

DISSERTATION

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF LOW-INCOME STUDENTS FORMERLY  
PURSUING BACCALAUREATE DEGREES WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF A PRIVATE  
FOUNDATION SCHOLARSHIP

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer 2013

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## ABSTRACT

### A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF LOW-INCOME STUDENTS FORMERLY PURSUING BACCALAUREATE DEGREES WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF A PRIVATE FOUNDATION SCHOLARSHIP

This qualitative study investigated the lived experience of at-risk students who were funded by a private foundation scholarship but who lost that funding for a variety of reasons. Data were collected through personal interviews with seven former scholars. The themes emerging from the study included: *educational aspirations, the scholarship opportunity, the college experience, and conscious reflection*. Implications of this study may be applicable to private gifting foundations as they establish scholarship guidelines and student support systems, faculty and college staff while working with students from underprivileged backgrounds and attempting to understand their complex college journey. Additionally college students and their families may benefit from this study as they learn to maneuver through the complexities of college, specifically as it relates being a first generation college student.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my sincerest thanks and appreciation to the participants who helped me accomplish this study. Thank you also to the gifting foundation for supporting my research. I would like to extend my gratitude to the all of the faculty and staff in the College of Education at Colorado State University. I would especially like to recognize Dr. Linda Kuk, our program chair and my dissertation committee advisor, for her guidance, background knowledge, patience and editing skills in the completion of this document. To the other members of my committee, Jennifer Wolgemuth, Oscar Felix, and Malcolm Scott, thank you for the feedback, direction, and assistance when I needed it.

Thanks are also extended to all the members of the 2008 doctoral cohort, especially the members of PhD2B. We were consistently there for each other and I will always appreciate the encouragement and good will we shared. Thanks to my former colleagues at the University of Wyoming, who supported me through my doctoral course work and to my new colleagues at Penn State who provided unwavering encouragement as I wrote this dissertation.

Special recognition goes out to my family, for their support, encouragement and patience during my pursuit of this Doctorate in Higher Education Leadership. To my amazing husband Clay, you inspired me and provided constant encouragement during the entire process. To our children, Gwen, Vivian and Gabe, I know you missed out on a lot of Mom time while I sought intellectual enlightenment. I thank all four of you for your patience and I love you more than you will ever know.

Finally, thanks to God for the wisdom and perseverance that He has been bestowed upon me during this academic journey, and indeed, throughout my life: "I can do everything through Him who give me strength." (Philippians 4: 13)

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

### **Overview**

Financial aid funding models at most institutions are based around financial need, often funded through grants or loans, combined with scholarships that reward talent and achievement. While in the past, the goal of financial aid has been access, in the 1990's there was a distinct change in scholarship funding philosophy (King, 1999), as evident in the increase of merit based funding rather than need-based funding (Kane, 1999, McPherson & Schapiro, 1998) in response to significant tuition and fee increases. This leaves the low- income student with average grades and test scores but with a strong desire to pursue higher education virtually without adequate financial aid to pursue a college degree.

In the twenty five-year span from 1982 to 2007, published college tuition and fees increased 439 percent while median family income rose 147 percent (Lewin, 2008). These numbers can be particularly daunting for students who lack the knowledge and understanding of the intricacies of college financial assistance. The plight of low-income, academically average college students has received the attention of scholarship providing private foundations (McGroarty, 2000). These scholarships have been established with "prevailing objectives including promoting participation in specific career fields, leadership, and public service, among others" (Ilchman, Ilchman, & Tolar, 2004, p. 10). Organizations that provide these scholarships include: need-based, merit based and blended forms of financial aid to students (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2005).

This study focused on one such private foundation scholarship that funds students above their Pell awards and expected family contribution (EFC). Participants in the study were awarded a private foundation-based scholarship to provide for four years of higher education at the institution of their choice. Funding included tuition, fees, books, room and board, study

abroad, and tutoring. The students in this particular study were unable to maintain their scholarship funding due to a lack of academic progress, choosing to leave higher education altogether, or miscommunication with the sponsoring foundation.

Most of the students funded by this particular scholarship identify within one or more racial or ethnic minority groups. They are all considered low-income and the majority of the scholars are first-generation college students. Research on low-income first-generation college students indicates that their persistence in higher education is unlikely. According to the Pell Institute, only 11 percent of low-income, first-generation college students have earned a bachelor's degree six years after initial enrollment compared to 55 percent of their economically advantaged non-first-generation peers. This number is even smaller if the low-income, first-generation student begins his/her higher education experience at a community college. In this scenario, only 5 percent of low-income, first-generation students will eventually earn a bachelor's degree compared to 25 percent of advantaged students (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Numerous studies have attempted to identify exactly what it is about being a first-generation college student that seems to inhibit collegiate success and many come back with one simple word: engagement (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2008; Curtona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, & Russel, 1994; Pike & Kuh, 2005). First-generation students are more likely to have to work off campus and to have greater family responsibilities than their non-first-generation peers (Curtona et al., 1994), leading to fewer opportunities to be involved on campus. Barry & colleagues, (2008) found that the challenges faced by first-generation students were grounded in the differences in social support they received and therefore students were often not able to effectively disclose the stress they were experiencing in college to members of their families.



If universities hope to maintain successful partnerships with private foundations they must be able to effectively assist private foundation scholars, regardless of their demographics, in their collegiate success. In order to better understand the lived experiences of these students, research must focus on both enrolled students as well as those who left higher education without a degree. While there are widely accepted theories surrounding student departure, such as Tinto's (1975) *Social Integration Model* or Astin's (1993) "input-process-output" model, little is known regarding students' own awareness of their collegiate experience and their journey leading up to college withdrawal. This study will attempt to enrich the understanding of the experiences of such students and help prevent future withdrawals.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to identify common themes among low income, first generation college students who were funded by the private foundation scholarship but who lost that funding due a failure of academic progress, by choosing to leave higher education or through miscommunication with the gifting foundation. These themes may prove informative to college faculty and staff as they support students who receive private foundation scholarships as part of their financial aid packages, particularly underprivileged students. Private gifting foundations may also find this information useful as they examine their own missions for giving, in conjunction with their scholarship requirements and the types of student success services they provide.

### **Research Questions**

1. What were the participants' experiences in college?
2. How do participants describe the experience of losing their private foundation scholarship?

3. What were the participants' experiences with university support services while attending college with the assistance of the private foundation scholarship?
4. How do participants describe their lives since losing the scholarship?
5. How do the students perceive the support and involvement, of their families, while the student was in college?

### **Definitions of terms**

**Continuing-generation student:** one or both parents attended a post-secondary institution and obtained a bachelor's degree (Ishitani, 2006)

**Expected family contribution (EFC):** a measure of a family's financial strength and is calculated according to a formula established by law

<http://www.fafsa.ed.gov/help/fftoc01g.html>

**First-generation college student:** a student whose parents' highest level of education is a high school diploma or less (Nunez and Curraro-Alamin, 1998)

**GEAR-UP :** Gaining early awareness and readiness for undergraduate programs- Designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/gearup/index.html>

**Low-income:** Income guidelines established by the Federal government for TRIO program eligibility. A family's taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150 percent of the poverty level amount. A family of four would make less than \$33,525 per year to qualify as low-income under these guidelines

<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/incomelevels.html>

**TRIO:** Federal outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds

(<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html> )

**Voluntary departure:** a student who leaves college while in good standing with the institution

### **Significance of the study**

This study advanced the understanding of the lived experiences of former recipients of an all-inclusive, private foundation scholarship and the subsequent loss of that scholarship. It is important to understand how these low-income, at-risk former scholars, who all happened to be first generation college students, perceived their collegiate experience and the subsequent loss of their scholarship. By understanding these former scholar's experiences, colleges and universities may be able to establish more comprehensive student support services and private foundations may re-examine their gifting mission, selection processes, and support mechanisms for their scholars. Through a qualitative analysis, this dissertation examined the lived social and academic experiences of former scholarship recipients, a topic which, based upon a review of the literature, is currently understudied. This research is intended to contribute to Tinto's (1993) currently accepted theory of student departure which was derived from quantitative research. Tinto's model (1993) was inclusive in considering pre-entry attributes, student goals and commitments, institutional experiences and social integration as core concepts of student retention. He attributed negative encounters to the increased likelihood of student withdrawal and positive encounters as increasing student investment into their college experience. This qualitative study provided rich descriptions of the participants' experiences thereby allowing for the development of emerging themes as they related to the participant's scholarship loss.

This research may be significant to private foundations as they establish or revise their own scholarship programs. Educational practitioners may find this research useful in advising students in making financial aid decisions, an area of significant importance when tuition is rising faster than inflation (Lewin, 2008).

Of particular interest to educators and private foundations may be the students' perspectives of the support they received while on campus. The involvement of the family of origin in the student's decision to leave higher education provides data for college preparation programs, such as GEAR-UP, specifically intended for first-generation low-income students. While there has been a great deal written on the plight of first-generation college students and their unique journey through higher education, a review of the literature found no research specifically studying the experiences of students who lost privately funded scholarships.

### **Delimitations/Parameters**

I have chosen to limit this study to only those participants who have lost their funding from a specific private foundation scholarship fund, who graduated from Wyoming or Colorado high schools and who attended one of three public research universities within the selected states. This study did not include those students who took a voluntary, temporary leave of absence from higher education so as to regain foundation funding in the future. Out of a pool of 20 students who met the previously stated criteria, 7 chose to participate in this study.

### **Assumptions and limitations**

One limitation of this study was the assumed inability to generalize participants' experiences around losing their foundation scholarship with individuals outside of this study as well as with each other. While participants' backgrounds may be similar, collegiate experiences are likely to be very dissimilar which was exemplified through the phenomenological method of

study. Additionally, another limitation was that all participants were from one of two western states and all participants had been recipients of the same scholarship by the same gifting foundation.

### **Researcher's Perspective**

As a first-generation college student myself, coming from a low-income household and graduating from high school with a mediocre GPA, I can now look back on the student I was on paper and can clearly see a student at-risk. As a self-supporting college student, I worked multiple jobs and took out student loans in order to pay for college. It required a great deal of focus and intentionality and therefore I was not able to take advantage of many extra-curricular activities or co-curricular learning opportunities. Based on my own experience, I am highly intrigued by alternative funding options available to students, particularly for those students who are not academically high achieving.

I served as the liaison to the private foundation scholarship recipients who attended the university where I was employed. On average seven to ten scholars choose to attend this university every year. My role was to assist them with any on-campus challenges they faced and I received additional support from the Scholar Relations Officer who worked at the foundation's central office. While I was a liaison, the scholarship had an overall four year graduation rate for female scholars of 44% while for men that rate was 32%. Having come from a background similar to many of the scholars, this low retention rate was perplexing to me and I believed it was important to try and understand the perspectives of the 46% of scholars who were not retained. When I first began working with the foundation scholarship recipients I naively believed that their path to graduation should be relatively easy due to the fact that they had few financial

worries, thanks to the scholarship. Instead I have come to know that for many of the scholars, their lives are challenged by a lifetime of low expectations and priorities that are not always conducive to collegiate success.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theory of student departure

Prior to Tinto's *Social Integration Model*, student attrition was often cited as being the fault of the student. Students who did not attain a degree were thought to be less motivated or skilled and failed to recognize the value of a college education while Tinto pointed out that only 15-25% of students leave higher education because of academic reasons (1993).

Much of the theoretical basis for student persistence and departure comes from Tinto. Tinto identified three main reasons for student departure: academic difficulties, inability of the individual to resolve their educational and occupational goals and failure to become incorporated in the intellectual and social life of the institution (Tinto, 1975, 1993). According to Tinto's original model, pre-college characteristics have a direct impact on grades and intellectual development within the collegial system and thereby result in academic integration. Peer group development and faculty interactions influence the student's ability to socially integrate within a collegiate setting. Tinto developed his theory around the idea that academic integration creates dedication to persist while social integration creates intuitional commitment. These two elements combine to affect a student's decision to persevere and complete his/her degree. More recently Tinto has added the elements of environment, social and institutional limitations as factors impacting collegiate persistence (1993).

Tinto (1975, 1987) also found that student departure, whether voluntary or involuntary, could be linked to the student's inability to disconnect from his/her family of origin. Astin (1975) concluded retention was higher if the student attended a college or university with students whose backgrounds were similar to their own. More specifically, Astin noted that African American students drop out more frequently when they attend predominately White institutions.

Additionally Astin (1984) noted that those students who were more involved in campus life tend to have better persistence and retention outcomes. Astin's (1993) "input-process-output" model capitalizes on the idea that the quality and degree of involvement a student puts into his/her college experience is directly related to their learning and development.

Additionally, Erikson (1968) indicated that the processes of developing an identity independent from one's family are a natural transition from adolescence to adulthood. For first-generation students this transition can be more complicated as they struggle between the identity they develop at college and their family members who are unable to acknowledge the student's independence (Orbe, 2008). Orbe also identified that first-generation college students often feel as though their family members accuse them of carrying pretentious attitudes or abandoning their true identity by attending college.

### **College success among first-generation college students**

The term "first-generation" is one that falls under a variety of definitions. For the purpose of this literature review, the author has chosen to use the definition as a student whose parents' highest level of education is a high school diploma or less (Nunez & Curraro-Alamin, 1998).

The number of first-generation college students is larger than often assumed. A 2010 study by the Department of Education found that 50 percent of the college population is made up of first-generation students (Lynch, 2013).

The label of first-generation college student is often associated a lack of college persistence and degree attainment (Choy, 2001; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). When compared to second or third generation college students, first-generation college students display notable differences in collegial behavior. First-generation college students tend to make the



decision to attend college later than second generation college students (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Terenzini et al., 1996). They take longer to complete a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001) and they are less likely to pursue graduate or professional programs (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004). A review of the literature revealed three main areas under which the success of first-generation college students is studied: comparison between first-generation college students and non-first-generation college students, the transition from high school to college, and retention and degree attainment.

Studies indicate that first-generation students are at a distinct disadvantage compared to their peers in terms of being able to navigate the collegiate experience (Bui, 2002; Pascarella, et al, 2004). From application to graduation, the road of a first-generation college student is treacherous as he/she typically has little to no family support to guide them along their journey (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Academically, non-first-generation college students are likely to have higher ACT/SAT scores, higher high school GPAs, take more rigorous high school courses, are Caucasian, and come from higher income homes when compared to first-generation college students (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta). First-generation students, while less likely to even apply to college, are also less likely to attend college and tend to choose less selective colleges, regardless of their high school academic record or standardized tests scores (Massey, Charles, Lundy and Fischer, 2003; Pascarella et al., 2004; Phinney, Dennis, & Osorio, 2006). Once in college, first-generation college students are less successful in their courses and are also more likely to not complete a course. (Ishitani, 2003; Ishitani, 2006).

According to Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, (2001) being a first-generation college student has an overall negative association with academic preparation and persistence. There are distinct differences between first-generation student enrollment patterns and those of their peers

whose parents are college educated. Of all students attending four year institutions, 41% of first-generation students attend comprehensive rather than research universities compared to 27% of students with at least one parent holding earned a bachelor's degree. Twenty seven percent of first-generation students are classified as part time students and the majority of the first-generation students work in addition to taking classes (Warburton, et al.)

A great deal of focus is given to first-generation college students on transitional issues, specifically the transition from high school to college. (Pascarella, et al. 2004) Being a first-generation college student is an indicator that the student will most likely have trouble adjusting to college (Ishitani, 2003, 2006). These adjustment issues often manifest themselves in the form of stress (Barry et al., 2008). Barry and colleagues found that this stress is caused, in part, by the lack of community support that first-generation students receive. First-generation students are less likely to talk about their college experiences with family and friends (Barry, et al.) Beyond this lack of support, first-generation college students were found to experience additional stress as they were more likely to be working while taking college courses and they had a particularly high level of responsibility to their family of origin in comparison to non-first-generation students (Curtona, et al., 1994).

The academic collegial experience for first-generation college students tends to be very different from non-first-generation college students. First-generation students generally attain lower grades, take fewer credits, and have higher dropout rates than continuing-generation students (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005; Housel & Harvey, 2009; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). More specifically, transitional challenges can often be tied back to socioeconomic status, minority status, and family of origin language other than English (Bui, 2002).

First-generation college students often do not have a clear purpose for why they are in college, have problems adjusting to the collegiate environment and feel isolated in their transition, all of which are reasons for them to abandon their pursuit of a college education (Olenchak & Hebert, 2002). Additionally first-generation college students thrive academically in classes that allow for in-class participation, in-class discussions, and collaborative learning (Kuh, 1997).

It has been found that first-generation college students tend to leave higher education at the end of their first year, are less likely to have earned a bachelor's degree after 5 years of college enrollment and are less likely to enroll in graduate school or professional programs than their peers whose parents have college degrees (Pascarella, et al., 2004). Ishitani (2003) concluded that even after controlling for race, gender, high school GPA and family income, that first-generation college students are 71% more likely to drop out than their non-first-generation counterparts. The risk of leaving college decreased in the second year but rose again in the third year to 60% (Ishitani, 2008).

Researchers have found that the most important factor in predicting college departure is that of parental educational level (Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Choy ascertained that after controlling for income, pre-college preparation, parental involvement, and peer influence, parental education could be correlated to college access, perseverance of educational goals, and the earning of a bachelor's degree. Both race and gender were also found to have an impact on retention, with women being more likely to leave college than men and Hispanic students being 64% more likely to drop out than their Caucasian counterparts (Ishitani, 2008).

Ishitani (2008) also studied the degree completion behavior of first-generation college students. Students with parents who had some college education were found to be more likely to graduate in a timely manner than those whose parents had no college education. The long lasting impact of high school academic success traits were also noted as having an influence on graduation times. According to Ishitani, precollege characteristics had direct correlations with both college retention and time spent working toward graduation.

Warburton and colleagues (2001) wrote that being first-generation had implications on retention as well. First of all, first-generation students were less likely to stay “on-track” for graduation, which is to stay enrolled at a four year institution continuously from the time of first attending until graduation, than were their peers who were not first-generation college students (58% vs. 77%). They were also almost three times as likely to leave their first institution of attendance without returning compared to non-first-generation students (Warburton et al.).

Notably, once first-generation college students earn a bachelor’s degree there is little difference in first year, post bachelor’s earnings between first-generation college students and their non-first-generation peers. The divide takes place four to five years after college graduation when first-generation college students are less likely to be enrolled in graduate studies compared to non-first-generation college students (Pascarella et al., 2004).

The outlook for first-generation college students is challenging. They are often inhibited by a lifetime of low expectations and misperceptions which prevent them from seeing college as a possible reality for them. The topics most commonly studied as they relate to the status of being a first-generation college student include comparison between first-generation college students and non-first-generation college students, the transition from high school to college, and retention and degree attainment. Demographically, first-generation college students are likely to

be a member of an ethnic or racial minority, from a low income home (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Academically this group is underprepared for college, has low GPAs and ACT scores and tends to choose less selective colleges (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta). Once in college, first-generation college students earn lower GPAs (Bui, 2002) and often have a difficult time with the adjustment to college (Ishitani, 2003, 2006). As for degree attainment, first-generation college students take longer to complete a bachelor's degree than their non-first-generation peers (Pascarella, et al., 2004). Given the fact that first-generation college students make up 43% of students entering four year institutions (Choy, 2001) it is vital for colleges and universities to address the challenges faced by this population. The table below illustrates the four areas of success inhibitors for first-generation college students compared to non-first-generation college students.

Table 1

*Colligate success inhibitors for first-generation college students compared to non-first generation college students*

Social	Academic	Financial	Demographic
Difficulty navigating the collegiate experience	Lack of college preparation	Usually working in addition to taking classes	Racial or ethnic minority
Little family support	Lower degree attainment	Significant unmet financial need	Low income
Unable to talk about college experience with family/friends	Longer to complete degree		Stigmatized as incompetent
Low level of college engagement	Less likely to pursue graduate degree		
High level of family responsibility	Lower college entrance scores		

### **Variables that have a positive impact on first-generation college students**

While the outlook for first-generation college students appears bleak, there have been studies based on a collection of variables that may motivate higher education institutions to invest very specifically in first-generation college students and the experiences they are having on college campuses. The first variable is that of on-campus housing. First-generation college students are less likely to live on-campus and are less likely to be engaged in campus activities overall (Pike & Kuh, 2005). In their study of over 3000 undergraduate students, Pike and Kuh found that students living on-campus tended to be more engaged in the campus community. Pike and Kuh's findings agreed with the research (e.g. Chickering (1974) and Blimling (1993) that demonstrated "living on-campus had a direct, positive effect on learning outcomes and educational aspirations" (p. 298).

Another variable that may positively influence the collegiate experience of first-generation college students is that of living learning communities. Inkelas and colleagues (2007) indicated that students who participated in living learning programs have higher retention, higher GPAs, are more likely to get involved in campus, and have more interactions with faculty and peers than those students who do not participate in living learning programs. Additionally, Inkelas and colleagues found that first-generation college students who participated in living-learning programs had significantly higher self-reported "ease with academic and social transitions to college" (p. 423) compared to those first-generation college students who were not a part of a living-learning community.

### **Examples of college preparation programs for low-income students**

As previously indicated, first-generation college students tend to significantly lack college preparation skills when compared to their non-first-generation peers (Warburton et al.,

2001). Additionally they are likely to have a difficult transition from high school to college (Pascarella et al., 2004) which has a direct impact on persistence and retention (Kuh, 1997). In an attempt to counteract the negative consequences of being a first-generation college student, there have been numerous programs designed to assist this population in an attempt to prepare them for their collegial experience. Since many of the participants of this study will have taken part in one or more of these programs it is important to note their intended purpose.

## **GEAR UP**

The GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness Undergraduate Program) program was designed to make low-income middle school students more aware and prepared for the opportunity of higher education. Evidence shows that a student's decision to attend college and the preparation needed to attend college begins somewhere around seventh grade (Cabreera et al., 2006). This awareness occurs, in part, because of collaborative efforts by the many influential individuals in a student's life including, but not limited to, parents, teachers and community members.

GEAR UP is designed and funded by the federal government to assist up to one million middle school students and their parents in learning about and preparing for college. GEAR UP partners with low-income middle schools, local colleges and community organizations to work with entire classes of students rather than individuals (Cabreera et al., 2006).

According to the *Early Outcomes of the GEAR UP Program* report, the greatest impact of GEAR UP for students and their families is in the area of knowledge (Standing, Judkins, Keller, and Shimskak, 2008). "Parental knowledge of post-secondary education requirements and availability of financial aid show[ed] the strongest associations with GEAR UP affiliation

(Standing et al., p. 65). Additionally, an increase in parents' expectations of their children was also noted as a result of GEAR UP participation (Standing et al.).

### **Summer Bridge Programs**

Summer bridge programs began to gain momentum in the United States during the 1960s when campuses noted an increase in the diversity of their student bodies which corresponded closely to high attrition and low graduation rates among previously underrepresented populations (Maggio et al., 2005). In response, campuses began offering remedial summer courses in an attempt to counteract the lack of college preparedness demonstrated by many students from minority backgrounds (Maggio et al.). These programs vary greatly in their structure, population and curricula but typically include academic skill building, academic advising and transitional programming to assist with college integration (Kezar, 2000; Pantano, 1994). Additionally, summer bridge programs often include academic instruction, tutoring, study skills instruction, mentoring/counseling/advising, and information about the college application and financial aid processes (Gullatt & Jan, 2003).

Kezar (2000) found that the overall purpose of these programs is to retain at-risk students. The programs are often referred to as "front loaded," as they take place either in the summer before the student officially begins college or throughout the first year of the student's college career (Myers, 2003). These bridge programs are intended to ease the transition between high school and college and most target students who are at the greatest risk of leaving college without a degree (Santa Rita & Bacota, 1997; Walpole et al., 2008). Program objectives include increasing students' academic and time management skills as well as assisting students in developing an understanding of campus culture as they connect to the university as a whole (Maggio et al., 2005).



There is evidence that participation in these programs has positive outcomes for college-bound students. Those who participate in a summer bridge program are more likely to be involved in their campus community (Buck, 1985), earn higher grades in their courses, (Santa Rita & Bacota, 2007) and return for a second year of college (Akerman, 1991) compared to those who do not. Notably, attending students are found to have increased self-esteem, which can have a direct impact on collegiate retention and academic success (Akerman). Students also reported positive responses for the social aspects of summer bridge programs including mentoring and community development (York & Tross, 1994).

## **TRIO**

Low-income, first-generation college students and students with disabilities are the focus of the federally supported program known as Student Support Services (SSS) which is a part of the TRIO program. Student Support Services was designed specifically to increase college enrollment, retention and graduation rates (Akerman, 1991). Student Support Services is just one of the six outreach and support components of the TRIO program, which is designed to serve and assist low-income, first-generation college students and students with disabilities as they proceed through college (United States Department of Education, 2009). The impact of TRIO participation indicate that students who participate in SSS programming are more likely to remain enrolled in higher education, amass more college credit, and earn higher GPAs compared to their peers (Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, & Rak, 1997).

### **Financial aid as a factor in student retention**

When studying the retention rates of students one must not overlook the issue of financial aid. Research indicates that the costs of higher education remains a major obstacle for many students from low income families (St. John, 2003; Deming & Dynarski, 2009). According

to the Pell Institute, despite their financial need, low-income, first-generation college students receive only slightly more financial aid than their peers. On average, even after loan aid is included, these students are \$3600 short of the amount determined they need to pay for college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This is a substantial financial burden for a low-income family whose median annual income is \$12,100 (Engle & Tinto).

Studies indicated that different types of aid had unique influences on student retention. Hochstein & Butler (1983) ascertained that loans held a negative association to college retention. This was in contrast to grants, which had a positive influence on retention. Students earning academic merit scholarships were found to have relatively low attrition rates compared those students who received need based aid (Bresciani & Lewis, 2002).

As previously stated, while loans have been found to have a negative association to retention, it is important to note the cumulative loan debt that low-income, first-generation college students accumulate, particularly those who do not complete a four year degree. For first-generation, low-income students who leave college after one year, their average loan debt is \$6557 and after four years that number jumps to \$16,548 without the earning power of a degree to assist with repayment. (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

The role of private scholarships in the financial aid equation is one that is generally understudied. Due to the fact that private scholarships account for 2-3% of all financial aid awarded or \$3.4 billion annually (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2005), little is known about the impact private scholarships on student retention and degree attainment. The role of the gifting foundation providing the private scholarship as it relates to student success is also unknown. Private scholarship aid is a unique component of financial aid for three main reasons:

1. Private scholarships often help students who are otherwise overlooked or ineligible for larger based programs.
2. Private scholarships foster choice and affordability for students from various socioeconomic backgrounds.
3. Private scholarships propose new ideas and strategies to help students pay for college (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2005).

### **College demographics related to college choice and retention rates**

Holland and Richards (1965) were some of the first researchers to examine the issue of college choice. They discovered that there were four main factors that influenced college choice:

1. Intellectual emphasis of the prospective campus
2. Practical concerns (cost, distance from home)
3. Advice by others (parents, siblings, guidance counselors)
4. Perceived social climate of the campus

While to some extent these factors remain salient today, examination of the current collegiate student body provides some further information on the issue of college choice. Cho, Hudley, Lee, Barry, and Kelly (2008) found that while students of high academic ability are more likely to attend highly selective institutions or out of state institutions, this is less likely to be the case for low-income, rural or female students. For these students, they seem to navigate towards less selective colleges and place greater preference on institutional factors such as size and location (Cho et al).

According to Cho and colleagues, (2008), regardless of first-generation status, gender or race, the academic quality of an institution was considered the most important element influencing college choice. Where first-generation students seem to differ from their peers

involved issues surrounding psychosocial attributes of prospective institutions. In particular first-generation students placed importance on perceived personal safety, a positive social climate, and having friends on campus (Cho et al.).

First-generation Latino/a students and all African American students reported the importance of an ethnically diverse campus when making their colligate choice (Cho et al., 2008). These two ethnic groups in particular are most likely to be stigmatized as incompetent in an academic environment (Hudley & Graham, 2001) and therefore are more likely to seek out social activities which provide a sense of belonging to the larger campus community. Research suggests students in these ethnic groups are particularly interested in finding a college where they will find supportive personal relationships and social activities (Cho et al.).

### **College success among students of ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged students**

In her study of an incentive based, high school drop-out prevention program for intercity youth, Leonard (2002) found one resonating theme: race and class matter. Less than half of low-income students who enroll in higher education were considered academically qualified to be there, compared to two thirds of high income students (Leonard). Low-income students were more likely to attend high schools that are considered sub-standard without the resources to meet the students' needs (Leonard). When this information is combined with race, the data indicates that low-income, minority students do not have the academic footing to allow them to succeed in higher education (Leonard). The outlook for African American students is bleak if they choose to attend a community college before attending a four year institution as only 12% of African American students transfer from community college to a four year institution compared to 32% of White students (Leonard).

There has been a prevalent theme among ethnic minority families from immigrant backgrounds to encourage their college age students to live at home and contribute to the family of origin while attending college. This was found by Christie and Duinham (1991) to have a negative impact on the completion of a degree. Moreover many first-generation students find that their parents do not necessarily understand the economic or social benefits to a college education. This occasionally causes conflict for students who are pulled between their family's expectation of employment and their own hope for an education (Olive, 2008). Bui (2002) compared the motivational reasons for attending college between students whose parents had a bachelor's degree and those who were considered first-generation students. Notable differences in responses from ethnic minority first-generation students that were not found among the general first-generation population included the importance of gaining respect, bring honor to the family of origin, and having the skills to provided financial assistance to the family of origin once a bachelor's degree was earned.

### **College success rates among full-ride scholarship students**

In Kentucky, the Robinson Scholarship Program offers a highly competitive scholarship to promising 8<sup>th</sup> graders, with the promise of complete cost coverage for 8-10 semesters of college at the University of Kentucky and neighboring community colleges. The authors of the Robinson Scholarship study specifically targeted 50 high school juniors who had been awarded the scholarship and were currently participating in college preparation programs as well as five college freshmen who were currently taking advantage of the scholarship program. The researchers found that the recipients of the Robinson Scholarship were incredibly dedicated to their home communities and while they looked forward to earning college degrees, they were also committed (at the time the research was completed) to return home upon degree completion.

The authors noted that these students could end up being agents of change in their own communities. The significance of this study stems to college prep programs such as GEAR UP and college programs like TRIO. The difference in the Robinson Program is that there is continual support from 8<sup>th</sup> grade through college graduation and therefore it is truly a full scope scholarship program.

While many states have attempted to create scholarship programs for their residents and there are still scholarship opportunities for those with incredible athletic talent, there is yet another fund from which scholarships most commonly arise: the private foundation. Arzy, et al.(2007) researched economically disadvantaged students who had received a four year comprehensive privately funded scholarship which provided full coverage of tuition, fees, books, room and board as well as a mid-semester cash stipend and were, at the time of the study, still enrolled in higher education. Through a phenomenological study of fourteen students attending one of four state universities, the researcher found that the students were not overly successful in transitioning to college. The students reported feeling as though the university they attended was large, impersonal and therefore left them feeling anonymous and unknown. These students experienced college largely from the perimeter so as to maintain relationships with their family and friends while taking advantage of the opportunity that their scholarship afforded them.

### **Conclusion**

It is essential to understand characteristics of the current student body within American colleges and universities before attempting to hone in on one very specific element of that population. While students awarded all-inclusive privately funded scholarships are vastly understudied, with the exception of the afore mentioned Arzy study, equally understudied are the perceptions of students upon departure from higher education. Student departure has previously

been studied and there are a few widely accepted theories such as such as Tinto's (1975) *Social Integration Model* or Astin's (1993) "input-process-output" model, however the literature is still lacking in the area of students' own awareness of their collegiate experience and their journey leading up to college withdrawal.

## CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Chapter three outlines the research design and support for using a phenomenological approach in this study. This chapter includes descriptions of the participants and sites used in the study, it also details data collection, trustworthiness and data analysis methods.

### Research Design and Rational

Qualitative methodology was selected for this study as it provided participants the opportunity to describe the meaning of their lived experiences and to identify common themes among low income, first generation college students who were funded by the private foundation scholarship but who lost that funding due a failure of academic progress, by choosing to leave higher education or through miscommunication with the gifting foundation. “In student affairs settings, a qualitative research design is suitable when student affairs professionals are interested in collecting in-depth data reflective of students’ attitudes about a program, students’ opinions about student services, and/or students’ college experiences” (Flowers & Moore, 2003, para1).

In order to understand the lived experiences of the participants as former private scholarship recipients, a phenomenological design was utilized. Phenomenology is used when a study focuses on how people in a particular condition, in this case, the loss of a scholarship, experience a shared phenomenon (Maxwell, 2005). The concept of a shared phenomenon can be more clearly understood by following Bullington and Karlsson (1984) who stated that the results of a phenomenological study describe the “*what* and *how* of a specific phenomenon rather than the explanatory *why*” (p. 53). This study is concerned with what happened to recipients of a specific private foundation scholarship who lost their scholarship due to lack of academic progress, challenges with the gifting foundation or by choosing to leave higher education and how they responded to that loss.



An interview-based approach was used in order to gain a deeper understanding of the students' experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). The interviews explored the former scholars' college experiences resulting in the loss of private foundation scholarship funding. This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What were the participants' experiences in college?
2. How do participants describe the experiences of losing their private foundation scholarship?
3. What were the participants' experiences with university support services while attending college with the assistance of the private foundation scholarship?
4. How do participants describe their lives since losing the scholarship?
5. How do the participants perceive the support and involvement, provided by their families, while they were in college?

### **Participants and Sites**

Through the assistance of the private foundation, the researcher was provided with the last known contact information of twenty former scholars. Sampling for this study was completed by convenience based on participant location. Participants' universities of attendance were limited to the three public research universities within the two selected states. For this study, sampling was limited to those scholarship recipients who graduated from a Wyoming or Colorado high school. The private foundation only awards scholarships to selected high school graduates from four western states. Participants who lived in Wyoming and Colorado were considered for this study because this geographic region and selected universities were most familiar to the researcher therefore allowing the best opportunity for understanding of the participants' experiences.

The private foundation awards the scholarship to 250 students per year. Current six year graduation rates for these scholars hover around 63%. Additionally, participants were limited to those who received their scholarship in 2008 or later. This was due to changes in the scholarship selection process and the college preparation program hosted by the gifting private foundation as well as the intention to ensure currency of the findings.

Seven former scholars chose to participate in the study. All were from low income background and were first generation college student. Six of the participants identified themselves as white and one identified herself as Hmong. The participants had been Mountain Pride scholars for an average of three semesters.

### **Data Collection**

A list of twenty former scholars who lost their scholarship due to lack of academic progress, challenges with the gifting Foundation or by leaving higher education, with last known contact information was provided to the researcher from the gifting foundation. Due to the small pool of possible participants, I attempted to contact all participants by phone and email. After an email and two phone calls, if I received no response from the potential participant, I considered the former scholar unwilling to participate.

Once the participants agreed to contribute to the study I began my data collection. Seven participants were provided with a cover letter outlining the types of questions they would be asked and signed a consent form before participating. Sixty to ninety minute interviews were conducted in restaurants and libraries close to the former scholars' residence. Each participant was interviewed one to two times which allowed ample time for the participant to "describe an individual's actions, experiences, and beliefs" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006, p. 132). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed following the interviews. Semi-structured interviews

allowed for a few predetermined questions followed by a participant directed discussion of perspective and experiences while the interviewer sought clarification of themes and meanings.

Semi-structured questions included:

Tell me about what your first few weeks of college were like?  
Did you have a roommate? What was he/she like? Did you both come from similar backgrounds?  
How were your classes? Did you get to know any of your professors outside of class?  
How were things between you and your family when you started college?

The additional interviews were guided by topics developed at the previous session with emergent themes and patterns identified in order to influence the later interviews (Bogdan & Biklen). Additional interviews clarified previously collected data, provided supplemental information and developed a deeper understanding of the participant's perspective.

### **Data Analysis**

The participants' interviews were transcribed and analyzed through inductive data analysis. Using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) stages of coding, all data was coded in a three step process.

In open coding, the analyst is concerned with generating categories and their properties and then seeks to determine how categories vary dimensionally. In axial coding, categories are systematically developed and linked with subcategories. However, it is not until the major categories are fully integrated to form a larger theoretical scheme that the research findings take the form of theory. Selective coding is the process of integrating and refining the categories. (p. 143)

Additionally, a researcher journal was kept in order to examine "personal assumptions and goals" and "clarify individual belief systems and subjectivities" (Russell & Kelly, 2002, p. 2). All coding was completed by hand, without the use of analysis software.

The complex process of coding qualitative research created a depth of understanding of the participant's lived experiences and was guided by Strauss and Corbin's suggestion to "let the data speak" which, through examination of the data, line by line, generated the initial themes that

emerged. These themes were apparent in the commonalities and connections described by the participants as they explained their lived experiences.

Member checking was conducted by providing the participants with their transcribed interviews, via email. While two participants responded affirmatively to the authentication of the transcriptions, the rest of the participants chose not to respond.

### **Validity Criteria and Ethics**

Validity was established by determining data and interpretation accuracy by the researcher, the participants, and the readers (Creswell & Miller, 2000). As outlined by Merriam and colleagues (2002, pp. 26-27), the validity strategies used in this study included the following:

- Member checks-participants will review original transcription and comment on the researcher's interpretation of the collected data
- Peer review-Doctoral colleagues will review the raw data and "assess whether the findings are plausible based on the data" (p. 26).
- Researcher submersion-the researcher will "engage in the data collection phase for a long enough period to ensure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon" (p 26). This strategy will be accomplished through 1-4 interviews with participants.
- Rich, thick descriptions-the researcher will provide the readers with enough information that they are able to determine the transferability of the research to their own situations

To ensure high ethical standards within this study, the researcher asked all participants to sign an informed consent letter informing them of "the protection of their rights during data collection" (Creswell, 2009, p.89). Privacy and confidentiality of the participants was and will continue to be upheld and "made public only behind the shield of anonymity" (Reiss, 1979, p. 73). In order to allow for a richer interpretation of the data, participants had the opportunity to review the original transcriptions of their interviews as well as thematic data analysis. An additional component of establishing trustworthiness came from a doctoral student peer group

who were well versed in qualitative research data analysis. This previously established cohort group reviewed interview transcripts, data analysis and early drafts of research results via email.

### **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is a form of critical subjectivity in which the investigator reflects on herself as researcher: “human as instrument” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 210). This process began by reflecting on my own lived experiences which took shape via social status, family of origin, gender, ethnicity and because as the researcher, I ultimately influence the study’s direction, interpretation and analysis. I have a background similar to the participants and have direct and consistent contact with the private gifting foundation and its scholarship recipients, thus reflection on internal responses gathered throughout the data collection process is necessary and noteworthy. Through education and life experiences, I developed a personal understanding of the oppressive constructs of a low-income status and the challenge of collegiate success while combating imposter syndrome. This understanding undoubtedly had an influence on the interpretation of and theme development within the collected data.

### **Limitations of Methodology**

While phenomenology describes a concept or “essence of human experience,” (Creswell, 2009, p. 231), it does not take as its focus the journey experienced by the participant. This limitation may be an inhibiting factor when interviewing former students who have not previously reflected on their higher education departure experience and are more likely to focus on the journey, specifically what lead them to leave higher education, rather than the experience as a whole. This issue was addressed with a second interview in which the interviewer was able to ask questions specifically related to higher education departure.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

### Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of my study *A Phenomenological Study of Low-Income Students Formerly Pursuing Baccalaureate Degrees with the Assistance of a Private Foundation Scholarship*. Through data analysis, common themes emerged demonstrating the participant's views of their lived experiences as scholarship awardees as well as their experiences after losing the scholarship. These themes included: *educational aspirations, the college experience, the scholarship opportunity, and conscious reflection*.

The theme *educational aspirations* explain the participants' motivations for attending higher education as well as the influence of family and friends as support structures. *The college experience* is a theme that exposes the participants' involvement and engagement in college life, connection to academic and student services, and balance among the complex constraints they were experiencing while enrolled in higher education. *Scholarship opportunity* demonstrates the participants' lived experiences regarding their relationship to the Foundation, the requirements placed upon them by being a Foundation Scholar and their perceptions of their scholarship loss. *Conscious reflection* describes the thoughts and life lessons learned by the participants as they looked back on their time as Foundation Scholars.

The interviews collected for this study illustrate the rich descriptions of the lived experiences conveyed by the participants. I have chosen to provide brief biographies on each of the participants, in no specific order, to allow the reader to develop some understanding of each of the former Foundation scholars.

#### **Brief Biographies of Former Foundation Scholars**

Charlie was a first generation college student who spent a year and a half at Peak University as a Mountain Pride Scholar. The oldest child in his family, Charlie was raised by his

mother and throughout childhood and the time he was enrolled at Peak University, Charlie's father was not a part of his life. He shared that his initial motivation to attend college was his belief that it was "the right thing to do." Charlie was involved with the Gear Up program while in high school and subsequently had also received a Gear Up scholarship for college. Charlie expressed notable bitterness towards the Mountain Pride Foundation for two reasons: one, the scholarship covered very little of his perceived financial needs and two, when he chose to transfer to a trade school, the Foundation discontinued his scholarship.

Kim, also a first generation college student, attended Summit University for a year and a half as a Mountain Pride Scholar. She indicated that she chose Summit University simply because other family members had attended that university. She was the only participant who identified being a member of a racial or ethnic minority group. Kim had eight siblings and her parents were divorced, with Kim being raised by her father and step mother. Kim's separation from the scholarship was due to poor grades.

David's father was not involved in his upbringing and his mother "wasn't quite a suitable mother" so he was raised by his aunt until a health condition forced him to move back in with his mother and her abusive boyfriends. The oldest child in his family, David spoke with a passionate sense of responsibility toward his two younger sisters. Ultimately because of David's sister's mental health challenges, his mother was unable to care for them so the father of one of David's friends offered to become the three children's foster father and David explained "he has been my dad since then." David, a first generation college student, chose to attend White Cap State University where he was enrolled with the assistance of the Mountain Pride Scholarship for one full academic year. David noted that most of his high school friends also enrolled in White Cap State University "which I really hate and regret to this day because I think they (high school

friends) are a big aspect of me not being there now.” David lost his scholarship due to poor grades and has since continued in higher education, on and off, at a local community college. When David was interviewed for this study he had enlisted and was weeks away from Navy boot camp.

Kelly came from a military family and her parents separated when she was quite young. The oldest in her family, Kelly and her siblings were raised by her mother who relied heavily on Kelly’s grandparents for financial and emotional assistance in raising her three children. Kelly’s grandparents, particularly her grandfather, played a vital role in her educational aspirations. While she fits the criteria as a first generation college student, Kelly stated that she did not feel like one, due to the fact that many people in her extended family had earned their college degrees. Kelly attended Peak University for four years, graduating with her bachelors in psychology however she only received financial support from the Mountain Pride Foundation for one academic year. Kelly lost the scholarship after a missed paperwork deadline with the Foundation. In order to continue her education, Kelly was offered a similar scholarship through Gear Up. Kelly was working as a Gear Up counselor and has aspirations of attending graduate school.

Samantha, the firstborn in her family, was raised by her mom and step dad. A first generation college student, Samantha attended Summit University for a year and a half as a Mountain Pride Scholar. In her first year at Summit University, Samantha roomed with a fellow Mountain Pride Scholar. Samantha’s scholarship loss was due to low grades and the loss caused a fall out with her family, ultimately resulting in her temporary homelessness. Samantha indicated that she was working to pay back accumulated debt from her time at Summit University but that she eventually hoped to return to college and earn a nursing degree.



Bianca, a former ward of the state, and first generation college student was raised by several foster families and noted that she had attended eleven different schools between kindergarten and high school. Bianca attended White Cap State University where she was a Mountain Pride Scholar for two full years. Education was always a priority for Bianca, summarizing its value as,

I think, because I was in foster care, I think my education was always my playing card. It was like if I could get good grades then maybe they would love me more; it was a way for me to stay in their good graces. (Bianca)

Bianca indicated that it was her own self-motivation that drove her to attend college, noting that “I never really thought of it as a choice...I guess I just knew that going to college would get me what I wanted.” Due to illness and personal crisis Bianca had to stop out of college during her first semester and then again at the conclusion of her second year. When she was ready to return to college, Bianca contacted the Foundation, only to be told that she had stopped out for too long and that the Foundation had tried to reach out to her but had not been able to make contact. Bianca maintained that this occurred during a fall out with her foster family who were listed with the Foundation as her point of contact. Despite the loss of the Foundation Scholarship, Bianca persisted in higher education through working and acquiring other scholarships. She is currently in her last year of a social work program.

Anthony was the only participant who came from a dual parent family. The middle child in a family of three children, Anthony indicated that he was “born to go to Summit University!” after having gone to sporting events and other activities on the Summit University campus his entire life. While Anthony parents did not attend college, his grandfather had been a faculty member at Summit University. Anthony attended Summit University for two years as a Mountain Pride Foundation Scholar. Anthony cited “pridefulness” was the underlying reason he ultimately lost his scholarship, due to poor grades. He indicated that he knew he needed help in

areas of tutoring and study skills but he was simply too prideful to ask for assistance. Anthony maintained hope that he would be able to return to higher education, possibly to earn a chemistry degree.

Participant biographic summaries were provided to offer background and insight as well as to further illustrate the lived experiences of the former scholars. The lived experiences of the participants have been compiled into themes and these themes are presented next. The themes that emerged through the participant interviews were *educational aspirations, the college experience, scholarship opportunity, and conscious reflection*.

### **Educational Aspirations**

The *educational aspirations* theme developed through the participants' descriptions of what the opportunity to attend college meant to them and their statements of motivating factors that had initially inspired them to pursue higher education. The influence of and responsibility to family were reoccurring subjects within the aspirations theme. Participants also described how they went about choosing their school of attendance and the other options they had considered as alternatives to college.

The decision to pursue a college degree was not entered into lightly for the participants of this study nor was it necessary an expectation levied upon them throughout their childhoods. Participants shared that it was the desire to have something better than the situation they had been raised in that had, at least initially, been their motivation for considering college. For many, parental expectations, whether real or perceived, had serviced as a motivating factor in exploring higher education. Additionally, the opportunity to be the role model amongst their siblings also provided inspiration for their chosen path.

## **Motivations for attending college**

In discussing the initial motivation to attend college, several of the participants indicated that they wanted to find a way out of the generational or situational poverty they had been raised in.

I wanted a better job than my parents. They work so hard and make nothing, basically. That was my greatest motivation and then my brother and sisters, they look up to me and that was part of it too, all family. (Samantha)

Additionally, Kim indicated, “my parents don’t have their education so they always wanted us kids to go to school.”

In order to be considered for the Mountain Pride scholarship, students and their families must have had a demonstrated financial need. While many of the participants identified their perceived connection between a college education and higher earning potential, Anthony shared that financial advancement had not necessarily been a motivation for him; in fact he was unaware of his family’s financial circumstances prior to earning the Mountain Pride Scholarship.

I wasn’t all too familiar with our financial situation at the time; it wasn’t until after that when I actually found out (that he had been awarded the scholarship) that I realized what a big deal it had been, when I found out how little we actually had. (Anthony)

Still there were other participants who seemed to pursue college because they considered it to be the “right thing to do.” Rather than an aspiration, it was seen as part of a very short list of options after high school.

At the time, I went just because it was the thing to do. I mean, at the time, I didn’t see the importance. You know you go to college, join the military or do nothing with your life. In high school at least that is what it looks like. There are obviously other options. It doesn’t mean if you don’t do those first two that you’re not going to be anything but at the time it was like, hey, you go to *college*. (David)

Charlie shared very similar motivations for attending college:

I thought that would be the “right thing” to do. You know college just fits in that picture of the things you are supposed to do so I thought it was right. I almost felt guilty if I didn’t go. I felt like that was a good decision and I wanted to make my parents and everyone else happy. I thought “Well, I’ll go to college and do the thing you are supposed to do by getting a degree and all will be right.” (Charlie)

The subtopic of college motivation begins to create the complex picture of the challenges faced by these participants as they weighed the decision of attending college. While participants indicated a variety of different motivations for pursuing a degree, all were influenced by their biological or foster families.

### **Influence of family**

Many of the participants indicated that family had a great influence on their choice to enroll in college although the participants had difficulty citing specific examples as to how that influence had been demonstrated. Several of the participants indicated that they “just knew” that their families supported their decision to pursue post-secondary education and that education had not been a general topic of discussion in their homes. Notably however, grandparents were a guiding factor for two of the participants who specifically indicated that it was the support and influence of their grandfathers that motivated them to choose higher education.

My grandfather on my mom’s side, was the professor. My parents kept saying “College would be better for you” but when I saw how my grandfather just stayed there after getting his degree, it kind of just gave me the idea that I really should go to college. (Andrew)

My grandpa was a professor at Black Hills. He taught education so obviously education was a really important thing to him. So from a young age I remember he taught me how to read. It was cool because it helped me appreciate reading. (Kelly)

For the two participants who were living with foster families while in high school, the experience of choosing to attend college was notably different than for those living with their

biological families. Bianca explained that she perceived her desire to pursue higher education as being largely intrinsic and that she felt her foster family considered her educational aspirations as pretentious.

I think, because I was in foster care I think my education was always my playing card. It was like if I could get good grades then maybe they would love me more, it was a way for me to stay in their good graces...my foster mom, she always thought I was very “uppity” when it came to education...I never really thought of it as a choice, well not really a choice, I guess I just knew that going to college would get me what I wanted. I am very educationally driven and have always had that internal drive, I guess. (Bianca)

For David, while his foster father was supportive of his decision to attend college and “just kept kicking (him) in the ass and telling him to get it done” throughout the college and scholarship application processes, having been raised in situations where college was seldom talked about or encouraged, resulted in a level of indifference for higher education. David indicated that in looking back on his priorities at the time, “it took a while to find out how important college was.”

### **Role modeling**

Four of the participants shared that they were firstborn in their families. This disclosure was coupled by feelings of responsibility and obligation to family stability, particularly for siblings, which is often experienced by first generation college students (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). For Kelly, those feelings of accountability weighed heavily on her as she reflected on her choice to attend college “As the oldest I had to set the example. They (younger siblings) were going to follow whatever path I took.” Samantha had similar thoughts as she recounted her role as firstborn in relation to her decision to attend college “my brother and sisters, they look up to me and that was part of it (choosing to attend college).” Upon facing personal uncertainty in his choice to attend college, Charlie, also a firstborn, shared “I remember

calling my mom crying, saying ‘I want to make you proud, I want you to be able to say your son has a degree.’”

Charlie went on to indicate that there were many times that he struggled while away at college as he “just kept thinking about things at home, back in Carbondale, and I was thinking ‘I want to fix my family.’ Ugh. You can’t do that.” David also shared feelings of obligation and responsibility in wanting to fix his family when he explained how it was that he and his sisters had initially gone to live with his foster father.

I was staying there whenever I was having blowouts with my mom and things were crazy and when I couldn’t stay there he would let me stay with him and it got to the point where he offered me, he said I could live there if I wanted. I said only if my sisters could come because I wouldn’t leave them in a bad place. (David)

Feelings of obligatory role modeling, combined with responsibility, did not cease while the participants were in college. For Kelly, they were intensified by feelings of guilt as she watched her younger sister spiral out of control while Kelly was away at school.

Once I went to college, a lot of things happened for my sister and I don’t know if she just wasn’t prepared or if I had been some sort of barrier like maybe the one voice of reason she would listen to but once I left home she started ditching classes and not turning in homework, she barely graduated, she moved out as soon as she turned 18 and even though she could have gotten the Mountain Pride scholarship, she didn’t. She went to one semester of CC and dropped out halfway through and then got pregnant but once she had her son, it was like the one thing she needed to get back on track. That second year of college, when I saw all of this happening, I couldn’t help but feel guilty. I just kept wondering, what could I have done to make sure this didn’t happen? So that was definitely a negative for me. (Kelly)

While the subject of role modeling seemed to weigh heavily on the participants, in subsequent interviews they did not specifically identify the obligation of role modeling as a source of stress during their college enrollment. It may be assumed that the family roles had long been established and therefore the additional dynamic of the participants attending college had little impact on stress levels specifically related to family obligations.

## College choice

Once the decision to attend college was made, the issue of college choice had a significant impact on overall collegiate success. Many of the participants indicated that attending colleges close to home, with friends from high school, the distraction of family issues and failing to connect with the campus experience had all been challenges to their academic progress.

All participants in this study attended colleges that were within 100 miles of the high schools they graduated from. When questioned as to the reasoning behind their college choice, none of the participants mentioned the rigors of particular academic programs or winning athletic teams. Rather, the participants cited their college choice was based on its outward ascetic beauty, affordability, distance from home and knowing others who were attending the same institution. Kim indicated, "I had a cousin who went there and I went to campus and it was really pretty. Also it was close to home so I decided to go there."

The decision was simple. It was cheap. I didn't want to go to the neighboring community college, I wanted to get away from my family and it was close enough that I could be independent and still get home whenever I wanted to. All of my friends also went up there. (Kelly)

In reflecting upon their choice in college, a few of the participants indicated that the fact that they had high school friends attending the same institution, while initially appealing, did not prove to be a supportive factor in their academic success.

Um, honestly all my friends went there which I really hate and regret to this day because I think they are a big aspect of me not being there now. I actually wanted to go to Summit U. more. I don't know, looking back now, had I not just followed my friends I probably would have been a lot more successful. I mean I could have gone to the Naval Academy or to Summit where I would have been forced to meet new people and not just settle, I mean it was really easy to settle and be with my friends, you know like "we're going to play video games and hang out and go party together." I mean I liked everywhere else better, honestly. (David)

My brother had spent some time at SU and my friends were there too and they were like “Oh, college, you get to party all the time. And I have some friends who could do well without doing any school work so I just assumed that I could do that so I just screwed around and never really got into the habit of paying attention. (Anthony)

The educational aspiration theme that developed through interviews set the stage for the participants’ responses regarding their journey through the scholarship selection process and their college experience. Background and family dynamics, along with the family’s perceived value of education all had influences on the participants educational aspirations for themselves.

### **Scholarship Opportunities**

Scholarship opportunities for students, who may be academically average or even slightly above average, are limited at best. The Mountain Pride scholarship was designed to bridge that gap for students who are seen as having potential to give back to their communities and demonstrate strong character. The selection process is arduous and complex, designed so the Foundation is able to select only the best of the best as scholarship recipients.

### **The scholarship selection process**

When asked to reflect upon the scholarship selection process, the participants shared many descriptive words to elaborate on their experiences. Beginning with the written application, Bianca explained that she felt the initial written component of the application was “very long; a huge application with at least four long essays.”

The word “intimidating” was most commonly heard as the scholars explained their thoughts on the selection process. Samantha represented the other participants when she explained her experience, “It was really scary. Some of the parts were really formal too so that was kind of intimidating. I remember thinking that I had no idea how it was all going to go but everyone was really nice.” Many of the participants shared Samantha’s opinion that the actual



interview process was quite relaxed, with the panel of interviewers engaging them in a conversation rather than bombarding them with questions.

David elaborated further on the selection process by reflecting on the payoff for what he considered a minimal amount of effort.

I remember at the time thinking that there were a lot of parts to it but looking back, it was nothing, compared to what you were going to get. So you know, the essays, in the big picture, were nothing, when you think about the reward. (David)

After the participants were selected to receive the scholarship, they were required to attend a week of scholarship orientation called SUCCESS. When considering their experiences as Foundation scholars, participants reminisced positively on their SUCCESS experience. Newfound friendships, exposure to the expectations of college and developing better understanding of the Foundation were all mentioned as the participants recalled their week at SUCCESS. Samantha reminisced:

The SUCCESS program was a lot of fun. There were a lot of things we had to go through but we ended up making a lot of friends and spending a lot of time hanging out. I really liked it. (Samantha)

Andrew indicated that SUCCESS was “one of the greatest experiences of my life. I met a lot of friends there, some of which I still have. It definitely helped me along the process. It helped me feel a little bit more comfortable with college.” Charlie revealed that while SUCCESS was a great influence on his continuum to become prepared for college, it was also made him question his choices and therefore caused some stress as well.

They covered everything relevant to life. It made me really nervous because I wasn't completely comfortable with who I was and so I remember being very safeguarded at SUCCESS. It was fun; it was a great college prep experience. But then I remember starting college and thinking “Why did I choose Peak University?” There were so many formalities to it (SUCCESS) and everything had a loop hole, but overall it was good. (Charlie)

## Reactions of others

For many of the participants, earning the Mountain Pride scholarship meant the difference between going to a university of their choice or a local community college, between going to college or having to find work with merely a high school diploma. When asked about the reactions of others upon learning they had been selected to receive the scholarship, some of the participants indicated that their success had been considered a success for the entire family. This was the case for Samantha as she shared her family's reaction to the news of her selection to the Mountain Pride scholarship. "They were really excited. They were like, 'oh my gosh, someone is finally going to college!' The fact that it is such a huge scholarship and so many people know about it, I think that made them really proud." In Kelly's family, the news of her scholarship provided her single mother with a sense of relief from the financial worries that had accompanied Kelly's college aspirations:

When I got it she was so happy, like I am pretty sure she cried. Both her and my grandma, they were both really excited. She (Kelly's mother) was just really relieved, knowing that things would be paid for. In the way she acted in the days after she finally had the security in knowing that college was going to happen for me. (Kelly)

Being selected for the scholarship had tangible reward for David, not only in terms of college access but his foster father had bet David that if he could earn the Mountain Pride scholarship, that his foster father would give David his collector's edition Trans Am. David remembered the exact moment when he had been selected for the scholarship.

When I got the letter saying that I was selected we were up in the attic getting things down for Christmas. So we were pulling stuff out and at this point I had been getting text from people all day saying that they had gotten the scholarship. So I was just helping out, getting things out of the attic and my sister comes up and tells me I have a letter from Mountain Pride. My heart stopped and as I looked down from the attic I saw that she was holding this big packet. I just knew that they would not send a big packet just to say "Good luck" you know. I'm in! It was awesome. It was a great feeling. He (foster father) had kept top of me (to complete the scholarship application) and he really proud. (David)

While Bianca's foster family had encouraged her to apply for the Mountain Pride scholarship, once she was notified that she had been selected for the scholarship, her foster family had a rather contradictory reaction to the news.

They had definitely pushed for it (applying for the scholarship) and encouraged it. I don't know, my foster mom, she always thought I was very, I don't know, "uppity" when it came to education. So I don't know, I mean I think they were proud of me and on some level expected it but on the other side also felt that they thought this was just one more thing that would put me above them. So there was as definitely a mixed reaction to me earning the scholarship, that is for sure. (Bianca)

As the participants reflected on their journey to college continued to unfold through their interviews, it was obvious that their lives became increasingly complex despite having been selected for the Mountain Pride scholarship. Support from family, economic challenges, and academic struggles were all issues shared by the participants of this study.

### **The College Experience**

While the Mountain Pride scholarship assisted in allowing the participants to attend college, there were still many challenges faced, largely based upon family dynamics, academic preparedness, and being able to circumvent the complexities of the college experience.

#### **Academic preparation**

When asked about their perceived academic preparedness in transitioning from high school to college, most of the participants overwhelmingly indicated that their preparation had been insufficient for their college experience. Many discussed a lack of life skills such as time management and knowing how to study. Others indicated that high school had been very easy for them while they found the academics of college incredibly hard. Samantha shared her experience with academic preparedness.

In high school I didn't try at all and still I had a 3.8 but in college you have to try. I just didn't completely understand how hard I had to try and it completely got me. I definitely got kicked in the face by more than one of my classes. (Samantha)

David shared that while he may have been prepared for the content being taught in class, he lacked the study skills and academic focus to earn good grades.

I mean I definitely was able to learn and understand the material but my habits were not developed in high school, were not so good and there I was able to get good grades just through the tests. I mean I didn't do much homework. I could just listen in class and do well on the tests. In college I could still do well on the tests but the tests weren't weighted as heavily or the papers were weighted heavier so things just didn't work as well as in high school. (David)

Participants were asked how many hours per week they spent studying while they were enrolled in college. None of them reported studying over 15 hours per week and many indicated they studied less than 5 hours per week. Bianca indicated that her lack of studying was manifested by her lack of motivation. For her, that may have stemmed from her experience in the foster care system.

I wasn't very motivated; not so much. I kept up with my classes for a while.... It was hard to stay motivated when I think, because I was in foster care, I think my education was always my playing card. It was like if I could get good grades then maybe they would love me more, it was a way for me to stay in their good graces. So then when I got to college it was like who am I going to impress now? So that was a bit of a demotivator that first year. (Bianca)

Two of the participants shared that learning challenges may have precluded them from being as successful as they would have liked in college. For Kim, her memory was her greatest barrier, "I probably didn't do as well as I should have in college. It was really hard for me to memorize everything." While for Anthony, a learning disability, diagnosed in college, combined with a pridefulness that prevented him from seeking help, resulted in poor academic progress.

I am a prideful person so I didn't like to admit that I needed help. Along with that, high school was just so easy for me that I always thought I could do it. Also finding out that I was dyslexic made it a little harder too. There were just a lot of struggles that I found out in college that would have been helped out a lot if I would have known in high school. (Anthony)

The two participants who indicated that they had been academically prepared for the rigors of college had been part of the Gear Up program and had taken advanced coursework while in high school which had assisted them in developing their college preparation skills. Charlie found himself so prepared that he found his classes "redundant" of high school. When asked if he felt he was adequately prepared he responded "Probably overly much except for the fact that if you hadn't taken AP exams you were basically retaking your courses from senior year. I knew how to study and manage my time. I felt like I was very prepared."

The message was similar coming from Kelly who shared that her experience in a high school international bachelorette program and Gear Up had provided her with skills that proved very beneficial in college. "I think IB and Gear Up may have helped me. Gear Up isn't too academic but they put you in the right mindset of "you have to take these classes, just suck it up and get it done."

### **Campus involvement**

There was a clear divide amongst the participants as to their involvement on campus in extra-curricular activities. While David found himself very over committed, wanting to be involved in many events on campus, others only participated in one or two activities outside of class. In describing his over-commitment David explained that it may have led to his poor academic performance.

Maybe always having some intermural sport every afternoon rather than studying was a big, big deal. I think I may have overwhelmed myself with those things. I mean I would go to classes then go to lunch then play video games for a few hours, then do intermural sports, be tired and to bed. That would be my day. Where's the studying in

there? Well there wasn't you know. You know they tell you "Sign up for these fun things" but what they don't say is "Limit yourself or be smart or manage yourself better, cut the video time out if you are going to do those things." I didn't. (David)

Additionally, David indicated that he returned to his hometown every weekend he was in college. Reflecting back on that decision, David said "I definitely know [that] was a big factor in some of the things I had happen."

For other scholars, they described their extracurricular participation in ways much more closely aligned with traditional commuter students, despite the fact that they were all living on campus in campus residence halls. Anthony stated "I didn't really join any clubs. Me and my friends did play some club sports," while Samantha indicated that she was a part of the "GSA-Gay Student Alliance-I went to the meeting every week and then they had activities 1-2 times a month. I wasn't super involved but I belonged to the group." For both Bianca and Kim, personal financial demands took precedence over on-campus involvement. Bianca explained that she had initially gotten involved on campus but ultimately work took over.

I took some workout courses a couple of times and I was part of the academic advancement center for a while and they were really helpful and encouraging but that was the extent of it. I actually ended up getting a job during that time too. (Bianca)

Kim shared that while she had minimal commitment to a course based leadership initiative, she spent a great deal of time working, "I was in a leadership organization,...and I worked at Target, back at home, on the weekends."

### **Support services**

Participants were asked to share the support services they sought out while they were foundation scholars. While all of the participants indicated that they knew services like tutoring and supplemental instruction were available, few followed through and took advantage of the services. Kim indicated "I think a lot of the time they were there to help you but you had to

schedule time to meet with them and I didn't do that." Similar insight was shared by Samantha, "I didn't take advantage of them but I always knew they were there." On the contrary, Bianca shared that her experience with the academic support office at White Cap State University was a great help to her.

The academic advancement center was a huge help. They bugged you which I think was a good thing because sometimes you need to be bugged. And my counselor there was a great resource and I met with her more often than they required. I think they required you meet with them 4x per semester but I was meeting with her every other week because of how much I needed to talk and stuff. (Bianca)

When asked about utilizing support services, Charlie joined the other participants in stating that help was there for those who sought it but he then went on to share his positive experience with Peak University's counseling services.

I feel like in order to have support you have to ask for it. It wasn't given but it was there if you asked so if you reached out there were plenty of people who would help you. Free counseling was a great support and when I walked in and on the intake form there was a place to indicate what you were dealing with and one of them was sexual orientation I was so relieved that they were willing to talk about that and I didn't have to fill in any of the other boxes. (Charlie)

It was interesting to note that none of the participants mentioned their academic advisors as support services. When questioned, none of the participants were able to recall their academic advisors' names.

### **Faculty interaction and academic success**

Based on what is known about first generation college students, class involvement and faculty interaction; it was not surprising to hear from the participant's very limited contact through office hours or in-class participation. Bianca shared that she never approached any during her first year, "I was pretty displaced from my teachers then."

Anthony reported taking advantage of faculty office hours but finding that his professors did not have much time for him during that time.

I met with a few of them outside of class. The classes I was in were 200+ students so you didn't get to see much of them outside of class. They would have 2 hours of office hours and there would be like 80 people lined up to see them so you would just get a couple of minutes with them. (Anthony)

Kelly disclosed that not only did she not approach her faculty members in her first year of college, she was so overwhelmed that she did not participate in class.

Lecture hall I zone out way too easily without active participation and I knew I was supposed to force myself to do that but I am a really shy person too or at least I was back then, I am not so much now. But I was way too shy, I didn't speak up, I would freeze it was like pure anxiety trying to like figure out a way of talking in class or answering a question. (Kelly)

David acknowledged that his faculty were very supportive and helpful and that reaching out to them was his responsibility.

Yeah, I would, I tried, honestly, I mean at the beginning of the semester, if I couldn't figure it out I would go to office hours, I'd email them, and they were great, they honestly were. They would point me in the right direction. I mean they did all they could, you got [in return] what you put into it. If you needed them, you could get ahold of them. (David)

Overall the participants' feelings regarding their faculty were positive although that did not seem to make up for being unwilling to seek out faculty assistance. This unwillingness combined with large courses and a lack of knowledge on the importance of faculty interaction may have had direct implications on some of the participant's academic success.

### **Personal finances**

The Mountain Pride Scholarship advertises itself as covering the financial needs of students after all other grants and scholarships have been applied, based on a family's EFC.

While the financial implications to the participants, based on the Foundation's philosophy, seem



rather straight forward, there were mixed reviews of the scholarship's financial assistance from the participants.

For David, he felt as though the financial support adequately covered his financial needs "completely, no doubt, above and beyond." Conversely, Bianca shared that while she believes the scholarship was designed to cover scholar costs, her first year of college left her with a large bill owed to White Cap State University.

I don't remember what all it was for but I know some of it was health insurance that was added on and I had thought the Mountain Pride fund covered. I think there was also like a parking ticket and maybe something else that I had to pay so I had a big bill from the first year that I actually just finished paying for. But I hadn't even realized I had a bill and then by the time I did there was like compounded interest and I don't really know if Mountain Pride was supposed to pay for that or not. But as far as tuition and fees, they covered all of that. (Bianca)

Samantha shared that she too left college after two years with a large bill to pay back to the university "I mean it is good in that they pay for so much but then they base it off of the EFC and it's so high. Like I am still in the hole \$18000 for two years."

By far the most vocal about their disappointment with the financial aspect of the scholarship was Charlie. Charlie had a high EFC and chose to attend a college that is well known for its low tuition. Those two factors ultimately resulted in virtually no financial assistance from Mountain Pride.

I really felt screwed by Mountain Pride. I was on the phone with my campus rep and I felt so screwed because they were doing a check-up call and I had just found out that they weren't covering anything. I really don't think that was the founders intent like "I want to give money to students who need it except if their EFC is too high?!?!?" I was really frustrated that the fact that I didn't qualify to receive money wasn't looked at first. I just remember thinking "This is why I put on a tie for the first time? So I could get something that wouldn't pay anything anyway?" (Charlie)

The financial challenges the participants faced while enrolled were areas of great emotional response for them while they completed the interview process. It was obvious from

several of the participants that they were still frustrated from the financial hardships they faced while Mountain Pride scholars.

### **Relationship with the gifting foundation**

The Mountain Pride Foundation employs scholarship representatives who are assigned a number of universities in a particular service area and stay in contact with the scholars attending those schools. Additionally, the Foundation requests that colleges and universities assign a “scholarship liaison” volunteer from the campus, to play the role of intermediary among the Foundation, the college or university and the student. The liaison is also asked to provide programming for the scholarship recipients.

The participants in this study were asked about their relationship with the Foundation or any individuals associated with the Foundation. Anthony shared that he remembered several Mountain Pride activities on the Summit University campus while he was enrolled.

They had a retreat every year and then they also set up other activities. There is a huge group at Summit University so we would hang out, maybe not as a Mountain Pride hosted activity but as a Mountain Pride supported activity. Then they always had the end of the year dinner. (Anthony)

David shared that while he knew about activities going on for Mountain Pride scholars, he chose not to participate due to a lack of connection

We had meetings where they would call us together all of the scholars. I don’t know, I mean I think they tried to make something of it but in the end I didn’t, like, feel any real connection with that group; I mean they just spent a lot of time talking. (David)

Bianca stated that her relationship with her Foundation campus representative was very positive for her.

I know I talked to them but I think more so it was them contacting me which I think is really good. I heard from my scholarship officer often and most of the time it was just a casual conversation like ‘how is everything going?’ and I thought that was really good and she was super sympathetic as to what I was going through. (Bianca)

Other participants could not recall having conversations with their scholarship representatives once they were on campus and several did not realize they actually had a campus liaison.

### **Roommates**

The Mountain Pride scholarship requires all first year students to live on campus. All of the participants lived with roommates for at least their first year of college. The impact on the participants who had roommates whose backgrounds were dissimilar from their own was notable as their relationships were explained. Kelly stated that her roommate came from a more affluent family who was providing her the financial means to attend college. Kelly's roommate's motivation for attending college was notably different than her own.

For me it was not an option [not attending college] and she might say the same thing too but her family was paying for her to go to college she had different motivations for sure. She wanted to be an engineer but she wanted to work from home. I never really understood her motivations actually. I mean she wanted to earn her degree but she wanted to work from home. Whereas for me it was if I don't do this I am going to fail my family, my siblings, I am the oldest, I would fail my grandpa who taught education which would be a slap in the face not to mention all the money I would owe...I knew I just couldn't drop out and come back and she had other options. (Kelly)

Other participants mentioned that their roommates' substance abuse prevented them from developing much of a relationship. Charlie's roommate, a fellow high school classmate, developed a marijuana habit after starting college. "...he was a bit of a hippy. He smoked a lot and he had friends who smoked a lot and so we didn't hang out much." Anthony found himself in a triple room at Summit University and watched one of his roommates' academic plans sidetracked by drug use.

He was a trust fund baby who spent all his money on drugs and was constantly high.... [he] would drop out of certain classes and he spent all of his time getting high. He would do his homework but you never actually saw him do it. He switched majors into something easier. (Anthony)

For Bianca, having a roommate was an overall positive experience but it also brought to light some of the things that Bianca was missing out on within her college experience, due to significant financial burdens. “She [roommate] was definitely more involved than me and if I hadn’t had some other issues going on I probably would have been more involved on campus.”

### **Relationship with family**

By far, the most complicated relationships the participants reported on were those involving family members. Many of the participants indicated that while they intrinsically knew their families were supportive of their college aspirations, family members did relatively little to demonstrate that support once the participant was attending college.

Kelly’s initial experience, moving onto campus, was supported by nearly her entire extended family. “We had everyone that day, aunts, uncles, my mom, siblings, my grandma...everyone.” As Kelly progressed through college, family support became “just emotional really.”

Anthony’s family was careful not to impart too much advice upon his college experience, “because my brother had already been to college, they were kinda just letting him guide me and show me, through his mistakes.” Anthony went on explain that while his family did assist him in moving onto campus, “that was it, I was on my own from there.” As time went on, Anthony’s family offered what support they were able. “They would offer by saying ‘Come down on the weekend and you can do your laundry and we’ll make you a homemade meal.’ Other than that it was, this is your life, these are your choices, make something of it.”

Kim’s family showed very little support for her education as she was largely on her own. She moved to college without help and as she continued at college “they weren’t there for me that much...I kept to myself a lot.”

Samantha felt, at least initially, a great amount of support from her family. “They helped me move up there. They started getting much less supportive after the first year though. But yeah, the first year they were like, just do your homework, you’re going to do fine, you’re doing really well.” That support began to decrease however, the longer Samantha was enrolled in college. “I did get phone calls and text from time to time but they were basically, ‘oh, we know you are busy with schoolwork, we’ll leave you alone.’ I did know they supported me but they didn’t call much.” By the time Samantha lost her scholarship her relationship with her family was so stained that she was temporarily homeless. Reflecting back and then considering her current situation, Samantha was able to explain the deterioration of her relationship with her parents was due to “Not being in college and then I started going down a path that I shouldn’t have and I am just now getting back on my feet.” At the time of her interview, Samantha was living at home and reflected on her family dynamics by saying “It has recently gotten better and I moved back home but it had gotten pretty bad.”

The issue of being a foster child was again at the heart of Bianca’s experiences related to her family relationships.

They were initially supportive. They didn’t help me like get my educational stuff together, I mean I have always been pretty independent with stuff like that but they did help me move into the dorms so you know, early on they were very supportive of me.  
(Bianca)

Like Samantha, Bianca also experienced deterioration in that support as she continued with her education.

We have a very complicated relationship. I mean in the beginning they were very helpful but then when I came back, I don’t know there was kind of a divide, you know like a ‘foster kid’ kind of thing. So they became completely unsupportive and then in the summer we kinda made up and I ended up renting their basement for a couple of months.  
(Bianca)

Charlie's mother made him feel very supported while he was enrolled but he did explain that "my mom is just the kind of person who is happy when I am happy." Charlie reflected on the fact that preparing for college was as much of a lesson for his mom as it was for him. "

It was that whole excitement thing of something new. Then there was the whole thing [from my mom] like 'Oh my gosh, my baby!' Everyone was excited and they didn't really give me expectations because I have really high expectations of myself anyway. Everyone was just like 'I'm so proud of you!' (Charlie)

As Charlie progressed at college, two pivotal things began to shape his experience, the lack of financial funding from the Mountain Pride scholarship and his coming out. "Then when things started getting sour [financially, with the scholarship] she was just there saying 'whatever you want to do is fine with me.' There was always support." When Charlie came out during college, his mother responded by saying:

'yeah, I know.' Ugh, why do moms always know!?! I think that caused our relationship to actually grow through that personal standpoint not from an academic standpoint. ...she would always say "I will be happy when you are happy." Her advice to me was always 'Do what you love, love what you do.'" (Charlie)

David reported that his foster father accompanied him to college orientation during the summer and "he made sure I had everything I needed, it was really great." As David continued pursuing his education his foster father's support did not waiver

...he gave me the car that I had won in the bet, he helped me pay for insurance as long as I was in school and me made sure my room was decked out, you know frig, supplies; I mean I had everything I needed. (David)

## **Stressors**

All of the participants indicated that they experienced significant amounts of stress in their daily lives at college. For some, that stress was academically based. Kelly cited the pressure of keeping up with others and not letting anyone down as the cause of her academic stress which also hinged on financial stress

Grades. It was always grades. I didn't ever want to slack off. Most of my friends were very graduate school minded and there was still a lot of comparison of grades going on. Then of course there were the GPA requirements for your major and you didn't want to let your faculty down either. That then ties into financial. I never wanted to get into a situation where I owed more than I could afford to pay. But I did graduate without loans and I am one of the few within my social group who can say that. (Kelly)

Academic stress was also an area of concern for Anthony who specifically mentioned tests as his greatest challenge.

Tests [caused the most stress] because I would know the material until the second I sat down and then everything seemed to fall out of my mind. Then after the test I would just freak out about it and then I would be worried about every other test along the way. (Anthony)

For other participants, reflecting on areas of stress brought back thoughts of complicated relationships and ineffective coping mechanisms. Samantha shared that her lack of time management skills was the cause of her stress as she "...would rather play video games or do something other than study or go to class. I would rather go out and party than do school work." This in turn, lead to habits that further challenged her academic success. "I was trying to go to school but ultimately I just went out and partied or drank and didn't really worry about it."

David cited stresses from a long distance girlfriend as one of his greatest challenges which had a direct link to his integration into college life and connection to campus.

My biggest problem was that I had a girlfriend going into college and so I was driving home every weekend and instead of spending that time studying I was having fun or I would squeeze all my fun into the weekdays and then on the weekends I was back here so I was definitely not studying, which is when most people do a lot of their studying. I was just always driving down to spend time with my girlfriend and then there was always fighting about me being there so that was my greatest stress. I was just dumb having a girlfriend.... I think had I maybe stayed up there and given it my all, maybe things could have been a lot different. (David)

### **Conscious reflection**

For the participants, discussing the greatest stresses of their college experiences led seamlessly into thoughts of reflection upon their entire experience as scholarship recipients. All of the participants in this study had been separated from the Mountain Pride Foundation for at least two years at the time of their interview, which had allowed them a period of conscious reflection of their lived experience.

### **Loss of the scholarship**

For some of the participants, the loss of the scholarship was not an instantaneous surprise. They had been told, often by the university they were attending as well as the foundation that they were on academic probation due to poor academic progress, at least one semester before their scholarship was revoked. Still, for the participants that had found themselves in that situation, changes in behavior and habits were seldom made.

For Samantha, the notice of academic probation was met with a casual belief that she could easily raise her GPA.

I wasn't super worried about it at the time, I was like, I can get my GPA up, it's not going to be that hard. Then my first semester my second year I must have really slept or something because I think my GPA was like a .6 or something. After that I kinda knew, I'm gonna lose it. (Samantha)

Rather than seek out the assistance of university support services, Samantha seemed to spiral downward once she was aware of her potential scholarship loss, a decision she shared with very apparent regret "I wish I would have changed what I was doing. I sort of did, but in the wrong ways. I definitely started partying more, doing other things more but I definitely wish I would have kicked it up."

David responded similarly when he was confronted by his poor academic progress through notification of probation. "First semester I didn't do too well and I just thought, OK, I'm



going to get it together. Second semester was alright.” Instead of continuing at White Cap University, David decided that it may be best for him to transfer to a local community college near his home.

I was I really thought I could do [community college] part time, figure out what I’m doing with myself and then pick it back up but then I stopped going to my [community college] classes because I just hated it and I realized, wow, I’m just not on the right track. I just realized that I was done with the scholarship. (David)

Anthony had a more difficult time facing the possibility that he was might to lose his scholarship. Once he was notified that he had been placed on academic probation, he shared that he had chosen to:

...block all the calls from them [the Foundation], lost all the emails. Basically tried to refuse all contact. Once again I was too prideful to admit that I needed help.... at that point I almost assumed that I was going to lose. I just didn’t want to take the heat so I just bottomed out. I didn’t communicate, didn’t accept anything from them; I ran away. (David)

For the other participants, their separation from the Mountain Pride Foundation was slightly more complicated. Bianca and Kelly lost their scholarships due to communication complications with the Foundation. For Kelly this was based on missing a required paperwork deadline while for Bianca, stopping out of college for too long resulted in the scholarship retraction. Both women were blindsided by the notification that they would not be receiving further funding from the Foundation. Their plans of action to continue their educations were notably different.

Kelly, distressed at the thought of having to take out a loan, sought out the assistance of Gear Up. The Gear Up program was able to provide her with a scholarship which allowed her to continue with her education and she was able to graduate in four years.

Bianca, already financially strapped even with the assistance of the scholarship, took additional time off from college in order to pay off debts and save up money before she was able

to return to school. At the time of her interview, Bianca indicated that she was in her last semester of course work and would graduate with a degree in social work the spring of 2013.

Charlie's experience was unique in that after having attended Peak University for a year and a half, realized that he did not want to earn a bachelor's degree, instead wanting to opt for massage therapy school. The Mountain Pride Scholarship's guidelines indicate that their funding is only for those pursuing a bachelor's degree so Charlie's funding was eliminated, something he still very vocally opposes.

Mountain Pride doesn't support trade school. When I called the Mountain Pride rep she actually discouraged me from doing it because the scholarship wouldn't cover that. It was all very frustrating and I don't really understand why Mountain Pride wouldn't help cover it because massage school is accredited but they just wouldn't. I really felt that because I wasn't going to follow the pretty picture on the wall then I wasn't worth their money. (Charlie)

### **Reactions of others**

Regardless of the reasons for their scholarship loss, all of the participants shared their experiences of loss with someone close to them. The most vivid and sometimes volatile reactions came from family members. Kim indicated that her family "was disappointed" but that they said little more than that about the loss. Anthony's mother however was much more emotional about her son's scholarship loss.

They were going to support me in everything I did but my mom was pretty upset about it. Pretty mad for a little bit and then she tried to help me out as much as she could. Unfortunately I am also a compulsive liar so for the next semester she thought I was still in school and I told her I was doing everything I needed to but finally Mountain Pride sent a letter to me, at home, and she opened it. She read all that stuff and I got a very, very angry call at that point. (Anthony)

Similarly, David chose to initially not be honest with his foster father regarding his scholarship loss.

I wasn't honest with my foster dad about how I was doing at school. I would just say that I was doing all right.... I think he eventually kind of knew. He would ask me "What about the Mountain Pride fund?" and I would always say "I don't know" or change the subject so I think he knew. But he was like, well, you have messed up the best thing you had going for you, now you have to work a lot harder for it. (David)

The loss of the scholarship for Samantha combined with the negative reaction of her parents led to a nearly out of control downward spiral.

My parents were pissed. They were so mad.... They had no idea what my grades were. I had to tell them something. They were not happy. So I ended up staying in Branson for a while longer, just staying with friends.... at first I was just staying on people's couches, I didn't have a job, I couldn't pay rent.... I ended up getting a job, finally. I had a drinking problem and I decided that I was tired of going out all the time so I just decided to work and I got two jobs and now I just work all the time. It's killing my body but it is better than drinking. (Samantha)

Reactions to the news of scholarship loss were much milder for Kelly and Charlie. Kelly stated that "My mom was confused by it but for everyone it was generally, well, as long as you don't owe the college money; as long as you don't have to take out loans, it's all fine." Charlie indicated that his parents were very supportive of his desire to change educational paths and viewed attending massage school positively.

My mom and my dad, both of them had the opinion, hey, go to school, see what you can make of it. So I just graduated last December so I am still learning what I want to do with it. But as far as my family, I think they thought going to massage school was even better than a four year degree because there will be jobs and you can actually use your degree, unlike so many other people who have four year degrees and don't have jobs within their fields. (Charlie)

Once again, the lasting effects of being a foster child impacted Bianca's view of her foster family's reaction to her scholarship loss. She had previously shared that her educational aspirations were not supported by her foster parents, particularly her foster mother so when

recounting the news of her scholarship loss, Bianca indicated that her foster parents may have found humor in her defeat.

I am sure my foster parents were just ecstatic; they probably thought it was funny. I mean we are OK now but I am sure at the time it was kind of a “ha” kind of thing for them. I didn’t really tell many people. I am kind of a private person when it comes to things like that. I am doing good now which, who knows, maybe is a result of me having to go out and do more on my own. (Bianca)

### **Final thoughts**

The participants were asked to share their final thoughts on being a Mountain Pride scholar. Their candid, honest answers serve as a springboard into the recommendations created by this study.

Kelly summarized her experience as “hard work pays off.”

I guess I learned to appreciate what I have and that hard work pays off. It is a lot of hard work, applying, interviews, SUCCESS, and being a scholar gives you a unique sense of responsibility. Once you are a Mountain Pride scholar, you kind of act differently. You want to give a good impression. They did really well, as far as SUCCESS goes, drilling into your head that you are a scholar and you need to act like one. There was definitely an expectation of behavior, and you wanted to act a certain way. I think it is really good; it makes me a better person; makes me motivated. Hard work pays off; I think that summarizes my experience with Mountain Pride as a whole. (Kelly)

Samantha shared her experience as advice for incoming Mountain Pride Scholars.

College is going to kick you in the teeth. At SUCCESS they did teach us some things about college but I wish they would have told us more. I know it’s not their job but I wish they would have provided more college prep. (Samantha)

In keeping with his general theme of excessive self-pride, Anthony offered the following advice as a summation of his Mountain Pride experience and advice to new scholars:

I learned that you can’t do it on your own. From being a scholar and losing it, I’ve learned, nothing in life is free. I have learned that multiple times but this time I lived it....Don’t put your pride on the line, it puts your future on the line. I wasn’t thinking as much about my future as I was about how I didn’t want to ask for help. Once again, if I

had just asked I would have still been in college and I wouldn't have to be paying for it now. (Anthony)

### **Summary**

Through data collection and analysis, the reoccurring, complex theme of financial opportunity not being able to override past history, the influence of others and the lack of preparation seemed to be the underlying current which caused the participants to lose their scholarships. Simply stated, the participants had too much to overcome to be able to maintain their scholarships. While a few were able to maintain enrollment or re-enter higher education, all have had very difficult roads to self-discovery and personal success.

## CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

### Introduction

Through this study I examined the lived experiences of former recipients of a private foundation scholarship and the subsequent loss of that scholarship.

The research questions for this study were:

1. What were the participants' experiences in college?
2. How do participants describe the experiences of losing their private foundation scholarship?
3. What were the participants' experiences with university support services while attending college with the assistance of the private foundation scholarship?
4. How do participants describe their lives since losing the scholarship?
5. How do the participants perceive the support and involvement, provided by their families, while they were in college?

Interview data were collected from seven participants who received private foundation scholarships but lost those scholarships due to a failure in academic progress, miscommunication with the gifting foundation or by choosing to leave higher education. Participants in the study were awarded a private foundation-based scholarship to provide for four years of higher education at the institution of their choice. Funding included tuition, fees, books, room and board, study abroad, and tutoring, beyond their Expected Family Contribution, as calculated from the FASFA.

The lived experiences related to scholarship award and losses were summarized in themes that emerged from an analysis of participant's words. The four major themes were educational aspirations, the college experience, scholarship opportunity, and conscious

reflection. While these themes represent certain commonalities of the participant's experiences, each participant had unique circumstances and perspectives which shaped their experiences as scholarship recipients.

### **Responding to the Research Questions**

This research study was guided by questions surrounding the lived experiences of former recipients of a private foundation scholarship and the subsequent loss of that scholarship.

#### **What were the participants' experiences in college?**

The college experience for the participants was very typical of first generation college students. The participants spoke of little family support, lack of college preparation, low college GPAs, low levels of campus involvement, and unmet financial need resulting in having to work numerous hours in addition to taking classes. Roommates, in some cases seemed to expose the difference in financial affluence between the scholar and other college students and for some of the participants, the personal habits and choices made by a roommate was a negative influence on the participant's success. Additionally participants spoke of the difficulty in navigating the college experience and feeling disconnected from faculty and advisors.

#### **How do participants describe the experience of losing their private foundation scholarship?**

Poor academic progress was the reason for the scholarship retraction for many of the participants. Low GPAs were the result of under-developed skills in areas such as time management, effective study habits and the importance of seeking out tutoring.

For two of the participants, communication challenges with the gifting foundation were the reason behind their scholarship loss. Both of these participants felt as though the communication challenges had been their responsibility although they maintain some disappointment over the lack of an appeal process from the gifting foundation.

The final participant lost his scholarship due to choosing to transfer to a trade school, an option which was not supported by this gifting foundation. This participants' frustration with the gifting foundation was very apparent during his interview.

All of the participants shared that the loss of their scholarship put some strains on their relationships with family, for some participants significantly more so than others. As time has passed since the scholarship loss, all of the participants reported repairing their familial relationships

**What were the participants' experiences with university support services while attending college with the assistance of the private foundation scholarship?**

While all of the participants reported that they knew university support services were available to them, very few took advantage of them. Some cited that it was an issue of pride in not to want to ask for help, others were convinced that they could be successful on their own. For those who did take advantage of success services on their campuses, participants reported that the services met their needs.

**How do participants describe their lives since losing the scholarship?**

Some of the participants chose to answer this question with one word responses of "boring," "regretful," and "difficult." Others took the question as their opportunity to offer advice to others who might one day be in the same situation. Participants reminisced on missed opportunities, wishing they would have tried harder, summarizing their experience as "everything happens for a reason" and "you can't do it on your own."



## **How do the students perceive the support and involvement, of their families, while the student was in college?**

While most of the participants' families helped them move to college, many reported that their family's support continued to decline as they continued their enrollment. Participants reported that a disconnect seemed to develop between themselves and their families, a point which is well supported in literature on first generation college students (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005).

The participants of this study responded to the research questions in ways that were very consistent based upon their backgrounds and demographics. Their challenges in higher education were largely based upon a lack of preparation and inability to effectively navigate the college experience, compounded by complex issues related to family dynamics and the imposter syndrome of being first generation college students.

The essence of this study centers on the issue of financial scholarship as a support mechanism for low-income, first generation college students. The findings indicate that while the Mountain Pride scholarship was perceived by the participants as an incredible gift which allowed them to pursue higher education, due to a lack of academic preparation, limited family support and/or narrow career aspirations, the financial assistance was not enough to guarantee their success in college. The implications section of this paper provides recommendations which may result in positive outcomes for future scholarship recipients from similar backgrounds.

## Connection to the Literature

The study's themes are interpreted and related back to the literature.

### **Literature related to the theme of educational aspirations.**

Research indicates that while it is not unusual for first generation students to “express high academic and occupational aspirations; often they do not demonstrate realism of choice or planning” (Vargas, 2004). This research point resonated multiple times throughout the participants' responses within this theme.

Participants in this study reported positive educational aspirations which had been supported largely by family members, including grandparents. The value of extended family members having attended college is supported by Chenoweth and Galliher, (2004) who found that if any member of the student's family attended college, he or she is more likely to attend. Participants also shared great aspirations as they made the decision to not only pursue a college degree but also proceed through the Mountain Pride Foundation's rigorous scholarship selection process. This self-motivation is largely tied to research which has “shown for first generation students, the motivation to enroll in college is a deliberate attempt to improve their social, economic, and occupational standing” (Ayala & Striplen, 2002, p. 57). Students are more likely to attend postsecondary education if they have confidence in their ability to succeed (Yang, 1981).

The responses by the participants regarding educational aspirations are not supported by literature which indicated that students with parents of low educational attainment (i.e. high school) were more likely to have modest aspirations about higher education, (Wilson & Wilson, 1992; Hossler & Stage 1992). Horn & Nunez (2000) found that in their study using nationally representative NCES data, over 40.0% of first generation college students aspired to earn a

Bachelor's degree and nearly 15.0% to an advanced degree, significantly lower than those students who were not first generation college students.

When it came time to choose a college, participants in this study did so using rather basic reasons of being able to attend a college close to home, with friends from high school. The reasons for their college choices, as explained by the participants, were not well aligned with the literature of Holland and Richards (1965) who were some of the first researchers to examine the issue of college choice. Holland and Richards had discovered that there were four main factors that influenced college choice, intellectual emphasis of the prospective campus, practical concerns (cost, distance from home) advice by others (parents, siblings, guidance counselors), and perceived social climate of the campus. For the participants of this study, their college choice decisions were based almost in what would be considered "practical concerns" according to Holland and Richards.

As stated in the methodology for this study, participants' universities of attendance were limited to the three public research universities within the selected states. These institutions all have admission requirements of high school GPAs of 3.0 or above and an ACT composite score requirement of 21 or higher. Therefore the Cho et al., (2008) study which found that low income, rural or female students are less likely to attend highly selective institutions or out of state institutions this did not seem to hold true for the participants of this study.

### **Literature related to the theme of the college experience.**

The behaviors exhibited by the participants while they were in college are well researched as resulting negatively on college retention. Numerous studies (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2008; Curtona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, & Russel, 1994; Pike & Kuh, 2005) identify campus engagement as one of the most important elements which supports student retention.

Participants indicated that they had very limited engagement at their school of choice and often found themselves leaving campus on the weekends, to spend time with family or friends. While Pike and Kuh (2005) strongly advocate the value of living on campus, for the participants this seemed to have little impact on their collegiate success.

Participants reported overall having little in common with their roommates and developing very few friendships outside of those with whom they went to high school. These experiences reported by the participants align closely with the writings of Billson and Terry (1982) in which they found first generation college students may leave the university because of identity dissonance since they may feel like outsiders within the university. First generation college students are less likely to be integrated into the university because they are “less likely to live on campus, be involved in campus organizations, meet or pursue their most important friendships on campus, or work on campus” (Billson & Terry).

When it came to academics, none of the participants of this study indicated participating in any sort of first-year transition course. According to Tinto, what may have made a difference in the participants’ academic success, based on his theory of student departure, would have been “relevant programming, such as first-year experiences, ingrained within the institution’s structure (Tinto, 1988).

Additionally, in order to be successful in the college classroom, proper high school preparation is necessary. First generation college students are more likely to have received poor academic preparation in pre-college years (Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000). Warburton et al. (2001) found that first generation students were less likely to have taken advanced course work in high school, compared with non-first generation students. These points were acknowledged

by the participants of this study who indicated they were not academically prepared for the rigors of the academics in college.

In discussing their relationship with faculty, participants were largely complimentary of their faculty but indicated that they had not reached out to them in a significant way. None of the participants indicated they felt a personal connection with their advisors and some actually stated that they had no idea who their advisor had been. This general apathy regarding faculty by first generation college students is supported by the literature (Pascarella et al., 2004) as this group of students are more likely to view faculty as unsupportive or unconcerned about them and are more likely to report having experienced discrimination on campus. In terms of insuring the collegiate success of first generation college students, Heisserer and Parette (2002) looked into the retention of at-risk students and declared that the “single most important factor” for retention of these students is advising them on a regular basis, thereby showing them they are “cared for” by the college and increasing their sense of institutional fit.

While enrolled in college, participants indicated that they received limited emotion support from their families and none of the participants indicated that their families were able to provide financial support while they were enrolled. Some of the participants indicated that their relationships with their families suffered while in college. These are rather typical experiences of first generation college students which are supported heavily in there literature. Parents who have little or no college experience may not recognize the benefits of higher education or may not believe they can afford to pay for college, thus becoming non-supportive or even obstructive (Grotsky & Jones, 2004; Vargas, 2004). Additionally, Striplin (1999) found that discouraging messages from parents can lead to alienation from family support.

The participants overall experiences related to the theme of *The College Experience* are grounded in literature and summarized well by Tinto's student departure theory. In his theory, Tinto identified three main reasons for student departure: academic difficulties, inability of the individual to resolve their educational and occupational goals and failure to become incorporated in the intellectual and social life of the institution (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). The participants of this study experienced all three of these reasons for departure to some extent.

### **Literature related to the theme of scholarship opportunity.**

Participants in the study were largely pleased with the financial support provided to them by the gifting foundation. This expression of gratitude may be in part related to the fact that none of the participants indicated that they received any financial assistance from family, consistent with the literature which indicates "first generation low-income students are less likely to receive financial support from their parents (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Still, many of the participants shared that they worked a great deal to provide for themselves in ways the scholarship did not. Some participants indicated that finances were some of their greatest stressors while in college. When comparing those responses to the literature, one finds that financial strain may contribute to attrition rates. First generation college students are twice as likely to worry about financing college as their later-generation peers (Saenz, Hurtando, Barerra, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007).

While there is little research involving student financial aid provided by private foundation scholarships, what has been identified are the overriding themes by which foundations choose to select their scholars and "prevailing objectives including promoting participation in specific career fields, leadership, and public service, among others" (Ilchman, Ilchman, & Tolar, 2004, p. 10). The Mountain Pride scholarship closely mirrors these prevailing

objectives with themes of character, passion for success, strong work ethic and a desire to give back to the community.

The uniqueness of scholarships such as Mountain Pride is complex in that the scholarship is awarded based on both merit and need. Research regarding the connection between scholarships and retention indicates that students earning academic merit scholarships were found to have relatively low attrition rates compared to those students who received need based aid (Stampen & Cabrera, 1988). Relating this research to scholarships such as Mountain Pride is inconclusive.

### **Literature related to conscious reflection.**

When considering responses provided by the participants as they reflected on their experiences as previous Mountain Pride scholars, the underlying theme of resilience resounded through their responses. Specifically, their responses demonstrated educational resilience, which identifies "students, who despite economic, cultural, and social barriers still succeed at high levels" (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004, p. 152).

Still, it is important to acknowledge that there is a body of research focused on students such as those who receive the Mountain Pride scholarship and in turn leave higher education. It is known that first generation college students are almost three times as likely to leave their first institution of attendance without returning compared to non-first-generation students (Warburton et al., 2001). Additionally it is sometimes assumed that students who did not attain a degree are somehow less motivated or skilled and failed to recognize the value of a college education however Tinto pointed out that only 15-25% of students leave higher education because of academic reasons (1993).

Within the theme of *Conscious Reflection*, the research connection for this study relates most prevalently to resistance. There has been significant research conducted by Bonnie Benard surrounding the topic of resilience among children. Benard (1991) has found that resiliency is a quality in children who, though exposed to significant stress and adversity in their lives, do not succumb to failure. Additionally, Benard was able to identify certain common qualities or characteristics in resilient youth. These youth possessed social competence, problem-solving skills, critical consciousness, autonomy, and a sense of purpose. From their detailed descriptions of their families and complex background to their reflections on the loss of their scholarships and lessons learned from that experience, the participants of this study demonstrated with almost every response, an incomparable level of resilience. Some had overcome almost unimaginable circumstances in order to even attend college and while for some participants, the loss of scholarship was viewed as a personal setback, it was also indicated as an opportunity for reflection, refocus and growth, nonetheless.

Benard (1993) found in her research that resilient youth were optimistic about their futures, therefore allowing them to gain some sort of control over their environment. Supporting those findings, Goleman (1995) identified common traits that exist through emotional intelligence and resiliency characteristics including the ability to delay gratification, a positive outlook on life, and the belief that one has the ability to change their personal situation. Goleman believed that resilient individuals usually recovered after a negative or stressful experience and were typically optimistic and action oriented which was indicated by the participants of this study in multiple ways and reflected in their responses to the research questions.



## **Implications of the Findings**

Findings of this study can help inform students and families as they consider the possibility of pursuing a college education, specifically with the assistance of somewhat alternative funding options. Additionally, this study may provide some insights for use by college faculty and student support staff, low income students and private foundations.

### **Implications College Faculty and Staff**

It was notable that for participants who indicated they had reached out to their faculty members that those interactions were largely positive. Conversely, the lack of connection between the participants and their college advisors was noted. Much has been published on the value of strong advising as both a persistence and retention tool (Kuh, 2008; Haverly, 1999), none of the participants indicated that they had developed meaningful relationships with their college advisor.

The debate on college campuses as to the value of “Intro to College” type courses is ongoing. What is generally not up for debate is the overall lack of collegiate academic preparation of high school students. The participants in this study were no different in that many disclosed they were not adequately prepared for the academic rigors of college and additionally they self-identified as missing the basic skills which are often taught in “Intro to College” type courses. None of the participants were able to recall attending a college transition course while enrolled however several of the participants indicated that such a course may have proven beneficial to them.

### **Implications for Low-Income Students**

As a long time college educator, I was struck by participants’ lack of campus connection. There seemed to be limited understanding on the part of most participants regarding the value of

on-campus involvement, overridden by the participants desire to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” and conquer college on their own which in turn lead to their limited use of university success services.

Whether because of pride, blind determination or a lack of knowledge, the participants of this study found collegiate success to be an arduous, near impossible task. Therefore it is essential that students such as those covered by private foundation scholarships be willing to reach out for help and develop the skills necessary to navigate the collegiate experience. This was one area where many of the participants indicated that they failed take advantage of their campus offerings. While they claimed to have knowledge of the student support services offered on their campuses, few took advantage of them.

While participants shared that applying for the Mountain Pride scholarship was a demanding task and the interview process was incredibly intimidating, they agreed that earning the scholarship was a positive, life changing event. The participants of this study suggested that future applicants keep in mind that the end result is well worth the effort exerted through the selection process.

### **Implications for Foundations**

I had served as a Mountain Peak campus liaison for a number of years before completing this study. The job was entirely volunteer, loosely guided, and I believe, minimally effective, based on the fact that the student’s on campus interaction with me was also completely voluntary. The gifting foundation did provide a generous stipend for programmatic efforts and the Mountain Peak Scholarship Representatives came to campus a few of times each year and called for “mandatory” meetings for all of the scholarship recipients.

After completing this study and considering the insight provided by the participants as well as the influence of my own experiences, recommendations to the foundation include a greater investment in the scholarship recipients, as well as those in the campus liaison positions. Only some of the participants indicated they knew their scholarship representative and/or liaison. In order to prevent miscommunications with scholarship recipients, these relationships need to be well established and maintained.

Additionally, gifting foundations have the chance to influence student retention and persistence rates. Beginning with transition programs and possibly including on-line modules or in-services, gifting foundations must consider educating their recipients on the life skills that may ensure their academic success such as time management, study skills or the value of supplemental instruction.

The foundation also has an opportunity to develop itself as an educational entity for its scholars and their families, which in turn may increase retention and graduation rates. By attempting to educate the scholar and their families about the importance of family support, the unique challenges faced by all family members when a child attends college and the transitional issues that may be experienced by the scholar themselves, the foundation prevent some of the disconnect first generation college students often feel with their family of origin. It may be prudent for these meetings to take place in the scholars' own homes, allowing for maximum participation by family members.

Gifting foundations, such as Mountain Pride, have the opportunity not only to change the life of a scholarship recipient but their entire family and social group. Working with recipients who are at great risk of not finishing college requires an extensive understanding of the complex issues which accompany these students and may impede their success.

At the same time, the value of private foundation scholarships for low income students with average grades and test scores cannot be overlooked. In a pie graph of financial aid funding sources they are but merely a sliver however for the students they support, these foundation scholarships potentially mean the difference between an individual entering the work force with a high school diploma and a college degree.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Findings from my study demonstrate the need for further research. I suggest two topics that could expand my study.

First, research is needed to further understand the role of private foundation scholarships as support mechanisms for student success. Such a study could examine student success among a variety of private foundations that provide scholarships and supply support staff for recipients.

Second, there is a need to study private foundation scholars who all attend the same university and compare them to a similar sized subset of private foundation scholarship recipients at another university. For example, the Mountain Pride Foundation scholarship has over 100 scholars at large, metropolitan, private college. Foundation scholars who attend that institution have a six year graduation rate of 85%. This is 12% higher than a nearby the state university with 90 scholars. Further study is necessary to better understand the factors present at particular colleges and universities that positively impact scholar success rates as well as the value of campus-hosted student success programs for at-risk scholarship recipients.

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