study provide qualitative evidence that college seniors, particularly first-generation seniors, need skilled helpers and focused opportunities to equip themselves to move out toward their new lives. Unlike the First-Year Experience which has spawned the creation of positions of first-year advisor, dean of first year students, first-year activities coordinators, first-year residence halls and assistants and generated special pedagogical training for faculty of first-year students, college senior have severely limited institutionalized 'helpers'. It is not unreasonable to envision comparable senior-year positions and services: senior-year advisor, dean of seniors, senior-year activities coordinators, senior year housing options, and coursework that presents real world challenges. Many of these functions could be provided by existing entities on campus, such as career services office, residence life, and student activities. Still, without partnership from academic faculty willing to expand the academic content of senior-year coursework, the 'helping' function resides with student affairs practitioners, many of whom students never recognize or come to know in the course of their college careers. As one student said: "There's probably someone on campus, like in student affairs, who can help me with all this, but I don't know where to go. I just know my faculty."

Interestingly, a few students reported that as a result of the interviews for this study, they felt they had 'worked through' some issues that were troubling them. It seems that

simply talking with an informed other who is sensitive to the needs of first-generation college seniors provided them with a psychosocial 'space' to ask questions and get answers. The act of interviewing and participating in the discussion helped them look at their transitions differently. They gained perspective and some distance to look at themselves; they had time to acknowledge the challenges and changes, appraise themselves and their abilities to get through it, identify resources and support, and adjust their approaches. All this for just a handful of students. Imagine what could be done on a large scale.

The results of this study suggest several opportunities for further inquiry. First, it would be useful to replicate this study (inasmuch as a qualitative effort can be replicated) with a larger population of participants. Second, the gender composition of the participants was 4:2 female to male. It begs the question of how gender may affect perception and expression of transition. Third, the interview method, while yielding deep and rich data, is somewhat artificial. Asking participants to journal, or blog for the digital natives, might yield more organic and authentic data. Fourth, the age of the participants reflected traditional senior year of 21 to 23. An older population might produce an entirely different expressed phenomenon, owing to a more mature outlook and greater life experience. Fifth, the population was selected from a public, state-supported institution. It would be intriguing to investigate how first-generation college seniors at private institutions mirror or differ. Sixth, it would be interesting to conduct a comparison study between first-generation and legacy senior-level students to identify any substantial differences in experience between these two groups. Finally, this study did not approach the perceptions of transition as viewed and felt by the parents of first-generation college seniors. This would be an important and interesting avenue of research on the effect of college on not only the student but also on the family.

Conclusion

This dissertation began with a discussion of higher education in America: from it's first purposes, to how it has changed and responded to various social pressures. The American college is no longer a 'simple' bastion of higher learning, but also now embraces a business model, relying on the good will, and the good donations, of its alumni. The importance of fostering strong relationships with students—at all levels, from first year through the senior year—was presented as crucial to honoring the access mission of modern American higher education, and to generating fiscal health. Issues of retention loom large, and with increasing intra-industry competition from online universities, the point was made that developing beneficial relationships with college seniors is a logical step in nurturing supportive alumni.

This dissertation then presented a review of the literature on first-year students, first-generation students, and on senior-year experiences. Certain points were made relevant to this study, chiefly that universities spend significant resources on support for first-year students, and first-generation, but comparatively little effort is expended on seniors. What effort is expended is focused on capstone coursework within academic disciplines, with few systemic institutionalized efforts to assist seniors as they transition away from college. It was further noted that almost nothing exists in the literature related to seniors who are first-generation, a status which may compound the experience of the final year of college. Taken with the importance of fostering strong relationships with 'rising alumni', and the gap in the literature, a case was made justifying this study.

The theoretical framework began with a discussion of the construct of transition, and relied on a variety of perspectives, chief among these the field of adult development theory.

Transition was defined using time, ritual, perspective and identity. It was viewed as a universally human experience, yet individually experienced and managed. As college seniors themselves are immersed in a transition, this conceptual discussion was relevant.

The theoretical framework continued with the adoption of Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory (ATT), first presented in 1984 and revised in 2006. Schlossberg's work originally focused on adults in life-transition of traumatic consequence (i.e. losing employment, divorce, death of a spouse), but proved to be applicable to the senior college year transition. Two phases of transition management exist in ATT: first, transition must be approached, identified, and psychologically 'framed' according to context and impact. The second phase details the 4-S System, a mechanism which should be used to help persons in transition. The 4-S System was used as an organizing tool to develop the interview protocol for this study.

It is the opinion of this researcher that this study illuminated some key findings regarding how first-generation college seniors experience their final year of college as a transition. Certain themes emerged, which I believe are quintessential to the first-generation college senior:

- They are fiercely independent in claiming their own adulthood away from parents;
- They are highly resistant to 'wasting' their degree, and the time, effort and money that was devoted by themselves and their families in its pursuit;
- They are proud to assume a leadership role for their younger siblings, and willingly accept their status as role model;

- They have developed very effective coping skills (adaptive, not palliative) contrasted to the stereotypical 'college senior' who is burnt out and indulges in excessive party behavior.
- They are eager for specialized help, but are unwilling to ask for it.

Early in this dissertation, a claim was made that colleges and universities must pay attention to their senior-level students, and to those who are first-generation. The college senior is an important, but grossly undervalued, member of American higher education. There is substantial literature addressing the senior year of college, but the research is limited by focusing primarily on career concerns of college seniors. There is more happening during the senior year, and their transitional experience is a good deal more complex than managing a successful job hunt. The senior year is the final year to build strong positive affinity between a student and the college, and the last opportunity to help students develop important life success skills. As emerging alumni, they represent a new definition of retention. Colleges, if for no other reason than financial, should turn attention to developing ways to sustain institutional affinity during the senior year and beyond.

For the college senior who is first-generation, the final year of college is particularly nuanced, as this dissertation has discovered. With caution, the researcher argues that the students in this study demonstrate a truly unique opportunity for higher education administrators and leaders to develop interventions for first-generation students on the cusp of graduation. The participants in this study were very clear in what they wanted, and rightfully expected, from their university: workshops developed precisely for them as first-generation students; academic advisors who are trained to work with this population; publications made available during the senior year (not at a long-forgotten first year

orientation). These are not unreasonable requests, and if by honoring them, colleges improve the entire senior year experience, the result is win-win for all. American higher education has transformed itself from catering to the privileged to welcoming all. Enormous success has been realized by helping first-year and first-generation students adjust *to* college, but efforts on the senior year are, in a word, pitiful. The assumption is that four years of structured education is adequate toward mitigating personal, psychosocial, and emotional transitions for young adults. They aren't. Capstone courses don't go far enough beyond academic disciplines to be useful in managing real-life transitions. A few resume-writing workshops don't answer all the career-related questions being asked by first-generation seniors. Faculty, most of whom are not first-generation themselves, must recognize and adjust pedagogy to accommodate these students. Student affair professionals need to develop programming matched directly to the developmental stage of the students, rather than based on theme or topic. Specifically, career services and faculty need to identify ways to bring the knowledge and help provided by career services into the classroom environment. Counseling center staff should consider adopting the 4-S System in their therapeutic protocols. Academic services staff, including advisors, need to adjust the ways they 'advise' first-generation students, recognizing that these students don't assimilate to campus the same way legacy students do, and therefore have different advising needs. There is so much more we can, and should, do for these students.

American higher education is still the finest system in the world, and yet we are not meeting our full obligation to students. First-generation seniors are not like other seniors, and just as with their first year at college, they need—and deserve—more help if they are to succeed in reaching the goals and dreams we've helped them create. As a society, and as an

industry, we teach students to think and dream bigger than their current situation. For first-generation students, we owe them more, from their first year of college and all the way through their senior year.

References

Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2007). *College learning for the new global century: A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise.* Washington, DC: AACU.

(2002-3). Retrieved May 28, 2007, from ACT Research: www.act.org

Adler, R. B., Towne, N., and Proctor, R.F. (2006). *Looking out, looking in* (12th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.

Astin, A. W. (1997). *The American freshman: Thirty year trends.* Los Angeles: Higher Education Information Studies, University of California.

Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel, 25*, 297-308.

Astin, A. W. (1993). *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Ayala, C. and Striplen, A. (2002). *A career introduction model for first-generation college freshmen students*. Thriving in Challenging and Uncertain Times, ed. Garry R. Walz, Richard Knowdell, and Chris Kirkman, 57-62. Greensboro, NC: ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED469996)

Baade, R. A. (1993, September). Identifying the factors that stimulate alumni giving. *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* pp. B1-3.

Barefoot, B. (2002). *Second national survey of first-year academic practices, 2002.* Brevard: Policy Center on the First Year of College.

Barnett, R. C., Gareis, K. C., James, J. B., & Steel, J. (2003). Planning ahead: College seniors' concerns about career-marriage conflict. *Vocational Behavior, 62*(2), 305-319.

Beebe, S. A and Masterson, J. T. (2008). *Communication in small groups: Principles and practices.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Bridges, W. (2004). *Transitions: Making sense of life's changes.* Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.

Brown S., & Lent, R. (2000). *Handbook of counseling psychology.* New York: Wiley.

Bui, V. T. (2002, March). First-generation college students at a four-year university: background characteristics, reasons for pursuing higher education, and first-year experiences. *College Student Journal, 36*(1), p3-11.

Chen, X., & Carroll, C. D. (2005). *First-generation students in post-secondary education: A look at their college transcripts.* U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Educational Statistics.

Choy, S. P. (2001). *Students whose parents did not go to college: Postsecondary access, persistence and attainment.* Retrieved October 27, 2007, from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/2001126.pdf

Cooper, D. L. (1994). Student development through involvement: Specific changes over time. *Journal of College Student Development, 35*, 98-102.

Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions.* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Dahlgren, M. A., Hult, H., Dahlgran, L. O., af Segerstad, H. H., & Johansson, K. (2006). From senior student to novice worker: learning trajectories in political science,

psychology and mechanical engineering. *Studies in Higher Education*, *31*(5), 569-586.

De Rodriquez, V. D. (2007). The senior year experience at Texas A&M University: Graduating seniors make meaning of their undergraduate education. *Dissertation Abstracts* (AAT 3296361).

Delong, A. W. (2003). *Parents of first-generation college students: Their perceptions on the importance of college.* Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University. (AAT 3119228).

Eckel, P. (1994). Building community in the freshman and senior year experiences: Completing the cycle of student-institution involvement. *International Conference on the First Year Experience* (pp. 1-17). Dublin: Senior Year Experience Project.

Erikson, E. H. (1963). *Childhood and society* (2nd ed.). New York: Norton.

Fenzel, L. M. (2001). *Predictors of the adjustment of first-year students to college: The role of early involvement and type of residence.* Conference paper, American Educational Research Association.

Filkins, J. W., & Doyle, S. K. (2006). First generation and low income students: Using the NSSE data to study effective educational practices and students. *Annual Forum for the Association for Institutional Research* (p. 28). ERIC Education Document Reproduction Service No. ED 473113).

First-generation students in postsecondary education: A look at their college transcripts. (2005). US Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Educational Statistics.

Friedman, T. (2006). *The world is flat.* New York: Picador.

Gardner, J. N. (1999, April). The Senior Year Experience. *About Campus*, pp. 5-11.

Gardner, J. N. (1998). *The Senior year experience: Facilitating integration, reflection, closure and transition.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Geiger, R. L. (2005). The ten generations of American higher education. In P. G. Altbach, *American higher education in the twenty-first century: Social, political and economic challenges* (2nd ed., pp. 38-70). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Gibbons, M. &. Shoffner, M. (2004). Prospective first-generation college students: Meeting their needs through social cognitive career theory. *Professional School Counseling, 8*(1), 91-97.

Goodman, J., Schlossberg, N. K., & Anderson, M. L. (2006). *Counseling Adults in Transition* (3rd ed.). New York: Springer Publishing Company, Inc.

Harvey, J. &. Immewahr, J. (1995). *Goodwill and growing worry: Public perceptions of American higher education.* Washington, DC: American Council on Education.

Heifetz, R., & Linsky, M. (1994). *Leadership without easy answers.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Hightower, D. R. (2007). *Toward creating anomalies: Examining institutional factors that cultivate educational resilience among low-income, first-generation students.* Ed. D. dissertation, University of South Carolina. (AAT 3272454).

Howard, A. (1986). College experiences and managerial performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 71*, 530-52.

Hsaio, K. P. (1992). *First-generation college students.* (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 351079).

Hudson, F. M. (1999). *The adult years: Mastering the art of self renewal.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hyers, A., & Joslin, M. (1998). The first-year seminar as a predictor of academic achievement and persistence. *Journal of the Freshman Year Experience and Students in Transition, 10,* 7-30.

Janis, I. L. (1965). The problem of validating content analysis. In H. D. Lasswell, *Language of politics* (pp. 55-82). Cambridge: MIT Press.

Kitas, C. (2009). *Report of entering student demographic profile.* Indiana University of Pennsylvania: Institutional Research, Planning and Assessment.

Krippendorf, K. (2004). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Kuh, G. D. (1995). The other curriculum: Out of class experiences associated with student learning and personal development. *The Journal of Higher Education, 66*(2), 123-155.

Kuh, G. (1996). Guiding principles for creating seamless learning environments for undergraduates. *Journal of College Student Development, 37*(2), 135-148.

Lambert, S. E. (1999). *An examination of the socioemotional impact of the resume on graduating seniors.* Ed.D. dissertation, University of Sarasota. (AAT 9946075).

Lazarus, R.S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping.* New York: Springer Publishing Company.

Lemme, B. (2006). *Development in adulthood* (4th ed.). New York: Pearson Education, Inc.

Lenning, O. T., & Ebberts , L. H. (1999). *The powerful potential of learning communities: Improving education for the future.* ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 428606).

Levine, L.J, & Bluck, S. (2004). Painting with broad strokes: Happiness and the malleability of event memory. *Cognition and Emotion, 18*(4), 559-574.

Levine, A., & Cureton, J. S. (1998). *When hope and fear collide: A portrait of today's college student.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Levinson, D. J. (1986). A conception of adult development. *American Psychologist, 41*, 3-13.

Lipman-Blumen, J., & Levitt, H. J. (1976). Vicarious and direct achievement patterns in adulthood. *Counseling Psychologist, 6*(1), 26-32.

Lundberg, C. S. (2007). First-generation status and student race/ethnicity as distinct predictors of student involvement and learning. *NASPA Journal, 44*(1), 57-83.

Maltzan, T. L. (2006). *Rurality and higher education: Implications for identity and persistence.* Ph.D dissertation, The Ohio State University. (AAT 3230872).

May, T. (2002). *Qualitative research design.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

McCoy, B. (2003). *The senior year: A study of transitions, liminality and students' perspectives of their final year as undergraduates.* Dissertation Abstracts International. (AAT 3078708).

Merton, R. K. (1987). Focussed [*sic*] interviews and focus groups: Continuities and discontinuities. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 51,* 550-566.

Meyers, J.L., La Voy, S.A., Shipley, D., and Mainella, F. (2000). *Exploring the UM senior experience through academics, diversity and transition.* University of Maryland.

Moltz, D. (2009, April 30). *Adapting performance-based funding*. Retrieved April 30, 2009 from www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/04/30/ohio.

Montmarquette, C. C. (2002). How do young people choose college majors? *Economics of Education Review, 21*(6), 543-556.

Moos, R. H., & Tsu, V. (1976). Human competence and coping: An overview. In R. Moos, & R. H. Moose (Eds.), *Human adaptation: Coping with life crises.* Lexington MA: Heath.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

NACE. (2007, November). *JobOutlook.* Retrieved March 22, 2008, from Job Outlook 2008: http://www.naceweb.org/pubs/JobOutlook/2008/JO8.pdf

National Resource Center for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. Retrieved November 30, 2008. http://www.sc.edu/fye/resources/soph/index.html

Noel-Levitz. (2006). *2006 National freshmen attitudes report.* Iowa City: Noel-Levitz Retention Management Systems.

Noldon, D. F. (2000). The best and worst: College seniors' experiences with academics and services. *Journal of the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 12*(2), 89-106.

Nunez, A. M., & Cuccaro-Alamin, S. (1998). *First generation students: Undergraduates whose parents never enrolled in postsecondary education.* U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Educational Statistics.

Pascarella, E.T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1991). *How college affects students.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods.* Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Pike, G. K. (2002). The relationship between insitutional mission, and students' involvement and educational outcomes. *Annual Forum for the Association for Institution Research.* Toronto.

Pistilli, M. D., Taub, D. J., & Bennett, D. E. (2003). Development of the Senior Concerns Survey. *Journal of The First Year Experience and Students in Transition, 15*(1), 39-52.

Ridgwell, D. M. (2002). *Perceived impact of institutional cultures on advanced degree aspirations of students attending two southern women's colleges.* Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. (AAT 3061273).

Rios, T. R. (2001). *Successful first-generation college students at Indiana State University.* Indiana State University.

Sagen, H. B. (1990). Structural discontinuities in the transition from college to work. *ASHE Annual Meeting*, (pp. 4-35). Portland OR.

Saginak, M. A. (1998). *College seniors and their final year experience: Perceptions and emotions of transition.* Idaho State University, Department of Counseling. Ann Arbor: UMI. (AAT 9831981).

Schilling, K. L., & Schilling, K. M. (1998). Looking back, moving ahead: Assessment in the senior year. In J. N. Gardner, *The senior year experience: Facilitating integration, reflection, closure, and transition* (pp. 245-265). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Schlossberg, N. K. (1984). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory.* New York: Springer Publishing Company.

Siegal, H. J. (1990). *A descriptive study of culminating programs for undergraduate college seniors.* Columbia University Teachers College. (AAT 9113487).

Smith, B. L. (2001, Summer/Fall). The challenge of learning communities as a growing national movement. *AAC&U Peer Review, 4*(1).

Stewart, D. W., Shamdasai, P. N., & Rook, D. W. (2007). *Focus groups: Theory and practice.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Striplin, J. (1999). *Facilitiating transfer for first-generation community college students.* ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 430627).

Survey of first year seminars. (2006). Retrieved November 19, 2007, from National Resource Center for First Year Experience and Students in Transition: www.sc.edu/fye/publications.indices.html

Takeda, M. W. (2005). Anxiety and career action: The impact of contextual factors on graduating college seniors. *NACE Journal, 65*(2), 37-43.

Taub, D. J., & Servaty-Sieb, H. L. (2006). On the brink of transition: The concerns of college seniors. *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition, 18*(2), 111-132.

Thayer, P. B. (2000). *Retention of students from first generation and low income backgrounds.* Opportunity Outlook.

Tinto, V. (1995). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research, 45*(1), 89-125.

Tym, C., McMillion, R., Barone, S., & Webster, J. (2005). *First-generation college students: A literature review.* Research and Analytical Services. Round Rock: Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corp.

United State Department of Education. (n.d.) *History of the federal TRIO programs.* Retrieved May 13, 2009, from http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/triohistory.html

Upcraft M. L., Gardner, J. N. & Barefoot, B. O. (Eds.). (2005). *Challenging and supporting the first-year student: A handbook for improving the first year of college.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Upcraft, M. L., Gardner, J. N., & Associates. (1989). *The freshmen year experience.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Van Manen, M. (1997). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy* (2nd ed.). London, ON: The Althouse Press.

Vianden, J. (2006). *"I don't need any help": What first year college men say about interacting with faculty outside of the classroom.* Ed.D dissertation, Indiana University. (AAT 3239659).

Vickio, C. J. (1990). The good-bye brochure: Helping students to cope with transition and loss. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 68*(5), 575-577.

Walsh, J. (2000). *Unique and effective practices for TRIO student support services programs.* Kankakee, IL: Educational Document Reproductive Service.

Whitbourne, S. K., & Tesch, S. A. (1985). A comparison of identity and intimacy statuses in college students and alumni. *Developmental Psychology, 21*(6), 1039-1044.

Wood, F. B. (2004). Preventing postparchment depression: A model of career counseling for college seniors. *Journal of Employment Counseling, 41*, 71-79.

Zhang, Y., & Chan, T. (2007). *An interim report on the student support services program.* Washington, DC: US Department of Education.

Zhao, C.M., & Kuh, G. D. (2004). Adding value: Learning communities and student engagement. *Research in Higher Education, 45*(2), 115-137.

Appendix A: Recruiting Email text and questionnaire

IUP Senior:

Congratulations! You are approaching the end of your college experience and are just a short while away from graduation. This is an exciting time for you. You are probably experiencing many different things and have concerns about what steps to take next.

I am a doctoral student here at IUP and my dissertation is a study of how you reflect on and feel about moving out of college and into the "real world". I would like to know more about what's happening with you as you prepare to graduate.

With this email I am inviting you to participate in my study to identify how well you are transitioning. If you choose to participate, you will be included in a random drawing to win your choice of a gift certificate of **$50.00** toward ITunes or Amazon.com purchases. There is no risk to you for participating, and you may find that the experience is helpful to you as you prepare to graduate.

If you would like to volunteer, please complete the questionnaire below and return it via email to overton@alfred.edu. Deadline to respond is XXXX, XX, 20XX. If you have questions, please feel free to contact me directly at 814-598-8430.

Thank you,

Julia Overton-Healy

IUP doctoral candidate, ALS program

~~~~~~

Name _____

Current address _____

Phone _____

Academic major _____

Age at time of graduation _____

Are you are 'first generation' student (neither parent has earned a four-year college degree)?

Yes _____ No _____
~~~~~~

Appendix B: Script for Opening the Interview

Thank you for being here. My name is Julia Overton-Healy, and I am collecting information for my dissertation on first-generation college seniors. We will define 'first-generation' as being a student for whom neither parent graduated from a four-year college. That's one thing all of you have in common with each other.

Today we will discuss a situation that affects you: preparing to graduate, and what that feels like for you. College has been a very large part of your life for the past few years, and you are in midst of leaving while at the same time moving on to the next phase of your life. As first-generation students, this can be a confusing, frustrating, exciting and happy time all at once. I'm trying to find out more about how this transition is uniquely experienced by first-generation college seniors.

Before we start, you should know that this meeting is being audio recorded so that I can refer back to your discussion when I write my report. The note taker is here to help me keep track of the sequencing of conversation. Let me assure you, however, that what you say in this group setting will be used only to study how being a first-generation college senior preparing to graduate feels for you. Any direct quotes I might use will be attributed to a fake name. Your identity is protected. If anyone is uncomfortable with being recorded please say so and you may leave. Please speak up, and speak freely. Don't worry about what I or anyone else may be thinking or feeling. Speak honestly about what your experience is and has been during your final year here. We are here to exchange opinions, experiences and feelings about this phase in your college life. I will moderate the conversational flow if I need to ensure equal participation from everyone. I would ask that you practice courtesy, and avoid interrupting each other. I expect we'll be here for about 90 minutes.

I have a consent form I need to distribute. Please take a few moments and read it carefully. {*distribute Consent Forms*}.

Before we begin our discussion today, it will be helpful to get acquainted with each other. Let's begin with some introductory comments about ourselves. Let's go around the room, state your first name, and offer some information about yourself such as a hobby, a favorite vacation spot, or something about how you spend your free time. {*Select one group member to begin*}. Could you being the introductions, please?

{*After introductions*}. Let's begin with a first question: {*refer to prompt protocol sheet*}

Appendix C: Focus Group/Personal Interview Prompts Protocol using the 4-S System

Situation:
1. As seniors who are also first-generation (meaning neither parent graduated from college with a four-year degree), and as you prepare to graduate within the next few months, what specific events are occurring that make this a time of transition for you?
2. Do you feel that you are on target, with your life-plan? Is this, as a first-generation student, where you expected to be?
3. Do you feel there is a contradiction between the emphasis on earning good grades and what employers seem to emphasize in skills and abilities?
4. How does this time feel to you? Does being first-generation make this situation more difficult for you? More exciting?
5. Think back to your first year and orientation, when you received a lot of information for how to enter and succeed in college. Does this time feel like a bookend or an echo of your first year?

Self:
1. How has your sense of self, your identity as a first-generation student, changed since you've been in college? Do you think going to college has eliminated that sense of first-generation?
2. As a first-generation student, how does your new self-identity mesh with expectations from family members? Do you have conflict between your self-image and their expectations?
3. Do you think being a first-generation student makes the changes and challenges of the final year more complicated than it is for non-first-generation students? If so, in what ways?
4. Do you feel you have developed more personally, emotionally and socially as a result of college?
5. Do you feel you came to college primarily for an advanced education or to prepare for a career or both? Do you think your motivation is different from non-first generation students?

Support:
1. As a first-generation student, who do you turn to for support and help during this time of transition?
2. As a first-generation student, what offices or services here on campus have helped you prepare to graduate and move on with your life? For example, have you attended any workshops on job hunting or gone to any financial planning help sessions?
3. What types of information do you as a first-generation student, need to get ready to graduate and move out into the 'real world'? How do you think this differs from information needed by non-first-generation students?
4. Who would you expect to be the greatest source of help and support during your last year of college as a first-generation student? Who has been great support? Who or what has been a disappointment?

Strategies:
1. As a first-generation student, where do you find information to help you through this transition? University website, department website, faculty, staff, friends, alumni…

2. How did you choose your major? Are you happy with that choice or do you wish you'd selected something else?
3 What do you do to help manage the stress of this transition time? Do you think these strategies are different for you as a first-generation student?
4. Do you have a clear understanding of what steps you now need to take as you prepare to leave college?
5 What does this university need to do to help you, as a first-generation student, manage the stress you're feeling?

Final question: What haven't I asked you, as a first-generation student, that is important for you to talk about and for the university to know, related to your final year of college?

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

VOLUNTARY CONSENT FORM:

I have read and understand the information on the form and I consent to volunteer to be a participant in this study. I understand that my responses are completely confidential and that I have the right to withdraw at any time. I have received an unsigned copy of this informed consent form to keep in my possession.

Name *(please print):* _____

Signature:_____

Date: _____

Phone where you can be reached: _____

Best days and times to reach you: _____

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits, and possible risks associated with participating in this research study, have answered any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above signature.

Date: _____ Investigator's signature:_____