DISSERTATION


THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF RECENT HIGH-SCHOOL GRADUATES IN A THREE-

CREDIT, SEMESTER-LONG, COMMUNITY-COLLEGE STUDENT-SUCCESS SEMINAR


Submitted by

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School of Education


In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2017


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ABSTRACT


THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF RECENT HIGH-SCHOOL GRADUATES IN A THREE-CREDIT, SEMESTER-LONG, COMMUNITY-COLLEGE STUDENT-SUCCESS SEMINAR


Student success has been an emerging topic within K-through-16 education in recent years. Community colleges play a valuable role within higher education, and they are challenged to support and foster the success of students in reaching their goals to earn associate's degrees, certificates, and to transfer to 4-year institutions.

Student-success seminars have been linked to positively impacting numerous outcomes such as student grade-point averages, student retention, and student satisfaction. Few studies have explored how and why the experiences of participants in a student-success seminar relate to these outcomes from the perspective of the students who participated in the courses.

To gain a better understanding of these student experiences, I conducted a qualitative phenomenological study using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to help answer the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of first-year community-college students who participated in a semester-long, student-success seminar?

2. How do these students' lived experiences of the student-success seminar influence their overall community-college experiences?

3. How do these students' lived experiences of the student-success seminar influence their decisions to remain at their institution?

Six students participated in the study through semistructured interviews to explore their lived experiences in a three-credit, semester-long, community-college student-success seminar. Data analysis revealed five superordinate themes that helped to describe participants' experiences through a metaphorical journey at sea. These superordinate themes included *choppy waters, a guiding light, a clearer destination, charting a course,* and *taking the wheel with the crew on board.*

Findings of this study suggest that the student-success seminar was beneficial to the participants in the following ways: mitigating the stress and anxiety associated with their high school-to-college transitions; enforcing their view of their course instructor as a source of comfort, trust, accountability, and encouragement; helping them to identify and affirm career and major goals; affirming their decisions to remain at their institution and continue their education; providing various resources that helped them achieve major and career goals; and increasing self-confidence to help them become more autonomous in their academic journey. This study provides a unique student perspective into the student-success-seminar experience and contributes to higher education by assisting community colleges in helping their students thrive in their high school-to-college transition and beyond. The findings also provide insight into how and why the student-success-seminar experience may contribute to various student outcomes highlighted in the current study.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The road to a doctoral degree is full of challenges that require motivation, drive, desire, and perseverance to complete the PhD journey. These elements of success are achieved through personal sacrifices and commitment, and also through the support and encouragement of several people who believe in the person taking the journey. I would like to thank my dissertation co-chair advisors, Dr. Sharon Anderson and Dr. Jackie Peila-Shuster, for their continued reviews, feedback, and encouragement, and for challenging me to do my best throughout my dissertation progress. I also want to thank my other committee members, Dr. Bruce Hall and Dr. Don Quick, for their feedback and support. Mostly, I owe a great deal of gratitude to my parents for bringing me to America, where I have had the opportunity to become who I am today. To my amazing kids, Samantha and Christopher, thank you for motivating me to set the best example about the importance of an education and to stick with your dreams regardless of various challenges that may arise in life. I love you both so much! The past several years have been a challenge and have required a great deal of my time and effort; but in the end, it has all been worth it as I end one major chapter of my life and begin the next.

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DEFINITION OF TERMS

*Student-success seminar:* A course that is usually aimed at students who have no previous college experience and is designed to provide them with useful information about the institution, assistance in academic and career planning, techniques to improve study habits, and opportunities to develop personal skills such as basic financial literacy (Cho & Karp, 2013).

*Lived experiences:* The way in which people make sense of life experiences that are of major significance (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

*Student/environment interaction theories and models:* Models and theories that assert that environmental factors influence behaviors through interactions with an individual's characteristics (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

*Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA):* A qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I highlight the current emphasis that has been placed on student success in higher education. Next, I discuss student-success seminars as a resource within community colleges to support student success. Following that discussion, I present the significance and purpose of this study, along with the research questions. I also share limitations and delimitations of the investigation. Finally, I present my perspective as a researcher.

## Overview

> If we want America to lead in the 21st century, nothing is more important than giving everyone the best education possible—from the day they start preschool to the day they start their career. (White House Press, 2012)

The aforementioned quote from President Barack Obama speaks to the increased emphasis on improving the quality of education across K-through-16 within the United States. This initiative is recognized within higher education through various state measures: California's Student Success Act (SB 1456, 2012) has tied community-college funding to the matriculation services of orientation, assessment, counseling and advising, and educational planning. Texas's Transfer101.org (2015) website has been developed to provide information to students and advisors to help increase the number of community-college students who transfer to 4-year universities. Likewise, Florida, North Carolina, and Ohio participated in the Completion By Design State Initiative (2011), with its commitment to the creation of an action plan for increasing community-college completion and graduation rates. In addition, private sources of support for improving higher education include the Lumina Foundation (2014), with a goal to have 60% of Americans hold high-quality postsecondary degrees or credentials by 2025, and also the Boosting College Completion for a New Economy Initiative (2011), sponsored by the

Education Commission of the States, which worked with legislative and higher-education leaders to improve their state economies through increasing the number of residents with postsecondary degrees. As an important link in the K-through-16 educational system, community colleges must find innovative and effective approaches in their responses to the various initiatives that seek to support and improve student success.

## Statement of the Problem

As an integral part of the higher-education system, community colleges, which represented 45% of total enrolled US undergraduates as of the fall of 2014 (AACC, 2016b), are essential in supporting student success. Some of the missions of community colleges include

> . . . providing open access to postsecondary education, preparing students for transfer to 4-year institutions, providing workforce development and skills training, and offering noncredit programs ranging from English as a second language to skills retraining to community enrichment programs or cultural activities. (AACC, 2016a)

Many students are attracted to the community-college experience for these and other various reasons, which include the willingness of community colleges to serve students who are part-time, minority, first generation, disabled, and single parents (AACC, 2016b). Furthermore, community colleges are considerably more affordable than 4-year institutions. According to the College Board (2016), the average 2016–2017 cost of yearly tuition and fees for public, 2-year, in-district, full-time, undergraduate students was $3,520, in comparison to public, 4-year institutions' cost of $9,650. Private, nonprofit, 4-year institutions were even more costly, at $33,480.

The willingness for community colleges to offer open access to a constituency that may not otherwise have an opportunity to pursue a higher education, along with their less expensive tuition than 4-year and private institutions, make community colleges viable options for many current and future students. Based on various initiatives that promote student success, such as

those discussed earlier, community colleges must find and implement innovative approaches to help students thrive in their college environments and complete their educational goals both successfully and in a timely manner.

For community colleges to formulate and implement effective student-success strategies, they must understand factors that contribute to students leaving or remaining enrolled in an institution, which in turn affects students' ability to complete their goals to earn degrees and certificates, to transfer to 4-year universities, or both. Although national data on term-to-term community-college student persistence is limited, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2015), the first-to-second-year persistence rate for all entering students at 2-year public institutions for 2013 was 57.6%. In comparison, the persistence rate for all entering students at 4-year public institutions was 79.3%, which suggests that community colleges may lose more students than 4-year universities between students' first and second years of enrollment.

Furthermore, Tinto (1993, p. 14), referring to findings from ACT (1992) that reported first-year attrition at 47.9% and 28.3%, respectively, for all entering students at public 2-year and 4-year institutions, stated that many students drop out of college early in their academic journeys. More recently, ACT (2015) cited that the first-to-second-year retention rate for 2-year public institutions was 54.7%, while 4-year public institutions reflected a slightly higher figure, at 64.2%. These data illustrate the importance for community colleges to help students succeed in their matriculation goals early in their academic careers, during a time that appears to be significant with regard to their deciding whether or not to return to school.

In addition to facing the issue of losing students who decide not to return from the first to second year of their education, community colleges also must deal with ways to assist their

students in completing their degree, certification, or transfer goals in a reasonable amount of time. A review from the National Center for Education Statistics of 2008 through 2013 graduation rates for 2-year degree institutions (NCES, 2015, p. 234) found that, of the students who began their pursuit of a certificate or associate's degree in the fall of 2010, only 29% of full-time, first-time, undergraduate students obtained a certificate or associate degree within 3 years or less; this outcome indicates that 71% of the students took longer than 3 years to complete a 2-year degree. These results suggest that most students seldom complete their educational degree objectives in a timely manner. Thus, community colleges are challenged to improve their student-support programs and services, not only to help students graduate and transfer, but also to decrease their time to completion and to help them better integrate into the college environment. Student-success seminars may be a viable resource that community colleges can use to help achieve this task.

Student-success seminars, also referred to in the literature as *college 101*, *student orientation*, *freshman experience*, and the like, are offered in the United States at 94% or more of all 4-year accredited colleges and universities (Padgett, Keup, & Pascarella, 2013). In a 2012 survey by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE), 83% of participating community colleges responded that they offered such a course. Student-success seminars are usually intended to help new students gain information about college and academic and career planning, obtain improved study habits, and acclimate to the college environment (O'Gara, Karp, and Hughes, 2009). While the specific curriculum of student-success seminars may vary from institution to institution, the common goal of such courses is to improve academic performance and student persistence by integrating students socially and academically (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006).

It is possible that student-success seminars can help students achieve a smoother transition into college through better integration with the campus environment. Tinto (1975, 1993) and Astin (1977, 1984, 1993) argued that students' experiences with, and connections to, their college environments may impact their decisions to remain at or leave an institution. Examples of areas in which research has identified some of the positive effects of student-success seminars include increased student outcomes such as student grade-point averages (GPAs) (Stovall, 2000), student satisfaction (Duggan & Williams, 2011; O'Gara et al., 2009; Padgett, Keup, & Pascarella, 2013; Redmond, Boucebei, & Engstrom, 2013; Rhodes & Carifio, 1999) and student retention (Derby & Smith, 2004; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Stovall, 2000).

Derby and Smith (2004) found that students who enrolled in an orientation course obtained their degrees faster and were less likely to drop out than students who did not enroll in the course. In a later study conducted by O'Gara et al. (2009), the researchers suggested that student-success courses can deliver enhanced student support, thereby influencing students to "bring about behaviors that supported persistence" (p. 8). More recently, Cho and Karp (2013) determined that students who enrolled in a first-semester, community-college student-success course were more likely to earn college-level credits within their first year; and they were more likely to persist to the second year than students who did not enroll in such courses. I will highlight these and additional studies in a more detailed review of the literature in chapter 2.

**Significance and Purpose of the Study**

Although various studies have explored the positive impact of student-success seminars at the community-college level, many of these studies have focused on a quantitative research approach, exploring relationships between student-success seminar courses and student outcomes such as increased first-year unit completion (Cho & Karp, 2013; Stovall, 2000), increased GPAs,

(Stovall, 2000), and increased retention (Derby & Smith, 2004; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Stovall, 2000). Few studies have explored the qualitative aspects of student experiences in a student-success seminar. More specifically, no study has been identified that explored the lived experiences of first-year students in a three-credit, semester-long, community-college student-success seminar, which was the purpose of this study. Gaining insight into the *how* and *why* components of student experiences in a student-success seminar can provide a better understanding of aspects of students' experiences that are contributing to the *what* components of success such as retention, GPA, student satisfaction, and course completion.

## Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of first-year community-college students who participated in a semester-long, student-success seminar?

2. How do these students' lived experiences of the student-success seminar influence their overall community-college experiences?

3. How do these students' lived experiences of the student-success seminar influence their decisions to remain at their institution?

## Limitations

This study assumed that the participants would be forthcoming and share their ideas candidly. Although as the researcher I tried to ensure participant anonymity, participants may still have been cautious to share their true opinions. Furthermore, since the participants were from a community college in the western United States and the purpose was to obtain rich description from a limited number of participants, the results may not be typical for other students in other locations within the United States.

Finally, while my employment may have been helpful in establishing a relationship with the students, it also may have influenced their interview responses.

## Delimitations

The research-sample participants were selected from a single-district community college located in the Western United States, using a purposeful sampling method. Participants were recent high-school graduates (within one year). I set these criteria because of my goal as a researcher to focus on a period of time in the participants' lives that was of major significance, and also because of the literature that cites a notable attrition of students between their first and second years of their college enrollment (ACT, 1992, 2015; National Student Clearinghouse, 2015). To limit a significant lapse of time since completion of the course, and to capture a more accurate account of their experiences, participants also had to have completed the student-success seminar within one year prior to the interviews. Participants were selected from several student-success seminar sections to allow for a more representative sample of students who had completed the course.

## Researcher's Perspective

I came to America as a Hungarian immigrant in 1983. My parents were unfamiliar with the educational system in the United States, and neither of them completed a US college education. After graduating from high school, I attended a community college, where I lacked any life direction or idea of what career or major I wanted to pursue. I felt lost. Eventually, I had an encounter with a community-college counselor, who not only assisted me in my career and educational planning, but also contributed to my belief that I was capable of succeeding in my studies. As a result of this positive experience, I was inspired to become a community-college

counselor with the goal to positively impact students who may have also felt lost or without direction in their lives.

Although I initially experienced difficulties with my college studies, some of my fondest memories stem from my community-college experiences. During that time, though, I did not have the opportunity to enroll in a student-success seminar, and therefore I learned to identify and utilize student resources through my own endeavors. Having taught student-success seminars in my current place of employment, I believe that there is a definite value to such courses in helping students make closer connections to their college environments, both socially and academically. My community-college experiences as a student and as a faculty member have been the impetus for my interest in and commitment to the community-college system, and also for my desire to research the impact of a student-success seminar on student success.

Findings of previous studies that I reviewed in this dissertation have suggested various benefits of student-success seminars, ranging from improved GPAs to increased retention of students who participated in those seminars when compared to students who did not participate in such courses; thus, these findings give insight into the *what* aspects of the impact of these seminars on students. By examining the lived experiences of students in a community-college student-success seminar, I sought to find out the *how* and *why* characteristics of the impact of student-success seminars, to be better able to formulate my pedagogy to support and promote the positive experiences of students. My intention is that the information from this research will help current and future instructors of student-success seminars, including myself, contribute to community-college student success from a perspective of student-environment interactions and connections.

**Recap**

Because of various national, state, and private initiatives, community colleges have been prompted to increase and improve components of their matriculation models. These changes are intended to increase the rate of student degree completion and transfer to 4-year institutions, and to assist students through the pipeline of higher education with increased efficiency and accountability. Student-success seminars are a viable tool for community colleges in their endeavor to meet the needs of this current challenge.

Currently, there is a lack of research that supports our understanding of the lived experiences of students in a three-credit, semester-long, community-college student-success seminar from the perspective of the participants in the course. In addressing this research gap, this study adds to the positive movement that aims to support and improve student success at the community-college level; it also addresses the lack of current studies that examine student-success seminars through the eyes and voices of the students themselves. In the next chapter, I will present a review of literature that is pertinent to this study and further supports my rationale for studying the lived experiences of community-college students in a student-success seminar.

# CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this chapter, I discuss the current emphasis on student success within higher education in the United States. I present a brief history of America's community colleges, along with their missions, visions, and purposes. Following this review, I introduce two prominent theoretical perspectives on factors that influence students' college departure and retention. Next, I examine how community colleges may benefit from student-success seminars as a specific resource to help their students thrive in their college environments. Finally, through a review of the literature, I highlight studies that have identified some of the benefits of student-success seminars.

## Context

Student enrollment in US higher education has experienced a notable increase in the past 17 years. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2015, p. 234), as of fall 2015, an estimated 20.2 million students were expected to attend colleges and universities in the United States. When compared to similar statistics for the year 2000, these data reflected an increase of approximately 4.9 million students (NCES, 2015, p. 234). Community-college students accounted for 45% of all US college undergraduates as of fall 2014 (AACC, 2016b). As of 2016, there were 982 public community colleges in the United States (AACC, 2016b). These statistics illustrate the important role of community colleges in assisting a significant number of students within the US system of higher education. Moreover, recent initiatives to promote higher education (e.g., Boosting College Completion, 2011; Completion by Design State Initiative, 2011; SB 1456, 2012; Lumina Foundation, 2014; Texas's Transfer

101.org, 2015) bolster the need for community colleges to successfully increase both transfer and degree- and certificate-completion opportunities.

The community-college experience is an attractive higher-education option to many adults. For example, the nature of the original comprehensive and open-access missions of community colleges means that they serve many students who are part time, minority, first generation, disabled, and single parents (AACC, 2016b). Furthermore, the considerably higher cost of tuition at 4-year institutions compared to community-college tuition rates enhances the attractiveness of community colleges to potential students. For instance, the average 2016–2017 cost of yearly tuition and fees for public, 2-year, in-district, full-time undergraduate students was $3,520 (College Board, 2016). In comparison, these tuition rates are noticeably less expensive than the cost of $9,650 for public 4-year institutions. And private, nonprofit, 4-year institutions widen the affordability gap even further, with yearly tuition rates at $33,480 for 2016–2017 (College Board, 2016).

As noted, community colleges are challenged with the pressure to increase the number of students who succeed in their college goals, and to accomplish that objective in a timely manner (Boosting College Completion, 2011; Completion By Design, 2011; SB 1456, 2012; Lumina Foundation, 2014; Texas's Transfer 101.org, 2015). Implementing various support systems in helping students succeed in their college environments is a vital part of the formula that community colleges must use to meet the national, state, and private initiatives for promoting student success. For us to better understand how student success has become a more prominent part of the community-college agenda, it is necessary to briefly examine the history of community colleges in the United States. This history helps frame how the stated missions and purposes of community colleges have supported and have advocated for student success. In the

following section, I briefly review the literature related to the history of community colleges in the United States, and the relationship of that history to the current focus on supporting student success at community colleges.

## A Brief History of the Community College

According to Witt, Wattenbarger, Gollattscheck, and Suppiger (1994), William Rainey Harper, the first president of the University of Chicago, is credited as the person responsible for the birth of the junior-college movement. Harper has been recognized for devising a plan in 1895 for the separation of upper and lower divisions of higher education, and referring to the first two collegiate years as *junior college*, which led to his nationwide plan for creating junior colleges (1994). Furthermore, Harper has been credited for establishing Joliet Junior College in Illinois as the first public institution in the United States to be named a junior college. Harper's plan and vision are seen as the roots of community colleges currently offering the first 2 years of a 4-year education, which at the time focused on undergraduate general education courses (Beach, 2010).

The original mission of community colleges in the United States included providing and expanding educational opportunity for all (Beach, 2010; Vaughan, 2000; Witt et al., 1994). Although one of the initial purposes of community colleges included assisting high-school graduates with a delayed form of admission to 4-year universities, those purposes evolved into broad and diverse missions that we can refer to as *comprehensive*. These comprehensive missions were aimed at meeting the varying needs of the local community and beyond (Beach, 2010). To illustrate the comprehensive scope of the community college, Vaughan (2000) outlined some community-college missions that included offering the first 2 years of a bachelor's-degree track; providing occupational and technical programs to train members of the community for workforce readiness and developmental-education programs to assist students in

remediating any deficiencies in their math and English learning; and making continuing-education opportunities available to the members of the community (pp. 3–12).

The expansion of community colleges continued during the middle of the twentieth century. The end of World War II in 1945 presented an urgent need for the US government to provide returning military personnel with a transition into the job market. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act (GI Bill) passed by Congress in 1944, significantly boosted community-college enrollments across the nation (Vaughan, 2000). The authors of the Truman Commission Report, written in 1947 with the goal to help education preserve the democratic ideals that were fought for in World War II, further supported the view that more community colleges were needed. An assertion in the report was that "49 percent of high school graduates could profit from two years of education beyond high school. . ." (Vaughan, 2000, p. 25). Additionally, during this time, the Truman Commission was responsible for introducing the term *community college*.

Vaughan (2000) described key events such as the passage of the 1965 Higher Education Act as helping to boost funding for community colleges. Furthermore, Vaughan stated that California's Proposition 13, established in 1978, began a trend of states paying an increased portion of community college costs instead of local entities (p. 26), prompting an increased public demand for greater accountability from public institutions (p. 36). These changes, along with the end of school segregation and the coming of age of baby boomers, helped to open community-college access to a broader constituency (2000). From 1960 to 2000, community colleges became more comprehensive in their offerings as they began providing workforce training and community-development curricula.

**Challenges for Community Colleges**

"In the 21st century, the community college's success will continue to depend on its ability to respond to a changing environment" (Vaughan, 2000, p. 29). More recently, community colleges are experiencing increased pressures to prioritize matriculating and transferring students over focusing on other branches of their comprehensive missions (Boosting College Completion, 2011; Completion By Design, 2011; SB 1456, 2012; Lumina Foundation, 2014; Texas's Transfer 101.org, 2015). Mendoza et al. (2009) cited student transfer and learning outcomes as prominent centers of focus at community colleges. According to Griffith and Connor (1994), during the late twentieth century, three main factors contributed to the waning concentration on the comprehensive missions of community colleges, and those factors suggested that the comprehensive nature of community colleges was facing an imminent threat.

The first factor that Griffith and Connor (1994) cited for the decline of focus on the comprehensive nature of community colleges was tight budgetary constraints on public education throughout the 1990s, which forced community colleges to prioritize academically better-prepared students, thus taking away the focus on developmental education. Second, arguments from advocates of career and technical education, and the transfer of students to 4-year institutions, were pressuring community colleges to place greater emphasis on those particular areas instead of serving the comprehensive missions they had in the past. Finally, many 4-year colleges during this time were more selective in their admissions because, to meet budgetary constraints, they were offering fewer courses; this change, in turn, prompted increased enrollments at community colleges, which responded by offering more classes that focused on transfer preparation (Griffith & Connor, 1994).

More recently, Bruininks, Keeney, and Thorp (2010) argued that universities are faced with the "new normal in which they must embrace a clear vision of the future, including access and opportunity for all learners and a culture of entrepreneurship and service" (p. 113). This vision is in line with President Barack Obama's 21st Century Initiative (White House Press, 2012), which calls for a smoother collaboration between K-through-16 educational institutions in order to encourage a greater number of college graduates. Thus, while the comprehensive mission of community colleges may be waning, current sources of federal, state, and private initiatives are simultaneously advocating for an increased number of students to be provided with the opportunity to pursue a higher education.

Based on the various measures and voices that promote increased access, opportunity, and collaboration within higher education, there is a real need for community colleges to use innovative approaches to assist current and future students to succeed in their educational goals, whether those goals are to transfer, or to earn a community-college degree or certificate, or both. To enable a better understanding of what can be done to help students complete their educational goals, and to help them stay in college long enough to do so, I outline in the next section some factors that have been found to contribute to students leaving college and also factors that have contributed to their remaining in college.

### Theoretical Perspectives on Why Students Leave or Remain in College

For one to better understand why community colleges are tasked to implement various resources and support programs to increase student success, it is necessary to gain some perspective on why students leave or remain in their college environments. In this section, I highlight two key theoretical viewpoints to help readers better understand student departure and

student persistence in college. The work of both Vincent Tinto (1975, 1993) and Alexander Astin (1977, 1984, 1993) provides the theoretical underpinnings of this study.

**Tinto's Model of Student Integration**

The first year of college appears to be particularly important in terms of students leaving their academic environments because a significant portion of all leaving takes place during this period (Tinto, 1993). In support of this assertion, Tinto cited statistical findings from the American College Testing Program (ACT) (1992), which reported that, out of all institutional leavers at private and public 2-year and 4-year institutions, 53.3% of all 2-year and 67.7% of all 4-year leaving took place during the first year. According to more recent data from the ACT (2015), the first-to-second-year retention rate for 2-year public institutions was 54.7%, while 4-year public institutions reflected a slightly higher figure, at 64.2%. Tinto (1993) stated that, to successfully retain students, institutions must be able to integrate those students into the "fabric of institutional life" (p. 204). Tinto's statement calls to community colleges to consider the use of programs such as the student-success seminar to assist and support students to better integrate into their college environments.

In his Student Integration Model, Tinto (1975) suggested that students who are able to integrate into their campus environments are more likely to graduate because of an increased commitment to their institution. Adding to his theoretical framework, Tinto (1993) presented his Model of Institutional Departure to explain why students may choose to leave or remain within their institutions of higher education. To support this model, Tinto (1993) utilized data from four main sources for his research: the National Longitudinal Survey, which tracked the educational activities of the high-school graduating class of 1972 (US Dept. of Ed., 1972, as cited in Tinto, 1993, p. 13); the High School and Beyond study of the high-school graduating class of 1980

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(Eagle & Carroll, 1988, as cited in Tinto, 1993, p. 13); the ACT survey of institutions (ACT 1992, as cited in Tinto, 1993, p. 13), which tracked first-year persistence of the entering fall 1990 class for 2-year and 4-year public and private institutions; and the Survey of Retention at Higher Educational Institutions (Chaney & Farris, 1991, as cited in Tinto, 1993, p. 13). Using these sources, Tinto (1993) examined a wide variety of factors pertaining to student departure from college. Tinto (1993) determined that students leave institutions of higher education because of a lack of social and intellectual integration into their college environments:

> An institution's capacity to retain students is directly related to its ability to reach out, make contact with students, and integrate them into the social and intellectual fabric of institutional life. (1993, p. 204)

Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure has been referred to as the first detailed longitudinal model for explaining connections between the academic environment and student persistence and retention (Tinto, 2006).

Figure 2.1 illustrates Tinto's (1993) model and shows factors that influence student departure and student retention, which range from students' family backgrounds and prior schooling, to their institutional experiences and how well they integrate into their respective institutions. The figure includes a representation of various precollege entry attributes such as family background, skills, and abilities, and prior schooling. These attributes lead to students' goals and commitment levels, which are closely related to what Tinto referred to as *institutional experiences*, and include both formal and informal student experiences (1993). It is these formal and informal institutional experiences, according to Tinto (1993), that ultimately lead to how well or poorly students integrate into their academic environment, and thereby influence their decision to leave or remain in an institution.

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Tinto's models for explaining factors that contribute to student departure and student retention (1975, 1993) can be useful for professionals within higher education to better understand how to facilitate student success in terms of the support services and resources they offer to help students better connect to their college environments. If community colleges can provide students with opportunities to feel more connected to and integrated with their institutions, especially during the critical transition from high school to college, those students may be more likely to stay the course in reaching their academic goals.



Fig. 4.1. A longitudinal model of institutional departure.

*Figure 2.1.* A longitudinal model of institutional departure. Reprinted from *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition (*2nd ed.), by V. Tinto, 1993, p. 114. Copyright 1993 by the University of Chicago Press. Reprinted with permission.

**Astin's Theory of Student Involvement**

A second prominent theoretical perspective that explains influences that contribute to students leaving or remaining in their college, and which is relevant to this study, is Alexander Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement. Astin (1977) researched the impact of college on students through a longitudinal approach that examined more than "80 measures of attitudes, values, behaviors, achievement, career development, and satisfaction" (p. 4). A notable finding in Astin's work was his assertion that ". . .affective changes may be attributed in part to the college experience rather than simply to maturation factors" (p. 70), which suggests that how students feel about and perceive themselves is influenced by their college environment.

Astin (1984) referred to student involvement as the amount of time and energy a student devotes to his/her academic experience. He asserted that a highly involved student "devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students" (p. 518).

A later study by Astin (1993) focused on environmental variables such as the students' institutions, curriculum, faculty, and peer groups; the study included these measures with the objective of helping institutions better understand the cognitive and affective influences of students' college environments. Referring to his Input-Environment-Outcome model, Astin (1993) argued that the characteristics of students when they enter college (inputs) are influenced by their experiences with peers, faculty, services, and so on (environment), and these factors interact and result in a set of characteristics following their college experiences (outcomes).

For example, Astin (1993) found that student satisfaction tended to be high where faculty was "strongly Student Oriented" (p. 311). Furthermore, student satisfaction was enhanced by repeated interaction both with faculty and with fellow students (Astin, 1993, p. 311). Moreover,

Astin found that student academic involvement, involvement with faculty, and involvement with peer groups were positively associated with learning, academic performance, and retention. He also determined that students' satisfaction and perceptions of their environment were influenced more by students' environmental experiences than by their entering characteristics (p. 310). These findings suggest that students with higher levels of involvement in their college environments are more likely to succeed in their educational goals and less likely to leave their institutions, and that student success in college may be influenced more by the environment than by influences of background and precollege characteristics.

In summary, Tinto (1975, 1993) and Astin's (1977, 1984, 1993) theoretical frameworks and models highlight the impact of the student-environment experience with regard to student departure and student retention in college. These perspectives present the opportunity for us to examine how community-college programs and services may contribute to the experiences of students, which may in turn influence students in their decisions to leave or remain enrolled at their institutions.

As noted previously, community colleges currently need to implement various resources and programs to help boost the success of students in their transfer and matriculation goals. In the next section, I highlight student-success seminars as a specific resource to help students succeed in community colleges; I also discuss the various benefits of student-success seminars that have been identified in this review of the literature.

<p style="text-align:center"><b>Student-Success Seminars</b></p>

Community colleges depend on various resources and programs to help their students succeed in completing their educational objectives. These include tutoring, supplemental instruction, learning communities, and others (CCCSE, 2012). As previously mentioned, one

such frequently used resource is student-success seminars, which have been found to help community colleges promote and support student success in various ways. These benefits include increasing student retention (Derby & Smith, 2004; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Stovall, 2000) and student satisfaction (Duggan & Williams, 2011; O'Gara et al., 2009; Padgett et al., 2013 Redmond et al., 2013; Rhodes & Carifio, 1999), and improving other student outcomes such as grade-point averages (GPAs) (Cho & Karp, 2013; Stovall, 2000).

Student-success seminars are also referred to in the literature as *student orientation*, *introduction to college, freshman experience,* and the like (O'Gara et al., 2009). Although first-year seminars have been reported to be offered as far back as 1882 at Lee College in Kentucky, their exact origins are difficult to trace because of a scarcity of historical records (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996). Such courses declined in popularity toward the middle of the 20th century (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996; Drake, 1966). This change was attributed to universities shifting their focus to intellectual and academic aspects of the student experience as opposed to life adjustment (Drake, 1966).

We can trace the resurgence of the concept of the first-year or freshman experience to 1972, when the University of South Carolina created and implemented the University 101 course as a means to ease unrest and help bond students after campus riots in 1970 over the Vietnam War and other issues (University 101, 2015). This concept eventually lead to John Gardner and colleagues developing The Freshman Year Experience at the University of South Carolina in 1982 (Upcraft et al., 2005), which, helped pave the way for the growth of the student-success-seminar movement.

The Freshman Year Experience program and student-success seminars in general, were designed to help students acclimate to and connect with their college environment (Upcraft et al.,

2005). "Orientation classes are designed to better connect students to the campus environment and allow them the opportunity to meet other students, faculty, and administrators" (Derby & Smith, 2004, p. 766). Because of their potential benefits, student-success seminars have been found to be viable retention tools within higher education. Padgett et al. (2013) stated that, according to national data, 94% or more of accredited 4-year colleges and universities in the United States offer a first-year seminar to at least some students, and more than half of these colleges and universities offer a first-year seminar to 90% or more of their first-year students. Another recent survey of 288 community colleges found that 83% of respondents offered such a course (CCCSE, 2012). These statistics suggest that while student-success seminars are offered at both 2-year and 4-year colleges, they are more frequently used at the 4-year level.

Most of the research on first-year seminars has focused on their impact on retention and academic performance measures (Padgett et al., 2013). For example, Stovall's research (2000) supported the argument that students' participation in a student-success seminar had an impact on both their college academic performance and their persistence. In her article, Stovall suggested that student participation in a student-success course could be especially beneficial for minority students who attend predominately White community colleges (2000). Stovall's comparison of first-semester academic performance of White participants versus White nonparticipants indicated a 0.401 increase in first-term GPA for White participants. When comparing the first-semester academic performance of minority participants to the first-semester academic performance of minority nonparticipants, Stovall found that the minority participants' first-term GPA was 0.872 points higher than that of the minority nonparticipants.

Stovall (2000) concluded that participants in a student-success course had higher first-term GPAs; completed greater percentages of their first-term credit hours; had greater odds of

persisting to the second semester, the second year, and the third year; and had greater odds of graduating from community college at 3 years after their initial enrollment compared to students who did not participate in such courses (2000). Stovall's findings suggest that, by aiding the early integration of students into the college environment, enrollment in a student-success course appears to positively impact both the short-term and long-term academic persistence of students.

Derby and Smith (2004) also sought to investigate whether students in orientation classes experienced higher rates of retention when compared to students who were not enrolled in such courses. The researchers studied a sample of three cohorts of 7,466 matriculates who attended a midwestern community college from fall 1999 through spring 2002. The participants varied in ethnicity, their median age was 24, and they represented a fairly equal gender balance. Derby and Smith sought to identify a relationship between taking an orientation course and (a) student success in obtaining a transferable degree within a specified 2-year time period; (b) student drop-out (completing less than three semesters of coursework within a 2-year period, having a three or more course-load average, and having a GPA below 2.0); (c) student reenrollment after an enrollment break of one, two, or three semesters; and (d) student persistence (carrying an average of three or more courses and completing four semesters of coursework within a 2-year period).

The results of the study indicated that students who enrolled in an orientation course obtained their degrees faster than those who did not enroll in the course (Derby & Smith, 2004). Additionally, an increased proportion of students who took the course did not fit the dropout criteria and were less likely to drop out. Furthermore, the researchers found that students who took the orientation course were more likely to reenroll after taking one-, two-, or three-semester breaks in their enrollment. The researchers concluded that students who did not enroll in or complete the orientation course were less likely to persist, while students who took the course

persisted over time. These results were consistent across all three of the cohort groups of the study, suggesting that student-orientation courses appear to contribute to increased student persistence and decreased student attrition.

According to Cox (2005), of the 322 2-year, 4-year, private, and public institutions that participated in the 2003 national survey of first-year seminars, 58.7% of responding institutions reported an increase in freshman-to-sophomore persistence, and 58.4% of responding institutions indicated improved student connections to their peers as a result of their students participating in a student-success seminar (p. 90). Data collection and analysis for this survey was conducted using student and instructor focus groups, student and instructor interviews, student course evaluations, survey instruments, and institutional data (Tobolowsky, 2005, p. 37). Although this type of research helps depict how student-success seminars may benefit institutions of higher education, Goodman and Pascarella (2006) noted that, despite their increased popularity in colleges and universities, first-year seminars were still in their inaugural state in terms of research that had documented their positive outcomes. Goodman and Pascarella (2006) also stated that while the research on first-year-seminars had increased, there was still a need for additional studies to explore causal relations that are linked to various outcomes.

In another study on community-college student-success seminars, Rhodes and Carifio (1999) sought to assess student perceptions of a freshman seminar (FS) course offered at a northeastern community college. The researchers randomly selected five students each ($n = 15$) from three FS sections that were a part of the seven FS sections the college offered each fall semester. Participants were interviewed about their FS experiences through nine questions that represented nine factors. The researchers analyzed the data by tabulating respondents' key

words, phrases, and short sentences into an 11-category matrix. They categorized responses as positive or negative based upon researcher agreement of the categories.

The findings of this study indicated that, in an examination of the nine factors, approximately half the respondents felt positive about each factor, and half the respondents felt negative about each factor (Rhodes & Carifio, 1999). The emergent theme of the data analysis indicated that it was primarily older students in the study who voiced dissatisfaction about the FS in areas relating to course content; themes included participants objecting to the FS being a college requirement and also being a "waste of time." Specifically, older respondents indicated that they did not need to be taught about the "value of their education" or "content related to teaching respondents things about themselves" (Rhodes & Carifio, 1999, p. 522). The researchers also found that the FS failed to meet the needs of older, nontraditional students, such as being a straightforward, educational experience that catered to their busy lifestyles. "Adult learners and student learners are differentiated by their set of life experiences and have a different set of needs" (Rhodes & Carifio, 1999, p. 522). These findings suggest that FS courses may be more relevant for first-time, younger students entering college than for older learners, based on the evidence that, in contrast to younger students in this study, older students appeared to have a developed sense of self and an understanding of the value of higher education (Rhodes & Carifio, 1999).

Adding to the literature on student-success seminars at community colleges, O'Gara et al. (2009) examined the effects of student-success courses at two urban community colleges. The authors maintained that such courses could deliver enhanced student support, thereby influencing students to "bring about behaviors that supported persistence" (p. 8). Participants in this study were randomly selected from a sample of first-time enrollees from two urban community

colleges. One hundred seventy-six students received letters of invitation to participate in the study and were offered $100 cash stipends. The researchers conducted 60-minute interviews with a final sample of 44 students during their second semester of enrollment, with subsequent interviews 6 months later.

The interviews in this study probed students' perceptions about their initial college experiences, including their reasons for enrollment; their goals; their first- and second-semester courses; and whether or not they were enrolled in the student success course and, if so, their experiences and perceptions of the course (O'Gara et al., 2009). The researchers also conducted interviews with various college staff members to better understand the variety of services available to students. Coding was specifically created to focus on the student-success-course factors; these factors pertained to whether students took the courses, and if they did, whether they found them helpful, and also the various types of information students received from the courses. O'Gara et al. (2009) surmised that students generally found the courses to be favorable in helping them find information about the college. The researchers noted that their findings provided evidence that the student-success courses in the study were a key component in helping students adjust to the community-college environment.

In another qualitative research study undertaken to derive a better understanding of the impact of a student-success seminar on students, Duggan and Williams (2011) studied the course syllabi from 10 community colleges in two states to create an interview guide and checklist for students to complete during interviews with the researchers. The researchers conducted interviews with 60 students who had completed an orientation course, and they coded the interview transcripts for themes relating to the research questions. Most of the interviewees completed their face-to-face orientation course during their first semester.

Results of the study indicated that, overall, students found their orientation course to have prepared them well for college; yet a few students deemed the course a "waste of time and money" (Duggan & Williams, 2011, p. 126). Some of the information students found useful included how to balance school, home, and work; information on student clubs and organizations; and time-management and organizational skills. Generally, participants in the study strongly recommended that future community-college students enroll in an orientation course. Similar to findings in the research conducted by Rhodes and Carifio (1999), Duggan and Williams (2011) also noted that since some the students reported that they did not benefit from an orientation course, these types of courses may not be suitable for all students. Although this assertion presents a question with regard to how orientation courses are best offered and to whom, the vast majority of students who took the course reported positive experiences, which supports the position that student-success courses are a valuable asset to community colleges.

Providing an additional perspective on the impact of a student-success seminar on community-college students, Redmond et al. (2013) conducted a pilot study on a first-year seminar that examined embedding the course in a learning community that employed project-based learning strategies, tutoring, and mandatory study periods. The study was based on an examination of Georgia Perimeter College as a participant in the Developing a Community College Student Roadmap project, sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. This project included 12 community colleges whose aim was to become one of the national models for student success. In analyzing the impact of the course, the researchers found that students who enrolled in a first-year seminar in the fall of 2011 persisted to the spring of 2012 at a rate of 76.4%, in contrast to a 69.6% persistence rate for a comparison group of all freshmen who did not take the first-year seminar.

Analysis of this study's focus-group interviews indicated that students found the first-year seminar to be beneficial in their transition to college, particularly in enhancing their understanding of academic life, including time-management skills; improving their ability to identify and rank priorities; and providing the opportunity to become aware of different learning styles (Redmond et al., 2013). Students also felt that having a "great instructor" was an important part of making the course enjoyable and effective. Participants in the study reported a sense of support and encouragement from each other and also reported being more aware of career options, experiencing a sense of increased engagement with others on campus, and having increased critical and creative-thinking skills following their participation in the first-year seminar.

In a more recent study on the academic impact of student-success seminars, Cho and Karp (2013) examined whether student-success-course enrollment, and also institutional characteristics, had positive associations with shorter-term student outcomes, including earning college credits within the first year and persisting into the second year. This study built on a large-scale study conducted by the Community College Research Center in 2007 that included all 28 of the Florida community colleges. According to Cho and Karp (2013) the larger study had found that students who enrolled in a student-success course, in contrast to students who did not enroll, were more likely to succeed as measured by credential completion, college persistence, and transfer to a 4-year college in the Florida state-university system. Cho and Karp (2013) found that the Florida study did not assess whether participants had enrolled in a Student Life Skills (SLS)/student-success course early in their college careers; thus, in their study they addressed this observed gap. Furthermore, the Florida study had counted enrollment in a nonacademic internship as enrollment in a student-success course, failing to differentiate the data

between the two types of courses. Cho and Karp addressed this issue by using more detail about student-success courses, such as excluding internships from the data that had been counted in the Florida study as enrollment in a student-success course.

Cho and Karp (2013) measured student success within the first 15 credits of each student's total attempted credits, and within each student's first semester at the institution. The researchers used a regression analysis to measure short-term academic characteristics associated with whether students earned any credits in the first year and their persistence into the second year. The findings suggested that students who enrolled in a student-success course in their first semester were more likely to earn college-level credits within their first year and were more likely to persist to the second year in comparison to students who did not enroll in a student-success course in their first semester.

While the studies reviewed thus far have largely highlighted the impact of student-success seminars on student outcomes such as persistence and retention, Padgett et al. (2013) sought to investigate the influence of participation in a first-year seminar on students' need for cognition (individuals' motivation and desire to purposefully seek out, engage, and enjoy cognitive activities). The study drew from a sample of 48 colleges and universities that participated in the Wabash National Study (WNS) of Liberal Arts Education, a longitudinal study that investigated "the effects of the liberal arts experiences on a series of cognitive and psychosocial outcomes associated with undergraduate education" (as cited in Padgett et al., 2013, p. 137). Analysis of first-year, full-time undergraduates who entered college in 2006, 2007, and 2008 provided the researchers with a sample that was representative of three cohorts.

Using both a comprehensive pretest-posttest and instruments such as the 18-item need-for-cognition (NFC) scale that measures individuals' desire to seek out and engage in cognitive

activity, the researchers used student participation in a first-year seminar as an independent variable, and first-year students' lifelong learning orientations as a dependent variable. In analyzing the data, the researchers found that participation in a first-year seminar significantly increased students' need for cognition. More specifically, the authors stated that first-year seminars enhanced student development with a motivation to inquire about academic and cocurricular learning experiences outside of the seminar, and they asserted that the impact of first-year seminar participation went beyond students' experience in that specific course, to other curricular and cocurricular learning experiences (Padgett et al., 2013, p. 145).

## Summary

As of 2014, community colleges served 45% of undergraduate students in the United States (AACC, 2016b). Furthermore, various national, state, and private initiatives currently promote a push for student success in US higher education (Boosting College Completion, 2011; Lumina Foundation, 2014; SB 1456, 2012; Texas's Transfer 101.org, 2015). Consequently, student success is at the top of the agenda for many 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities in the United States. Several studies highlighted in this chapter suggest that student-success seminars are effective in helping students succeed in community college.

The review of literature in this chapter has identified various benefits of student-success seminars for community-college students. The highlighted research reflects the positive impact of student-success seminars on various outcomes such as increasing student retention (Derby & Smith, 2004; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Stovall, 2000); student satisfaction (Duggan & Williams, 2011; O'Gara et al., 2009; Padgett et al., 2013; Redmond et al., 2013; Rhodes & Carifio, 1999); and GPAs (Cho & Karp, 2013; Stovall, 2000). These outcomes speak to assisting students during their early experiences of their higher education, which represent a critical period

of transition. Therefore, this time period may have a significant impact on students' success and their decision to remain enrolled in and continue their education at an institution.

Tinto (1975, 1993, 2006) and Astin (1977, 1984, 1993) have suggested that students who are connected to their academic environments are more likely to remain enrolled and persist when compared with students who do not establish a connection to their academic environments. The findings of the O'Gara et al. (2009) study suggested that a student-success course was a key component in helping students adjust to the community college, while Rhodes and Carifio (1999) indicated that student-success seminars might be more beneficial for younger students than for older students.

The impact of first-year seminar participation may go beyond students' experiences in that specific course, to other curricular and cocurricular learning experiences (Padgett et al., 2013). As such, student-success seminars have also been found to be beneficial in students' transition to college through enhancing their understanding of academic life, such as learning time-management skills, developing their ability to identify and rank priorities, and increasing their understanding of different learning styles (Redmond et al., 2013).

The literature on student-success seminars in this review includes both quantitative and qualitative studies with regard to the benefits of such courses, yet there is a lack of identifiable research that examines student-success seminars from a phenomenological perspective. More specifically, the review of literature in this study has recognized a research opportunity to better understand the lived experiences of students in a community-college student-success seminar. O'Gara et al. (2009) have pointed out a lack of qualitative research that looks at student-success courses through the student perspective. The following chapter in this study will provide the reader with a more detailed explanation of how this study will address the gap in the research on

community-college student-success seminars that has been identified in this review of

the literature.

**CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, I reintroduce the research questions, present the research design, and discuss the methodology for this study. Additionally, I provide an overview of the participant selection, data-collection and data-analysis strategies, and evidence of steps taken for enhancing trustworthiness of the study.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to fill a research gap by examining the lived experiences of students in a semester-long, three-credit, community-college student-success seminar. Gaining insight into the *how* and *why* components of student experiences in a student-success seminar can provide a better understanding of aspects of students' experiences that may be contributing to the *what* components of success such as retention, GPA, student satisfaction, and course completion. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of first-year community-college students who participated in a semester-long, student-success seminar?

2. How do these students' lived experiences of the student-success seminar influence their overall community-college experiences?

3. How do these students' lived experiences of the student-success seminar influence their decisions to remain at their institution?

The review of literature in the previous chapter has identified several qualitative studies on student-success seminars, but these studies differ from the current study. For example, in O'Gara et al.'s (2009) research, the student-success courses in the study were offered at two urban community colleges as a one-credit course that met weekly for 55 minutes at one

institution, and for 50 minutes at the other institution. In the current study, in contrast, participants participated in a three-credit, student-success seminar that met for three 50-minute sessions or two 75-minute sessions per week for 18 weeks at a single institution.

Rhodes and Carifio (1999) also used a qualitative research approach to examine student-success seminars, yet several of their participants were more than 25 years of age (older students). In addition, Rhodes and Carifio interviewed their participants during the last 2 weeks of the semester, while the participants were still completing the course. In the current study, participants were recent high-school graduates (within one year of graduation and therefore, younger students) who transitioned directly from high school to community college. Furthermore, the current research occurred after the semester ended and students had completed their experiences in the student-success seminar, as opposed to during the last few weeks of the course (interviews during the in-process stage may not account for factors that could impact participant's experiences toward the end of the semester, after their participation in the study).

Furthermore, Rhodes and Carifio (1999) used a set of nine predetermined questions for their participant interviews, and each question was coded to reflect an inquiry into specific input, such as determining aspects of the freshman seminar that participants found useful. The data were then entered into an 11-category matrix that were classified by positive or negative responses. Rather than using a deductive approach, I analyzed data from participant interviews and identified emergent themes in the current study. Also, the FS courses in Rhodes and Carifio's (1999) study were mandatory, which may have contributed to older students feeling dissatisfied with the course. In contrast, this study encompassed student-success seminars that are highly recommended, but not mandatory.

Finally, in their study, Rhodes and Carifio (1999) were intentional in informing their participants that the researchers were interested in both negative and positive comments during their interviews. The current study reflects an interest in all aspects of the participants' experiences in a student-success seminar. The interviews contained one guiding question that asked what participants may not have found beneficial in the student-success seminar. Rather than soliciting explicit negative or positive feedback, I sought to let the interview conversation shape how participants' lived experiences were analyzed. This approach is complementary to the nature of interpretative phenomenological research, in which

> The 'conversation' . . . is also rather artificial; the aim of an interview is largely to facilitate an interaction which permits participants to tell their own stories, in their own words. (Smith et al., 2009, p. 57)

Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, I encouraged the students in the present study to describe their experiences of the three-credit, nonmandatory, but highly recommended community-college student-success seminar. Participants were recent high-school graduates.

## Research Design

I used a qualitative research approach to better understand the lived experiences of the participants. Creswell (2012) stated that "qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 44). Willis (2007) described qualitative research as having a goal of understanding a situation or context, rather than discovering universal laws. The phenomenological qualitative research approach, one of the five main branches of qualitative research, seeks to describe the common experience of participants identified as the phenomenon. Within the use of a phenomenological lens of inquiry

for this study, I further narrowed my methodology through the approach of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), as defined by Smith et al. (2009).

## Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

IPA has been described as an approach to qualitative inquiry that seeks to provide the researcher with insight into "how people make sense of major life experiences" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 1). More specifically, IPA seeks to offer an understanding of the particular experiences of participants; the approach is concerned with how a phenomenon such as an "event, process, or relationship" is understood from the perspective of the person going through the experience (p. 29). Furthermore, IPA involves the researcher making sense of how the participants make sense of their experiences (p. 36). Smith et al. (2009) referred to this process as the hermeneutic circle (p. 28).

The research approach of IPA is appropriate for this study because the purpose of my inquiry was to understand the lived experiences of students in a student-success seminar. The studies identified in chapters 1 and 2 have focused on the relationships between student-success seminars and student outcomes, such as increased first-year unit completion, increased grade-point averages, student satisfaction, and increased retention (Cho & Karp, 2013; Derby & Smith, 2004; Duggan & Williams, 2011; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). In essence, these studies address *what* student-success seminars do for students related to outcomes. The current study addressed, from the student perspective, *how* and *why* these seminars enhanced or influenced their college experience.

## Participants and Procedures

This section includes a description of the recruitment process and the participants, and details about the process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. It also contains

information about the coding process and identification of emergent themes. In the final section, I discuss the methods I employed to help establish trustworthiness in this study.

**Sample**

I used purposeful sampling in this study. Smith et al. (2009) stated that purposeful sampling is used in IPA to "grant us access to a particular perspective on the phenomena under study" (p. 49). In essence, rather than representing a sample population, the participant represents a perspective. Creswell (2014, p. 189) suggested that, for a phenomenological study, a sample size of three to 10 participants is acceptable. Smith et al. (2009) recommended between three and six participants for an IPA study sample.

For this study, I interviewed six participants, which was sufficient to reach saturation. I recruited participants from the main campus of a single-district, multicampus, community college located in the western United States, hereafter referred to as CCC. CCC is an Hispanic-serving institution, with about 56% of its student population identified as Latino/a.

Participants were delimited to those who were within one year of high-school graduation and in their first year of attendance at CCC. This delimitation was to capture a sample of students who were more likely to be experiencing the significant life transition of moving from high school to college and because the literature previously discussed states that most students leave an institution during their first year. Participants all completed a three-credit, semester-long, community-college student-success seminar within one year of participating in the study and were recruited from various daytime course sections during the semester preceding the interviews.

**Recruitment of Participants**

To recruit participants, I visited various course sections of the student-success seminar at CCC and explained the purpose of the study. The student-success seminar provided an introduction to the college experience for first-year students through an exploration and application of the psychological, social, and physical principles and life-management skills that impact lifelong learning, well-being, and success. Topics in the course ranged from career exploration and learning strategies, to wellness and lifestyle choices, and also included educational and transfer planning. Average course enrollment was 39 students per course section, with approximately 12 course sections offered each fall and spring academic semester. The student-success seminar was recommended for all incoming CCC students.

After I visited the course sections and explained the study, I left a sign-up sheet and description of the study with the course instructor. Interested participants were asked to provide their names and contact information on the sign-up sheet so they could be contacted to explain further details. I clarified with each instructor, and ensured that prospective participants also understood, that students' course grades would not be impacted by their participation or lack of participation in the study. This clarification was also included in the informed-consent form that I provided to and reviewed with each participant before the interviews began. As the researcher, I provided a $15 gift card to a coffee shop to each participant at the conclusion of the follow-up meeting. I announced this incentive when I visited the classes to recruit participants, and the incentive was highlighted on both the sign-up sheet and the informed-consent form.

**Participants**

Six students participated: four women and two men. All of the participants self-identified their ethnicities as either Mexican or Mexican American. A specific population or ethnic group

was not purposely recruited in the study. This was an unintended sample outcome. The

participants were all first-year students at CCC and had graduated from high school the spring

prior to beginning their fall semester at CCC. The participants represented three daytime sections

of the student-success seminar taught by three different instructors. All participants completed

the student-success seminar and returned to CCC for the Spring 2016 semester. Table 3.1

provides a summary overview of the participants' background information. I describe each

participant briefly in the sections that follow, using their chosen pseudonyms.

Table 3.1

*Participant Background Information*

| Name | Alondra | Amy | Bill | Jocelyn | Nick | Nicole |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Female | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| Age | 19 | 18 | 18 | 18 | 19 | 19 |
| Enrollment Status | Full-time | Full-time | Full-time | Full-time | Full-time | Part-time |
| Academic Major | Language Arts & Social Sciences | Sciences | Computer Science | Allied Health | Agriculture | Allied Health |
| Ethnicity (self-identified) | Mexican | Mexican | Mexican American | Mexican American | Mexican American | Mexican |
| First in family to attend college | No | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | No |
| Working | Yes | No | No | No | Yes | No |

**Alondra**

Alondra was a 19-year-old female student at CCC. She was enrolled full-time and was

pursuing a double major in language arts and social sciences and planned to transfer to a 4-year

institution and earn bachelor's degrees in her chosen majors. Alondra was born in Mexico and

came to the United States at an early age. She identified as Mexican. She worked seasonally

during the summers as a field worker. Alondra was the third person to attend college in her family, with her two older siblings having attended and having completed college.

### Amy

Amy was an 18-year-old female student at CCC. She was enrolled full-time and was pursuing the sciences with the goal to transfer and complete her studies to become a veterinarian. Amy was born in the United States and identified as Mexican. Although Amy's two siblings both attended college, neither of them completed their college education. Amy was not working at the time of the interview.

### Bill

Bill was an 18-year-old male student at CCC. He was enrolled full-time and was majoring in computer science. His goals were to earn an associate degree at CCC and then transfer to a 4-year university to earn a bachelor's degree. Bill identified as a Mexican American. Bill had three younger siblings and was the first in his family to attend college. Bill was not working at the time of the interview.

### Jocelyn

Jocelyn was an 18-year-old female student at CCC. She was attending full-time and was planning to pursue a profession in the medical field, with goals to earn a bachelor's and a master's degree in Allied Health. Jocelyn identified as Mexican American. Jocelyn was the first to attend college in her family. She was not working at the time of the interview.

### Nick

Nick was a 19-year-old male student at CCC. He was attending full-time and planned to transfer to a four-year university to earn a bachelor's degree in Agriculture. Nick was the first person in his family to attend college. Nick worked part time as a translator in healthcare and as a field worker. Nick identified himself as Mexican American.

### *Nicole*

Nicole was a 19-year-old female student at CCC. She was enrolled part-time for the spring 2016 semester. Nicole planned to earn her associate's degree in the Allied Health area at CCC and did not plan to transfer. Nicole was born in the United States and identified as Mexican. Nicole was the fourth person in her family to attend college, with three older siblings having attended before her. Two of those siblings completed their college education, while the third sibling was in the midst of finishing her degree. Nicole was not working at the time of the interview.

### Data Collection

I conducted the interviews in a private and quiet environment. All participants reviewed and signed informed-consent forms that briefed them on the goals and purpose of the research. I also informed participants that they had the option to discontinue participation at any time during the research process. The interviews were semistructured; I used guiding questions throughout the interview process (see Appendix E). I asked additional questions if further clarification or new areas of probing were needed.

Creswell (2014) stated that follow-up interviews with participants can allow for participants to comment on the researcher's findings. Accordingly, after the first round of interviews and data analysis, I conducted follow-up meetings with each participant. During this second meeting, I shared my initial analysis of the interview and provided the opportunity for each participant to give feedback about whether or not my interpretation of the interview content was congruent with what the participant intended to communicate. This step contributed to the trustworthiness of the study, which I describe in greater detail later in this chapter.

I used a variety of methods to ensure confidentiality of data in this study. All participants had the opportunity to choose a pseudonym for themselves, which I used throughout the

interview. These pseudonyms were kept with the participants' signed informed-consent forms. The information connecting the participants with their pseudonyms was kept in a locked site separate from all data gathered. This locked information was placed in the custody of one of my two committee co-chairs.

## Data Analysis and Interpretation

To conduct the analysis of the data collected, I followed the recommended analytic process of Smith et al. (2009, pp. 79–108). This process included (a) reading and rereading the transcribed text of the interviews, (b) making initial notes that included free textual analysis and exploratory comments, (c) developing emergent themes, (d) searching for connections across emergent themes, (e) moving to the next case and repeating the aforementioned steps, (f) looking for patterns across cases, and (g) writing up analyses of the findings. I outline these analytic steps in greater detail in the ensuing sections of this chapter.

### Transcription

Before beginning the data analysis, each interview was transcribed from an audio recording to written form using a transcription service. Smith et al. (2009) recommended that a transcript should show all spoken words of everyone present. Thus, I took measures to ensure that the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim for each participant. To facilitate an expedited timeline for my research analysis, I had the data transcribed after each interview and began the data analysis while I continued with the subsequent interviews.

### Initial Reading

The first step in the data analysis was to read and reread the transcribed interviews to immerse myself in the collected data. During the first several readings, I also listened to the audio recording of the interview. These steps helped ensure that I had an accurate understanding

of the transcribed data and a thorough comprehension of the interview content. According to

Smith et al. (2009), one of the purposes of initial reading is to ensure that the participant

becomes the focus of the analysis. This step is designed to slow down the tendency to summarize

complex information in short periods of time and to really gain a sense of what the participant is

experiencing (Smith et al., 2009).

## Exploratory Noting

After the initial reading and rereading of the transcribed data, I followed Smith et al.'s

(2009) second step of data analysis to develop initial notes that examined "semantic content and

language on a very exploratory level" (p. 83). In this step, I focused on identifying the meaning

of the interview content to recognize how participants talked about, understood, and thought

about their experiences in the student-success seminars. This step assisted me in developing a

detailed set of notes and comments about the acquired data, and helped provide a sound

foundation for subsequent coding in my analysis. Within my exploratory noting, I utilized

*descriptive*, *linguistic*, and *conceptual* coding, as Smith et al. (2009) discussed.

## Descriptive, Linguistic, and Conceptual Coding

"One basic element of exploratory commenting is analyzing the transcript to describe

content" (Smith et al., 2009, p.84). This step refers to beginning the coding of the data. I placed

my exploratory notes into three categories of coding that included descriptive comments,

linguistic comments, and conceptual comments.

**Descriptive coding.** First, I analyzed the interview transcripts for descriptive comments

that included key words, phrases, and explanations by the participants. Here, I focused on

identifying what the participants said within the transcripts. I used this step to describe content. I

highlighted my descriptive codes in yellow in the text of the transcription.

**Linguistic coding.** In the next step of data analysis, I further analyzed the previously highlighted text, to conduct my coding on a linguistic level. I used Smith et al.'s (2009) techniques of considering "pronoun use, pauses, laughter, functional aspects of language, repetition, tone, degree of fluency (articulate or hesitant)," (p. 88) and metaphors in the text to analyze how the content and meaning of the interview were presented. I made my linguistic coding comments with blue ink to differentiate them from other forms of coding.

**Conceptual coding.** In the third category of coding, I made conceptual comments. Smith et al. (2009) stated that this method is more interpretative and may include drawing on personal experiences that may be tied to the researcher's new understanding of the participants' world. Through thinking about my own past experiences as an instructor who has taught a student-success seminar, I was able to make better sense of the key events and experiences of the participants. Conceptual coding also involves shifting the researcher's focus toward the participants' understanding of the subject they are describing (Smith et al., 2009). I wrote my conceptual comments in red ink in the margins of the transcripts. Figure 3.1 provides an example of the different levels of coding that I used for data analysis of the transcribed interviews.

1

Interviewer: Okay. So, the first question I have for you is to please tell me about your experience in the student success seminar?

Interviewee: Well, right out of high school, I'm kinda like not good with change. So like from middle school to highschool, it was pretty nervous in the beginning. And now from high school to college, I was pretty nervous. So, having that as my first class it kinda, was like helpful. I guess like, so I know I have a class but I can ask questions and not feel afraid to ask questions I guess. And with her, she was really, she was really nice and I felt like comfortable. I was expecting you know like, she's a strict teacher writing the name just start lecturing that was I expecting. There you feel like comfortable and not afraid to ask questions. And I like how she explained everything so well like, she told us like what the goal of that class was. And, she was gonna show us all resources and --cos I'm a shy person, I don't like asking questions, I don't like you know uhm.. So, she made me feel really comfortable and the first day I was very, very nervous, I was very nervous.

Interviewer: Okay. What were you mainly nervous about?

Interviewee: I don't know uhmm, just transitioning like the new. I didn't know what to expect other than like a professor and lectures. I didn't know what else to expect, I didn't know if they were gonna be friendly or barely even talk to us or not. You know? uhm that's what I think ..just change..

Interviewer: So, little bit change that kinda unknown? Yeah?

Interviewee: Unknown, Yeah

Interviewer: Okay. And so you said, she, being the instructor made you feel comfortable

Interviewee: Yeah

Interviewer: So, what what was it about her that you felt like you, you know put more at ease, that made you comfortable?

Interviewee: I think the way she talked to us. The way, she didn't really feel like a professor, in a way. Like, she felt like someone that was there just to help. Not just someone that was, "I'm gonna teach you this, this and this."

*Handwritten annotations (left margin, red):*
Does she have difficulty with changes?

were there possible negative past experiences with instructors?

How did the unknown drive her fear/anxiety?

How important is the role of the Instructor?

*Handwritten annotations (right margin, blue):*
Fear and anxiety about transition & change

class helped alleviate fear & nervousness

comfort from Instructor

clarity, support from resources

college was making her very nervous

Scary transition. Fear of unexpected and change

confirming fear of unknown

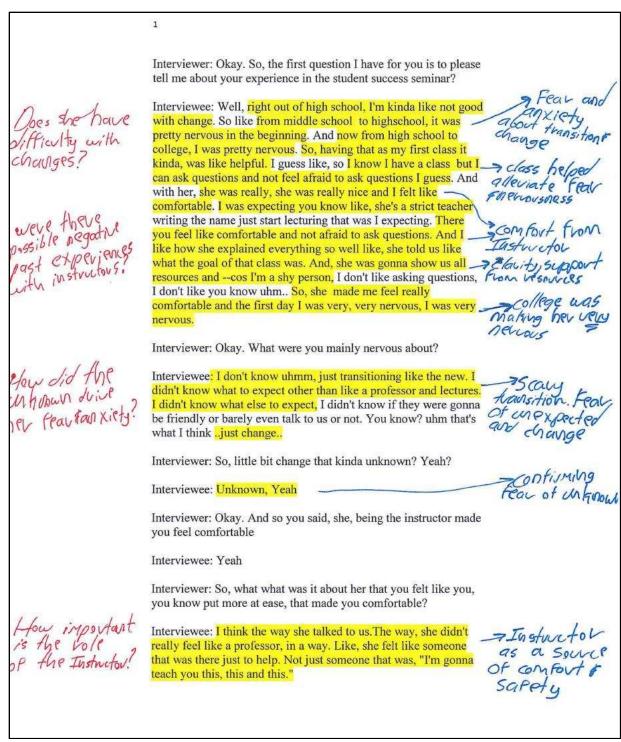Instructor as a source of comfort & safety

*Figure 3.1.* Example of levels of coding used in data analysis.

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**Theme Development**

The next step of the data analysis was to develop what Smith et al. (2009) referred to as *emergent themes*, which represent data that may be recurrent throughout the interview. I used this step to develop emergent themes for each interview. The comprehensive exploratory comments I created in the previous step helped me to develop a data set that I then reduced through identifying relationships, connections, and patterns among my exploratory notes. Smith et al. stated that the main purpose of this step is to turn the previously developed codes into "concise pithy statements of what was important in the various comments attached to a piece of transcript" (p. 92).

More specifically, after descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual coding was completed, I assigned numbers for recurring themes within individual cases. For example, I assigned Jocelyn's recurring theme *lost in new environment* the number *1*. Once a theme was no longer recurring for an individual participant, saturation of the data had been reached for that theme and I moved on to identifying the next individual emergent theme. I continued this process for all individual emergent themes. After completing coding for the six individuals, I noted that similar themes were emerging and no new themes were developing. Consequently, no additional interviews were needed because data saturation for the study had been reached.

After all individual emergent themes were identified, I began my cross-case analysis, in which I searched for connections among the emergent themes across interviews; these connections ultimately became what Smith et al. (2009) called *superordinate themes*. In this process, I began looking for similarities within the individual emergent themes, and I placed those themes within superordinate themes, which represented the collective experiences of participants. Saturation was reached when I identified no new superordinate themes through the

analysis of similar emergent themes. As a final step of my data analysis, I used a metaphorical journey at sea to characterize the superordinate themes. For example, emergent themes centering on worry, anxiety, and nervousness as a result of the high school-to-college transition I labeled *choppy waters.* The metaphorical labels helped to capture the essence of participants' experiences in the student-success seminar.

## Trustworthiness

I employed various methods to help establish trustworthiness in this study, using a combination of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria and Creswell's (2012, 2014) standards. Some of these approaches included member checking; rich, thick descriptions; and prolonged engagement with the participants.

The first element of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for establishing trustworthiness is *credibility*, which seeks to provide confidence in the truth of the findings. Similar to Creswell (2014) making recommendations for convincing readers of the accuracy of the research, Lincoln and Guba (1985, pp. 289–331) discussed various activities for increasing the probability of establishing the credibility of research findings. These strategies include *prolonged engagement, persistent observation*, and *member checks*. Prolonged engagement refers to the researcher investing enough time to build trust with the participants to learn the "culture," and to help the researcher rise above his or her own preconceptions. All interviews began with my acquiring some background information about the participants that helped me to better understand them, which contributed to our ability to establish rapport from the early part of the participant/researcher relationships.

My meetings with the participants and discussions about the study through my classroom recruitment presentations and through phone conversations with interested participants before I

conducted the interviews also spoke to the use of prolonged engagement and further contributed to building rapport with the participants. This was an important step of my research design because Creswell (2012) stated that building trust with the participants may help elicit open and honest responses. I further established credibility by ensuring that I was familiar with the culture of both the student-success seminar and the student population of the institution where the research was conducted, which spoke to the persistent observation aspect of credibility.

Another technique that I used to help establish credibility was to conduct member checks with my participants. Creswell (2014) described member checking as a means to "determine accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to the participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate" (p. 201). This step provided the participants an opportunity to assess my interpretations of their experiences via the emergent themes I developed. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted, "if the investigator is able to purport that his or her reconstructions are recognizable to audience members as adequate representations of their own (and multiple) realities, it is essential that they be given the opportunity to react to them" (p. 314).

To further strengthen the study's trustworthiness, I attempted to ensure that my research had the element of transferability. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), transferability seeks to determine the extent to which findings of an inquiry are applicable in other contexts. Creswell (2014) stated that a thick description "may transport readers to the setting, and give the discussion an element of shared experiences" (p. 202).

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the researcher has the responsibility to provide data that allow others to determine whether the research is transferable. I have provided a thick description of my data analysis that is clear and detailed, to help assure that the findings of the

study may be evaluated by consumers of this research for applicability to their own studies and their own research populations. My data analysis is presented in a manner that clearly, and in depth, reflects the lived experiences of students in a three-credit, semester-long, community-college student-success seminar.

Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 328) stated that a reflexive journal may help contribute to the trustworthiness of a study. So, as an additional measure to add to the trustworthiness of this study, I kept a reflexive journal to document my progress and process. This journal provided an overview of my research steps and progress, and it also allowed me to address issues that may have arisen throughout the research process. Finally, to further contribute to the trustworthiness of this study, I had one of my coded transcripts reviewed by two peers, to examine my process and accuracy in capturing codes. Feedback from these peers suggested that my coding analysis was trustworthy. Both peers indicated that their coding analysis was congruent with my interpretation.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the research methodology for the study, which examined the lived experiences of students in a three-credit, semester-long, community-college student-success seminar. I also have discussed how this study is different from some of the studies identified in the literature. I have presented my research design and discussed IPA as my research approach, and presented an overview of my participant selection and procedures. Finally, I have highlighted my data-analysis methods and interpretation, including my coding, and the methods I used to ensure trustworthiness in the study. In the following chapter, I present and discuss my findings and offer answers to the research questions within the current study.

# CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The goal of this study was to better understand the lived experiences of first-year community college students who had participated in a semester-long student-success seminar. I begin the chapter by explaining in more detail the superordinate themes that I developed through analysis of the data. To capture the essence of the lived experiences of the participants, I represent the superordinate themes using a nautical metaphor. These superordinate themes are *choppy waters, a guiding light, a clearer destination, charting a course,* and *taking the wheel with the crew on board.* Each of these themes consists of emergent themes that help to support my analysis of the data (see Figure 4.1). In the following sections of this chapter, I describe these superordinate and emergent themes in detail and in relation to the student-success seminar experience of each participant. In the final section, I offer answers to the following research questions within the context of the identified superordinate and emergent themes:

1. What are the lived experiences of first-year community-college students who participated in a semester-long, student-success seminar?

2. How do these students' lived experiences of the student-success seminar influence their overall community-college experiences?

3. How do these students' lived experiences of the student-success seminar influence their decisions to remain at their institution?

| | |
|---|---|
| **Superordinate Theme 1**<br><br>Choppy Waters<br><br>*Emergent Themes*<br><br>Feeling lost in an unknown environment<br><br>Concerns about succeeding as a student and as an adult | **Superordinate Theme 2**<br><br>A Guiding Light<br><br>*Emergent Themes*<br><br>Instructor as a source of comfort and trust<br><br>Instructor as a source of accountability and<br><br>encouragement |
| **Superordinate Theme 3**<br><br>A Clearer Destination<br><br>*Emergent Themes*<br><br>Awareness and reinforcement of college major and<br><br>career possibilities<br><br>Affirmation of continuing college education at CCC | **Superordinate Theme 4**<br><br>Charting a Course<br><br>*Emergent Themes*<br><br>Awareness of campus resources<br><br>Awareness of study tools<br><br>Classroom guests as academic-success role models |

| |
|---|
| **Superordinate Theme 5**<br><br>Taking the Wheel With the Crew on Board<br><br>*Emergent Themes*<br><br>Building self-confidence through classroom experiences and interaction<br><br>Building self-confidence through sense of community |

*Figure 4.1.* Superordinate and emergent themes of research study.

## Superordinate Theme 1: Choppy Waters

A voyage at sea can be affected by the conditions at hand. The waters can sometimes be calm and smooth. In such circumstances, those taking the journey may avoid encountering difficulties as they navigate uncharted waters and arrive at their destination without many issues. Other times, however, waters may be rough and turbulent, making navigation and moving toward a destination a more challenging task.

Similarly, the first superordinate theme I identified in this study was *choppy waters*. Just as turbulent conditions at sea may bring forth anxiety for those traveling, the choppy waters that five of the six of the participants spoke to as they entered their first semester of college and began their experiences in the student-success seminar presented them with stress and challenges. These participants talked about their high school-to-college transition bringing them some anxiety as a part of their experience in the student-success seminar. I describe these choppy waters through the identified emergent themes of *feeling lost in an unknown environment* and *concerns about succeeding as a student and as an adult*.

**Emergent Theme: Feeling Lost in an Unknown Environment**

Amy described experiencing anxiety about making the transition to a new college environment. She attributed this source of anxiety to stress factors such as not knowing what to expect in college, entering a new unknown environment, and not knowing what to expect from instructors: ". . .just transitioning. . . I didn't know what to expect other than like a professor and lectures. . . I didn't know if they were gonna be friendly or barely even talk to us or not." These stressors contributed to Amy feeling lost, which presented her with a great deal of anxiety as she began her new college experience. She stated, ". . .the first day, I was very, very nervous; I was very nervous."

Jocelyn also felt lost in her new and unknown college environment, which contributed to the choppy waters she encountered. Jocelyn attributed her sense of feeling lost to her concerns about navigating the college campus, figuring out her new class schedule, and becoming familiar with her new surroundings. She began her college experience without an understanding of what she was getting into:

. . .at first when I got into that program [student-success seminar] . . . I didn't know what I was getting into . . . for a brand new student coming into, like, community college. . . I was completely lost. I didn't know where to go, what classes to take. . . . I felt lost.

Alondra also described a general feeling of being lost in an unknown environment, which contributed to her experience of choppy waters: "I felt like I was pretty nervous in a new environment because I wasn't used to it. . . . I was pretty nervous because I didn't really know anyone in the class and, like, I didn't know what was gonna go on. . ." Similar to the other participants, Alondra did not have a clear understanding of her new college environment, and because of this lack of clarity, she felt lost at CCC.

Nick also encountered choppy waters as a result of feeling lost at CCC, which he attributed to his lack of understanding of the college environment:

Well, I knew very little about the college. I only found out more after taking the class. . . . I didn't know how it was gonna be. . . . well, I didn't know where I should go, what I should do, how I should act, what am I supposed to say and I'm supposed to not say.

Additionally, Nick's family had not attended college themselves and did not understand how it worked: "My family did not know about college, so they could not give advice for me to do well."

Bill also encountered choppy waters because he felt lost. He too was the first person in his family to attend college, and, similar to Nick, Bill's family did not understand how college worked: ". . .I'm the first one to go for my family. So I was nervous at first because it was my first time going to college and I thought I would be lost, like, no guidance."

**Emergent Theme: Concerns About Succeeding As a Student and As an Adult**

Amy was anxious about facing some adult responsibilities as part of her new life as a college student. For example, she mentioned living independently from the family: ". . .we went over like, living on our own . . . so apartments, looking for apartments, it made everything like a

reality." Furthermore, Amy discussed becoming aware of skills such as budgeting as part of succeeding as an adult: ". . .budgets and things I don't know how to do now, but learned about; it helped me think about the future and becoming an adult in a less nervous way."

Alondra also became aware of college as a transition to adult responsibilities. Referring to what her instructor would say in the class, Alondra recounted realizing that becoming an adult was a part of her college experience:

> . . .I mean just the fact that she was always like, telling us, like, "Oh, you guys need to be responsible," like, "You guys are grownups now. . ." It made me realize that we kind of were because she was like "You can't lean towards [on] your teachers, or . . . your instructors anymore. . ."

This reality check was recurrent for Alondra as she came to terms with other aspects of entering an environment in college that included more adult responsibilities: ". . .basically, you're responsible, because in high school . . . you have a full schedule and, like, they schedule it for you . . . now you have to, like, make your own decisions. . ." This sense of adult responsibility and concerns about succeeding as an adult contributed to Alondra finding herself in some choppy waters.

Nick was the first person in his family to attend college. In hoping to set an example for his three younger siblings, he also experienced a sense of choppy waters as he felt pressure to succeed as a student in college. "I feel like I go to college and show my [siblings] that we can do everything. And to be someone, like, cultivated in this country; that's why I want to go to college." Nick felt a strong duty to thrive in college as a message to his siblings, so they could succeed as well.

To summarize, the first superordinate theme suggests that the high school-to-college transition may bring forth anxiety for those experiencing the transition. All but one of the participants shared feelings of anxiety about this transition, and various aspects of the sources of

their anxiety were unique to their individual experiences. Participants experienced anxiety as the result of feeling lost in a new environment because they were unfamiliar with their new surroundings and did not know how to navigate the college campus, and also because they did not know what to expect from their instructors, did not understand their class schedules, and did not have any guidance about college from their families. Within this context, worries about succeeding as students and as adults also contributed to the anxiety some participants experienced. These emergent themes helped to create the choppy waters that participants experienced at the beginning of their high school-to-college transitions and the onset of their journeys in higher education.

## Superordinate Theme 2: A Guiding Light

During a challenging journey at sea, where choppy waters may present difficulties, travelers have relied on the stars and lighthouse beacons to gain a sense of direction and assistance in reaching their destinations. These sources of light provide guidance and offer a sense of security in their navigation; they know that the light source will help supply trustworthy information about location, ways to be safe, and security during their journeys. The second superordinate theme I identified in this study relates to the *guiding light* of the lighthouse, with the instructor of the student-success seminar representing the guiding light. All of the participants spoke to this theme. All provided details that were specific to their experiences about why they felt that their instructors were guiding lights and sources for helping them to succeed in their college environment. The two emergent themes I identified within this superordinate theme were *instructor as a source of comfort and trust,* and *instructor as a source of accountability and encouragement.*

**Emergent Theme: Instructor As a Source of Comfort and Trust**

Amy viewed her instructor as a source of comfort and trust: ". . .she was really nice and I felt like, comfortable. . . I like how she explained everything so well; like, she told us what the goal of the class was. . ." Amy's sense of comfort and trust stemmed from her feeling that the instructor was approachable and wanted to help students in class: "I think the way she talked to us. The way she didn't really feel like a professor, in a way. . . . she felt like someone that was just there to help."

Jocelyn felt that she was able to approach her instructor both within and outside of class meeting times for assistance, which made her feel she had someone to trust to help her with various issues: "The instructor . . . he would help me with everything. He even helped me to register for my classes, be on the right track." This guidance from the instructor provided Jocelyn with a clearer idea about the details of her educational plan: ". . .he is obviously trying to help me 'cause he knows what he's doing. . . I would ask him about my general ed and how it would count for transfer . . . so I'd go back to him for that. . ." Jocelyn viewed her instructor as the "expert professional" and trusted him to help her stay focused on her academic goals.

Similarly, Bill found comfort in his instructor, who offered him clear guidance and helped him with his high school-to-college transition. This guidance eased some anxiety he was experiencing because he did not understand various aspects of the college experience:

> Well about the course, I want to clarify about the instructor. . . . she really made my first experience more comfortable at [CCC]. . . .she taught me how college works, like studying, getting tutoring, about scholarships.

**Emergent Theme: Instructor As a Source of Accountability and Encouragement**

Nick's instructor encouraged him to use class information, and also kept him accountable in his studies through various course assignments and homework: "Well, the instructor was

really good. She was a little strict, and she always gives us a lot of homework and just tell[s] me more about college and what we should do with that [information]." Additionally, Nick and other students in the class were repeatedly held to high standards of classroom conduct: "Well, she always required us to be on time in class, never be late."

Alondra's instructor encouraged her to take her college education and her future seriously, and this encouragement appeared to inspire her to succeed in college: "[The instructor] was like, 'if you're gonna wanna win the race, like, you can't stop; like, you have to keep going.'" These words of encouragement resonated with Alondra on a social level, as well: ". . .she was always, like, telling us to, like, meet new people. . . .so I took her advice. . ." Alondra saw her instructor as a source of encouragement, a guiding light in her new college environment.

Likewise, Nicole was encouraged by her instructor to interact with other students in her student-success seminar: ". . .him telling, like, us to go see, like, what others think . . . he put us in groups, and then we had to discuss . . . the lecture . . . to see like, what other people think, not just us." As a result of her instructor's encouragement to exchange ideas and viewpoints with other students, Nicole became more comfortable interacting with her peers.

Within this guiding light theme, some participants' sense of comfort and trust was reflected by the instructor's approachability and helpfulness. Additionally, some instructors provided guidance to students by helping them with course registration, clarifying general education and transfer issues, and offering information about other aspects of the college experience such as studying, tutoring, and scholarship resources. Moreover, as Alondra and Nicole noted, participants felt they were encouraged by their instructors to interact with other students in class, and to take their college education seriously. Participants also felt that their

instructors kept them accountable through various homework assignments and classroom etiquette standards, such as expecting students to be on time. Overall, the instructors became guiding lights to help participants gain their bearings on their college journeys, to help them navigate some of the hazards they might encounter along the way, and to remind them they were not alone on their voyage.

## Superordinate Theme 3: A Clearer Destination

Once travelers at sea are able to gain a sense of their bearings through a guiding light, they have a clearer vision of where they are headed. Continuing with this metaphor, the third superordinate theme I identified with the participants in this study was a *clearer destination*. This theme reflects the outcome that participants who completed the student-success seminar had a clearer idea of where they were headed in terms of career and college major choices. I labeled the emergent themes in this superordinate theme *awareness and reinforcement of college major and career possibilities,* and *affirmation of continuing college education at CCC*. These themes were reflected in the comments of all participants.

**Emergent Theme: Awareness and Reinforcement of College Major and Career Possibilities**

Amy had a clear idea of her major and career goals before she began her first year of college. Her career exploration experience in the student-success seminar provided her with information that reinforced these goals:

> . . .since I was like 10, "I'm gonna be a Vet"—that's what I told my dad. And ever since then, that's what I've been planning to do. And I think when I got there [the student-success seminar], I did more research on my education, but it stayed the same.

Career exploration was a significant part of the student-success seminar. For some students, such as Amy, this component helps to confirm their already chosen career paths, while for others, it offers career options that they can investigate further.

When Bill entered college, he did not have clear career or academic major goals, but his experience in the student-success seminar helped him identify options for goals during the decision-making process. As he explained,

> Well, the success seminar really help[ed] me. I chose my major in the class. That's where I decided I want to do this. And then I saw more opportunities to . . . visit certain universities I want to transfer to; so throughout the course we made a PowerPoint to explain our major. I went more into detail on the job I wanted to do. . . . I searched more and more to see what I want to do, and then I found certain types of jobs that were related to the [my] major. And that really helped me to explain to others what I want to do, but also for myself. As I searched, I got more comfortable with the major I chose and the career.

At the beginning of the course, Bill felt lost in planning his future. As he gained more clarity about his major and career options through his research in the course, he was able to approach his college experience with a greater sense of clarity about his future, as well. By gaining an understanding of different majors, Bill was able to narrow his major and career choice and focus on those choices: "So comparing it to other courses, I think the student-success seminar, I mean, it really helped me a lot to see what I wanted to do with my career."

Nick also gained awareness of possibilities for his major and career from his student-success seminar experience. This awareness prompted him to consider the viability of his choices for major and career not only in the short term, but also over the long term:

> Well. . . I was here to study about agriculture, but then the teacher told me there was a lot . . . of different jobs to do, and she told me that . . . I should think about the jobs in the future, in 5 years, . . . if I want to be happy with a job.

**Emergent Theme: Affirmation of Continuing College Education at CCC**

Several participants discussed the impact of the student-success seminar on their decisions to continue their education at CCC. Although Amy stated that she would have returned to CCC the following semester without having participated in the student-success seminar, she did not feel that the course reinforced that decision. Jocelyn, however, felt that the seminar

reinforced her desire to continue her education there: "So it helped me to want to come back because they [the course instructor] introduced so much help, and it made me realize and open my eyes that I wanted to actually be here."

Bill also felt that the student-success seminar strengthened his decision to remain enrolled at CCC: "I probably would have returned, but I won't [wouldn't] have any clarity. I would be clueless towards a lot of things." Bill's statement suggests that the student-success seminar helped to clarify a lot of details about college, which helped him continue his education.

Similarly, Nicole felt that she also would have returned to CCC the following semester even if she had not taken the student-success seminar. Her experience in the course, including information from and exposure to various guest presenters, helped reinforce that decision:

> Yeah I think I would have come back anyway if I didn't take the class. But it was really encouraging . . . to see what you can do; and like, all the presenters that came to talk to us, so it's really helpful. . . . Like financial aid. . . I don't really know the other program that they were talking about. . . ahh, the STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics]. . .

Alondra felt that the student-success course would be beneficial to help someone decide to return if they were not certain about coming back: "I probably would have [returned] because my [sibling] is really on me. . . I felt like, for anybody who is still like, in between staying . . . the course is helpful."

Nick stated that he may not have returned for the following semester had he not completed the student-success seminar: "Well, maybe I wouldn't be here because I work, and I was stressed, and the class helped with that stress." He was able to take advantage of the resources the student-success seminar offered. Knowledge about and use of these resources appeared to help alleviate some of his stress and contribute to his decision to continue his education at CCC.

In summary, the student-success seminar helped students identify a clearer destination through picking majors and clarifying career goals. The seminar also helped to affirm majors and career goals for those students who had already decided on an academic and career path. Furthermore, the majority of participants' experiences in the student-success seminar appeared to support and reinforce their decisions to continue their college education at CCC after they completed the student-success seminar.

## Superordinate Theme 4: Charting a Course

During a trip at sea, travelers need tools, maps, and instruments that will help make the trip as smooth as possible. Once they have established a clear destination, they can determine details regarding how to best reach that destination. By charting a course with the safest and best route, travelers can better avoid the choppy waters that may otherwise impact their trip. In that context, the fourth superordinate theme I identified from the participants' responses in this study was *charting a course.* Within this theme, participants identified various resources that they perceived helped them succeed both academically and socially in their college environments. Consequently, the emergent themes I identified within this superordinate theme were *awareness of campus resources*, *awareness of study tools*, and *classroom guests as academic-success role models*. Five of the six participants spoke about the types of tools, maps, and instruments that contributed to the course they charted for their completion of college.

**Emergent Theme: Awareness of Campus Resources**

Amy found that the student-success seminar helped her become aware of a variety of campus resources. For instance, awareness of the campus library helped her utilize its resources in completing her English papers: "I think if I didn't take that class, I wouldn't have known resources like the library. . . . that's been so helpful for papers."

Likewise, Jocelyn became aware of various resources that could help her navigate the college environment and succeed as a student. This assistance came in various ways, including help with college forms such as financial-aid paperwork, and with borrowing a textbook from the class instructor for the semester:

> They [the class] had a lot of resources. I like the fact that [the instructor] even let us borrow the book for the semester. That's . . . less stress for me to try to find a book even though I have financial aid. . . .the class has a lot of resources. . . . I like how they specified . . . how to correctly fill, like, financial aid for next semester; stuff like that.

Nicole found that information from guest speakers on financial aid and campus programs was useful in helping her succeed in college. Furthermore, she was able to feel like she had access to different sources of academic and personal support throughout the campus, "like where to go . . . all those presenters that came that like told us where to go when we need help. . ." For example, she was able to access academic counseling services to help with her course planning based on information academic counselors provided in class: ". . .for counseling, they [students] can go there; . . . if they have questions about the classes they are taking right now, or about their major, they can go there for that too."

In the student-success seminar, Bill learned about several resources to assist with his college success, including information about scholarships and tutoring:

> [The instructor] taught me how college works, like studying, getting tutoring, scholarships, all of that. . . . I remember one day we went to a tutorial session, I think in the library, and they showed us how to handle the first semester . . . first year of college, to transition better for the next years as I move on.

Bill was able to feel better prepared for his academic future as a result of the resources he was exposed to in his student-success seminar.

**Emergent Theme: Awareness of Study Tools**

Amy found that the student-success seminar provided her with tools that helped with her academics: "We learned learning styles . . . note taking was really helpful . . . and I used that in bio. . ." The study tools Amy learned about in the student-success seminar helped boost her skills and self-confidence toward her academics:

> . . .I know if I wouldn't have taken that class, I wouldn't have asked questions about the resources [study tools] we have here. . . I wouldn't have gotten the grades that I did. I think it's really important to take that class.

Nick was the first person to attend college in his family. As a result, he believed he had very limited knowledge of how to study and manage his college schedule. The success strategies and resources in the student-success seminar helped him better manage his academics. For example, Nick found time-management and study skills to be useful tools for college success:

> . . .when you are tired, you are not supposed to study a lot, and when you have a lot of power, you can . . . study and do your homework. When you have free time, you could read a lot of stuff.

Nick's awareness of how to better manage his time helped him to choose a more manageable course load for his next semester: "The class also helped you to choose [a] better class [schedule] because when I started the first semester, I took six classes; and then I dropped two because I thought I was not ready."

**Emergent Theme: Classroom Guests As Academic-Success Role Models**

Jocelyn discovered that several of the guest speakers in the student-success seminar were former community college students, "so I thought it was really interesting how many guest speakers did go to community colleges, and they transferred; so they're doing fine." Seeing these former students who became successful professionals after once being in her place as a new

community college student prompted Jocelyn to view the classroom guests as academic-success role models.

For the participants in this study, the results suggest that resources and role models for college success are an important part of preparing students for a successful college experience. They may become aware of resources on campus, such as the library or counseling; gain awareness of study tools, such as learning styles and note taking; or experience classroom guest speakers as role models for academic success.

### Superordinate Theme 5: Taking the Wheel With the Crew on Board

Participants started off in choppy waters, but they made progress in their travels in the new college environment through their instructors serving as guiding lights, and through the greater clarity they gained in their academic and career goals which helped them chart a clearer course toward their destinations. Although they had not yet fully reached their destinations, they became more prepared to successfully handle their journeys at CCC. A final element of the participants' metaphorical nautical journey was their increased confidence to take the wheel to steer toward their destinations. They were not wholly alone in taking the wheel because they still had a support system to assist them with their navigation, as described in the earlier superordinate themes. Nevertheless, the participants were more confident in becoming the main navigators of their educational journeys. Consequently, the fifth superordinate theme I identified in this study was *taking the wheel with the crew on board.* Emergent themes within this superordinate theme included *building self-confidence through classroom experiences and interaction* and *building self-confidence through sense of community*. Four of the six participants spoke to their growth in navigating their academic journey.

**Emergent Theme: Building Self-Confidence Through Classroom Experiences and Interaction**

Jocelyn stated during her interview that she was typically a shy person until she became comfortable with the new people she met. Jocelyn's experience in the student-success seminar helped her to become more confident in her interactions with other students:

> . . .I noticed that they [the instructor] always make us present . . . so that really helped me gain confidence and be friendly with people and not be scared to just talk to people and say, you know, like "Let's work together." . . .since we had to present daily it made . . . it OK to talk to people.

Jocelyn's presentations in class also helped her to gain more confidence as a public speaker, which prompted her to become more engaged as a student: "I participated more. In all my classes I participated more. I'm not afraid to shout answers, and it's OK if you're wrong, and it's OK if you're right."

Nick was able to gain a boost in his self-confidence by presenting to and interacting with other students within class: "There was a presentation that I did. . . I was nervous because there's a lot of students . . . that was helpful to be in front of people, to talk to a lot of people. . . .we did a lot of presentations."

> Bill's self-confidence also grew through his classroom experiences and interaction:

> Well, my experience in the student-success seminar was very pleasing. I learned a lot of details about how to become successful in the college education world and for my future academics. It taught me how to become less afraid to join clubs, apply for scholarships, and interact with other classmates.

Bill was able to acquire more specific details about social and academic options through his classroom experiences, which allowed him to be more confident to apply for scholarships and join clubs.

**Emergent Theme: Building Self-Confidence Through Sense of Community**

Bill also became more confident by gaining a sense of community through his experience in the student-success seminar. This involvement spanned various parts of the college campus: "So I took the class, and then after I finished the course, it actually made me more comfortable to be around the campus. I actually started spending more time here in the library and around the campus. . ."

Bill was also able to meet new people who contributed to his sense of community in college: ". . .you're more comfortable if you talk to everyone. So say if I go and present in front of the class, I would be more comfortable since I've talked to every single person in the class." Through the various positive connections Bill made with other students and throughout the campus, he felt a sense of community within his college environment, which made him more confident in that setting.

Alondra also increased her self-confidence via her sense of community within the student-success seminar: "I was able to meet new people. We were always like, connecting with each other; and like, if they didn't know what the homework was or if they lost it. . . we were always there for each other." This feeling of community provided Alondra with the belief that she had a support system throughout her current and ensuing college experiences, thus allowing her to feel more confident: "It made me feel like I could do this. . . having them there for me."

Alondra's connections with other students in the student-success seminar also provided her with the confidence to connect with the rest of her college environment:

> It [the student-success seminar] gives guidance, and, like, the people are really nice and you do group things . . . you get to know them really well . . . throughout college you see them . . . you won't feel like, "Oh, like, I only know that person from that club, and I'm not going to talk to them"; it's more like, "Oh, hey, I remember you."

As a result of this increase in self-confidence, Alondra ended up joining the sociology club:

" . . .I've wanted to join a club and, like, there was an opening for the sociology club this

semester, and I kind of just remember, like . . . it's something new but I should try it. . ."

To summarize this superordinate theme, participants experienced increased self-

confidence by interacting with classmates, speaking publicly during class presentations,

connecting with other parts of the college campus such as clubs, spending more time on campus,

and meeting and networking with other students in class. This increased self-confidence

translated into their choosing to take the wheel during their academic journey, while they still

had the support of the "crew on board."

To describe the outcomes of this study, I have used the device of a nautically themed

journey at sea to describe the lived experiences of first-year community college students in a

semester-long student-success seminar. As participants began their college journeys, they found

themselves in choppy waters, which represented the various challenges they experienced as they

began their transition to college and their experiences in the student-success seminar. As they

moved ahead on their journeys, participants were able to gain a sense of their bearings through

trusting and finding comfort in their student-success seminar instructors, whom they viewed as

guiding lights. Moving ahead, participants were able to establish a clearer destination toward

their goals, establishing or affirming college-major and career-path options.

With a clearer destination, their academic journeys continued as they charted their

courses using the various academic tools, maps, and instruments available to them for solid

navigation through the unknowns and uncertainties of the college environment. A final element

of their new journeys was when they gained increased confidence and took a more active role in

guiding their choices—the metaphorical ship—toward their destinations. Collectively, these five

superordinate themes helped capture the essence of the lived experiences of the participants in this study and provided a means for me to answer the research questions.

<div align="center">**Answering the Research Questions**</div>

Although each participant's experiences in this study were unique, the superordinate and related emergent themes apply across all cases to capture the essence of participants' lived experiences in the student-success seminar. The superordinate themes of choppy waters, a guiding light, a clearer destination, charting a course, and taking the wheel with the crew on board and their related emergent themes helped me to answer the research questions presented within this study.

**Research Question 1**

To address the first research question of this study, "What are the lived experiences of first-year community-college students who participated in a semester-long, student-success seminar?," I chose to use the metaphor of a nautical journey. During this journey, participants encountered various experiences that were similar to part of a voyage at sea. These experiences reflecting the challenges and tribulations participants encountered on their journey are described in this chapter through the identified superordinate and related emergent themes.

The findings suggest that some participants went through an anxious transition from high school to college, described by the choppy-waters theme, as they began their experiences in the student-success seminar. The participants recognized that their high-school experience was more structured—they knew what was expected and how to get from one point to the next. However, the college experience was a whole different world. Some participants felt anxious and lost being in a new environment and not knowing their instructors or class schedules. Additionally, they were lost because they did not have a clear idea of what college was going to be like and were

not sure how to navigate a new campus. Furthermore, some participants felt lost as a result of their families not being able to give advice about college since they had not attended college themselves. For other participants, being in college appeared to give them a heightened awareness of adult and student responsibilities, such as living on their own and developing their academic schedule.

The lived experiences of these participants also suggested that they relied upon and viewed their course instructors as guiding lights, much like lighthouse beacons or stars in the sky. The participants viewed their student-success seminar instructors as sources of support they could look to for direction in their new college environment. In addition to being lights that provided guidance, the instructors provided participants with comfort and trust through being approachable and serving as resources for issues and challenges inside and outside of the classroom. The students also viewed their instructors as sources for accountability by expecting students to exercise good habits such as being on time and completing homework. Instructors were also a source of encouragement to participants as they urged them to interact with other students and to research their academic majors in greater detail.

Additionally, the student-success seminar contributed to participants gaining a clearer sense of their destinations in terms of college majors and career paths. Some participants did not have any idea of their prospective college major or career path prior to the course. For other participants, their lived experiences in the student-success seminar helped to reinforce an already chosen major or career path. Through their experiences in the student-success seminar, these students were able to research and identify options for their prospective majors and careers. Through this process, they also gained clarity on the requirements for completing their career and educational goals.

The lived experiences of the student-success seminar also seemed to reinforce participants' decisions to continue their college education at CCC. This outcome was evident in the statements by some participants that, had they been on the fence about returning to CCC, the student-success seminar would have helped them decide to continue their education. Others stated that they would have continued at CCC regardless of having taken the course, but the seminar strengthened their decision to return. One participant explicitly stated that he most likely would not have returned to CCC had he not participated in the student-success seminar.

A fourth theme of participants' lived experiences of the student-success seminar suggested that, once they had more clarity regarding their destination in the form of prospective majors and career goals, they were better equipped to chart a course for reaching their goals. To chart this course, participants needed the aid of various resources that help with college success. These resources included the campus library, financial aid, scholarship information, access to tutoring, the ability to borrow a textbook, and academic counseling. Some of these resources were provided directly by the student-success seminar instructor, while the participants discovered other resources through guest-speaker presentations in class. Participants also became aware of study tools, such as learning styles and study skills, as resources. Additionally, they viewed some of the classroom guests as academic-success role models because they had formerly attended community college and participants perceived them as successful professionals.

Lastly, participants in this study were more confident about taking charge of their academic journeys based on their seminar classroom experiences and interactions. They gained confidence by connecting with other students, completing class presentations, and engaging in public speaking. This confidence prompted participants to interact more with other students both

within the student-success seminar and throughout the campus, such as with campus clubs. Participants also gained a greater sense of community. By interacting with other students, they felt comfortable meeting and talking with more students; and for some participants, this comfort translated to spending more time on campus.

**Research Question 2**

To answer the second research question, "How do these students' lived experiences of the student-success seminar influence their overall community-college experiences?," it's important to note that the college experience is one that includes both social and academic involvements. The participants suggested that the student-success seminar was a positive influence for their overall community-college experiences. As discussed, participants in this study benefitted from positive social interactions and experiences with their course instructors, other students, and various persons throughout the campus whom they identified through classroom presentations.

Academically, participants were introduced to a variety of resources such as study tools and other resources and information about potential majors and career paths that helped to support their progress and success at CCC. In addition, participants' experiences in the student-success seminar appeared to offset some of the stress and anxiety that was a part of their high school-to-college transitions; the seminar helped calm some of the choppy waters they encountered at the onset of their academic journeys.

Students' lived experiences in the student-success seminar may also help them become more engrained in the fabric of their institution. This potential was evident through some participants' reports of joining campus clubs and spending more time on campus as a result of their seminar experience. Furthermore, resources that the participants became aware of in the

student-success seminar provided additional connections to the campus environment and also appeared to reinforce their decisions to continue their education at CCC and beyond.

**Research Question 3**

In response to the final research question, "How do these students' lived experiences of the student-success seminar influence their decisions to remain at their institution?," the participants' experiences seemed to support their decisions to remain enrolled at their institution after completion of the seminar. Although the majority of participants in this study stated that they would have returned to CCC even if they had not taken the course, they also indicated that their experiences in the seminar helped to reinforce their decision to return to CCC. Finally, the confidence participants gained in their classroom interactions and experiences, and in the sense of community they gained, suggests that this increase in self-confidence also may have contributed to reinforcing their decision to remain enrolled at their institution. This outcome suggests that the student-success seminar experience may also have a positive effect on student retention.

Factors such as instructors serving as guiding lights, and participants being able to clarify their destinations and gain confidence in themselves to handle the "wheel of the ship" contributed to their beliefs that the student-success seminar helped reinforce their decisions to remain at CCC. For example, participants discovered that they could count on their instructors as sources of comfort, trust, accountability, and encouragement. As a result, their instructors offered them a support system that made them feel safe in their new environment and provided a push for them to succeed.

Another factor that may have contributed to participants' decision to remain enrolled at CCC was their identification or affirmation of an academic major or career path, as depicted by

the superordinate theme of a clearer destination. By being aware of both their goals and the requirements to meet those goals, these students gained a sense of clarity for following through with their educational and career goals.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the lived experiences of the student-success seminar through superordinate themes that capture the elements of a metaphorical sea voyage. This voyage represents participants beginning their college experiences feeling anxious as a result of their high school-to-college transitions, and the rest of their early journey that led to them ultimately taking more control as they navigated toward their chosen academic and career destinations.

The findings of the lived experiences of students in a student-success seminar presented in this study suggest that such a seminar provides numerous benefits to first-year community college students. These apparent benefits include alleviating the anxiety associated with the high school-to-college transition for students by providing them with support and guidance from their seminar instructors, offering resources that help them succeed in the college environment, and forging their connections to the college and with other students. Based on the lived experiences of the participant in this study, such seminars may also contribute to students' retention by providing them with the support and self-assurance that will enable them to continue their chosen courses of study.

**CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

I begin this chapter by discussing how the findings of the current study relate to the relevant literature reviewed in this dissertation. Next, I discuss future research opportunities, followed by presenting various implications for practice as they pertain to designing, offering, and teaching student-success seminars at the community college. Finally, I share my perspective as the researcher and offer a conclusion to the chapter.

**Findings Related to the Literature**

The relevant literature includes theories regarding student institutional leaving, and also other research that includes benefits of student-success seminars as that research relates to transition from high school to college, and then in general beyond the seminar itself. I also address the value of the information provided in student-success seminars, and the relationship between student retention and student-success seminars.

**Overview**

The concept of the student-success seminar can be traced back to 1882, at Kentucky's Lee College (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996). After declining in popularity during the mid-20th century, such courses received renewed interest in 1972, when the University of South Carolina implemented the University 101 course to help ease campus unrest and facilitate student bonding (University 101, 2015). Currently, such courses are designed to better connect students with and integrate them into their college environment, both socially and academically (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Upcraft et al., 2005). Various studies have explored relationships between student participation in a student-success seminar and outcomes such as first-year unit completion (Cho & Karp, 2013), GPAs (Cho & Karp, 2013; Stovall, 2000), retention (Derby &

Smith, 2004; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Stovall, 2000), and student satisfaction (Duggan & Williams, 2011; O'Gara et al., 2009; Padgett et al., 2013; Redmond et al., 2013; Rhodes & Carifio, 1999). The current study suggests some possible interpretations to help explain *how* and *why* some of the aforementioned outcomes may be occurring. In the following section I discuss how the current study relates to Tinto's (1975, 1993) and Astin's (1977, 1984, 1993) theoretical approaches to institutional leaving. In addition, I discuss how the current study relates to the studies highlighted in this chapter, which offers a basis for better understanding how and why student outcomes may have occurred within these studies. I discuss the possible reasons for these outcomes in the concluding section of the chapter.

**Tinto, Astin, and Institutional Leaving**

According to Tinto (1993) the majority of institutional leaving takes place during the first year of college. To help better explain this occurrence, Tinto asserted that students leave higher educational institutions because of a lack of social and intellectual integration into their college environments. Tinto (1975) suggested in his Student Integration Model that students who were better integrated into their college environments were more likely to be committed to their institution, and therefore to remain at their institution long enough to complete their goal to graduate. Integration, as described by Tinto, refers to the social and academic connections students make within their institutions.

To expand on his theoretical framework, Tinto (1993) added his Model of Institutional Departure, which included the term *institutional experiences* to describe formal and informal experiences that lead to how well or poorly students integrate into their academic environment. More specifically, Tinto (1993) stated that formal academic institutional experiences, such as academic performance, and informal academic institutional experiences, such as student

interactions with faculty/staff, impact student decisions regarding leaving or staying at their institutions. Furthermore, Tinto asserted that formal social institutional experiences, such as extracurricular activities, and informal social institutional experiences, such as peer group interactions, also contribute to students' decisions to leave or remain at their institutions.

Findings from the current study reveal that participants encountered several opportunities to become integrated within CCC through both formal and informal institutional experiences. For example, in viewing the course instructor as *a guiding light*, participants experienced the instructor as a source of comfort, trust, accountability, and encouragement. These experiences with the instructor had the potential to impact student performance in class, and thus were a part of the participants' interaction with formal academic institutional experiences that involved their academic performance. Additionally, participants encountered formal institutional academic experiences that built awareness and reinforcement of college major and career possibilities, and also affirmed their commitment to continuing their college education, giving them a *clearer destination*.

Additional formal institutional experiences that participants encountered in the current study involved *charting a course,* whereby students in the student-success seminar became aware of campus resources and information about study tools. Results of the current study also show that, following their introduction to resources and study tools, some students followed up to access these resources, which involved further interactions with college faculty and staff. These interactions can be considered informal institutional experiences.

Various formal and informal institutional social experiences were also encouraged through the student-success seminar. Such interactions with the CCC environment may have encouraged participants to become more proactive in taking control of reaching their goals. This

is evident in the study in participants *taking the wheel with the crew on board* as they gained increased self-confidence through classroom interaction with peers and through their interactions with the campus community.

The participants' increase in self-confidence, along with the other previously mentioned academic and social interactions attributed to the student-success seminar experience, may have prompted them to take a more active role in navigating toward their destination on their metaphorical journey at sea. As a result of all this, participants may have established stronger levels of commitment to their studies at CCC. This outcome speaks to Tinto's (1975; 1993) Student Integration and Institutional Departure models and helps to shed light on how and why the student-success seminar experience could have facilitated participant integration with the CCC environment, which in turn may have influenced participants' decisions to return to CCC following their student-success seminar experience.

Another model that addresses why students may decide to leave or remain at an institution is Astin's (1993) Input-Environment-Outcome model. This model has been used to suggest that student characteristics upon entering college (inputs) are influenced by student experiences with peers, faculty, services (environment), and result in new characteristics following those college experiences (outcomes). Examples of inputs in Astin's model include high-school grades, parental education, and race and ethnicity. The environment in Astin's model relates to various programs, policies, faculty, peers, and educational experiences that students may encounter. Examples of outcomes in Astin's model include cognitive outcomes such as reasoning and logic skills, and also changes in students' attitudes, values, and self-concepts. Astin found that student satisfaction with the college environment tended to be high in an environment with a strong faculty orientation toward students. In addition, learning, academic

performance, and retention were positively associated with student academic involvement, involvement with peers, and involvement with faculty. Astin went on to say that students' perceptions of their college environment were influenced more by students' environmental experiences than by the characteristics they exhibited at the time of entering college.

In the current study, participants found themselves in *choppy waters* that represented a variety of stressors and challenges. These choppy waters stemmed from participants feeling lost at CCC as the result of being in an unknown environment. Additionally, some participants experienced choppy waters because of their concerns about being successful as an adult and as a student. These elements of participants' experiences may be considered some of the inputs as defined by Astin's (1993) model. As participants continued in their journey at CCC, their experiences with peers, faculty, and other campus constituents influenced their input characteristics in various ways.

Through their interactions with their student-success seminar instructors, their peers, and guest speakers from around campus, participants were introduced to the environment of CCC. Thus, with their instructor serving as a guiding light, the choppy waters began to calm and the participants began to sense a clearer destination. Furthermore, participants experienced an increase in self-confidence through taking the wheel with the crew on board, confidence that was built through their classroom experiences and interactions, and through their sense of community on campus. Thus, the student-success seminar experience may serve as a part of the environment as described by Astin (1993).

Participants in the current study also became aware of resources that were available to help them in charting a course. The campus resources, study tools, and academic-success role models are also related to the environment part of Astin's model. Astin (1977) stated that

". . .affective changes may be attributed in part to the college experience rather than simply maturation factors" (p. 70), suggesting that how students perceive themselves and feel about themselves is influenced by their college environment (Astin, 1984). The findings of the current study speak to Astin's assertion that the way students feel about themselves is influenced more by their college environment than their incoming characteristics, as highlighted by the various aspects of participants' metaphorical journey at sea.

In summary, the findings of the current study speak to both Tinto (1975,1993) and Astin's (1977, 1984, 1993) theoretical models. In the current study, both formal and informal institutional experiences, which were part of the college environment, appears to have influenced students' decisions to remain at CCC by influencing and mitigating some of the student inputs and contributing to helpful outcomes. In other words, participants in this study reported having positive experiences through the student-success seminar, which they stated reinforced their decisions to return to college the following semester.

## Current Research

In this section, I again focus on current research in terms of the benefits of the student-success seminar relative to the high-school-to-college transition and in general. I also discuss the specific value of the information provided in student-success seminars, and the relationship between student retention and student-success seminars.

### Student-Success Seminars and the High School-to-College Transition

Studies have suggested that student-success seminars can help students with their high school-to-college transitions. Redmond et al. (2013) found that students viewed the first-year seminar to be beneficial in their transition from high school to college. The first-year seminar encouraged them to understand college student life, learn time-management skills, identify and

rank priorities, and recognize learning styles. Students also stated that support and encouragement came from each other, and that having a "great instructor" made the course more effective and enjoyable. Furthermore, participants reported being aware of more career options as a result of their first-year student-success seminar experience. All of these factors contributed to a better transition. O'Gara et al. (2009) found that students generally viewed student-success seminars favorably in helping them find information about the college, and also in helping them adjust to the community-college environment. Similar to Redmond et al. (2013) and O'Gara et al.'s (2009) findings, the findings of the current study speak to how student-success seminars can both provide students with information about the college and help them with their adjustment to the college environment.

The participants in the current study began their high school-to-college transition having experienced various challenges. This was described previously through the choppy waters that represented their feeling lost in their new college environment, and being concerned about succeeding as adults and as students. Participants adjusted to their new college environment with the help of the student-success seminar, which helped to offset the anxiety and stress that they associated with their high school-to-college transitions. One main key to this adjustment was the student-success seminar instructor. As a guiding light, the instructor served as a source of comfort, trust, encouragement, and accountability, and thus was a part of why the seminar assisted the students in their transition to college.

Similar to participants in the Redmond et al. (2013) and O'Gara et al. (2009) findings, participants in the current study also gained information about college campus resources and college study tools through their student-success seminar instructor and the classroom presentations from various guest speakers. Participants described how the course helped with

identification of various resources such as the campus library, counseling, study skills, and classroom guest speakers. This support facilitated students' ability to chart a course to help with their social and academic integration to CCC, which in turn contributed to a better transition for them to and through college and thus speaks to how and why the course was helpful. In addition, resources introduced through the course helped participants gain a greater sense of clarity in their overall college experience, which led to a clearer destination for them, yet another example of how student-success seminars may help students with their high school-to-college transition.

**Benefits Beyond the Student-Success Seminar**

The benefits of participation in a student-success seminar can extend beyond the course itself. For example, Padgett et al. (2013) suggested that student-success seminars appear to enhance students' development by increasing their motivation to inquire about academic and cocurricular learning experiences outside of the student-success seminar. The researchers proposed that the impact of participation in a student-success seminar went beyond that particular course experience and extended to other learning experiences. As an example, Cox (2005) found in the 2003 national survey of first-year seminars that 58.4% of institutions responding to a survey item about improved peer connections identified students' participation in a student-success seminar as the reason for improved student connections with peers.

The findings of the current study also suggest that participants developed connections with peers because of their classroom experiences and interactions within the student-success seminar. For example, participants talked about building a sense of community with other students on campus through the seminar. In addition, participants appeared to gain an increase in self-confidence through their classroom experiences and interactions. This increased self-confidence encouraged participants to become involved in their college environment by spending

more time on campus, utilizing tutoring services and the library, and joining campus clubs. In essence, through their sense of community, as described previously by their taking the wheel with the crew on board, participants experienced the impact of the student-success seminar on other parts of their college experiences. These findings relate to the study results of both Padgett et al. (2013) and Cox (2005) and also expand on them by posing the possibility that building community within the course and gaining more self-confidence may be aspects of how the student-success seminar experience can improve peer connections and also extend beyond the course to other college experiences.

**Useful Information From Student-Success Seminars**

Duggan and Williams (2011) concluded that students who participated in an orientation course found the following information useful: balancing school, home, and work; learning about college clubs and organizations; and developing time management and organizational skills. In charting a course, the participants in the current study became aware of various resources similar and in addition to the resources discussed in Duggan and Williams' study. These resources included study tools; time management; information about different learning styles; help with financial aid paperwork; campus resources such as the library, counseling, and tutoring; and also classroom guest speakers who represented various campus constituencies. The current study highlights the importance of specific resources and information that may be helpful and could be included in a student-success seminar curriculum to better help students navigate the college environment.

**Retention and Student-Success Seminars**

Stovall (2000) found that participants in a student-success course had greater odds of persisting to the second semester of college than did nonparticipants. In the current study, all

participants returned to CCC the semester following their student-success seminar experiences. Although it is not possible to ascertain whether the experience of the student-success seminar had a strong influence on the other seminar participants' decisions to return, one participant in the current study stated he would not have returned had it not been for his participation in the student-success seminar. However, it is important to note that the majority of participants stated that their experience in the course affirmed their decision to return to CCC, as highlighted by the earlier discussions of the clearer destination they experienced as a result of their seminar participation.

In summary, the studies reviewed in this chapter suggest that the benefits of the student-success seminar extend beyond the course experience; foster better connections with peers; assist with the high school-to-college transition; provide useful information about college resources, programs, and services to students; and support students in continuing their college education. The current study speaks to these reviewed studies by highlighting how and why participants in a student-success seminar may experience these outcomes.

## Future Research

The current study provides possible explanations of how and why a three-credit, semester-long, community-college student-success seminar may relate to various student outcomes that have been previously discussed; however, additional research is needed to expand on the current body of literature in this area. Therefore, I offer recommendations for future research opportunities within this section.

As noted previously, the current study relates to Astin's (1993) Input-Environment-Outcome model primarily in terms of the input and environment parts of the model, suggesting that students' characteristics (inputs) can be influenced, mitigated, or enhanced by their

experiences with peers, faculty, services, and so on (environment). Future research could explore the outcomes that participants experience following their graduation from a community college, or after the transfer to or graduation from 4-year colleges and universities. This research could help close the loop as it relates to Astin's model (1993) by addressing its third component, outcomes. Additionally, this type of future research could help institutions better understand how the student-success seminar experience relates to, or influences, various outcomes such as changes in student attitudes, values, and self-concepts that may take place after participants' college experiences.

A second recommendation for future studies is to conduct research that can help identify what both nontraditional students (i.e., those who are older than 25), and those who take the student-success seminar during the second semester or their second year, may find most helpful in such a seminar. O'Gara et al. (2009) found that the few students who did not find the student-success course useful took the course during their second semester rather than their first semester of college. Those students did not feel that the student-success course benefited them; they were already aware of some of the information that was offered in the course to acquaint students with the college. Additionally, Rhodes and Carifio (1999) found in their study that older students did not find their freshman seminar experience useful for reasons similar to those O'Gara et al. (2009) found. Thus, a study addressing this research recommendation could help identify specific elements that should be included in a student-success seminar built for second-semester or second-year students or nontraditional students.

A final recommendation for future studies is to delve deeper into the incoming characteristics of students, described by Astin (1993) as inputs. Duggan and Williams (2011) discovered in their research that, while participants found information in their orientation/student

success courses useful, the usefulness of topics varied amongst students. It is possible that the impact of the student-success seminar and its influence on one's environmental experiences may differ based on student inputs. Thus, it would be useful to explore student inputs such as ethnicity, family income, whether the student is the first in the family to attend college, past educational experiences, and whether or how these inputs influence students' experiences in the student-success seminar.

One example of inputs in Astin's model that related to this study was the cultures and ethnicities of participants and how those inputs may have influenced their lived experiences in the student-success seminar. In this study, all participants self-identified as Mexican or Mexican American. Their experiences of the seminar may be related to CCC being an Hispanic-serving institution, where participants represented the majority of the student population, or it may have been influenced by cultural aspects that were not addressed in the current study. Future research could delve into how the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of participants may influence their student-success seminar experiences.

Additionally, exploring the impact of participants having other family members who attended or graduated from college may help further clarify how and why the student-success seminar impacted their college experiences. In this study, half of the participants were the first in their families to attend college. Inquiry into how participants' experiences may differ in a student-success seminar as a result of influences by family members who enrolled in or graduated from college, can bring forth additional insight into the student-success seminar experience. This research could contribute to increased clarity regarding how and why students with varying inputs may gain value from student-success seminars, and also what components of the experience may be most useful for those students.

**Implications for Practice**

The current study's findings present several implications for practice as it relates to designing, offering, and teaching student-success seminars at the community college level. I discuss these implications in more detail throughout the ensuing sections.

The first implication for practice as it relates to the current study is to offer modified versions of the student-success seminar, to reach a broader base of students. The outcomes of research by O'Gara et al. (2009) and Rhodes and Carifio (1999) suggest that varying student populations may not find the student-success seminar experience equally beneficial. Therefore, community colleges could develop workshops or courses that are designed for older and returning students, or for students who do not take a student-success seminar during their first semester of college after having recently completed high school. This format would offer more students the opportunity to gain useful information about the college and to become better integrated with the college environment while avoiding a "one size fits all" approach to accomplishing these goals.

The second implication for practice as it relates to the current study is to consider making student-success seminars a highly recommended or mandatory course for all incoming freshman community-college students. According to Goodman and Pascarella (2006), while many 2-year institutions offer first-year seminars, these types of courses are not mandated across the community-college system. More recently, 83% of participating community colleges in the 2012 survey from the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) indicated that they offered a student-success course. Of those colleges, only 15% stated that the course was required for all first-time, full-time, and part-time students (CCCSE, 2012). Research by Cho and Karp (2013) found that students who enrolled in a student-success course in their first semester

were more likely to earn college-level credits and were more likely to persist into the second year as opposed to students who did not enroll in a student-success course in their first semester. In the current study, all but one of the participants spoke to experiencing choppy waters at the beginning of their high school-to-college transition, and the student-success seminar appeared to help offset the stress and anxiety associated with these choppy waters. Thus, based on the results of the current study, offering a student-success seminar as a highly recommended or mandatory course for all incoming freshmen community-college students could be beneficial in helping those students with their college transition and with shorter-term student outcomes such as earning college-level credits and persistence into the second year.

In addition to offering student-success seminars to all new students, adequate training of course instructors is essential to maximizing the possible benefit of the student-success seminar. The current study suggests that students' relationships with the seminar instructor is an important part of their experience. Participants viewed their instructors as guiding lights and considered them to be sources of comfort, trust, accountability, and encouragement. Thus, it is important to select and train instructors to teach the student-success seminar in a manner that best supports these elements of serving students as a guiding light.

Instructor training should include enhancing instructor communication skills in ways that foster their ability to serve as sources of comfort, trust, accountability, and encouragement. For example, active listening skills and empathy could be topics that are covered in training. Furthermore, instructors can be encouraged to realize how their awareness of campus resources and their positive relationships with campus constituencies may serve them to be able to better link students with such resources, thus facilitating students' abilities to charting a course through their college experience.

As an additional recommendation for training, I suggest that instructors establish relationships and collaborate with the college's academic counseling department. Academic counselors (or their equivalent titles at various community colleges) can provide up-to-date information on choosing and finding academic majors and career options, and also current information about transfer and degree requirements. Thus, the proposed collaboration with the academic counseling department would help to ensure that this type of information is embedded in the course curriculum.

Although academic freedom allows all instructors to teach in their own styles and place their personal touches on the course curriculum, there should be common learning outcomes for the course and common topics covered by all instructors. Based on findings from the current study, these topics could include study skills; time-management skills; learning styles; information about financial aid, the campus library and tutoring, campus clubs, academic counseling services, and scholarships; career exploration; and guest speakers from various campus departments.

The recommendations presented for designing, offering, and teaching student-success seminars within the community college may maximize the impact of the student-success seminar on participants. Adjusting the format of the student-success seminar to meet the needs of different student populations; offering the student-success seminar during the first semester as a highly recommended or mandatory course for incoming freshmen students; training instructors to better serve as sources of comfort, trust, accountability, and encouragement; promoting curriculum that supports best practices; and encouraging instructors to collaborate with the college's academic counseling department are all important aspects of helping to achieve these goals.

**Researcher's Reflection**

As previously disclosed in Chapter 1, I came to the United States as a Hungarian immigrant in 1983. Because my family was unfamiliar with the educational system in a new country, I did not receive much guidance or have much understanding about the details of a college education. After graduating from high school, I decided to attend community college to explore my major and career options. Much like the students in the current study, I too experienced my own metaphorical journey at sea. I felt lost during my high school-to-college transition as the result of being in an unknown environment and being unaware of various student services and campus resources. Additionally, I felt the pressure of succeeding as an adult and as a student. These factors contributed to my own stress and anxiety at the onset of my community-college experience and presented my own encounters with choppy waters. As I reflect on the findings of the current study, I believe it has further reinforced my thoughts that I would have greatly benefited from participating in a student-success seminar during this time of my life. Although I eventually was able to chart my own course and take the metaphorical wheel to navigate my academic journey, I believe that I would have greatly benefited from a guiding light during my first semester of community college, which likely would have provided a clearer destination and assisted in my charting a course earlier in my college experience.

Another reflection I have about the findings of the current study is that I have a greater appreciation of how student-success seminars may be utilized to help students integrate socially and academically into the college environment. This integration can ultimately contribute to their decision to continue their education after their student-success seminar experience. I have gained a clearer understanding of how the current study relates to the various student outcomes that have been identified in the literature reviewed within this study.

A third reflection related to the current study is the insight I have gained into the role and impact of the student-success seminar instructor. Prior to conducting the current study, I believed that the instructors were an important part of students' lived experiences in the course. However, through the study and after delving deeper into the instructors' role, I recognized that their impact appears to be very important, and that students see them as a source of comfort, trust, accountability, and encouragement. I now have a better understanding of the value of selecting and training instructors in ways that will facilitate their ability to be guiding lights. Additionally, I found that, while the course curriculum is an integral part of the student-success seminar experience, instructors who teach the curriculum may influence how students are impacted by what is being taught in seminar. In other words, not "just anyone" should, or could, teach student success-seminars.

Finally, the current study has taught me that research often can be a continually evolving and inductive process, which was the case in the current study. As the researcher, I edited emergent and superordinate themes several times. These adjustments were based on new discoveries and insights as I continually analyzed and organized the data. As a result of these adjustments, I was able to ultimately develop the metaphorical journey at sea to describe and capture the essence of the lived experiences of participants in the study. Thus, I have a clearer understanding of the need to be patient, open, and flexible while conducting qualitative research, and I also believe that I have consequently become a better researcher.

Another aspect of my study that speaks to the inductive and continually evolving nature of research was the ethnic composition of my participants and my reflections about how that may be explored in future research. As previously mentioned, all of the participants in the current study self-identified as Mexican or Mexican American. I did not purposefully recruit participants

who represent a specific ethnicity. The fact that all participants identified with a similar ethnicity prompts me to encourage future researchers to explore this area. In hindsight, had I taken into account the ethnic background of my participants, I would have requested an additional interview to explore how their identity as Mexican or Mexican American might have influenced their lived experiences of the student-success seminar. Without that additional information from participants, it is difficult to suggest findings related to ethnicity.

## Final Thoughts

In this chapter, I have discussed how the findings of the current study relate to the relevant literature reviewed in this dissertation. I have presented suggestions and opportunities for future research and discussed various implications for practice as they pertain to designing, offering, and teaching student-success seminars at the community college. I also have shared my reflection as the researcher.

This study adds to the current body of research on community college student-success seminars and how these seminars may impact students who participate in such courses. Additionally, the current study also helps to answer how and why various student outcomes that have been identified in the literature may be occurring as a result of participation in a student-success seminar. This study focused on the lived experiences of first-year community college students who had participated in a semester-long student-success seminar. I used a qualitative research approach with interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the participants in the study and to help answer the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of first-year community-college students who participated in a semester-long, student-success seminar?

2. How do these students' lived experiences of the student-success seminar influence their overall community-college experiences?

3. How do these students' lived experiences of the student-success seminar influence their decisions to remain at their institution?

Findings of the study resulted in five superordinate themes and 11 supporting emergent themes. Superordinate themes included choppy waters; a guiding light; a clearer destination; charting a course; and taking the wheel with the crew on board. I used these superordinate themes to describe the lived experiences of participants through a metaphorical journey at sea and help answer the research questions.

The findings of the current study can assist community colleges in maximizing the positive impact of student-success seminars on students who participate in such courses. These findings suggest that the student-success seminar experience may help to offset the initial stress and anxiety of the high school-to-college transition that was described in the current study as choppy waters. Furthermore, through the instructor serving as a guiding light, participants may be presented with a clearer destination through awareness and reinforcement of college major and career possibilities. This clearer destination may help participants chart a course and ultimately help them to take the wheel with the crew on board. Student success-seminars appear to be a valuable resource for community colleges both in the present and in the foreseeable future, and they may provide various experiences that contribute to student outcomes discussed within the current study.

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# APPENDIX A: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

## Colorado State University

**TITLE OF STUDY:** The Lived Experiences of Recent High School Graduates in a Three-Credit, Semester-Long, Community-College Student-Success Seminar

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Sharon Anderson, PhD, Professor, School of Education, sharon.anderson@coloState.edu; (970) 491-6861

**COPRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Aron Szamos, candidate for the degree of PhD in Education and Higher Education Leadership, aszamos@hotmail.com; (831) 905-3321

**WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?** This study is focused on obtaining the experiences of first-year community college students who are recent high-school graduates and who have completed a three-credit, semester-long, student-success seminar at a western United States community college.

**WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?** The researcher for this study is Aron Szamos, candidate for the degree of PhD at Colorado State University. The principal investigator, Dr. Sharon Anderson, will be available for support in all phases of the study.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?** The purpose of the study is to learn about the lived experiences of students at a western United States community college as those experiences relate to their participation in and completion of a student-success seminar, and their decision to remain enrolled in college.

**WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?** This study will take place in a private and quiet location in a study room in the campus library. Participants will be asked to submit to an interview lasting between 60 minutes and 90 minutes and attend a follow-up interview for 30 minutes to 60 minutes after the research has been gathered.

**WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?** You will be asked to answer several interview questions relating to your experiences in your student-success seminar after you have completed the student-success seminar. The interviews will be informal and you are encouraged to speak openly and honestly about your experiences. You will also be invited to participate in a follow-up interview where you can review the transcript and my notes and interpretation of the interview content. Because it is important to accurately capture your comments, all interviews will be audio recorded.

**ARE THERE REASONS I SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?** You must be a first-year student at the community college where the research has taken place. Further,

you must have completed and passed, with a grade of C or higher, the student-success seminar within one year of graduating from high school.

**WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?**
There are no known risks to participating in this study. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

**ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?** There may be no direct benefit to you associated with participation in this research; however, you may benefit from the study from being given the opportunity to express personal beliefs and experiences related to the student-success seminar that you completed. This study may provide a better understanding of this experience and help to influence future planning and development of student-success seminars in a way that may be more beneficial to students.

**DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?** Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE?** We will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law.

This study is not anonymous. We will be obtaining your name or other identifiable data from you; however, you will have the opportunity to select a pseudonym or have one assigned to you in order to prevent persons outside of the research team to identify you. We may be asked to share the research files for audit purposes with the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee, if necessary.

**CAN MY TAKING PART IN THE STUDY END EARLY?** You may be removed from the study if you fail to show up for scheduled interviews. Every attempt will be made to accommodate your schedule, but repeated absences may require that you to be dropped from the study. While you will have the option to withdraw from the study at any time, your compensation will be provided to you only at the conclusion of the follow up interview.

**WILL I RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?** Participants will receive a $15 (USD) Starbucks gift card at the completion of the follow-up interview.

**WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?** Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigators, Sharon Anderson, at sharon.anderson@colostate.edu, or Aron Szamos, at aszamos@hotmail.com If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Human Research Administrator, at 970-491-1553. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

**WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?** After your initial interview, a follow-up interview will be held so that you can review the transcript of the interview and check for any errors or omission and discuss my interpretation of the interviews. At the completion of the follow-up interview, you will be given a $15 (USD) gift card to a coffee shop.

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document, containing  3  pages.

_____          _____

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study          Date

_____

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

_____          _____

Name of person providing information to participant          Date

_____          _____

Signature of Research Staff          Date

**APPENDIX B: LETTER OF COOPERATION**

Colorado State University
Institutional Review Board
601 South Howes St.
Suite 208 University Center
Campus Delivery 2011
Fort Collins, CO 80523-2011
Attention: IRB Coordinator

Dear Sir or Madam:

      I am aware that Aron Szamos, a graduate student in the School of Education at Colorado State  University, is conducting a research study entitled *THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF RECENT HIGH-SCHOOL GRADUATES IN A THREE-CREDIT, SEMESTER-LONG, COMMUNITY-COLLEGE STUDENT-SUCCESS SEMINAR,* and he has shared with me the details of the study. I feel comfortable that the participants in this study will be adequately protected, and I give Aron Szamos permission to conduct this study at our institution.

      Aron Szamos will have access to recruiting potential participants for his study by visiting various sections of the ▮▮▮▮ student-success seminar, where he will present an overview of his study and provide interested participants with a sign-up sheet in order to be contacted with further information about participating in the study. Alternatively, Aron may request that the Counseling Department send e-mails to prospective participants who have completed the ▮▮▮▮ student-success seminar during the fall 2015 semester. The e-mails will provide an overview of the study and Aron's contact information for prospective participants.

      If there are any questions, please contact my office.

      Sincerely,

Dr. ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮                   Dr. ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮
Dean of Student Affairs           Vice President of Student Affairs

# APPENDIX C: SCRIPT FOR RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

My name is Aron Szamos and I am a researcher from Colorado State University in the School of Education department. We are conducting a research study on the experience of being in a student-success seminar at the community college, which is designed to understand what students participating in and completing the student-success seminar are experiencing. The title of our project is *The Lived Experiences of Recent High-School Graduates in a Three-Credit, Semester-Long, Community-College Student-Success Seminar*. The Principal Investigator is Sharon Anderson, PhD, School of Education and the CoPrincipal Investigator is Aron Szamos, PhD student, School of Education.

We would like you to take part in informal interviews at the campus library, in a reserved private study room or other location that is convenient to you. Participation will take approximately 60 minutes to 90 minutes for initial interviews. Additional interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes to 60 minutes will be conducted to provide follow-up information or to more thoroughly address a previously discussed topic, and to review my notes of your interview to ensure accuracy. Both sets of interviews will be digitally recorded. At the conclusion of your second interview, you will receive a $15 gift card to a coffee shop as a form of compensation for your time and participation in the study. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time without penalty.

We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private. All participants' names will be replaced with pseudonyms, and all audio files and transcripts will be stored on a locked, password-protected computer. Only the

researchers will have access to these files, and the audio files will be destroyed once they have been transcribed. Data will be used for a dissertation study and will be reviewed by Colorado State University educators. While there are no direct benefits to you, we hope to gain more knowledge on the phenomenon of participating in and completing a student-success seminar, in an effort to give voice to the student population in the study. An additional goal of the study is find out how and why the student-success seminars may influence participants to remain enrolled in college after completion of the course. There are no known risks associated with this study.

If you would like to participate in the study or have any questions, please provide your contact information including your name, phone number, and e-mail address on the provided sign-up sheet. Your participation or lack of participation will not impact your grade in this course.

You may also contact Aron Szamos at aszamos@hotmail.com, (831)905-3321, or Sharon Anderson at sharon.anderson@colostate.edu, (970) 491-6861. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu, 970-491-1553.


Sincerely,

Sharon Anderson, PhD                                    Aron Szamos

Professor, School of Education                          PhD Student, School of Education

# APPENDIX D: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

**Colorado State University**

**Date:** December 8, 2015

**To:** Sharon Anderson, Ph.D., School of Education
Aron Szamos, School of Education

**From:** IRB Coordinator, Research Integrity & Compliance Review Office
(RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu)

**Re:** The Lived Experiences of Recent High School Graduates in a Three-Credit,
Semester-Long, Community-College Student-Success Seminar

**IRB ID:** 120 -16H          **Review Date:** December 8, 2015
**This project is valid from three years from the review date.**

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The Institutional Review Board (IRB) Coordinator has reviewed this project and has declared the study exempt from the requirements of the human subject protections regulations with conditions as described above and as described in 45 CFR 46.101(b):

Category 2 - Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

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The IRB determination of exemption means that:

- **This project is valid for three years from the initial review.** After the three years, the file will be closed and no further research should be conducted. If the research needs to continue, please let the IRB Coordinator know before the end of the three years. You do not need to submit an application for annual continuing review.

- You must carry out the research as proposed in the Exempt application, including obtaining and documenting (signed) informed consent if stated in your application or if required by the IRB.

- Any modification of this research should be submitted to the IRB through an email to the IRB Coordinator, prior to implementing any changes, to determine if the project still meets the Federal criteria for exemption.

- Please notify the IRB Coordinator (RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu) if any problems or complaints of the research occur.

Please note that you must submit all research involving human participants for review by the IRB. **Only the IRB or designee may make the determination of exemption**, even if you conduct a similar study in the future.

# APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND INTERVIEW

## QUESTIONS

### Participant Background Information

Participants will be asked to provide the following background information:

(a) Age

(b) Gender

(c) Enrollment status: full-time or part-time student?

(d) Academic major

(e) Educational goals

(f) Ethnicity (optional)

(g) First to attend college in family?

(h) Receiving financial aid?

(i) Working? (approximate hours per week)

(j) Selection of a nonidentifiable name you wish to use to establish anonymity for the purposes of this research project. If you are unable to select a nonidentifiable name, one will be selected for you by the researcher.

### Interview Questions

The following guiding interview questions will be used for this study:

1. Please tell me about your experience in the student-success seminar.

2. What stands out to you about your experience in the student-success seminar?

3. What did you find beneficial?

4. What did you feel was not beneficial?

5. How did the course influence your college experience?

6. As you reflect upon your experiences in the student-success seminar, how has it influenced/impacted your future educational decisions?

7. How has the student-success seminar impacted your decision to remain enrolled in college and return to college for the next semester?

These questions are designed to be leading questions for the interview. Additional questions will be developed in response to the interview flow and participant answers. As the researcher, I will use my experience and skills as a counselor to develop these additional questions.