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Abstract

This phenomenological study looked at highly-at-risk college seniors who exhibited four out of the eight risk factors defined by the institution where the study took place. The purpose was to gain insight into how highly-at-risk college seniors persist to graduation by discovering what protective factors they utilized in their college career as well as the role resiliency and/or grit may have played. The participants were five undergraduate students who were enrolled at a mid-sized, public university in the rural Midwest. They responded to questions in one semi-structured interview designed to capture their experiences about college starting from high school until their anticipated graduation date. The findings confirm previous research which found that highly-at-risk students adequate support from a variety of sources in order to be a successful college student. In addition, these supports are most effective when they are unyielding. Furthermore, these ‘persisters’ often exhibit intrinsic motivation, grit, and resiliency -- the spirit of getting back up after setbacks. The findings also demonstrated that there is still more to be done to help highly-at-risk students to persist.

Dedication

There have been several people who have helped in my journey to completing this thesis. I am extremely thankful for my multiple support systems. These people have made me into the woman I am today and have been there for me throughout this whole process.

First, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mom, Michelle, and my sisters Chloe and Sarah. Though they may be miles away, they have stuck by my side throughout this process. From long nights on Facetime, to our family group chat, to wishing me encouragement when I did not want to continue, they made me push through to finish. Thank you.

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To my grad school pals and the CSA 2020 cohort, you are some of the most amazing people I have ever met. I could not have made it through this thesis without your constant support. The bonds and friendships I have formed with you will last forever. Thank you.

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I would also like to thank Dr. Tanya Willard for serving on this thesis committee. Thank you for your encouragement, availability, and willingness to help. I have not only gotten to know you through this process as a student, but as an intern for your office. I am grateful to have you as a part of my graduate school journey.

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Chapter I

Introduction

According to the 2017 graduation report by the National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES] (2017), only 40.6% of students who enroll in four-year institutions graduate within four years of initial enrollment. This graduation rate slowly increases the longer one is enrolled in the institution with a 55.8% graduation rate at five years and 59.4% after six years (NCES, 2017). This means, just over half of the students who are enrolling in four-year public institutions are graduating college within six years of being at a particular institution. Of the 59% who make it to graduation, many experience challenges and barriers that would make getting to graduation seem an impossible feat. These challenges, sometimes referred to as risk factors, can vary, and could include financial constraints, homelessness, ACT/SAT scores, student employment, and academic underpreparedness (Attewell & Riesel, 2011; Harackiewicz, Tauer, Barron, & Elliot, 2002; Horton, 2015).

Horton (2015) identified 50 risk factors that can affect a student's chance of success in college, including background characteristics, personal traits, and environmental factors that work together to create barriers for students wishing to obtain their degrees. Yet, many students persist despite their circumstances which would have predicted a different outcome. One qualitative study that looked at high-risk students found that many of them experienced traumatic events based on their life circumstances that led them to do everything they could to get into college (Pizzolato, 2003). But these individuals, the outliers, are often kicked out of quantitative studies, treated as anomalies, or otherwise not studied further. *New York Times* best-selling author, Malcolm Gladwell

(2008), defined an outlier as “something that is situated away from or classed differently from a main or related body” (p. 3). In statistical jargon, it is “an observation in a set of data that is inconsistent with the majority of the data” (Sage Encyclopedia of Research Design, 2010). When thinking about college student success, these outliers are the students who appear to have beaten the odds and are within a few courses to matriculation.

In an interview with *USA Today*, Malcolm Gladwell defined outliers as people who do not fit into the social norms for achievement (Donahue, 2008). Whether it be through their socio-economic status, their first-generation student status, or coming from a troubled home, these students overcome the odds stacked against them, and make it to college graduation. These outliers, the ones who shatter their stereotypes, stand out because they have the ability to work hard and have the right amount of zeal to push them to the finish line (Duckworth, 2016). In short, these students are resilient and encapsulate grit; they possess the drive to accomplish long-term goals and are able to rise again after a setback. People who are resilient have had a significant amount of risks in their life but have still been able to succeed, despite their limitations (Reyes, Elias, Parker, & Rosenblatt, 2013; Luther, 2015).

Highly-at-risk students rely on protective factors to increase their chances of having positive outcomes (Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000). Examples of protective factors include having a positive adult role model, having support in school, or having an internal locus of control (Luther, 2015). Many times, these resilient students are labeled as “at-risk” by an institution based on their race, socio-economic status, high school GPA, or test scores among others. The institution of interest for this study, a four-year public

university located in the rural Midwest, utilizes eight factors in its predictive model that put students at risk of attrition. Some of these include being an ethnic minority, having an admit month of March or later, attending public high school in a specified urban region, and having a financial need gap of \$7, 000 or more. For the purposes of this study, a highly-at-risk student one who possesses at least four of the eight factors identified by the institution.

Personal Statement

Before joining the student affairs profession, I was a nationally certified recreational professional. During my undergraduate career, I believed that my job was to improve the quality of life for the people I serve. Though my career path has changed, my passion for improving the quality of life for the people I serve has not. As a student affair professional, I am an educator, friend, advisor, mentor, and an advocate for all of my students. For the students that we, as student affairs professionals serve, is important to remember that there will always be people who need our help and we have to try our best to accommodate those who we serve. Sometimes being equal is not enough; we must be equitable in our choices to serve our community.

As a student affair professional, I want to put the students at the center of everything I do. Student affairs professionals are the facilitators in showing students their inner potential. I am passionate about addressing the inequities in our society and am hoping that this research will allow me to see how I can best advocate for future students, so that they are able to graduate and by doing so, improve the quality of their life. It is with this conviction that I embark on this research journey, open to learning about some

of our most vulnerable student populations, with a deep respect for their diverse experiences, yet fascinated by those who I see as the ‘persisters’, the outliers

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research study was to gain an understanding of how highly-at-risk students persist despite the odds against them. More specifically, I sought to discover the protective factors that contribute to persistence among highly-at-risk college seniors preparing for graduation from a four-year public university. Studies have shown that an increased understanding among student affairs professionals in a resilience-based approach can lead to better retention rates (Garza, Bain, & Kupczynski, 2014).

Research Questions

I wanted to uncover the essence of persistence among highly-at-risk students: Why do some highly-at-risk students persist? What makes them persist? The following research questions were developed to guide the study:

1. What protective factors contribute to the persistence of highly-at-risk students at a four-year university?
2. How do highly-risk students perceive resiliency and grit?

Significance of Study

According to Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, and Cantwell (2011), the higher education system in America has made little improvement in ensuring all students enrolling into college are successful. The research on high-risk students has been conducted from a perspective of high-risk students failing out of school, rather than discovering the factors that lead to their successes (Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, &

Cantwell, 2011). Research over the past 30 years suggests that comprehensive interventions at four-year institutions positively affect short-term grades and persistence for at-risk students (e.g. Abadie, 1998; Clark, 1993; Cone, 1991; Fry, 2007; Hecker, 1995; Milligan, 2007; Sanders, 2000). There is little information about how these intervention programs work and how to help students reach long-term goals and persist (Valentine, Hirschy, Bremer, Novillo, Castellano, & Banister, 2011). Valentine et al. (2011) conducted a review of college retention programs. They looked at 8,000 potential articles about at-risk student persistence but found only 19 that truly looked at student intervention programs helping at-risk students persist in college. This reveals a potential gap at a time that institutions are facing increasing competition for a smaller (NCES, 2018), but increasingly diverse student population (Musu-Gillette, Robinson, & McFarland, 2016). It is important for institutions to gather data on students' experiences. Most of the research conducted on persistence looks at the first year to second year transition (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005). However, some researchers argue that schools need to examine issues that may hinder persistence of college students past the first year to truly understand student success (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005). This study is significant because student affairs professionals must be aware of the backgrounds of their students to provide them the proper resources to succeed. By understanding this demographic of students, student affairs professionals will be able to empathetically care for their students. Though having knowledge on these types of backgrounds, the literature shows that research on educational resilience is limited (Williams, Greenleaf, Albert, & Barnes, 2014). This creates a need to study the role that resiliency and protective factors play in education. It is important to understand how protective factors influence resilient

tendencies because resiliency can be the greatest contribution to predicting an at-risk student's adjustment to university life (Rahat, & Ilhan, 2016).

Limitations of Study

Several limitations were identified that threatened the trustworthiness of the study. One limitation was the size of the target population; that is the number of students at the institution that meet the criteria to be included as a participant. Since the participants needed to meet four or more of the institution's risk factors and would all come from the same incoming class, there was a small pool from which to select participants. However, this limitation was alleviated as a committee member gave me access to the sample. Before receiving the access to the sample population, I did not know the size of the target population. Not having a large target population from which to draw a sample to study, could influence the transferability of the findings, as well as trustworthiness and credibility.

Another limitation of the study was that some of the interview questions (Appendix B) are retrospective. Asking college seniors to recall high school and early college experiences may be challenging because they are unlikely to remember all their experiences that are relevant to the study (Pizzolato, 2003). This limitation was minimized by providing participants with questions ahead of time to allow them more time for reflection and recall.

A third limitation of the study was building rapport with the participants during a single meeting with them. According to McDermid, Peters, Jackson, and Daly (2014), "Rapport involves trust and respect for the participant and the information that is shared. The creation of a safe and comfortable environment is essential in helping participants to

tell their stories” (p. 31). Rapport is essential to any qualitative study because the more positive rapport that exists, the more likely participants will reveal stories about themselves (McDermid, Peters, Jackson, & Daly, 2014). Since I had limited interactions with the participants, I tried to establish a safe, friendly environment immediately through my initial interactions during the interview. I did this by sharing a little about myself, treating my informants with respect, and assuring them that they have a safe space with me.

Definitions of Terms

Some terms used throughout this study may have generally accepted definitions while others may be more rare or unclear. This section provides the definition of terms as they will appear throughout the study to ensure understanding and uniformity. Terms provided without citations have been created from the researcher’s point of view.

Academic resiliency. This is defined as “The heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences” (Wang, Haertal, & Walberg, 1994, p. 46).

Educationally resilient. This describes “students who succeed in school despite the presence of adverse conditions” (Williams & Bryan, 2012, p. 291).

First generation college student. A student whose biological parents did not complete a 4-year university program.

Grit. “Perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007).

Protective factor. “Internal and external resources used to moderate or mediate the effects of risk or adversity and enhance good adaptation or competence” (Williams &

Portman, 2013, p. 15).

Highly at-risk student. A student who possesses four out of the eight risk factors determined by the institution (having a need gap of \$7,000 or more, the percentage of need is met at a rate of 60% or less, financial aid verification, academic index, high school grade point average, college admit month was March or later, ethnicity, metropolitan area public high school status)

Resiliency. “The process of positive adaptation to significantly difficult life circumstances” (Theron, 2013, p. 392).

Risk factor. “A characteristic at the biological, psychological, family, community, or cultural level that precedes and is associated with a higher likelihood of problem outcomes.” (O’Connell, Boat, & Warner, 2009 p. xxviii). The institution has created a list of eight risk factors that Academic Student Success and Admissions looks at to determine a student’s at-risk status.

Summary

Only about half of the people enrolling in college are graduating within six years of attending their institution (ACT, 2010). Many students going into college today exhibit risk factors that could potentially inhibit their chance for success. Those highly at-risk students, who are resilient and possess the internal quality of grit, can utilize protective factors to help lessen their chances of dropping out of school. These protective factors range from institutional resources to one’s own self-motivation. This study is relevant to the college student affairs field because there are gaps in the literature when talking about student success and retaining students until graduation (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005). Chapter II presents a review of the literature surrounding college student

success, persistence, and how a student's environment may impact their persistence while chapter III presents the methods that were used to complete the study.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

The purpose of this study was to identify protective factors among highly at-risk college seniors preparing for graduation from a four-year public university. More specifically, the researcher seeks to understand why students who are predicted to be at-risk of dropping out persist to graduation, that is, to discover the factors that contribute to their resiliency. The idea of college student success is composed of several varying factors that contribute to a student's overall success in college (Attewell, Heil, & Reisel, 2011; Duckworth, 2016; Gorski, 2016; Kundu, 2014; Millea, Willis, Elder, & Molina, 2018; Schreiner, 2017; Thomas, 2012; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2003). However, there is limited research on the successful highly-at-risk college students (Schreiner et al., 2011, p. 322), yet it is difficult to argue that looking at that population more closely may provide valuable insights for those who work with them. Hence, it is important to investigate the factors that facilitate students' success. The following is a review of the literature around college student success in general, and persistence, resilience, and at-risk students more specifically. It also includes selected theories that guided the study.

College Student Success

There is no paucity of research and theories on college student success (Fry, 2007; Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, & Elliot, 2002; Horton, 2015; Millea, Willis, Elder, & Molina, 2018). In as much as it is studied, there is still deep interest in understanding not only why one succeeds, but also the barriers to student success. Student success can be perceived in many ways. Some may view success as something as large as college graduation (Tinto, 2006; Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, & Elliot, 2002; Bailey, Calcagno,

Jenkins, Leinbach, & Kienzl, 2006) or some may view success someone successfully adjusting to their academic environment (Attewell, Heil, & Reisel, 2011; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2003). Though success may mean different things to some, many may agree with the words of Millea et al. (2018) who stated that, “The first hurdle in academic achievement is remaining in school” (p. 314). In an effort to identify what factors helped students successfully make it to graduation, Millea et al. (2018) conducted a longitudinal study of about 13,000 college freshmen over a seven-year period at a midsized, southeastern university. They found that student retention depended on a variety of factors including institutional factors, the socioeconomic status of the student, how the student behaved during their college career, and the student’s ability to achieve academic success (Millea et al., 2018). The study also showed that retention for students was higher when students were academically prepared for college coursework and/or received an academic or athletic scholarship. This study is the foundation for the following literature review looking into the multiple factors from the student and university that allow for college student success (Millea et. al, 2018).

Graduation Rates. College student success, as it relates to graduation rates, is integral to higher education institutions (Tinto, 2006; Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, & Elliot, 2002; Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Leinbach, & Kienzl, 2006). This was perhaps made more significant when in 1985, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) started to require universities to report their graduation rate data so that student athletes’ academic performances could be compared to their non-athlete peers (Cook & Pullaro, 2010). Soon after this policy began to be enforced, a new bill known as the Student Athlete Right-to-Know Act of 1988 was passed by the 101st congress. This act,

created as an extension to the Higher Education Act of 1965, made it mandatory that schools reported the graduation rates of student athletes. Creating new laws on what data colleges had to report (Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act, 1990).

Today, there are several institutional data base systems that contain public information on national graduation rates including the Integrated Postsecondary Education System (IPEDS), the National Student Clearinghouse, and state data systems (Cook & Pullaro, 2010). Though these data bases serve different purposes, they all focus on the rates at which students are graduating from public and private institutions across the US. The Integrated Postsecondary Education System, for example, has kept track of different cohort's graduation data since 1996 and under the Higher Education Act of 2008 (HEA), the Integrated Postsecondary Education System must be able to show these graduations easily accessible to the public (IPEDS, 2016). Though the process of collecting and finalizing data takes up to nine years, IPEDS data is used by states to allocate educational funding, evaluate legislative programs, and institutional benchmarking. It is also used by students and parents researching perspective colleges and by the media to assess the educational landscape (IPEDS, 2016).

Using IPEDS data, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) completed a set of graduation data from 1996 to 2010. The data was divided by cohorts of graduates who are first-time, full-time, degree seeking students. IPEDS defines a cohort as, "a specific group of students established for tracking purposes" (IPEDS, 2016, p. 4). Graduation rate data was determined by dividing the number of students who complete their program within the allotted time frame (100% or four years, 150% or five

years, or 200% or six years) over the number of students entering the cohort (IPEDS, 2016).

Although student enrollment rates from 2000 to 2010 increased by 36%, or five million students nationally, graduation rates hardly improved (NCES, 2018). In 2010, 40.6% of the total cohort graduated within the first four years compared to 36.1% in 2000, 55.8% within five years compared to 52.6% in 2000, and 59.4% within six years compared to 57.5% in 2000 (NCES, 2017). These percentages seem to be constant amongst the literature. For example, one longitudinal study analyzing the 2004 Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) Freshman Survey (TFS), less than 39% completed a degree after four years. The degree completion rate increases to roughly 56% after five years and about 61% after six years" (De Angelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, & Tran, 2011). It is important to note that these rates are based on full-time, first-time students and do not include transfer students, students who took breaks in their education, or students who went to a community college before going on to a university.

Millea et al. (2018) also focused on the graduation rates as well as the retention of their students. They focused their study on factors like institutional decisions, the socioeconomic status of the student, how the student behaved during their college career, and the student's ability to achieve academic success. One of the greatest factors that they found was that merit-based scholarships increased the chances of a student graduating by 18.4% (Mill et al., 2018).

Institutional Factors. The institution where a student goes to school can have a significant impact on the chances of student success in college (Thomas, 2012). There is not one particular reason why students leave an institution, however. Some potential

reasons why students drop out of college could be poor high school academic preparation, financial aid and affordability, student demographics, student employment, and remedial coursework (Attewell, Heil, & Reisel, 2011). Tinto (2003) combined these factors into two categories that he described as academic and social integration.

Tinto's conditions for student success. Tinto (1993), a notable theorist specializing in student retention, asserted that students do not complete their degree because there is not a good fit between student and the institution due to poor academic integration or poor social integration. He further argued, though it is important to know why students drop out, the knowledge of the why does not clarify what institutions need to do to promote retention efforts. According to Tinto (2003), retention is not related to drop out rates as much as some may think. He believed there are certain conditions that colleges must have for students to be successful. He broke down these conditions into four essential categories: (1) institutional commitment to student retention, (2) student support, (3) student involvement, and (4) student learning.

Tinto (2003) believed schools must be committed to student retention in order to have a successful student, and that this commitment is more than just words on a page, but rather an active pursuit to invest and provide incentives and rewards for students who stay committed to the campus. Since “no student rises to low expectations,” (Tinto, 2003, p. 3) universities need to be truly committed to keeping their students on campus for as long as they can. With regards to support for the student, Tinto (2003) asserted that students need to feel supported academically and socially to have a base for success. Many students enter the university underprepared for university coursework, making it a

priority for institutions to help their students academically. This can be done with the help of social support through counselors, mentors, and communities within the campus.

The third condition for student success as described by Tinto (2003) is student involvement. Similar to providing students support for academics and social life, universities need to provide opportunities for involvement for academic and social groups. Tinto's research shows that the more a student is involved, the more likely they are to be retained continually throughout their college career. The final condition for student success is the value of learning. Students come to college first and foremost to learn. The more students feel they are learning, the more likely they are to finish their degree. It is imperative to start this learning process during the first year of a student's academic journey in order for them to succeed in the future (Tinto, 2003).

Individual Factors. The institution is only part of the equation when it comes to student success. The individual student must also be involved in the student success process. Many students possess individual factors that can be operationally defined as factors that contribute to a student's success in college that are outside of what the institution of higher learning provides (Duckworth, 2016; Gorski, 2016; Kundu, 2014; McCubbin, 2001; Morales, 2014; Schreiner, 2017; Williams, Greenleaf, Albert, & Barnes, 2014). These factors are typically intrinsic that allow an individual to maintain a sense of guidance throughout their college career, and include, but are not limited to, grit and resiliency.

Grit. Recent literature on student success has started to focus on the concept of grit as it relates to the individual student's long-term success in college (Schreiner, 2017; Duckworth, 2016; Gorski, 2016; Kundu, 2014). In 2007, researchers Duckworth,

Peterson, Matthews, Kelly, and Dennis began to theorize the concept of grit as a key to student success. A person who exhibits grit has been defined as someone who is able to grasp perseverance and passion for long term goals. Evidence has shown that grit positively impacts academic performance (Hodge, Wright, & Bennett, 2016). Grit is often misconceptualized as someone working hard for what they want to accomplish. Though hard work is a crucial part of grit, it is the perseverance and passion for long term goals that makes grit more than just working hard (Schreiner, 2017). Grit is often seen as solely an intrinsic factor that some people are born with, but Duckworth (2016) described that grit is not only an intrinsic quality, but a matter of the environment in which a student grows up. Duckworth (2016) explained that, “the environment we grow up in really does matter and it matters a lot” (p. 83).

Since grit has been described to be as much of an environmental factor as it is an intrinsically motivated factor, some researchers believe that there is a lot of privilege when it comes to the concept of grit. For example, Schreiner (2017) contended that there is an immense amount of privilege involving the concept of grit, and that since the environment in which a student grows up plays a tremendous part, students who have family support and steady financial needs have a significantly easier time establishing their inner grit. An example of this “grit privilege” is being able to play sports as a child. If a student’s parents are able to pay for the sport, afford uniforms and equipment, have access to a safe recreational league, and are able to take time off from work or other responsibilities to get the child to and from practice, that child will have a significantly easier time establishing perseverance and passion than a child whose parents are not able to do such things (Schreiner, 2017).

Some research has claimed that the concept of grit is dangerous because it is focused on the individual student and was created on the idea of a deficit ideology (Gorski, 2016; Kundu, 2014). An example of deficit ideology is the belief that poverty is a direct result of ethical, dispositional, or spiritual shortcomings of people who live in poverty (Gorski, 2016). Deficit ideology is seen as dangerous as it relates to grit because with it, no matter how hard a person works, their shortcomings are their own fault. They do not have enough grit, resiliency, or effort; making it seem like grit can be a cultivated trait that can be possessed (Schreiner, 2017).

Schreiner (2017) contended that grit being framed in a way that it can be cultivated, is not necessarily true. In fact, just about 40% of grit is a genetic trait. Findings from 88 samples of over 66,000 individuals, found that grit is only moderately correlated with performance and retention and that it is strongly correlated with conscientiousness (Crede, Tynan, & Harris, 2016). Some claim that grit is not malleable like other factors such as student engagement, regulation, and motivation (Sedlack, 2004.) Even with these doubts about the concept of grit, research concluded that grit does have some merit in predicting student success (Schreiner, 2017).

Resiliency. Another concept that has been studied as a factor for student success is educational or academic resiliency. Since the beginning of the conceptualization of resiliency over 50 years ago, the main ideology of resiliency has always been debated (McCubbin, 2001). Some researchers view resiliency as an outcome to a person's success, while others believe the act of resiliency itself is a process that people must experience over time (McCubbin, 2001; Morales, 2014). The complexity of the word "resilience" can make the concept seem unruly, challenging, and hard to conceptualize.

Since it is such a complex concept, most researchers will use their own definition of resiliency to best fit their study (Reyes, Elias, Parker, & Rosenblatt, 2013).

Kwek, Bui, Rynee, and Fung So (2013) viewed resiliency as a personal characteristic that allows people who have the resiliency trait to bounce back from adverse challenges. Those who possess this resiliency trait are able to persevere in ways that others cannot. However, no matter how resiliency is seen or explained, there's some consensus in the literature that every resilient approach follows the same model; resiliency cannot exist without a significant amount of risk (Kwek, Bui, Rynee, & Fung So, 2013; McCubbin, 2001; Morales, 2014).

Educational or academic resiliency. Educational resiliency, also known as academic resiliency, is how the complex ideology of resiliency affects education (Williams, Greenleaf, Albert, & Barnes, 2014). Someone who is educationally resilient will be able to perform well in school despite personal and environmental setbacks (Williams et al., 2014). Limited research exists on educational resiliency and how it can help a student succeed and few conceptual and empirical studies have been conducted on educational resilience (Banato, 2011). What limited research there is on educational resiliency focuses on finding the characteristics of resilient students, rather than the idea of educational resiliency itself (Banato, 2011; Williams et al., 2014). Though research is currently limited, the field of educational resilience is growing, creating a need to define and measure what resilience looks like in an educational environment (Banato, 2011). Research on educational resilience looks at applications to help all students but places an emphasis on academically at-risk students (Banato, 2011). Academic resilient students use their environmental and personal strengths to their advantage to help protect them

from circumstances that could lead them to academic failure (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes 2009). Students who display resilient tendencies often have environmental advantages--protective factors-- that have helped contribute to their success.

Protective factors. Protective factors are the “internal and external resources used to moderate or mediate the effects of risk or adversity” (Williams & Portman, 2013, p. 15). These factors are described to be, family factors including social support and positive family values, school factors such as effective school counselors and educated teachers, and community factors like community involvement and initiatives (Williams et al., 2014). Williams and Portman (2013) conducted a qualitative study to find the factors that contributed to the academic success amongst eight low-income, African American high school graduates between the ages of 18 and 20. Participants were enrolled at a Midwestern, historically Black college at the time of data collection. The study used focus groups. The researchers were hoping to find educational resiliency amongst the students and the protective factors that they used in their everyday lives (Williams, Portman, 2013). The results suggested that when it came to educational resiliency, many of the students talked about parental involvement, support systems, school counselors, and their community. The students also felt that there was a shared responsibility between the students and staff in the school to promote educational resiliency (Williams & Portman, 2013). Participants self-identified some of the protective factors that they used in their everyday life. Williams and Portman (2013) concluded that the students interviewed knew the individual factors that affected their academic performance making

it crucial for higher educational professionals to be aware of how their students have succeeded despite their challenges and setbacks.

Counseling services and mental health. According to the Center for Collegiate Mental Health 2018 annual report, 54.4% of the 179,964 students who used counseling services throughout the 152 institutions included in the report attending counseling for a mental health concern in the 2017-2018 school year (Penn State University, 2018). This is an 8.4% increase since 2010 with concerns about depression, anxiety, and social anxiety consistently increasing (Penn State University, 2018). Additionally, 40.3% sought counseling services in the 2017-2018 school year due to a traumatic event, an increase of 2.3% since 2010 (Penn State, 2018). According to Center for Collegiate Mental Health Annual Report, 41,365 stopped their counseling services at some point during the school year. Only 3.2% students stopped their services because they withdrew from their institution (Penn State University, 2018).

Research has shown that students who struggle with mental illnesses are at higher risk for dropping out compared to their peers (Salzer, 2011). For example, the National Survey of College Counseling (Gallagher, 2012) found that 39% of students who seek counseling support in college have severe psychological issues. Fortunately, of that 39%, 33% are able to remain in college with the help of college counseling services.

Counselors in this aspect are crucial when it comes to predicting a student's success rate because they are able to identify and understand the protective factors that students have in order to support their growth and development (Williams, Bryan, Morrison & Scott, 2017). One study concluded that though institutions may never hit a total 100% retention rate for all of their students, that does not mean that they should not be intentional with

their efforts to reach high-risk populations (Bishop, 2016). Upon the completion of his study, Bishop claims that, “with more concentrated, proactive interventions and the use of specific counseling techniques for high-risk students, the difference in retention between high-risk and low-risk students who use counseling services may decrease” (Bishop, 2016, p. 215). Mental health also contributes to a student’s ability to be resilient (Eisenberg, Lipson, & Posselt, 2016). Students must have the ability to get through the challenges that colleges bring in order to be successful in and out of the classroom (Eisenberg, Lipson, & Posselt, 2016). By creating this ability to get through these challenges and be resilient, students are also able to recoup from challenges related to mental health. Resilience in this capacity can be taken into the classroom where students can use their coping skills they learned during their mental health struggles to persist in the classroom when challenges arise (Eisenberg, Lipson, & Posselt, 2016).

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

This study will be guided by three theories: Bandura’s social cognitive theory, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems/developmental ecology, and Sanford’s challenge and support theory. The following section describes them in some detail.

Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory. The conceptualization of Bandura’s 1978 social cognitive theory (SCT) began with his infamous Bobo doll study conducted to expand on the ideas of vicarious learning to show that people learn from observation and imitation just as much as they do through rewards and punishments (Bandura & Hudson, 1961). During this study, eight groups of children observed an adult’s behavior toward a Bobo doll. Half of the children observed aggressive behavior toward the doll, while the others observed nonaggressive behavior toward the doll. The children then got to interact

with the doll, and many treated the doll the same way they observed it being treated. This study was significant to social sciences because it showed that behavioral learning can be through observation not just through rewards and punishments as earlier research had shown (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963). This idea of observational learning led to the social cognitive theory which puts heavy emphasis on observational learning, imitation, and modeling (Bandura, 1978).

In SCT, Bandura uses the triadic reciprocal causation model to explain the interactions between behaviors, personal factors, and the environments in which people live (Bandura, 1978) (Figure 2.1.). Though the factors interact in a bidirectional fashion, they all do not make equal contributions at the same time. Instead, the interaction depends on what is most important in the person's life at the time (Bandura, 1978). These are in continuous interactions among the behaviors, personal factors, and environments Bandura explained that people's reactions to stimuli do not just happen. Rather, reactions are an internal process through cognitive thinking. This cognitive thinking is based on observation, perception, self-efficacy, and information that one has in their head. It is these factors and more, according to Bandura, that let a person know how to react to stimuli (Bandura, 1978).

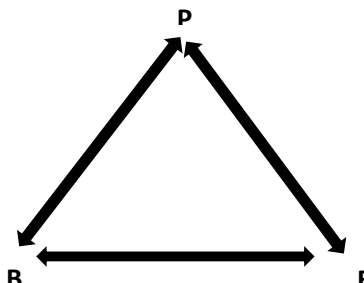


Figure 2.1. Bandura's triadic reciprocal causation model (where B stands for behavior, P stands for cognitive events and E stands for environment)

Social cognitive theory has been an influential part of social science history (Porter, Bigley, & Steers, 2003) and it has been the base for many studies and social science theories. Since its conceptualization, hundreds of studies have been conducted using SCT in a variety of different career fields such as health promotion (Bandura, 2004) and organizational management (Wood, & Bandura, 1989). It has been used as a guide to help show how people become motivated (Schunk & Usher, 2012).

Perhaps the most significant concept that has emerged out of SCT research, and one that has seen a mass amount of applications across multiple fields, is self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) described self-efficacy as one's belief in their ability to produce desired results for their actions. Bandura used his work on social cognitive theory to help explain the phenomena of self-efficacy in people and how self-efficacy plays a key role in shaping the course of an individual's life (Bandura, 2001). These beliefs in one's actions can be empowering or devastating depending on if a person believes they can, or they cannot, accomplish a task (Bandura, 1997). For instance, people who see outcomes as intrinsically purposeful but do not have the skills necessary to perform the task would experience a low sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). An example of this phenomena would be a child having a hard time understanding the process of math and being demoralized because they expect their grade to depend on the quality of their work (Bandura, 1997). On the other hand, if a person has a high sense of self-efficacy in an environment or situation, they will feel accomplished and will be able to continue to make strides towards their aspirations. By using this frame of reference, self-efficacy and ideal performance outcomes can be one of the biggest factors in predicting human

behavior (Bandura, 1997). Bandura created a chart to understand how a person's outcome expectancies and efficacy beliefs affect their social and emotional state (1997) (Figure 2.2.). By using this chart as a guide,

		OUTCOME EXPECTANCIES	
		-	+
EFFICACY BELIEFS	+	Protest Grievance Social Activism Milieu Change	Productive Engagement Aspiration Personal Satisfaction
	-	Resignation Apathy	Self-devaluation Despondency

Figure 2.2. The effects of efficacy and behavioral performance

students who have high efficacy beliefs and high outcome expectancies will have productive engagement or in this study academic persistence to graduation. While those students with low efficacy and low outcome expectancies will encounter resignation or in this study, are more likely to drop out of the institution before degree completion.

Bandura (2001) viewed people as agents who intentionally make thoughts happen. Agents are self-regulators who direct their goals but do not automatically spark self-influences and motivation (Bandura, 2001). The motivation for these goals is self-efficacy. Bandura (2001) described four sources of self-efficacy: social modeling, mastery, social persuasion, and physical and emotional state. In the current study, Bandura's self-efficacy and social cognitive theory will provide a framework for explaining persistence among highly-at-risk students.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems/Developmental Ecology. Urie

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is a theoretical model that addresses the progressions and circumstances in an environment throughout a person's life that shapes

them overall development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Bronfenbrenner broke down a person's living environment into four basic levels: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem is a multifaceted zone filled with interrelationships. This level includes objects with which a person interacts or people with whom a person sees on a face-to-face basis, for example, family, friends, peers, instructors, and schools. Because of the person's close interaction with elements of the microsystem, they have the potential to significantly impact the person's development. The mesosystem includes the interaction of two or more elements of the microsystem where a person develops. For example, a college student's mesosystem might include the relationships among family, work, and school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The exosystem does not contain any direct relationships with a person and their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A developing person has little to no control over these factors, though these factors have an effect on a person's life. In a college student, this could be laws created at the state and federal levels that impact how they receive their education. The macrosystem is the broadest level of the development. This level includes things that are outside of a student's control and are often assigned at birth like cultural norms and belief systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems (1979) has been used in resiliency research by breaking down the individual mind into a variety of temperaments, self-esteem patterns, attribution style, problem-solving skills, and other foundations for psychological coping strategies (Ungar, 2011). Researchers have looked at how the systems in Bronfenbrenner's theory create a path for resiliency. According to the research, the microsystem includes the family, peers, and teachers of the individual. The mesosystem

includes interactions within the microsystem that help establish the amount of accessible resources for an individual that impact their chances of success. The exosystem includes the places in which learned policies and services are created and has rarely been used in resiliency research (Boyden & Mann, 2005; Leadbeater, Dodgen, & Solarz, 2005; Ungar, 2011). Conversely, the most resiliency research has been done on the macrosystem level that focuses on what cultural practices and customs help an individual create positive stress coping strategies (Donald & Dawes, 2000; Ungar, 2011). In this study, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory will be used to understand the systems in which a student's behavior, personal factors, and environment come together to establish a resilient attitude. Examining and understanding a person's ecological system can provide good insight into how and why a person reacts to challenging situations.

Sanford's Challenge and Support. Sanford's (1966) challenge and support theory explains that in order for students to experience growth, there needs to be an equal balance of challenges that students face and enough support systems available in order for them to overcome said challenges. In other words, when challenges arise and one does not have the skills, knowledge, or attitude to cope during a situation, an adequate amount of support needs to be provided to the individual in order for them to succeed (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016) (Figure 2.3).

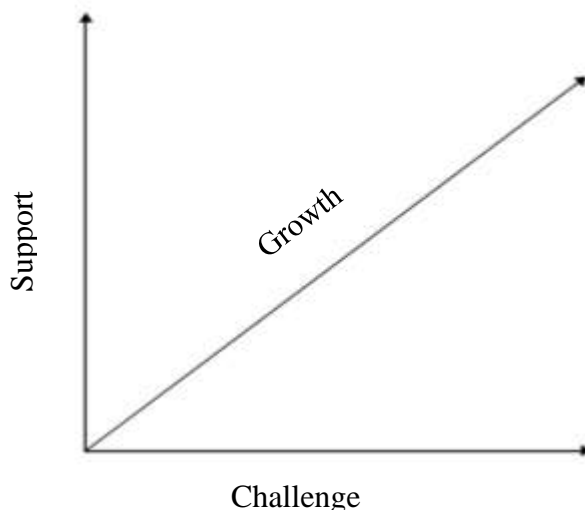


Figure 2.3. Sanford's challenge and support model

Some challenges that a student can face when entering the collegiate system are living in a new environment, meeting new people, and learning an abundance of new ideas and perspectives (Strayhorn, 2008). To combat these challenges, some of the most common forms of support in college are establishing a healthy living and learning environment, a sense of belonging on the institution's campus, and the ability to obtain the resources necessary to be successful (Strayhorn, 2008). From a resiliency standpoint, these challenges can be identified as risk factors like going to an inner-city high school, coming from a low-income home, or growing up in a home where English is a second language (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009). From a resiliency standpoint, support refers to people or factors that help a student overcome the challenges that have been put on them. These factors, referred to in the study as protective factors, could be an influential teacher for example (Bondy, Ross, Galligane, & Hambacher, 2007). The study used Sanford's (1966) challenge and support framework as a guide to show the relationship between a student's risk factors, protective factors, and how they are able to be successful in college (Figure 2.4.).

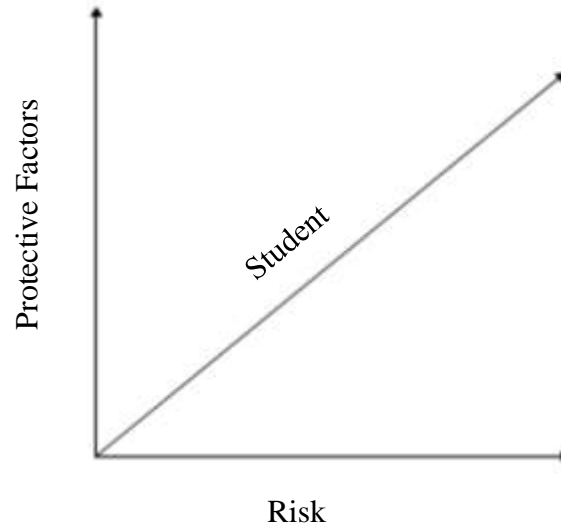


Figure 2.4. Sandford's model adapted

Summary

Resiliency is an overarching concept that describes the theoretical framework for someone who has succeeded despite challenges that they may have faced. Educational resiliency is the way of applying the resilient framework to the way a student learns and succeeds. Resiliency and grit combine to make a psychological tool to help a student achieve more. Using Bandura's, Bronfenbrenner's, and Sanford's theoretical models will help guide the study on what highly at-risk students are doing in their everyday lives to help them complete college year after year until they graduate. The next chapter presents a detailed description of the methodological processes that will be used in the study.

Chapter III

Methods

This study examined the experiences and habits of highly at-risk college seniors from a midsized, four-year institution in the Midwest that contributed to or impacted their success. More explicitly, I discovered the protective factors that they utilize to persist at a four-year institution. Furthermore, I determined if these factors can be further categorized in any way. This chapter contains a comprehensive description of the procedures that were used to answer the research questions including the design of the study, the participants of the study, the instrumentation, data collection and analysis, and how the data will be treated.

Design of Study

A qualitative methodology was utilized for data collection and analysis. This approach allowed for in-depth conversations with participants, allowing them the opportunity to further explain their stories and experiences of persistence at the four-year institution. More specifically, I used a phenomenological approach (Creswell & Poth, 2017) and learned more about the participants and their holistic collegiate and pre-collegiate experiences. According to Creswell and Poth (2017), the phenomenological approach allowed me to “focus on describing what all of the participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (p. 75), with that phenomenon being graduating from college. I listened intently to participants to understand how they persisted to graduation despite their predicted odds. Participants were students who exhibited at least four out of the eight retention risk factors defined by the institution. I selected four because, according to 2017 institutional data, a significant dip occurred in retention after four risk

factors, with 86.41% for four risk factors and 56.94% for five risk factors, suggesting that some phenomenon was occurring after four risk-factors were present.

Participants/Sample

Participants were five undergraduate college seniors anticipating graduating in spring 2020 or fall of 2020 and who met the following inclusion criteria: (1) continuously enrolled at the institution of interest over the previous six semesters; (2) have at least four out of the eight risk factors identified by the university (having a need gap of \$7,000 or more, the percentage of need is met at a rate of 60% or less, if they were able to have their financial aid verified, their academic index, their high school grade point average, if their college admit month was March or later, their ethnicity, and if they attended a metropolitan area public school) (CORE, 2019). I used university data sets based on the criteria above to determine eligible students. This criterion sampling method resulted in a sample that had heterogenous variables including race and gender. The sample came from the 2016-2017 incoming freshman class or earlier who would be anticipating graduation in spring 2020 if they had taken a traditional four-year track.

I utilized a purposeful sampling design. Access to participants was provided through the Executive Director of the university's Academic Success Center. The Executive Director agreed to provide the names of students who were admitted into the university that had at least four out of the eight risk factors identified by the university. I contacted students by email and invited them to participate in an approximately 60-minute semi-structured interview. Participation was by informed consent and all participants were offered a gift card incentive valued at \$10 in return for their participation.

Research Site

The research was conducted at a predominantly White, mid-sized Midwestern university with approximately 7,400 undergraduate students. Based on university statistics, in the 2017-2018 school year during the fall semester, 40.7% of the university were males and 59.3% were females, and over half of the students were full time. Racially, the largest population of students were White (63.28%). The second largest population was African American or Black students making up 14.84% of the university population followed by Hispanic or Latino representing 10.52% (Rural Midwest University, 2017). The university was home to about 335 international students from 57 different countries (Rural Midwest University, 2019). Rural Midwest University offers a variety of programs and services to enhance student success including academic advisors, campus ministry liaisons, on campus leadership opportunities, TRiO, and on campus programming (Rural Midwest University, 2019).

Instrument

Demographic questionnaire. To enhance transferability of the findings, I collected some basic demographic information from the participants such as age, race, major/minor, their anticipated graduation date, and if they were a first-generation college student.

Semi-structured interviews. Data was collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews. This approach allowed me to probe the participants to go into detail about their experiences and get richer data. The interviews were approximately one-hour long and took place in the university's library in a place of the participant's choosing. Interviews were video/audio recorded with the participant's permission. Questions were

designed to gather information about student experiences, including the role the college has played in their success, their college experiences, the support they have received, and their intrinsic motivations to persist through graduation despite their predetermined limitations. For example, students were asked to “describe any experiences during your enrollment at [the institution] where you felt that you might not continue.” (Appendix B). Given the nature of the questions, and being retrospective in nature, I provided participants the questions in advance, so that they could have more time to think about and recall responses.

Researcher-as-instrument. The researcher-as-instrument is a widely accepted concept amongst qualitative researchers (e.g. Patton, 2002, Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, 2012; Xu & Storr, 2012). Because of the nature of qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument for qualitative interviews. This means that the researcher has “the potential to influence the collection of empirical materials” (Pezalla et al., 2012, p.165). Throughout qualitative research, the researcher and participant must establish trust to create an environment where the data collected will be truthful and significant (Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017). In qualitative studies, trustworthiness is important to be able to receive honest statements from participants that will make the study valid (Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017).

As a former “at-risk” student, my personal passion is to help at-risk students succeed. I want to do everything that I can to help all my students, no matter their background circumstances. As stated in Chapter I, I want to improve the quality of life for all that I serve. Because of this, I recognize that I may have biases and beliefs in conducting this study. To help combat these biases, I used a technique called

“bracketing.” As cited in H. J. Streubert & D. R. Carpenter (Eds.), *Qualitative research in nursing: Advancing the humanistic imperative* The phenomenological technique of bracketing is, “the cognitive process of putting aside one’s own beliefs, not making judgments about what one has observed or heard and remaining open to data as they are revealed” (Carpenter, 2007, p. 27). Additionally, prior to starting formal interviews with my participants, I conducted a pilot interview. I used the result of this “practice interview” to evaluate my performance, identify areas of weakness with my interview style, as well as with the questions. I used this information to modify my approach as needed. I worked with three experts on student retention, at-risk students, and college student success to guide me through the study.

Data Collection

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews during the fall semester of 2019 and spring semester 2020. I met with each participant once, for approximately one hour. The interview proceeded as outlined in the interview guide (Appendix B). After providing the participant with an informed consent form, I explained it to them, and remind them of their rights as a participant. The participant signed the form before the interview began. Once the participants signed the consent form participants were instructed to choose a pseudonym. The interviews were recorded, with permission, by two audio devices to ensure the best audio quality for high quality analysis. As a thank you for participating in the study, I gave each participant a \$10 gift card after completion of all interviews.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed them using Microsoft Word ®.

Transcription was completed within a week of the initial interview. I read through each interview twice. The first read through was to get a general feel for the content. On the second read, using the review feature I highlighted and coded the main points corresponding to the research questions. As I read, I identified the factors that may have impact students' persistence. This took place over a three-week period. This process is an inductive approach. An inductive approach allowed me to put all my data into a concise, summary type format, find clear links between research questions and participants responses, and be able to develop a framework to analyze data (Thomas, 2006). My thesis director did the same process independently. Once my first transcript was analyzed, we met to discuss themes that we discovered. We worked together to find themes that best match the study's research questions in order to form a complete and accurate conclusion. Once these were identified, I proceeded with the other transcripts. The transcript data was coded carefully and individually (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The coding was separated into different levels based on the information provided by the participant (Yin, 2015). Level one codes was used for relational topics while level two codes were specific examples and commonalities between level one codes (Yin, 2015). The researcher made a chart of the codes to be able to assemble and reassemble data until all related themes are connected (Yin, 2015).

Treatment of Data

The treatment of the data followed the Institutional Review Board's (IRB's) policies and procedures. The participants were asked to choose pseudonyms for themselves to maintain confidentiality. Data was be stored in a document on the researcher's university OneDrive account that was only seen by myself and my thesis

chair. In accordance with IRB policies, all data collection will be stored for three years in the researcher's possession and then will be shredded and deleted.

Summary

To accurately investigate the patterns of resiliency amongst college seniors, I conducted a phenomenological qualitative study at a mid-sized, Midwestern, four-year university. Participants were selected based on their risk-factor rate defined by the university. The participants were interviewed on a one-on-one basis using semi-structured interviews. All interviews were scheduled for an hour in length and took place in the university library. Participants remained anonymous throughout the whole process and were given the opportunity to choose pseudonyms for the study. Chapter IV contains a comprehensive analysis of the qualitative study and its findings.

Chapter IV

Findings

This chapter presents the findings from qualitative analysis of data gathered from five highly at-risk college seniors at a midsized, four-year, rural institution in the Midwest. Highly-at-risk people rely on protective factors to increase their chances of having positive outcomes (Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000). Examples of protective factors include having a positive adult role model, having support in school, or having an internal locus of control (Luther, 2015). Many times, these resilient students are labeled as “at-risk” by an institution based on their race, socio-economic status, high school GPA, or test scores, among others. The institution of interest utilizes eight factors in its predictive model that puts students at risk of attrition. Some of these include being an ethnic minority, having an admit month of March or later, attending public high school in a specified urban region, and having a financial need gap of \$7,000 or more (Rural Midwest University, 2018).

Perhaps resiliency explains why some of these highly-at-risk students persist; or maybe they utilized grit to accomplish long-term goals and rise again after setbacks. People who are resilient have had a significant amount of risks in their life but have still been able to succeed, despite their limitations (Reyes, Elias, Parker, & Rosenblatt, 2013; Luther, 2015). For the purposes of this study, a highly-at-risk student was a student who possessed at least four of the eight factors identified by the institution. This study was designed to discover how this at-risk population persisted to graduation based on what protective factors they had in their life during their college career and what were the nature of these protective factors. This was done through the discovery of two research

questions: What protective factors contribute to the persistence of highly-at-risk students at a four-year university? How do students perceive resiliency? Findings are focused around these questions. All participants answered questions about their experiences as at-risk students during face-to-face interviews that lasted between thirty and sixty minutes. Audio and video recording were used to ensure accuracy of the interviews which were then transcribed. Filler words such as um, uh, and like, were removed from transcriptions for the ease of the reader. Personal names from participant names and names given as examples by participants were changed to protect the identity of the participants and the people in their life. Data analysis was done using a thematic analysis approach. As each participant shared their individual college journey, similarities in their experiences provided themes that helped answer the research questions. Themes were created on codes which appeared throughout the interview experience. The next section gives a description of the participants at the time they were interviewed.

Participants' Profiles

Participants were purposefully selected and were individually interviewed at the campus library. Participants selected pseudonyms which were used to protect their identities. It is important to note that 4 of the 5 participants identified as African American, with this being one of their risk-factors. Although the research was not restricted to race, because of its focus on the highly-at-risk student, the target population included an over-representation of African American students.

Chris. Chris was a 21-year-old Black male studying health administration with a minor in business administration. His expected graduation date was Spring 2020. He was a first-generation college student who had five risk factors.

Cobb. Cobb was a 21-year-old Black female studying human services and leadership development with a concentration in family services. Her expected graduation date was Fall 2020. She was a first-generation college student who had four risk factors.

Christian. Christian was a 21-year-old Caucasian male studying political science, civic, nonprofit leadership with a minor in sociology. His expected graduation date was Spring 2020. He had four risk factors.

Dave. Dave was a 21-year-old African American male studying corporate communication. His expected graduation date is Fall 2020. He had five risk factors.

Nicole. Nicole was a 21-year-old African American female studying biology with a focus in pre-medicine. Her expected graduation date was Fall 2020 or Spring 2021 depending on her course load. She was unsure if she is a first-generation college student. She had four risk factors.

Research Question #1: What protective factors contribute to the persistence of highly-at-risk students at a four-year university?

Participants were asked a series of questions ranging from their high school experiences to their last year of college experiences that sought to discover the protective factors that could explain their persistence in college. Participants discussed several reasons, including *Social Support*, *High School Preparation*, *On-Campus Resources*, and *Involvement* (Table 4.1).

Social support. The first major theme which emerged as a protective factor for highly-at-risk students in this study was *Social Support*, which was defined as participants' reference to people who have positively influenced their collegiate goals. Social support plays a role in all aspects of an at-risk student's chance of success in

college. One of the best predictors of educational resiliency is if a student has positive support systems with their parents, school counselors, and their community (Williams & Portman, 2013). Four main subthemes were found within the realm of social support.

They were (1) *family*, (2) *support from friends and significant*

Table 4.1

Themes and Subthemes for Discovered During Qualitative Analysis of Data from Highly-at-Risk Students

Research Question	Major Themes	Subthemes
What protective factors contribute to the persistence of highly-at-risk students at a four-year university?	Social Support	Family Friends & Significant Others Mentors Teachers & Advisors
	High School Preparation	High School Involvement Honors, AP Courses, and Study Hall College Prep, ACT Prep, and Dual Enrollment Teacher & Counselor Support
	On-Campus Resources	Writing Center Tutoring Career Services TRiO Support Services Counseling Center
	Involvement	Community Involvement On-Campus Involvement

others, (3) *supportive mentors*, and (4) *supportive instructors and advisors*.

Family. Family was the most recurring protective factor, and describes participants' receiving social support from their parents, siblings, and grandparents. Each of the participants indicated that at least one family member supported them throughout their collegiate process beginning with their transition to college to their persistence

through graduation. For those who were not first-generation college students, their families influenced their decision to come to college at a young age. For example, Dave spoke about how his parents and immediate family had pushed him to get an education and started conversations about college when he was in his middle school:

They were telling me to start thinking about what I want to do for my career. I remember grades... not grade school... but like middle schoolish, sixth, seventh, eighth grade, my parents were telling me you need to start thinking 'cause high school is going to go like that and then you're in the real world. So, at an early age it was emphasized - you need to know what you want to do.

Christian, another non-first-generation student, had similar conversations about going to college. When asked when college was talked about in his home he shared that it was brought up often starting in elementary school, "it was kind of like an expectation, like to go to college someday" followed by "[there was] pressure from the beginning...when you asked, why do you go to school? They kind of just said, "So you can go to college." That was kind of always the answer..."

Those who identified themselves as a first-generation college student also had parental support but in other ways. Chris spoke about how his mom wanted him to go to college but there was not as big of push compared to his non-first-generation peers. When asked how often college was talked about in his home Chris explained that:

It wasn't like the main focus or anything, but it was mentioned here and there in the household. I'm in a single parent household. My mother, she was one of those people who felt like if you keep pressuring your kid to go to college instead of letting them make their own decisions, they're not really going to do it. But she

really wanted me and my sister to go to college. She mentioned it like, “I really want you guys to college but if you guys don’t go to college, you need have a plan when you graduate high school because you’re not finna be living here for free.” It wasn’t mentioned so much to the point it got tiring but it was mentioned every here and there. Particularly, it was mentioned a little bit more toward my senior year of high school.

Nicole, also a first-generation student, had similar experiences. With regards to how often college was discussed in her home, Nicole expressed that she knew she wanted to go to college “my whole life only because it’s something that I wanted to do.” Though Nicole had always had her mind set on a college education, her parents also encouraged her to apply. Nicole said that, “My parents did start talking about it (college) in high school, like, well, you got to start looking in college.”

Not only did the family structure play an important role in getting the participants to college, but they also helped the participants get through tough times throughout their experiences. Dave shared that the first semester was rough for him. Adjusting to a new environment was hard on him and he did not enjoy his initial major. When asked what made him continue to go to school through that rough patch, Dave said simply, “Family, family motivated me. They were paying for me to get here and then now it’s we want to live a life for me and my girlfriend and give back to my family.” Even Cobb, who had been in the foster care system for most of her life and was not adopted by her parents until she was 13, said that her family helped her stay during her rough patch after being put on academic warning:

Last semester I was getting like super overwhelmed with my financial aid. Because I was on academic warning, I didn't really receive my full refund check. So, I was like, "I just can't do this anymore. Why do I have to go through all these hoops just to be successful?" And I was just so overwhelmed, and I was just like, "I don't want to go to college no more." I even texted my mom, "I don't want to do this. Can I just go home, and I just go to cosmetology school 'cause I like doing lashes and stuff? I'll just take the classes and just do that and start my own business. Like can I just please do that?" My mom always said if that's what you really want to do, do it. And then my mom -my mom, surprisingly she told me - she was like, you came this far. You're so close. Don't let this, this temporary setback in your situation affect your outcome because you're so close. That's why I stayed.

Though their familial support differed from person to person, all of the participants were able to lean on their families to support and guide them throughout their college journey. Though the support looked different for all of the participants, the familial support was to moderate or mediate the effects of risk or adversity and enhance good adaptation or competence (Williams & Portman, 2013, p. 15).

Friends and significant others. Second to family, friends and significant others was another recurring theme stated by all participants. *Friends and significant others'* support is defined by having a friend from back home or at school providing them constant support through their college career. Though many had family support toward the beginning of their journey, all of the participants spoke of the importance of friends that they made here in order to keep them going in school once they got to college and

adjusted to being a college student. During this time in college, Christian, a student athlete, thought about transferring to a different university due to lack of playing time he was receiving and fitting in with the rest of the team. When asked what made him stay at the institution, Christian said:

I guess I have good friends on my team. I don't know. I was challenged really hard, so it was kind of like you can just quit, or you can keep fighting when it's hard. But yeah, it's like that little path. When it gets harder, it gets better. You know, a little while longer. So just kind of sticking with it. Like my friends helped me, like my parents helped me just get through the harder times.

Dave also spoke about how his friends and girlfriend have helped him persist and be a successful college student. These are people in Dave's life that he said have pushed him to be his best self. His friends and girlfriend have a definite impact on his college experience. Dave stated that:

*[sic]*There's a lot of people who pushed me to do my best; wanna see me do my best - period. Just whatever I do, [including] my parents. But more so here, my close friends, [the institution] family if you want to say that. My girlfriend too, my girlfriend's a huge motivator because I want to be able to take care of her.... And family doesn't have to be blood related only, blood doesn't mean your family.

Dave's desire to provide for his girlfriend and please his family were a significant factor in his success as a student.

The two females in the study spoke about how their social circles impacted their success. When talking about what has made her a successful college student, Cobb said

that her friend circle has made a huge impact on her life. During her first year of school, Cobb was having a rough transition to college and did not have the full family support she needed:

I felt like so alone, like me and my family, like we were clashing because they didn't understand the amount of support and emotional support that I needed.

They couldn't get that. They didn't call. They didn't come down here for families and friend weekend. They were busy doing other things and it really drained on me. I really felt alone and coming from my background in foster care, it made it 10 times worse.

During her first year of school, because of her family challenges, Cobb leaned heavily on her friends for support. Unfortunately, her initial group of friends were not a good influence on her. She recounted the challenges of peer pressure; “if a person's going out, your friend, and they're in your friend group, you're going to go out too ‘cause peer pressure is real.” Cobb stated that she went out often, resulting in decreased academic performance. There was a time where she thought she was dismissed from the university because of how poor her grades were. This scare prompted her to change her friendship circle:

I changed my circle. I have less friends, the right friends, who are on the same path have the same passion and drive for school in their future the same way that I do. When I was a freshman, I was around people who didn't care. Out of everybody that was in my friend group [my freshman year], I'm the only one that's still here. So that says something. I always tell my mentees, “I've been where you're at. Where all these friends...you think you know them fully and all

of that stuff. Nope. I'm the only one still here, everyone else is gone. I'm the only one [left] out of my friends I had made my freshman year 'cause we all lived on the same floor." So yeah, I'm the only one and that to me that says a lot.

Nicole also spoke on how her friend circle has helped her persist since being in college. She said that her friends are, "very supportive. We all have similar goals, so we push each other so it's like nobody's getting left behind."

Not only was friend support at school important, but for Chris, it was his friends from back home that helped him persist through his tough times. He said that his junior year he was having a rough time and was feeling socially isolated. He recalls a lot of his relationships changing and did not feel like anyone at school was really there for him, so he leaned on his friends from back home to support him through this time. When asked to give tips to someone on how to be successful in college, Chris stated that, "It's always good to have friends. Personally, it's different from having your family who is far away from you being your support system then friends are actually there supporting you. So, make sure you have some friends that you can really count on."

Similarly, to family, though their experiences with their friends are all vastly different, their friends were able to support them through challenging times to make sure that they persisted to graduation. These experiences with their friends were able to help them adapt to their new surroundings and give them a foundation away from home.

Mentors. Some of the participants spoke about receiving support from mentors at the university that helped them persist during their college experience. Some were teachers, others were program coordinators and department chairs, while some were

coaches and other role models. Though these mentors have served in different roles for students, they have all encouraged persistence in completing their college education and beyond. When Dave was asked if there were any people at the institution that helped him persist, he listed several individuals that helped him in the classroom, with the small business he runs, and in his growth and development as a person.

So many people. Friends, family, advisors. Like I said, J. King, Mike Laurence from the business department. He kind of helped me start my clothing line was an advisor for me. Gave me some good ideas. Jordan Chang in the communication department really got me on my hustle mentality, mindset, making things simpler. My barber back at home, just so many people contributed to my success. Joe too, of course he helps with Black Student Union and he's a huge advocate for me to just push myself to my best. He's actually made me want to make BSU more active the semester, more developed, because we did good last semester, but we're trying to do better.

Christian, being a student athlete did not have many teaching or advisor mentorship but had a tremendous support system and mentor thorough his soccer coach. When asked who helped him persist in college, Christian recounted how the almost military-like style of one of his coaches was effective in helping him persist

I guess the coaches on my team are pretty good with that...the coach who just left was a good, kind of a good guy. He was on my ass. If I missed a class, he would find out. Or if I was not getting the good grades, he'd kind of get on me, not punish me, but would like sit me down and be like, "what are you doing?" Like that kind of thing. I'd say the coaches was [*sic*] probably like a big thing because

[they'll] get you in the office or call you like right away. Like almost like a military type way, but I guess it worked.

Cobb also spoke positively about the mentors she had through her academic support program, TRiO. TRiO was an influential program throughout Cobb's academic college experience. When describing how the TRiO program has made an impact on her, she spoke about its director, and how she has become a positive figure in Cobb's life:

I know I can call Ms. Maya. I have her cell phone number. So I can always call Ms. Maya, even if she don't answer the first time, I know she's returning my phone call later on. So, that's why I stayed in the amount of resources [I have used].

By having mentors as a system of social support, the highly-at-risk participants were able to utilize them as a way to receive support, guidance, care, and trust through their first year of school and beyond.

Teachers and advisors. Lastly, teachers and advisors provided social support to their highly-at-risk students throughout their academic coursework. With academics being at the forefront of the collegiate journey, it is understandable how teachers and advisors would be critical to a student's success in college. Nicole struggled with her mental health throughout her time in college. She disclosed being hospitalized on multiple occasions for suicidal ideation. She was recently in the hospital for over a week while she was trying to recover from her mental health crisis. When she came back to class, she wanted to talk to her teachers to explain her absence and receive materials that she had missed when she was absent. She described an interaction with one of her teachers as she explained to him about her class attendance:

I went to him maybe a week after [when] I started going back to classes or whatever. I told him why I was in hospital. Just so he knew like, if I'm not in class, it's not because I'm trying to be rude. I didn't want him to be like, "Oh, like she just stopped caring." So, I explained to him what was going on and he was very understanding. He used things from his own experiences from the people that he's known or his self to kind of like make me feel like, okay, it's not a bad thing. He also like has been very understanding. If I need to miss a class, he's like, "It's okay, just let me know. If you don't think you can take the exam with the class, just let me know."...I guess having someone that understands and will give you like the time or help that you need when you really need it, is nice.

Not only have professors helped students succeed in the classroom, advisors also played an integral role in helping highly-at-risk students persist in their academic life. During her academic dismissal scare, Cobb's advisor reached out to her to make sure she had the proper resources to succeed:

My advisor, she was like, what is really going on? She was like, the classes that you're doing good and you're getting A's and B's, but the rest are F's so what is happening? You're clearly capable. Are you applying yourself? Do you have the resources?

During this time, Cobb met her mentor who told her about TRiO. Her freshman year, she had received an email notifying her that she could be in the TRiO program, but she did not know what it was or the benefits it could have for her. Once she got into the program and started to utilize her TRiO advisor, Cobb's grades drastically improved. For Cobb, her TRiO mentor was pivotal to her success, and was evident in her improvement from

freshman or sophomore year her grades now. Looking back to her sophomore year compared to her grades today, “like a total 360,” Cobb exclaimed.

When thinking of social support as a protective factor, it is key to have support both inside and outside of the classroom for students to be successful. By having these various supports students can receive assistance when needed and continue to challenge themselves to persist through their darkest moments. It is important to note that these students did not only have one form of support. They all had multiple support systems working together over their time at college, not just one support system their first year, in order to create the path of persistence to graduation.

High school preparation. One of the risk factors identified by Rural Midwest University was a particular urban school district. Therefore, the researcher wanted to capture some of participants’ high school experiences that may provide insight into their college performance. Four main subthemes emerged within the realm of high school preparation including (1) *high school involvement*, (2) *honors, advanced placement (AP) courses, and study hall*, (3) *college prep, ACT prep, and dual enrollment*, and (4) *teacher and counselor support*.

High School Involvement. High school involvement refers to the participants experiences in being involved in a high school extracurricular activity. Four out of the five participants spoke to being involved in high school. Many were involved in some kind of team sport while others were involved in charity work and the arts. Many of the participants spoke about how being involved in high school helped them become better leaders, understand time management skills, and to be dedicated to an organization.

Nicole spoke about how being active in sports, choir, and working an outside job helped her develop the time management skills that she supported her college success:

Being in high school, literally my time was always pretty much consumed because I would wake up, go to school, go to practice. And then like my junior year, I think that's when I started working. So, it'll be school, practice, work, home from work, sleep. So, it was like my days were pretty occupied. I guess it taught me how to manage my time and like make sure I had enough time to do everything.

Similarly, Cobb, who was the captain of her high school dance team described how the time management skills that she learned in high school aided in her college performance:

It really made me more aware of responsibility. And like dedication and it was just...added more structure to me to prepare for college. So, it was like, whenever I'm busy or I'm too tired, I always say, "I've done it before, I can do this." You know what I'm saying? So, it installed some, how do you say, like some important like values and strengths. So, like that's what I carry, you know, here. And then time management, it added that because we've had rehearsals or practices to like 6:30 at night... 7:30, so, like from the moment we got out of school from 3:30 to 7:30 sleep plus homework after. So, like that kind of like guiding me to, to like be on top of my stuff when I come to college too.

Christian spoke about how his high school sports career led him to become a collegiate athlete. He liked his routine from high school so much that he wished to pursue sports in college. He aspired to play college sports since high school. His involvement in sports helped his transition to college because, "it's a good routine that I've always been in. I

didn't really want a change I guess; I like sports at school." Whilst in high school, Dave was involved in varsity basketball and DECA, the Distributive Education Clubs of America, a club targeted at high school students wanting to go into business. He spoke about how being involved in high school helped him in different ways based on his involvement. When asked how his extracurricular activities prepared him for college, Dave described how basketball bolstered his competitive nature and his network:

Oh, well, basketball, I was a competitor. Always been a competitor. I've always tried to be the best of what I do. It allowed me to have networking opportunities.

DECA helped me experience the business side (his current major).

Though their high school involvement impacted the participants in different ways they learned crucial skills such as time management, routine, and dedication that transferred to their collegiate careers.

Honors, AP Courses, Study Hall. Given that attending high school in a particular urban school district was one of the risk factors, this theme describes the participants' opportunities to participate in advanced academic work. Participants explained how opportunities to participate in advanced academic work, like honors classes, AP courses and study hall, may have contributed to their college success. By having these opportunities available to them, it could potentially provide them college credits, preparedness for the collegiate academic workload, and the support from faculty and staff responsible for these programs, making it a protective factor in terms of academic preparedness.

In terms of honors courses and study hall, only one student participated in honors coursework and only one participant utilized study hall hour in their high school. Three

out of the five participants did not take any AP courses. This is significant because research has shown that students who participate in AP classes tend to do better on standardized tests, which can determine college enrollment and scholarship opportunities, and in GPA for general education classes in college (AP Collegeboard, 2016; Warne, 2017). Based on research, when covariates are not controlled, students who take AP courses had an average ACT composite score of a 26.5 compared to their non-AP peers at a 21-composite score (Warne, 2017). Additionally, students who score an average of 3 or higher on their AP tests earn anywhere between .03 and .96 higher GPA's in general education classes based on subject (AP Collegeboard, 2016). Those who did not partake in AP classes claimed it was because of social pressure and their feelings of not being capable enough to take them. Chris talked about how, because of the social issues he was facing in life, AP was not a good option for him:

My high school offered those dual credit classes and those AP classes. I didn't take any AP courses 'cause the situations I was going through in that time in my life it like, it.. it was going to be a disaster waiting to happen, I would've been so stressed out with all of the workload and everything, considering like the personal relationships that I was just going through that was really affecting me big time.

Cobb also had similar feelings about the workload, though she took an honors English and honors Spanish class one year, AP coursework was never seen as an option in her eyes:

I was always scared. I only took honors English, that was it. I didn't take anything and then I took Spanish honors. But I was always like afraid of taking AP 'cause everybody was like, it's so hard, so hard. Cause those are the classes that do

prepare you for college supposedly. But like, I was always like afraid of taking those classes because I heard they were hard.

Christian stated that his high school offered AP classes, but he did not have good enough grades to get into them. He claims, "They were offered, but you had to get your grades enough to get into them and I wasn't able to."

For those who took AP classes, they only took a few later in their high school career due to lack of accessibility or social pressure. Nicole talked about how she did not start taking AP course until her senior year because she was following her classmates' example:

The high school that I went to, we had lots of advanced placement programs and stuff. I didn't really start taking AP classes until my senior year cause...I don't know, everybody else made it easy on themselves. They're like, "I'm doing this easy class" and for some reason I was like, "I'm going to go for it," or whatever. So, I took AP Literature and Composition and I took AP Statistics. And I had AP Spanish my senior year, so I had all those classes together. I honestly think that the high school that I went to prepared me for college because I was always the type to kind of make sure I get my stuff in on time, like, and just to get my work done. I actually had really good study habits already on my, by myself. So that wasn't an issue. So, when I got here like most people's like, "oh, like it's actually harder." I didn't think it was a big transition at all. And I also think the AP classes I took senior year kind of prepared me for the workload as well.

Nicole was also the only student who had a study hall type of class offered to her during her lunch period where she could get homework help, tutoring, and other services. Nicole had the highest GPA out of all participants.

Taking these AP and honors courses can help provide students experience in the classroom as they graduate to college. By not taking these types of classes, these students could not be prepared for college workload based on their high school experiences.

College Prep, ACT Prep, and Dual Enrollment. The 3rd protective factor that was discovered within the theme of high school preparation is the participation in and access to College Prep, ACT Prep, and Dual Enrollment Courses. Similarly, to Honors, AP Courses, and Study Hall, the participants explained their opportunities to participate in college preparatory courses.

For one participant, college preparation was enhanced when their parents enrolled them in a private high school near a large Midwest city to avoid the city's public-school system. That participant, Christian, enjoyed his experience and felt that they prepared him for college, by teaching him studying and notetaking skills, as well as preparing him for college writing. In addition, his small private school provided him with that 'other parent' and 'good friend' experience:

You really knew the teachers. Like, I graduated with 204 kids in my class. You really knew every teacher you had, and they knew you very well. So that was kind of a big thing. It was almost like they're your other parent in a way or like, or like good friend. So yeah, it was cool. There was a couple of classes you take that they would teach you how to take notes or teach you how to study. That was kind of a big thing I think freshman, sophomore year, like early in high school. So then, in

junior senior they just kind of test your skills. And then in the summer they offered English ACT classes and then like English, just English classes overall for college and writing and like preparing you for like college writing.

Though Christian took the private high school route, some participants who went to public high school received this protective factor there. For example, Nicole utilized the lunch study hall program at her high school, and Chris enrolled in a dual credit class his junior year which helped him during his first year at the institution:

I did take one dual credit class at my community college because the year I took it, they weren't offering it inside the high school. I took it just to see what it was at my community college at home. It was pretty nice. Ironically, it transferred over here when I came into college, so I was like, ok cool.

Overall, all participants had varying experiences in terms of college prep work. While some participants perceived this to be significant to their academic careers, others did not. A student's personal motivation when it comes to academics did seem to play a role in their pursuit of college prep programs.

Teacher and Counselor Support. Another protective factor that emerged from the findings was teacher and counselor support. This was defined as participants' reference that social support, emotional support, and college preparedness assistance from high school teachers and counselors provided them with the tools needed to be successful. In addition to the classroom instruction, structural and emotional support from teacher and high school counselors was a contributing factor in helping the participants reach their collegiate goals. When Chris was asked about some of the tools, he had been given in

high school to be successful in college, he did not talk about course work or programs, but rather, the teachers in his school:

The teachers were a big part in like giving out those tools. We had some teachers that deducted points from you if you showed up late to class. There were some teachers who were very strict about the assignments that they assigned. There were some teachers that wouldn't take late assignments and there were some who would just take a whole bunch of points so you couldn't even get an A or a B and the highest you could go was a C. I did have teachers here at school who would do those things about their attendance policies and about their assignment policies. I had this one teacher for college algebra (in high school) who gave us a whole bunch work. Her workload was a lot. I actually had to do homework for her at home. 'Cause I was one of those people who if the homework doesn't get home at home then it's not getting done at school... no wait if the homework isn't getting done at school then it's not getting done at home. I did all of her homework like at home because I couldn't finish it in school and she explained to us at the end of that school year, "the reason why I assigned all this work is not because I want you guys to learn the material 'cause let's be honest you guys will probably forget this material once you graduate. But like this how college is. I want to teach you guys how to manage your time properly cause of workload and college is going to be a lot more than what I am assigning you now or what any of your other teachers are assigning you. So, you're going to have to properly learn how to manage your time in order to be successful."

Nicole also had a teacher influence her study habits. To get into the lunch study hall program, Nicole was nominated for the program by a teacher that saw her potential. Cobb also had someone at school that saw her potential, her high school guidance counselor.

Cobb spoke about how influential her counselor was to her college career:

If it wasn't really for my counselors in school, I wouldn't be in college if I'm being honest. I had taken it upon myself to apply to colleges. When I first got my ACT score it was a 13. My counselor was like, "that's really, really low. Try again. What happened?" I was stressed. I was overwhelmed. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know exactly... my mind wasn't in the test. So, she allowed me to – she gave me the information to retake it at a different school. I did. Got it back and I received I think a 20. I got recognized [because I] got the biggest jump, some people usually just get two points increase but I got like 4 or 5 points increase.

Cobb later explained that her counselor was the person that influenced her decision to go to college at all:

She always said that I was smart. Like she *always* said that I was smart. All the time. She was like, "You got this. You can go to college. You can do well. I can see it in you." And I was like, "Really?" because I've always been the one who is down on myself. She really is the one who made me be like, "you can do this. You can go retake your ACT. You can go apply. Don't give up on yourself. Just because you got this score that doesn't mean this is the end of your potential career and college." She really pushed me to my full potential and allowed me to see what I can accomplish. She really made that impact.

Throughout her first year of school, Cobb and her counselor spoke often and continually talk today through social media.

By having support and structure through their teachers and counselors, these participants were able to prepare themselves for college both academically and mentally. Their teachers and counselors became their protective factors by providing support and structure for the future.

On-Campus resources. One of Tinto's (2003) conditions for student success is that the student feels that the institution is helping to support them academically and socially. On-campus resources provide support for students as they go through their college journey. Based on the participants stories, five on-campus resources emerged to help students persist academically during their collegiate career. These resources included (1) *the university's writing center*, (2) *departmental tutoring*, (3) *career services and the university library*, (4) *TRiO services*, and (5) *the counseling center*.

Writing Center. This theme describes the participants' use of the writing center over their time in college. Three of the five participants spoke about using this resource during their college career. The institution has a writing center located in one of their academic buildings on campus. It is open for students Monday-Thursday 9am-3pm and 6pm-9pm and on Fridays from 9am until 1pm (Redacted Writing Center, 2020). This is a free service for all students who attend the institution.

When asked what about resources she has used to help her be a successful college student, Cobb said she utilized this resource for her English and communication classes, "The writing center, especially with my English classes I did and then my communication, I did - a lot of classes. I went there a lot." Dave also noted that he used

the writing center for his English classes, “the writing center I used to use a lot when I was in those core classes. Like 1001, 1002.” Nicole talked about using the writing center during her early years of school she said that she, “used to use it like freshman and sophomore year, but I haven't really had a ton of papers as I did in the past. So, I don't really need it.” Among the participants, the writing center seemed to be used heavily during their first two years of their education but not seen as helpful or a resource they needed anymore once getting into their general education credits.

Tutoring. At the institution where the study takes place, many academic departments offer tutoring that is free for students. The theme of tutoring illustrates the participants use of on-campus tutoring. Three out of the five participants talked about going to tutoring at some point during their academic career. Chris spoke about how tutoring helped him receive a higher grade in one of his difficult classes:

The school of business offer tutoring programs for some of their classes. And financial accounting, that was pretty... that was like....oh wow that was very tedious...I'm not terrible at math, I can do math, but the way that type of math was... it was mostly word problems and stuff like that. You gotta understand what the question is trying to ask. I was pretty much like, “oh just give me a problem and the steps on how to solve it.” And that's it. Financial accounting was pretty rough for me so I utilized the school of business tutoring, so I'll be able to pass the class. I was able to understand a bit and I ended up getting a B in the class.

Cobb also struggled in her math classes and utilized the math department's tutoring to help her get the grades she wanted, “I had math last semester. They helped me out a lot. They did. I was going to tutoring all the time, like three times a week and they really

helped me out.” Additionally, Dave used math tutoring. When asked what resources he used to be successful, he listed several and said that, “I use whatever I can to help me thrive.” By utilizing tutoring as a resource, these students were able to get through challenging classes and continue their passion for long term goals.

Career Services and the library. Career Services on campus supports students with their post-graduation goals including interview prep, resume and cover letter skills, and support in choosing a career path. Some participants used this service during their college career. Chris spoke about how career services helped him choose his major of study:

I used career services the beginning of my sophomore year because I didn't know what I wanted to do. I changed my major three times. They helped me out figure out what would be the best major for me to have, that's how I found health administration.

He also spoke about how Career Services helped him prepare for his job search as he graduates in May:

I used career services not too long ago because for one of my assignments for one of my classes, we needed to write a resume for ourselves to include in our health portfolio. I had no clue how to write a resume, so I went to career services and the person they assigned me to, she helped me out a lot. She helped me build a nice-looking resume because I tried to do it myself and I hated it and I just ended up deleting it and just tossing it away. So, it was clean, it was nicely formatted, it was very to the point, and it outlined my work ethic very nicely and I'm just like I like, “I like this.” So yeah, career services helped me out a lot.

Others spoke about how the campus library has helped them reach their academic goals. Similarly, to career services, Christian said it was the people at the library have been some of the biggest tools that have helped him succeed:

I go to the library a lot and like the library resources, but I'm kind of getting used to it. So, I just kind of have my own way of doing things now. But I'd say the library was probably my biggest source. If you have any questions, you can walk like down the stairs and talk to somebody or up the stairs. The library was a big thing.

TRiO. TRiO is a federal grant-based program for students who identify as low-income, first generation college students, or students with disabilities. This program aims to help these students academically succeed and is offered from middle school until postbaccalaureate work (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Though not everyone can be a part of TRiO, the subtheme TRiO illustrates the participants' experiences who were involved in the program.

Cobb claimed that TRiO made the most significant impact on her college career. Through the support both emotionally and academically she received from TRiO, she was able to make significant improvements to her grades. She at one time was on academic probation because her grades got so low. She used TRiO services to be removed from the academic probation list and was able to boost her GPA.

When I got enrolled in TRiO, it was the end of spring of freshman year. And then I wasn't...I never really met with my advisor because I was still in that mindset of, I don't care. I don't even want a coach. I don't want to go to school anymore. Thanks, Chloe, but I don't care. Literally. Then towards the end of my sophomore

year, I took it upon myself to go back to the TRiO office and let them know like, “Hey, you know, I might have to resubmit my application again.” Then my TRiO advisor, Richie, she really helped me, and you can see the improvement from freshman and sophomore year to now with my grades. Like it was like a total 360.

When asked what resources have influenced her to continue in her college career, Cobb gives a lot of credit to TRiO:

I think it's TRiO. It very...definitely changed my whole college career because it really helped me. Some people - some students, think it's hard because they got somebody down their back, and you don't with TRiO. You choose when to meet - whenever you want to meet and it's just good. We got free printing. I'm there all the time doing homework.

Similarly, to Cobb, Nicole also had positive experiences with TRiO. Nicole enjoyed that “they provide a nice quiet small place where you can do your work and they offer tutors and stuff.”

Counseling Center. Research has shown that students who struggle with mental illnesses are at higher risk for dropping out compared to their peers (Salzer, 2011). The institution where the study takes place offers free counseling to all of its students. The Counseling Center as a resource refers to participants using the counseling center as an emotional support system. Four of the five participants utilized counseling services at some point during their collegiate careers. When Chris was at his absolute low point, he was thinking about dropping out of school. He was having a hard time making authentic relationships and felt alone at a place three hours from home. Chris spoke about how by

going to counseling, he was able to work through this mental health issues in order to stay in school.

I started going to counseling services. Just seeing a counselor and talking about the way that I'm feeling and how it was affecting me and how like I was thinking about not coming here for spring semester really helped me out. [My counselor] really opened up my eyes to different parts of my characteristics - different parts of like my personality that I didn't realize, and it really helped. He really showed me the type of people I need to surround myself by and become friends with as well as what I'm striving for in the future. It's what's kept me here. And past that rough time.

Cobb has a similar experience with her counselor when she was struggling with her mental health during her academic crisis. She spoke about how her counselor got her back on track and the importance on continuing to go to her counselor for help:

The counselors helped too. My counselor was great. If she's still here I should go, because I haven't been since 2018? Yeah 2018. Only when I really needed it. And I think it's okay to go even though I'm doing okay. I should go to cause you're never know, especially with me. You never know. I can be happy one day and be like emotional wreck the next. But yeah, those are like some really helpful resources.

Dave and Nicole also listed counseling services as a resource when asked what some resources on campus that were have helped them during their undergraduate career.

Involvement. The third condition for student success as described by Tinto (2003) is student involvement. Similar to providing students' support for academics and

social life, universities need to provide opportunities for involvement for academic and social groups (2003). Tinto's research shows that the more a student is involved, the more likely they are to be retained continually throughout their college career. For the theme of involvement, two major subthemes emerged: (1) *on campus involvement* and (2) *community involvement*. Four of the five participants talked about their involvement at school and others spoke on how they have been involved in their community outside of the campus community.

On-campus involvement. Participants showed being involved on campus in a variety of ways. For the purpose of this subtheme, it does not matter what the participant was involved in, as long as they were involved in either a school sport, registered student organization, or the performing arts. Of the participants, two of them were involved in the National College Athletic Association (NCAA) athletics at the university. Both used athletics as a way to continue old habits from high school to keep a good routine. Christian said that the reason he is at the Rural Midwest University is because of his interest to play soccer in college. He got on to the soccer team, so he decided to attend school Rural Midwest University. Christian spoke about how at times he wanted to transfer institutions but because of his team and his drive to play the sport, he stayed.

Nicole had similar experiences with her athletic career. She was very involved in athletics in high school and wanted to continue that passion in college. Her main goal when she came to college was to walk onto the track and field team.

My classmates, my RA, everybody knew that I had one main goal: to get on that track team and I had to walk on. So, that was really hard. I had to race against girls who were already on the team. My first year I didn't make it - I thought I

should have because my second year I did worse during the trials - but I finally made it. That was one of my biggest goals. Like I want to be good enough to make this team.

This goal helped Nicole stay busy and continue to make good grades to be able to stay on the team.

Others were involved in registered student organizations on campus. Dave had numerous experiences on campus including being the president of the Black Student Union on campus.

I'm the president of [traditionally marginalized student organization], what else? I'm a STRONG mentee member, NAACP member. So yeah, I'm involved. I'm trying to make the most of my college experience.

Dave continued to say that being involved is an important element to be a successful college student. Dave believed being involved in both the classroom and in registered student organizations is extremely important to a student's success in college.

College success to me is pushing yourself past your limits and just being proud of the work you did. Not only in in the classroom, but also being in the orgs, getting involved on campus and meeting friends, just enjoying making the best of your college experience. My parents either told me the two best times of your life will either be in college or high school. And for me high school was terrible. So, it was college. At first, I was thinking, "nah college isn't the one, high school is better," but no college is a lot better for me.

Being involved in performing arts also had an impact on participants' success in college. Cobb was involved in the theater department on campus and spoke about how one of the plays she was in drastically affected her college career:

So that [the play] was life changing for me because still to this day, someone comes up to me and says, "You did so amazing. You touched me with all your pieces." It's just that experience, like the rehearsal process and everything was just... first of all, people don't understand the amount... we put in three months, three entire months and a half maybe. We created something that was so needed here. We had a diverse cast and it showcased the struggles of women, not Black /African American, not Asian - women.

To Cobb, the play gave her an emotional support system through her class and her director. The play gave her confidence in ways she did not know where possible and gave her the ability to see herself as a role model on campus.

Community involvement. Community involvement describes a participant's involvement in the community outside of campus. This subtheme focuses in on community service projects and giving back to the local community. One participant, Christian, grew up in a service-based household. When he was in high school, his parents made community service a priority for their family. This instilled a lifelong passion for helping others and giving back. He spoke about one of his community services projects when he was younger:

My parents would take me and my brother to West Africa to work there. [We did] cool stuff there. So, like, community service is kind of a big thing too. So, it was

like sports, school, and then community service. It's almost social too - do it with your friends. Community service is pretty big.

Later in the conversation when Christian was asked about his goal setting strategies, he spoke about how he includes community service as part of his priorities alongside his sports and academic course work.

Research Question #2: How do students perceive resiliency and grit?

Participants were asked a series of questions ranging from their high school experiences to their last year of college experiences that shaped how they persist overtime. These experiences were viewed through a lens of resiliency, grit, and the student's motivation to be able to persist through challenging times (Table 4.3).

Resiliency. In an attempt to gain some insight into participants' conceptualization of resiliency (a trait often attributed to student persistence) participants were asked to describe what resilience meant to them. Many spoke about being able to come back stronger from their setbacks and continue growing as people. For example, Cobb described her life as almost the epitome of resiliency even if she does not always understand how she does it:

That's basically my life. I get thrown with so many different bad obstacles almost, I don't know, three times-four times a year. And not even that, probably even more, but I always bounce back. I've always been able to pick myself up. I don't know how, and just keep going. So like, I think that it's so important. Resiliency means so much to me because some people feel like they can't. I always tell them if I could, because when I look at my transcript, I don't understand what I was doing but it's like no matter how many times you fall, it's just how you gonna pick

yourself back up. Are you going stay, and make the same mistakes or are you going to change? Are you going to make some changes or are you going to evolve and grow?

Nicole was unsure of what resilience was at first. When she thought about it for a moment, she equated it to knowing that not all setbacks are permanent, and that life should also include teachable moments:

I guess resilience to me is understanding that the hard times that you're going through now are temporary. Everything that you're going through now has a purpose. Getting what you want should not be easy because if it was easy then it wouldn't really mean that much to you. So, I guess like every struggle now is helping to build your future. So hopefully when you finally make it to where you want to be, you don't have to go through many of those things that you did in the past or like you would have learned enough to know how to like handle those situations.

For Christian, his teammates' academic efforts in the face of their failing grades and reminded him of resiliency:

Two of my roommates have not failed out, but have gotten almost all F's like one, two semesters in a row: and one, three semesters in a row, and they're both back in my house. One is going to school here; one's working to go to another school.

So like, just kind of like, not taking the punches but like getting back up I'd say.

When the participants were asked if they considered themselves to be a resilient person all said yes with confidence. Dave described that being resilient was a part of his identity that has shaped him into the person he is today:

I would describe myself as, a self-made motivator, a hustler, a competitor, somebody who just wants to push themselves to be the greatest you can. I just want to be remembered for being great in every avenue, everything I did.

Chris also spoke about how his resiliency has shaped him into the person he is today and the person he would like to continue to be in the future:

There is so many things that I've dealt with and stuff like that that has affected me but I learned from those mistakes and I try not to affect me and of course, I'm not going to lie, there one or two things that still bother me that happened in the past but like I'm not going to let those two things that I still dwell on stop my future and stop what I want to achieve and everything.

When Nicole was asked if she was a resilient person, she said her resilience has helped her to be a better student:

Oh yes! It's like every semester brings a new challenge and then it's like sometimes I would be like, I don't know if I could do this, but then it's like I have to think if I give up now, then to me the way I see it, if I give up now, then basically I have no purpose because it's like I know my purpose.

Grit. For the purpose of this study, grit is defined as the perseverance and passion with long term goals. While resiliency is being able to bounce back after horrible setbacks, grit is resiliency's partner to the motivation to complete these goals once a person has been able to comeback from their set-back. When some of the participants were asked what resilience means to them, they described grit instead. For example, Dave was asked what resiliency meant to him, he described the perseverance for long term goals:

Resiliency is kind of ... the word resiliency means... it's like persistence. If I'm right. Correct me if I'm wrong. It's never giving up on something that you set. Like a goal for yourself. It's constantly pursuing it with ambition, with passion, perseverance, like you said, you said resilience, but perseverance. It's like a hustler mentality. Mindset. You're gonna get it by any means necessary.

Chris had similar thoughts about persistence and passion within one's self.

Don't let like anything stop you. Just keep going no matter how rough or hard it is. Anybody is capable of getting through anything as long as they set their mind to it. So like just like sticking through the tough times and just having faith and just like believing in yourself - that's the big thing, just believe in yourself and know that you can do this and you will be able to conquer and get through anything and stuff like that too.

Participants were asked if they set goals for themselves. All participants spoke about their goal setting techniques and strategies. All spoke about how they are constantly making new goals for themselves to complete and actually follow through on these goals. Most of the participants talked about setting realistic obtainable goals. Cobb shared with me her goal setting process:

I normally just write them out, like in my planner, or in my phone, and my notes. I had a goal for this year that I [had] never really done in the new year. New goals, new me - I never was into it, but this year I made it. I'm going to make some goals for myself to like not get too caught up in outside and how to have a healthy balance of back home situations in school - don't allow that to interfere

with what I have going on because my mind is always on goal. I'm always thinking about stuff.

Similarly, to Cobb, Dave spoke about how he is always reaching and setting new goals:

Yes. Huge goal setter. I feel like, it just makes it even better because once you reach those goals, you just gotta keep going. Now you gotta set new one, you have a new mentality. Okay, what's next? Always that what's next mentality.

Additionally, Chris spoke about how he was starting to shift his focus from short-term goals to long-term goals and how that was going to help him in his future:

I used to be someone who does short term goals and make plans on how to achieve those goals...but I realized, sometimes when you make those itineraries on how to achieve those short term goals, the short-term goals it doesn't always necessarily plan out the way you want to. And it frustrates me when it doesn't happen. So, at the moment, I'm trying to go with the flow. And instead of making short term goals like I have long term goals that I'm wanting to achieve.

Christian spoke on how without goals, what is there really to do. Christian said that, "I'd say definitely goal-setter because I don't think there's anything to work for you if you don't have a goal."

Motivation. To determine whether resiliency and grit were caused from an outside factor or an internal factor, the motivation for why the participants persisted was analyzed. This was broken down into two categories: external motivation and internal motivation.

External motivation. Three participants spoke about money as their main source of external motivation. They were going to college to have a career where they could feel

secure in their financial future. Some spoke about being able to support their future families while others focused on their own personal financial goals. A major factor that surfaced was a family member or mentor telling some of the participants that if they want to make money in the future, they had to go to college. When asked what his main influence was for coming to college was, he said it was all about living the lifestyle he wanted to live. Coming from a low-income single parent home, he was determined to further his education in order to live how he wanted to:

I always wanted to live a particular lifestyle, that I feel like I deserve. I work so hard and like I've always been working hard like ever since. School was always my number one priority and then like I was focused on working and making as much money as I can.... That's my main motivational factor I want to live a luxury lifestyle.

Dave spoke about how going to college would help support his future family and how he wanted to give his future children a better life just like his family before him had done for him:

[I] want to live a life for me and my girlfriend and give back to my family. Just living the life that I want....My grandmother, she didn't have to say anything. She would just always give me what I needed and if I knew she didn't have it, I hated having to ask. And then my uncle, he just didn't have the opportunities that I'm presented with myself 'cause he went to college, but he never got his bachelor's. And then seeing how hard my parents worked pushed me to want to be great, to want to be better than them. While my kids will be better than me. It'll just continue.

Similar, to Dave, Nicole's parents want her to live a better life than the one they gave her.

My stepmother really encouraged it because she went to school and my dad encouraged it as well because he wanted me to be better than him because he wasn't able to like get a college education cause he kind of had us at a younger age. Although, he's an entrepreneur, he has his own body shop and stuff so he provides for us, but it's like kinda harder for him. He didn't want us to like struggle as much as he is even though he's doing this job.

Additionally, this is the only time Nicole's parents even spoke to her about college was talking to her about receiving more money. When she was asked about who talked about college in her home, she couldn't think of any particular examples. Her brother did not really talk about it and when her parents spoke to her about it the main topic of conversation was money:

My older brother never really talked about college or whatever, but I guess I heard from my parents...but my mom and dad used to tell me if you go to college, then you get more money.

Internal motivation. Several of the participants spoke to their internal motivation to persist and make it through college. Though they have had tremendous setbacks, almost all of the participants spoke to how they had to rely on themselves to persevere. Cobb reflected on retaking her ACT to get a better score for college. When she retook her test and scored significantly higher than her first test, there was no talk in her home about going to college; her foster mom was just happy for her. There was no influence from her foster mom to go to college or even think about applying:

So I went to apply for schools and stuff like that. And then like I just told my parents, “hey I retaken my ACT and I got this score” and she was like, “yay! Wahoo!” but it wasn’t a thing of like you have to go to college or you’re going to college or anything. I just did it myself. And since I’m an independent student because I’m a ward of the state I don’t need any parent income or anything of that sort. So, I just did it myself. I just applied and went on college visits with my school. And I made my choice.

Nicole had a similar experience with her college decisions, since she got such high grades and is a high achieving student, her parents did not talk to her much about college because they just assumed, she would go. Nicole said that going to college was just always something she wanted to do. She wanted to go to college from a young age. When asked what has made her stay in school despite her depression and mental health concerns, she said she always goes back to her original mentality and love for school:

I guess myself, because I know as much as I wanted to stop, school is very important to me. Like ever since I was little it's been very important. So, I'm like, I don't see myself doing anything else, if I'm not here, it's like what am I going to do? Like it's no purpose if I'm not getting my education

Chris also spoke on the importance of education and completing college for yourself. When asked what makes someone a successful college student, Chris expressed that to be a successful college student, a person must be in college for themselves, not because someone is telling them to be there or influencing their decision to stay:

To be successful in college legitimately think about why you’re in college. Like are you there for somebody else or are you really there for yourself? ‘Cause

honestly that'll make or break your experience in college cause if you're in school for somebody else you're... It's like you're not doing anything for yourself you're just trying to achieve these things to make one person proud. You're not, is this what you really want to be doing? Are you really going to be happy doing this career?

Dave spoke about wanting to be a person that people looked up to. He really valued how people viewed him. This shaped how he presented himself and his work ethic throughout his college experience. He wanted to leave a legacy at Rural Midwest University as:

Somebody who not only was real, but somebody you could relate to, somebody who just, you felt like you could talk to on a daily basis. Like you're just a normal person. 'Cause me being the president of BSU, I'm talking to people all the time. I don't want people thinking that I'm better than them or I'm stuck up or I'm cocky, but I just want people to remember me for being a great kind, caring, real person. Just real. 'Cause it's, it's hard, finding real people nowadays. Real is rare.

From these examples, it can be assumed that intrinsic motivation is a key factor to a student's success in college. Overall, the participants utilized their internal drive to persist and continue through their college careers.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings of semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with five participants about their experiences as highly at-risk seniors persisting to graduation. The study concentrated on the lived experiences of students who had four or more risk factors determined by the university. Although all participants had different experiences, their experiences shared some common themes. When thinking about

question one, “What protective factors contribute to the persistence of highly-at-risk students at a four-year university?” four main themes emerged including *Social Support, High School Preparation, On-Campus Resources, Involvement*. Themes discovered in response to the question “What is the nature of these protective factors?” included *Resiliency, Grit, and Motivation*. These themes added to the understanding of how highly-at risk college seniors persisted throughout their college experience. The findings in this chapter will be discussed further in Chapter V.

Chapter V

Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

This phenomenological study was conducted to investigate how highly-at-risk students persist despite the odds against them. More specifically, this study sought to discover the protective factors that contribute to persistence among highly-at-risk college seniors preparing for graduation from a four-year public university. The researcher was interested in answering two questions: What protective factors contribute to the persistence of highly-at-risk students at a four-year university? What is the nature of these protective factors? Participants answered open-ended questions in one-on-one semi-structured interviews about their experiences starting in high school to their expected college graduation date. The study focused on experiences starting in high school because a student's K-12 education can make affect their chances to be a successful college student. Research shows that some of the biggest risk factor that can inhibit a student's chance of success in college are academic preparation, ACT/SAT scores, and academic underpreparedness (Attewell & Riesel, 2011; Harackiewicz, Tauer, Barron, & Elliot, 2002; Horton, 2015).

This chapter includes a discussion of the major findings that were revealed from this qualitative inquiry. These are presented within the framework of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory (SCT), Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems/developmental ecology theory (1994), and Sanford's challenge and support theory (1966). The limitations of the study, recommendations for student affairs professionals working in higher education, and recommendations for future research are also presented.

Discussion

According to the 2017 graduation report by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), only 40.6% of students who enroll in four-year institutions graduate within four years of being enrolled. The graduation rate slowly increases the longer one is enrolled at the institution with a 55.8% graduation rate at five years and 59.4% after six years (NCES, 2017). This means, just over half of the students who are enrolling in four-year public institutions are graduating college within six years of being at a particular institution. Of the 59% who make it to graduation, many experience challenges and barriers that would make graduation seem impossible. These challenges, or risk factors as they were referred to in this study, can vary, and could include financial constraints, homelessness, ACT/SAT scores, student employment, and academic underpreparedness (Attewell & Riesel, 2011; Harackiewicz, et al., 2002; Horton, 2015). In order to find how students overcome these barriers to persist to graduation, a qualitative study may provide insight to student affairs professionals and institutions on what resources these at-risk students are using and how they are using them to persist to graduation. Several theories could have been used to help guide this study, however, the researcher selected Bandura's (1978) social cognitive theory, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, and Sanfords (1966) challenge and support theory to provide direction for this study.

Bandura uses the triadic reciprocal causation model to explain the interactions between behaviors, personal factors, and the environments in which people live (Bandura, 1978). Though the factors interact in a bidirectional fashion, they all do not make equal contributions at the same time. Instead, the interaction depends on what is

most important in the person's life at the time (Bandura, 1978). These are in continuous interactions among the behaviors, personal factors, and environments. Bandura explained that people's reactions to stimuli do not just happen, rather, reactions are an internal process through cognitive thinking. This cognitive thinking is based on observation, perception, self-efficacy, and information that one has in their head. It is these factors and more, according to Bandura, that let a person know how to react to stimuli (Bandura, 1978).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems (1979) has been used in resiliency research by breaking down the individual mind into a variety of temperaments, self-esteem patterns, attribution style, problem-solving skills, and other foundations for psychological coping strategies (Ungar, 2011). Researchers have looked at how the systems in Bronfenbrenner's theory create a path for resiliency. According to the research, the microsystem includes the family, peers, and teachers of the individual. The mesosystem includes interactions within the microsystem that help establish the amount of accessible resources for an individual that impact their chances of success.

Sanford's (1966) challenge and support theory explains that in order for students to experience growth, there needs to be an equal balance of challenges that students face and enough support systems available in order for them to overcome said challenges. In other words, when challenges arise and one does not have the skills, knowledge, or attitude to cope during a situation, an adequate amount of support needs to be provided to the individual in order for them to succeed (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). It is within these frameworks that the following discussion is presented.

The study revealed 5 major findings: (1) Social support from family, friends and significant others, mentors, teachers and advisors, serve an important role in ameliorating the negative impact of barriers to highly-at-risk college students; (2) Institutional support such as the writing support services, tutoring services, counseling services, career services, and programs such as TRiO are important to the highly-at-risk student's persistence; (3) personal factors such as community and on-campus involvement could play an important role to some highly-at-risk-students; (4) students' personal cognitive factors are important mediators to their ultimate success; and (5) Positive attitude towards mental health services could be critical to students' ultimate success. These findings correspond well with past research which suggests that academically resilient students use their environmental and personal strengths to their advantage to help protect them from circumstances that could lead them to academic failure (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes 2009). Students who display resilient tendencies often have environmental advantages, protective factors, that have helped contribute to their success. In the current study, when answering the first research question of what protective factors contribute to the persistence of highly-at-risk students at a four-year university, the idea of support was universal among participants. Some support was offered at the university through programs and services while other support was received through family, friends, and mentors. For instance, some students utilized on campus academic resources such as the writing center or on campus tutoring while others used emotional support from their family, friends, and mentors. All students utilized both kinds of support at different times to allow them to persist throughout their collegiate career.

The use of support and the different kinds of support illustrate Bandura's (1978) triadic reciprocal causation model, which shows how the environment and personal factors influence behavior, which then influences personal factors. As students' challenges arise, they utilized their cognitive skills (personal factor) to seek support in their environment, working simultaneously with their support systems to impact their academic outcome (behavior). By focusing on what was most important to the student's life at any particular time (Bandura, 1978) all three elements worked together to impact students' self-efficacy beliefs, one's belief in their ability to produce desired results for their actions. Bandura (2001) purported that self-efficacy plays a key role in shaping the course of an individual's life. These beliefs in one's actions can be empowering or devastating depending on if a person believes they can, or they cannot, accomplish a task (Bandura, 1997). Support systems can be instrumental in boosting students' academic self-efficacy, propelling them to take the necessary actions to be successful, leading to them to persist toward their graduation goals.

Participants in this study were all at high-risk of dropping out compared to their peers who had lower numbers of risk factors present. Using Sanford's (1966) challenge and support theory as a guide, we can expect that these students require higher levels of support in order to achieve collegiate success. By all of the participants speaking about support in various ways, this shows how students used their protective factors to counteract their at-risk status in order to obtain their degree.

Students perceptions on resilience and grit. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory in support of Bandura's (1978) triadic reciprocal causation model was used to understand the systems in which a student's behavior, personal factors, and

environment come together to establish a resilient attitude. By looking into the various ecological systems of the participants, patterns can be seen of the participants' levels of resilience and grit. Furthermore, when looking at Bandura's triadic reciprocal causation model, if any of the three factors are not working with the other two, it can cause major setbacks for the student's life. For example, if a student is not in an environment where they can be successful, the other two will not be able to effectively work with the environment, leading to low self-efficacy.

Many of the participants saw themselves as a resilient person. Some spoke about how they have been resilient their whole lives. Cobb, for example, spoke about how she has to overcome many obstacles in a year and "bounce back" from these obstacles. She viewed resilience as a part of growing as a person. When asked if she was a resilient person, she ended her statement with, "Are you going stay and make the same mistakes or are you going to change? Are you going to make some changes or are you going to evolve and grow?"

For others, there was a blurred concept between the distinction of resiliency and grit. When asked what resilience was, two of the participants actually described more of a grit mindset. Dave spoke about being a "hustler" and always reaching for new goals and Chris spoke about resilience as "[not letting] anything stop you. Just keep going no matter how rough or hard it is." This language is more commonly associated with grit, or the perseverance and passion for long term goals.

Many of the students spoke about being intrinsically motivated and pushing themselves to reach the end. This internal motivation helped the students channel their inner grit and resiliency to persist through their collegiate career. Students also had some

external motivation through wanting to have a better life for themselves and their future families. The participants felt that if they graduated, they could get a good paying job which could lead to financial stability.

Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals

Student affairs professionals can provide support, guidance, and resources to their highly-at-risk students in order to help them to succeed in the collegiate environment.

The following recommendations are suggested for practice.

- *Create better partnerships with high schools to minimize the high-school college skills gap.* Some participants expressed that the skills they were taught in high school did not transfer to their college careers. Administrators or other educational personnel at the high school and university level can work together at the curriculum level to ensure that high-school juniors and seniors are being scaffolded towards a more college ready skill set. By creating better relationships with high schools and communicating what skills are being taught, this could close the gap between high school preparedness levels for college and students staying in school.
- *Provide mandated mental health training to all professionals.* Implement mandated mental health training for all professionals on campus. Creating an educated staff on mental health issues and how to effectively help students who are struggling could not only lead to help retention efforts for the university but could also save lives.
- *Create strong supportive relationships outside of the classroom.* Create relationships outside of the classroom setting. Be open with students to build trust,

dependability, and respect which can lead students coming to you when they are in crisis and at risk of dropping out.

- *Create increased flexibility in services offered.* Students who are highly-at-risk may have difficulty accessing services on campus due to their complex schedules. For example, many of the students interviewed spoke about having to work to help pay for school. If a student works during the only time when services are offered, they will not be able utilize them. By offering flexible services such as hours outside of the 9-5 day or virtual services could be helpful to students.
- *Understand the importance of peer and family influence.* Family and friends have a large influence on student behavior, especially if they are at a school far away from home. It is important to understand these influences in order to have an idea of what struggles the student is going through and how their support system may or may not be a positive influence.
- *Promote a culture of positive mental health.* By professionals creating a culture of positive mental health, it could help create an environment where students to feel comfortable to ask for help when they are struggling. If student affairs professional can find out student problems when they are first starting, they could offer solutions earlier, making a student stay in school longer.
- *Understand that students' risks go beyond the ones defined by the university.* During this study many of the participants expressed risks that were beyond the eight that the institution defined. Some of these included being in the foster care system, growing up in a single parent household, and struggling with mental illness. It is important understand that when working with highly-at-risk students,

they may have some risks (the unidentified or invisible risks) that go beyond what the university reports; meaning that they will be handling multiple risks layering up against them.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study was conducted to contribute to existing research by analyzing the lived experiences of five highly-at-risk college seniors anticipating graduation at University A, with four or more risk factors, at a public, mid-sized institution in the Midwest. Though some valuable information was discovered regarding the experiences of these students, future research is needed to fill the gaps. The following are recommendations for future research.

- *Conduct a similar study at different size institutions.* Different size institutions may offer a different perspective on what factors have shaped participants college career. Larger institutions may offer a larger pool of participants to speak potentially creating more or different themes.
- *Conduct this study with larger sample of participants with a more diverse pool of students.* Having a larger sample size with a more diverse pool can add depth to the study by adding additional protective factors that the participants used based on their personal experiences.
- *Conduct a longitudinal study.* A longitudinal study would allow the researcher to follow the participants from their high school years until they graduated college. This would allow the researcher to observe their experiences while they were happening rather than having to have participants recall experiences that happened years ago.

- *Conduct a similar study with the topic being first-generation highly-at-risk seniors.* Three out of five participants were first-generation-college students. In addition to be a highly-at-risk student, first generation college students face additional challenges. There is a significant gap between the 33% of first-generation college students who drop out before receiving their bachelor's degree compared to their non-first-generation counter parts at 26% (NCES, 2018).

Limitations

Some shortcomings are endemic of the research process. First, it is important to note that qualitative approaches are vulnerable to specific limitations that may threaten the trustworthiness of the findings. Six limitations were identified in this study. The first was limited exposure time with participants. I spent 30-60 minutes with each student in one space at the end of their collegiate career. I was unable to observe them during their first three years of college, in the classroom, non-academic campus involvements, or at home, to offer a broader lens on their experiences.

Additionally, the study focused on one small subset of highly-at-risk participants only being able to interview five out of the potential 68 participants who experienced four or more risk factors determined by the university. Therefore, the participants' experiences do not necessarily transfer to all highly-at-risk students and University A.

Another limitation is the transferability of the findings (Malterud, 2001). A drawback to qualitative research is that it is difficult for qualitative research findings to be transferred to larger populations with the same degree of certainty as quantitative research (Ochieng, 2009). With institutions ranging in size, location, and demographic

information, the findings from a predominantly White, rural, mid-sized institution may not be transferable to all institutions.

Thirdly, the researcher as an instrument was a limitation (Anderson, 2010). A disadvantage to qualitative research is that the research relies on the knowledge of the researcher and the researcher can be influenced by their own personal experiences and biases (Anderson, 2010). Qualitative researchers also choose the amount of time spend on the study, determine if the data is effective enough to establish solid themes, and how the data becomes a narrative that can become persuasive (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The presence of the researcher may also affect the participants reply to the interview protocol (Anderson, 2010). To combat these limitations, I acknowledged my personal biases, picked a central location for both the participant and the researcher, and worked with the thesis chair to develop themes.

Another limitation of this study was that it can be challenging to contact students to be a part of the study. With the students being considered highly-at-risk, they do not always utilize their institutional email. In order to find participants for the study, I had to send emails to students' advisors to encourage participation and go to student organization meetings where highly-at-risk seniors may be involved to present the opportunity to participate in my research. It took several months to find willing participants to complete this study.

The final limitation of the study is that qualitative research is difficult to replicate and low numbers of participants can be a negative factor. For this study in particular, it can also be difficult to replicate based on a university's at-risk factor guide or the inability to receive university data sets to contact participants. It is uncertain, of there

were important differences between the experiences of those who volunteered to participate and those who did not. For example, a student who has a significant need gap, who is compelled to work many hours to help fund their education, may have different experiences, or access to the services provided.

Conclusion

A qualitative study was conducted to discover the persistence of highly-at-risk college seniors at a mid-sized, public, rural university in the Midwest. More specifically, I sought to discover the protective factors that contribute to persistence among highly-at-risk college seniors preparing for graduation from a four-year public university while using a resilience-based approach. In regard to my first question, “What protective factors contribute to the persistence of highly-at-risk students at a four-year university?,” overall findings were congruent with previous research which found that protective factors that contributed to academic resilience included themes such as social support, effective school counselors, dedicated teachers, and community involvement (Williams et al., 2014). With this, I conclude that highly-at-risk students need support from multiple levels in order to succeed, and that these supports need to be provided from the time the student begins to the time they exit the institution, to ensure the best outcome. Not only do they need academic support from programs and initiatives, but they also need social and emotional support from family, friends, mentors, and counselors; some of which are present on campus and others are not. By having support in multiple areas, the student will not only persist academically to graduation, but also gain skills, establish relationships, and grow into thriving people.

With regards to what is the nature of these factors, the overall findings contribute to the ideals of resiliency and grit. I conclude that highly-at-risk students have an internal sense of resilience and grit to reach their graduation goals. Additionally, these are most robust in an environment which communicates a high degree of care. Many of the students had supportive players in their lives, who often went the extra mile to communicate their care to students. Sometimes these were intense, or military-like. Though they have faced setbacks, whether it be academic, financial, or related to mental health, all students found a way to stay in school whether they had support or not. This internal motivation to graduate is something that can be helped by the protective factors and shaped by the environments in which they live but ultimately comes from the inner person. It is doubtful, that in the absence of this inner grit and a sense of resiliency, that some highly-at-risk students would truly overcome their setbacks.

As a qualitative researcher, I do not promote an objective reality. Conversations with the participants affected me, and I had an effect on my participants. Conducting this study has given me an impactful learning experience and has sparked a passion for student retention and success. I have obtained understanding on the nature of qualitative research and the many phases of the research and writing process. I have discovered the importance of research and how it can provide insight and awareness to issues concerning higher education.

My personal experiences with the findings included commonality with being labeled all of my life as an “at-risk” student based on my environmental and financial status. Many of the participants stories of leaning on family and friends for support during tough times was similar to my own. I was prepared to hear what academic

resources students used in order to help them with their education. Something that surprised me to learn was how many students utilized counseling services on campus. I am relieved that they felt confident and brave enough to reach out for that support but am alarmed by how many used the resource due to a mental health issue.

Through this study, I have learned important information that I will be able to apply in a variety of situations throughout my career as a student affair professional. I have always been passionate about supporting vulnerable students and this has given me more base information to effectively care for my students. I will continue to be a lifelong learner to further discover how I can best support the students I serve. Many of the challenges that highly-at-risk students face are similar to those that non-at-risk students face, but with another layer added to it. For example, a non-at-risk student may be solely able to dedicate their time to their school work while a highly-at-risk student might have to work multiple jobs in order to pay tuition just so they can have the chance to attend classes.

As collegiate environments continue to become more diverse, student affairs professionals, faculty, staff, and the institution need to be aware of the challenges that these highly-at-risk students go through and support their needs. By understanding what helps these students, colleges and universities will be able to better support their needs which can in turn increase nationwide retention and graduation rates.

As highly-at-risk students continue to come to college, they will use their inner resilience and grit combined with the support from their institution, family, and friends, to create equitable environments so that they will thrive and persist to lengths greater than graduating college. These highly-at-risk students are more than capable of success, they

just need the proper guidance and support to reach their potential. In conclusion, I end with another quote from Gladwell (2008):

The lesson here is very simple. But it is striking how often it is overlooked. We are so caught in the myths of the best and the brightest and the self-made that we think outliers spring naturally from the earth. We look at the young Bill Gates and marvel that our world allowed that thirteen-year-old to become a fabulously successful entrepreneur. But that's the wrong lesson. Our world only allowed one thirteen-year-old unlimited access to a time-sharing terminal in 1968. If a million teenagers had been given the same opportunity, how many more Microsofts would we have today? (p. 268)

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Appendix A

Consent to Participate in Research

A Discovery of Persistence and Protective Factors in Highly At-Risk Undergraduate Seniors

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Alexis Straub, a graduate student in the College Student Affairs program at Eastern Illinois University. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you have been identified by the Rural Midwest University as a student who has been enrolled at EIU for six or more consecutive semesters, and who possesses five or more of the eight designated risk-factors identified by the university.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to identify protective factors among at-risk college seniors preparing for graduation from a four-year public university. More specifically, the researcher seeks to understand why is it that students who may be predicted to be at risk of dropping-out, persist to graduation; that is to discover the factors that contribute to their resiliency. This study will allow the researcher to further understand the reason(s) for your persistence.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to schedule out an hour of time that you will be willing to meet with the researcher to be interviewed. All interviews will take as much of that hour as you need to share their experiences with the researcher. The interviews will be recorded, with permission, by two audio devices. You will be able to choose a pseudonym.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

Due to the nature of the research, serious topics may be disclosed. If the completion of this research triggers or causes psychological harm, stress, or emotion, please contact Eastern Illinois University Counseling Center for assistance. Contact information for the Counseling Center is listed below:

EIU Counseling Center
Health Services Building
Phone: 217-581-3413
Hours: Monday- Friday 8:00am-4:30pm

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

By discovering protective factors that you utilize, student affairs professionals will be able to best find the resources and programs that work to help their students persist to college graduation. Studies have shown that if student affairs professionals can understand these protective factors in a resilience-based approach, it can lead to better retention rates throughout a student's undergraduate career.

INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION

As a thank you for participating in the study, you will receive a \$10 dining dollars.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of a document on the researcher's university OneDrive account that will only be seen between the researcher and their chair. All data will be stored for three years in the researcher's possession and then will be shredded and deleted.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled.

There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Ms. Alexis Straub

Email: [REDACTED]

Phone: [REDACTED]

Dr. Catherine Polydore

Email: [REDACTED]

Phone: [REDACTED]

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board
Eastern Illinois University
600 Lincoln Ave.
Charleston, IL 61920
Telephone: (217) 581-8576
E-mail: eiuirb@www.eiu.edu

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

I, the undersigned, have defined and fully explained the investigation to the above subject.

Signature of Investigator

Date

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Welcome and thank the participant.

Ensure that the participant is comfortable. Give the participant their informed consent and explain the informed consent with participant. Allow the participant to ask any questions they may have. Remind participant that their answers will remain confidential and will not be used to identify them.

1. Do I have permission to audio record this interview?
2. What pseudo name would you like to be called in this study?

Background Information

The following questions will be used to gather demographic information about the participant.

1. What gender, if any, do you identify with?
2. What is your age?
3. How do you racially identify?
4. What is your major/minor?
5. When is your anticipated graduation date?
6. Are you a first-generation college student?

Pre-College Questions - Household

These questions will help me learn more about your precollege experience in the household you grew up in to give some background information about these experiences:

1. How often was college discussed in your home?

2. When it was discussed, who discussed it? Siblings? Mother? Father? Other relatives?
3. What were your perceptions of college growing up?
4. Was there someone or something that influenced your decision to come to college and if so, how did it influence your decision?

Pre-College Questions- School

These questions will help me learn more about your precollege experience in high school to give some background information about your education experiences pre-college:

1. Can you describe any college prep courses/ programs offered by your high school?
2. Describe any extra-curricular activities that you were involved in at high school.
3. How did your high school extra-curricular involvement prepare you for college?
4. Did you take AP/ Honors classes in high school?
5. Describe how your high school preparation gave you the tools you needed to be successful in college.

College Experiences

These questions will help me learn more about your college experiences to explain how you have persisted until graduation:

1. Describe any experiences during your enrollment at EIU where you felt that you may not continue. What made you continue?
2. Did you ever think about leaving EIU at any time? What made you stay?

3. What resources, if any, did you utilize at EIU to help assist in your educational journey?
4. Are there any specific people that helped you persist during your college career?
If so, who and how did they influence you?
5. What does college success look like for you? Or how would you know that someone is successful in college?
6. What made you a successful college student?
7. How did the collegiate environment facilitate your success?

Personal Endeavors

These questions will allow you to touch on some personal feelings about your undergraduate experience:

1. What does resiliency mean to you? Would you describe yourself as a resilient person?
2. Are you a goal setter? Explain.
3. What has been your greatest accomplishment during your undergraduate career?
4. What would you tell your high-school self about the person you are today?
5. What would you say to a younger sibling to help them to be successful in college?
What tips would you give them for success in college?
6. Any other comments you would like to make about your undergraduate experience?

Thank you for taking the time to talk to me about your undergraduate experiences. I appreciate your vulnerability and courage to talk to me. Thank you again for sharing your story with me.