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DISSERTATION

UPON ENTERING COLLEGE: FIRST SEMESTER EXPERIENCES OF  
FIRST-GENERATION, RURAL STUDENTS FROM AGRICULTURAL FAMILIES

Submitted by

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School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

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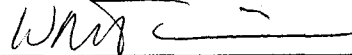
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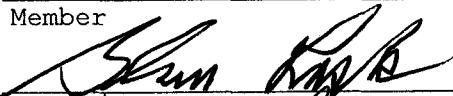
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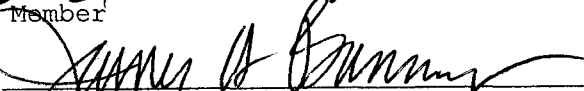
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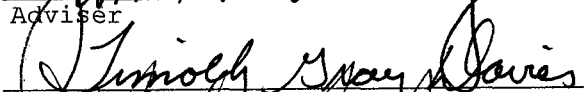
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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### UPON ENTERING COLLEGE: FIRST SEMESTER EXPERIENCES OF FIRST- GENERATION, RURAL, STUDENTS FROM AGRICULTURAL FAMILIES

First-generation and rural college students are considered by many retention theorists and practitioners to be an at-risk population. This study examined the details of the first semester in postsecondary education from the perspective of a group of students who met the demographic criteria of being first-generation to go to college, from rural geographical areas, and from agricultural backgrounds. It focused on the first semester experience, during its occurrence, and how six students of this specific population viewed that phenomenon. A secondary objective was to determine if the understandings that issued from the research could form a foundation from which first semester retention strategies for this particular population could be configured.

Information about the essence of the first semester emerged from the responses of the participants to four primary research questions in a structured interview format. A qualitative, phenomenological methodology

provided the empirical approach used to gain an understanding of this multi-faceted experience for this group. Within-case and cross-case analyses were performed on the data produced by the interview transcripts.

The study verified that first-generation and rural college students face difficulties in the transition to college that can be related to these demographic characteristics, such as lack of knowledge of campus culture, class size, academic expectations, and academic rigor. The analysis produced a unique set of findings regarding the status of agricultural background. These findings suggest that an agricultural background may compound the sense of different-ness encountered by first-generation and rural freshman when that heritage is added to the other two. Additionally, positive aspects of an agricultural background (i.e. self-esteem, courage, a history of hard work) may serve to mitigate some of the contrary factors. Recommendations include potential retention programs for institutions and suggestions for further research.

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I would like to gratefully acknowledge the members of my committee: Dr. James Banning, Dr. Timothy Davies, Dr. Glen Rask, and Dr. William Timpson. Their dedication, wisdom, and willingness to share information and advice was prevalent throughout the process. A word about their dedication: The defense meeting for this dissertation was scheduled for 8:00 AM on March 18, 2003. Many will remember that date in Fort Collins history for the heaviest accumulated snowfall on record since 1913. Although the CSU campus was practically deserted, many streets and roads were closed, and the campus eventually suspended operations for three days, every member of the committee was present for the defense. That's dedication.

Dr. Gene Gloeckner's contribution to the creation, maintenance, and guidance of the Grand Junction cohort operation is greatly appreciated. Additionally, the friends and colleagues of the Grand Junction cohort provided timely encouragement. I would also like to acknowledge the support and assistance of the Mesa State College Academic Services team; without their ability to be self-managed, this endeavor would not have been possible.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to three families. My wife Diane, and daughters Eve and Gabrielle have been models of patience and understanding through the long years of this doctoral journey. I drew strength and inspiration from them from beginning to end.

Edward and Marian Schutz, my parents, instilled a passion for learning, understanding of others, and a religious faith that channeled my ambition toward an ever-widening circle of discovery.

Walter and Genevieve Golec, my wife's parents, were unwavering in their support of my scholarly endeavors.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Research Problem Statement and Context**

A recognizable regimen of generally accepted strategies exist to attract, retain, and graduate students in America's postsecondary institutions. Changing national demographics and a societal shift toward lifelong learning have propelled our nation's colleges and universities to rethink those strategies, and invent new ones, to meet the needs of students from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. These approaches do not replace, but rather add to, those that are more conventional in nature. For example, freshman orientations and introductory seminars today are as likely to be designed for specific ethnic or racial groups, as they are to the general freshman population. The belief is that groups of students who share distinct characteristics have similar needs and respond more favorably to orientation and retention programs that are designed with these students in mind. Ethnic cultures and socioeconomic status are but a few of the defining categories that drive these distinctive

orientation programs (Campos, 2001; McKnight, 1996; Anderson, 1985).

One group of postsecondary freshmen, however, has been neglected in the movement to customize and choreograph programs designed to enhance the freshman year experience. Daughters of ranchers, sons of farmers, children of agricultural heritage are expected to engage in a sort of self-directed mainstreaming. Do they? Can they? Are the children of rural, agricultural parents, who are the first in their families to aspire to a college degree, able to adjust, adapt, and blend in with the culture of their chosen college or university? Are they indeed an at-risk population? According to a recent longitudinal study for the National Center for Educational Statistics (Nunez & Cucaro-Alamin, 1998), when the variable of first-generation was isolated only 57% of first-generation postsecondary students persisted in college versus 73% of their non-first-generation peers. Being rural has also been associated with a greater propensity toward dropping out than is typical of non-rural students (Brown, 1985; Elliott, 1989).

Student retention theories abound (Tinto, 1993; McKnight, 1996; Padron, 1992; Anderson, 1985). The literature is replete with current studies of *first-*

*generation college students* and their strengths and weaknesses relative to the transition to higher education (Billson & Terry, 1982; Fallon, 1997; Hsiao, 1992). Similarly, much has been written about the possible impact of racial and ethnic background on the successful acculturation of college freshmen. Colleges and universities place significant resources in the hands of academic and student affairs personnel in their quest to increase the satisfaction and performance level of their first-time freshmen who have disabilities, low high school grade point averages, or who are intending to major in disciplines that are non-traditional to their gender. Some researchers have concentrated on freshmen who come from *rural* geographical areas, or who are expecting to pursue a degree in agriculture. The combination of all three characteristics (a) first-generation-college, (b) rural students, (c) of agriculturally employed parents, however, rarely shows up in the literature. This dissertation focuses on the first semester experiences of this particular group of freshmen with respect to their first semester in higher education.

### *Purpose Statement*

The purpose of this study is to discover the experiences and uncover the ways in which these students view and engage their journey into the world of higher education. A qualitative phenomenological study provided the methodology of inquiry that resulted in a recounting of emergent themes or patterns that are indicative of the participants' first semester affective, cognitive, academic, vocational, and philosophical experiences. It was anticipated that, through intensive interviewing and constant member checks, themes would emerge and provide a holistic understanding of the participants' first semester -- by virtue of their distinct perspective(s). A formative and substantive comprehension about first-generation, rural students from agricultural families should issued from the study and facilitated a foundation from which a set of strategies for first semester retention activities were formulated.

### *Research Questions*

One primary question guided the research:

1. What is the essence of the first semester

experience for these first-generation college students from rural areas and agricultural backgrounds?

Subquestions included:

- 1a. What people and things influenced the students' decision to go to college?
- 1b. When was the decision made to go to college?
- 1c. Was the first semester the same or different from what the students expected?
- 1d. What is the meaning of the first semester, in the words of the participants?

#### *Definitions of Terms*

Agricultural Background: An agricultural background relates to families of students who are engaged and otherwise involved with the production of crops or livestock. Farms, ranches, and orchards are typical environments. Participants in the study are individuals, and members of families, who are engaged in agricultural industries, or were at the time of the student's enrollment in the first semester of higher education. Family ownership of the agricultural enterprise was not necessary for participation and

children of parents who work for wages in agricultural environments are included in this definition.

First-Generation Students: Of the several definitions used in the literature to describe first-generation college students, the most succinct simply states that the student must be [a member of ]first generation in his or her family to attend college (Hellman & Harbeck, 1997; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Terenzini, 1996; Ting, 1998)

First-Semester: The first semester in a postsecondary institution.

Phenomenology: According to Cresswell, "This type of study describes the meaning of experiences of a phenomenon (or topic or concept) for several individuals. In this study, the researcher reduces the experiences to a central meaning or the 'essence' of the experience (Moustakas, 1994 cited in Cresswell, 1998, p.236).

Rural: Conceptualizations of what comprises rural are many and varied. Stern (1994) expresses dismay with regard to the difficulty of defining rural: "Few issues bedevil analysts and planners concerned with rural education more than the question of what actually constitutes rural" (p.4). Campos

(2001) utilized the United States Bureau of the Census and the Encyclopaedia of Education to define rural students "...as individuals who were raised in places of no more than 2,500 individuals, individuals raised in 'small, sparsely settled relatively homogeneous populations that engage primarily in agriculture' (Deighton, 1971, p.573, in Campos, 2001), or individuals who were raised in metro counties that heavily rely on the agricultural economy" (p.6). This dissertation also utilized the Goldsmith Rural Modification model that defines rural as a property of counties that are considered to contain population areas that are a significant distance from an urban center.

Postsecondary: This term refers to colleges and universities; the academy; education beyond secondary (high) school.

### *Delimitations and Limitations*

A small, public, liberal arts college in a Western state provided the site for the study. Only students of that institution who meet the criteria of first-generation, rural, from agricultural backgrounds were interviewed. It was anticipated that parents, siblings, and high school

counselors of these students might become participants if it became necessary for an understanding of the essence of the phenomenon; these additional participants were eventually deemed to be unnecessary for the scope of this study.

Although it is believed that the substantive understanding of the phenomenon that was generated by this study should be replicable by other studies performed with students of similar socio-demographic characteristics at other colleges and universities, it is possible that the selected site is somewhat unique because of its proximity to rural, agricultural communities. Generalizability of the findings may be limited accordingly.

The primary researcher is an administrator and adjunct professor of management at the study site. As such, the primary researcher may have known, and/or been known by, some of the participants. This proved not to be the case.

#### *Significance of the Study*

A formative sense of the phenomenon that explains and thereby enhances the understanding of a specific segment of first-time college students, in their all-important first semester, can be important to the attempt to increase overall retention in colleges and universities. The

financial and human resources that postsecondary institutions dedicate to student retention is considerable. The larger population that will be studied in this research (first-generation and rural) has been examined principally with respect to academic achievement, aspirations toward higher educational attainment, social and structural integration, and persistence through the use of quantitative comparison studies (i.e. first-generation v.s. non-first generation persistence rates) (Ting, 1998; Marine, 1995; Nunez & Cucarro-Alamin, 1998). Comparison studies based upon quantitative research provide college retention practitioners with valuable knowledge about the differences between several groups. However, college personnel who are charged with retention responsibilities are frequently given those duties *in addition to* an already full job description and do not always have access to the complete findings of the studies, or the time to examine them. Consequently, the inclination may be to merely note that there are differences between groups of freshmen, and to intensify the typical orientation and intervention activities that are used for all freshmen with the expectation that the accretion of the activity will benefit all students alike. The use of a qualitative phenomenological approach allowed the participants to

direct the formation of a true, potentially shared, understanding of this event. Vivid, deep descriptions of the students' perceptions as they experience their first semester will add personal affective and cognitive accounts to the scholarly body of knowledge about this group. The increased awareness of the underlying conceptualizations of this specific population should enable scholars to better understand their motives and behaviors, while empowering practitioners to design customized orientation and retention programs.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this study can be found in its intent to discover and comprehend the experiences and college-going behaviors of first semester freshmen *from agricultural backgrounds*. The social migration of urban and metropolitan families to suburban areas, and the suburban-to-exurban drift to rural areas has created a dichotomy of sorts between what is rural, and what is agricultural. The former is no longer necessarily synonymous with the latter. That is, what is rural is not necessarily agricultural. The current literature has only begun to delineate the recent distinctions between the two. Therefore, today's college freshmen who are rural do not necessarily have familial ties to agricultural industries, lifestyles, and cultures. Retention programs designed for

rural and first-generation students may not be effective in their attempt to meet the needs of freshmen who are from agricultural backgrounds, even though they possess the other two demographic characteristics.

Additionally, it is anticipated that postsecondary administrators who enact retention policy will find value in the design of distinct programs that are geared toward first-generation, rural, agriculturally-grounded students just as they do with programs for racial or ethnic minority populations.

#### *Researcher's Perspective*

As the researcher, I have several dispositions that are noteworthy to an understanding of the motivation, and possible bias of this study. My own background mirrors the characteristics of the students who will participate in this project. It is neither ironic nor serendipitous, but rather, intentional that this particular demographic group would become the focus of this discourse of student persistence and postsecondary academic success.

Many people accept the anecdotal folk wisdom that members of ranching and farming cultures, by virtue of their environment and occupations, are decidedly independent and self-sufficient. If that is the case, some

first semester students in this category may not accept advice automatically, may be reluctant to admit ignorance, and may be less than eager to place themselves in positions where they might experience cognitive dissonance in situations where an *external* locus of control might be more conducive to success. They are also becoming increasingly insulated from the mainstream culture due to their traditional reliance upon the land and their knowledge of animal husbandry and crop production for occupational and multi-generational success. This lifestyle was considered the norm during most of the history of the United States. Today, the overwhelming majority of Americans are engaged in occupations and lifestyles that are unquestionably non-agricultural. Yet, the need for children of agricultural families to engage in higher education has never been greater. The positive, significant correlation between the level of educational attainment and socio-economic status is the same for all in the modern, globally-oriented society. Whether or not they return to the agricultural lifestyle after college, these Americans share the same need for advanced education as their peers. The literature indicates that at least due to their 1<sup>st</sup> generation, rural status they may be less prepared, and certainly are less knowledgeable about, the strategies necessary for gaining

access to and being successful in the postsecondary arena (Elliott, 1989; Anderson, 1985; Terenzini, 1995; Pratt & Skaggs, 1989).

Additionally, my practice in both the proprietary and public sectors of higher education, as well as experience with behavioral science applications in business (human resource management), combine to create a personal, marked propensity toward naturalistic research which is based on outcomes that may be immediately applicable upon discovery.

**CHAPTER 2**  
**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Introduction**

Are certain post-secondary students more prone to becoming attrition statistics than others? The literature on college student retention and persistence is vast with respect to studies that examine these concepts from an aggregate perspective (all American postsecondary students). There also exists a wealth of more specific, available research about the success rates of students who are members of ethnic and racial minority groups, and their college experiences. Theorists often utilize the data from longitudinal studies about college students, whether aggregate or minority, to determine the degree to which those students successfully enter and complete their program of study in the higher education environment.

Tinto (1993) estimated from a 1992 ACT study, and extrapolated data from other sources on institutional leaving, that 30% of all students of four-year public colleges and universities and 54.2% of those attending two-year public institutions did not enter their second year consecutively after their first. Is this attrition rate significant? Additionally, is it worthwhile to isolate certain cohorts of first-semester students from the total,

according to their collective characteristics, and endeavor to determine ways in which their respective retention rate might be enhanced? Tinto reminds us that aggregate studies of student departure are generally only useful in the determination of the attrition rate in its entirety. Whereas, "In many respects, departure is a highly idiosyncratic event, one that can be fully understood only by referring to the understandings and experiences of each and every person who departs" (p.37). Personal dispositions of students, their interactions within the school, and the external forces which impact their higher education experience are all quite relevant to their quest for success (1993). The Mexican saying "Cada cabeza es un mundo," comes to mind: Each person has his own way of thinking. And so it is with first-time freshmen.

According to McNight (1996), the difficulty of making the transition from high school to the world of postsecondary education is something that confronts all students to a greater or lesser degree. For some, the progression is somewhat effortless. For others, the ability to balance freedom and responsibility, finding comfort in a strange environment, and fitting in with an alien culture pose significant challenges. Trent (in Anderson, 1985) suggests that completing institutional procedures, selecting appropriate courses, reading and analyzing college textbooks, achieving satisfactory grades on complex examinations, completing library research

assignments, and demonstrating ability, motivation, and time management by performing in laboratories and studios are but a few of the "forces mitigating against achievement and persistence" (p.46).

It is not completely clear whether rural, first-generation college students from agricultural backgrounds are at greater risk of becoming attrition statistics than are their counterparts who do not possess the same demographic characteristics. The following discussion of the literature on each of these personal variables will at least aid in our understanding of the frameworks and conditions upon which members of this cohort experience the postsecondary event.

### **Characteristics**

#### *Rural*

Through the use of the resources such as the United States Bureau of the Census and the Encyclopaedia of Education, Campos (2001) defines rural students "...as individuals who were raised in places of no more than 2,500 individuals, individuals raised in 'small, sparsely settled relatively homogeneous populations that engage primarily in agriculture' (Deighton, 1971, p.573, in Campos, 2001), or individuals who were raised in metro counties that heavily rely on the agricultural economy" (p.6). To further explicate what comprises rural, Insko (1991) asserted in a

presentation to the National Conference on Rural Adult Education Initiatives that of the twenty states west of the Mississippi, each square mile contains only twelve or fewer people. This expanded definition will suffice for the purposes of this paper.

To the extent that all first-time college students are influenced in their selection of the higher education option by particular factors, Anderson (1985) offers the following list of external and internal forces that are abridged for this dissertation:

1. Parents who value higher education
2. Peers from similar SES (socio-economic status) who also plan to attend college
3. Cultural values that emphasize learning
4. Information on college opportunities that explains admissions, financial aid, programs of study etc.
5. Encouragement from teachers and counselors
6. Exposure to college educated people
7. Appropriate academic skills and abilities
8. Career aspirations that include college
9. Self-confidence to accept the challenge
10. Enjoyment of learning

Although not comprehensive, this abbreviated inventory is helpful in establishing baseline ambient factors from which a discussion of any group of high school or first-time

college students can be conveniently analyzed. McCracken and Barcinas (1989) quantitatively studied public, urban and rural 12<sup>th</sup> grade students from 71 Ohio secondary schools in order to describe educational and occupational aspirations, and to identify any differences between the urban and rural students. In this study, the urban students had higher educational and occupational aspirations even though the rural schools emphasized college preparatory programs. It was also found that parents had a significant influence on the educational and occupational aspirations of both urban and rural students. In terms of academic ability, it is interesting to note that the mean grade point average of the rural students was higher than that of their urban counterparts, and that the rural student enrollment in academic versus vocational programs exceeded the urban population by 8%. Parents of rural students with four or more years of college education totaled approximately 12% while the parents of urban students with similar education totaled about 34%. It is perhaps not surprising then, that about 74% of the urban parents expected their offspring to attend college compared to nearly 61% of the rural parents. Through the use of 1977-1989 data obtained from the Monitoring the Future Project, Van Hook (1993) determined

that rural high school seniors had lower higher education aspirations than their urban peers with respect to completion of a four year degree program. Plans to attend two-year or vocational programs were about the same for both groups. With graduate school aspirations included in the total mix, rural students fell behind urban students 58.2% to 77.3% in their desire to engage in higher education. Rural students in this study showed lower levels of academic self-confidence than their counterparts in larger population centers. Another study, that drew data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 indicated that living in a rural environment negatively impacts student expectations for higher education without regard for high school influences or student SES (Marine, 1995).

Decrying the propensity of researchers to use statistically based instruments to draw comparisons between rural and urban youth with respect to higher education, Edington and Koehler (1987) suggested that "...rural-urban might be an inappropriate dichotomy" (p.2). Edington and Koehler posit that urban settings are considered to be diverse and rural settings are not. In an attempt to dispel this myth, they cite the differences between children of Black sharecroppers, Kansas wheat farmers, relocated urbanites,

Native Americans, and others. So that the comparisons can be more accurate, the researchers recommended that the origins and life conditions of all those studied should be held constant.

In a departure from the more typical theory-driven research on rural college student persistence, Elliott (1989) engaged in an inductive, qualitative study of rural college students that "...produced three higher order conceptualizations". Her work in this area uncovered student themes of "back home" and "the new world" that students use to interpret stimuli in the college environment (p. 183). The schema that rural students employ with reference to the back home/new world conditions generally result in a "balancing act" to find their place in the college environment "...which is perceived to be large, complex, and indifferent" (p. 184). Additional factors affecting the drop out rate of rural college students according to Brown (1985) can be attributed to low economic status, low family expectations, and geographic isolation. McGrath (2001), however, contends that farm families (a subgroup of "rural") should not be considered to belong to a lower SES than families of more populated areas because of the social resources of the farm parents.

Marine (1996) surveyed rural high school principals and college admission counselors and found that the decisions made by many rural high school students regarding the choice of higher education were made "...without sufficient professional assistance" and that there is a perception that rural students do not recognize the value of higher education (p. 81). Additionally, many rural students may lack the financial resources and the information about financial aid that is necessary for higher education attainment.

#### *First-Generation College Students*

Of the several definitions used in the literature to describe first-generation college students, the most succinct simply states that the student must be the first in his or her family to attend college (Hellman & Harbeck, 1997; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Terenzini, 1996; Ting, 1998).

According to the work of Nunez and Cucaro-Alamin (1998) statistics from the National Center for Education Statistics Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study suggest that first-generation students possessed particular, distinguishing characteristics. Some of those attributes follow:

1. First-generation students were more likely to be older, have lower incomes, be married and have dependents than their non-first generation peers.

2. First-generation students were more likely to enroll in postsecondary education part-time, and to attend public 2-year institutions; private, for-profit institutions; and other less than four-year institutions than their non-first-generation counterparts.
3. First-generation students persisted in postsecondary education and attained credentials at lower rates than their non-first-generation counterparts.
4. Even when controlling for many of the characteristics that distinguished them from their peers, such as socioeconomic status, institution type, and attendance status, first-generation student status still had a negative effect on persistence and attainment (p. iii, iv)

Some of these findings have been corroborated and explained in independent studies. For example, regarding demographics, Inman and Mayes (1999) found in a recent study that community college, first-generation students tend to be older and female. It may be that members of this group of students realize after they have been in the work force for a while that higher education has greater value for them than it did in high school. First generation

students of all ages are more likely to live off campus with their families while non-first generation students more often live in campus residence halls (Billson & Terry, 1982). Also, these students appear to be very constrained by the location of the postsecondary institution. If the location is correct, they will attend. If not, they will not. Additionally, they are more interested in attaining a degree than they were in using their community college experience to enhance their grade point average in order to facilitate transfer to a four-year school (Inman & Mays, 1999)

Although Pratt and Skaggs (1989) found no appreciable differences between first-generation students and their counterparts in goal commitment, self-rated academic ability, or predisposition to academic or social integration, they did find that they have stronger commitment to their institutions than their non-first peers. Terenzini (1995) asserts that first-generation students are less likely to have positive experiences when away from the classroom. They work more hours and are not as socially integrated as their non-first generation peers. Non-first generation students are more likely to attend workshops, perceive faculty as being student-oriented, and to be inspired by their friends and family to succeed in

college than first-generation students (p. 13). Hsiao (1992) suggests that family and friends of first-generation students may be supportive or obstructionist with respect to college success due to the first-generation student's departure from the established pattern of life.

Self-efficacy, refers in part to an individual's belief in his or her ability to be effective in accomplishing goals, especially those that are perceived to be difficult and challenging. First-generation students often exhibit low levels of self-efficacy which may negatively impact performance and persistence in higher education (1982). In fact, Hellman and Harbeck ((1997) suggest that some first-generation students go so far as to perceive themselves as impostors; people who don't belong in the higher education environment.

As has already been established, some research indicates that the persistence rate for first-generation students is lower than it is for their more traditional peers, and that this is attributable somewhat to the first-generation condition. Riehl's (1994) comparison study of Indiana State freshmen attributed the lower grade point averages and lower first year retention rates for the first-generation group to their significantly lower grade point average expectations and lower math preparation than

their counterparts. Lower SAT scores of entering first-generation freshmen in this study were construed to be indicative of depressed math knowledge among this group. Padron's (1992) study and analysis of demographic and retention data for first-generation students suggested that anecdotal and demographic evidence pointed to a negative relationship to persistence.

Borne out of the efforts of researchers to study first-generation students and their relationship to higher education, strategies for mitigating the negative impacts of first-generation status are numerous and diverse. For example, high school students who will be the first in their families to attend college can benefit from increased awareness of postsecondary opportunities and challenges. High school counselors can help these students become prepared for college entrance exams. Informing parents about the exciting, but formidable tasks ahead of the graduating senior should increase the likelihood of positive transitions (Fallon, 1997; Hellman & Harbeck, 1997). Hsiao (1992) suggests three sets of support service programs for the purpose of intervening in the first-generation college student's experiences in order to decrease the potential for negative effects early on: (1) specialized outreach, tutoring, and mentoring programs; (2)

bridge programs, linking high schools and postsecondary institutions to help students confront the obstacles to successful college preparation; and (3) college-orientation classes reviewing practical skills, college procedures, and available support services (p. 1). Terenzini (1996) also recommends tutoring and study labs.

Structural integration will be strengthened and enhanced for this group of students when activities aimed toward streamlining and modernizing college processes and procedures are implemented (Padron, 1992; Billson & Terry, 1982). Newsletters to parents that explain the rigors and expectations of the academy can be effective in assisting the family in the process of becoming aware of the first-generation student's college encounter (Riehl, 1994). Hellman and Harbeck (1997) propose parental counseling, as well as designing academic success workshops for these students. Faculty can be informed of the unique characteristics of these students in the hope that they will recognize the challenges that they face and be willing to suggest compensatory strategies when needed (Riehl, 1994).

#### *Agricultural Background*

The literature is sparse in this domain. In fact, after an extensive search, two articles and zero books were

located. It is understood that the primary reason for the dearth of material is likely due to the key purpose of this search. Literature and research can be found in significant quantity about students who are attending agricultural colleges, and about agricultural college programs. However, agricultural families and their childrens' relationship to higher education has apparently not been studied. It is made clear in the first section of this paper that there is abundant literature about rural students, but rural does not necessarily imply agricultural. In fact, fewer young people are raised on farms and ranches today in America than ever before. Rural areas are becoming more populated and that compounds the difficulty of isolating literature that may be centered on rural families who happen to be involved in agriculture.

For the purposes of this paper, an agricultural background relates to a situation where the student's family is involved with the production and/or care of crops or livestock. Hence, farms, ranches, and orchards are typical environments.

Zimmerman and Fetsch ((1994) engaged in a study of consensus management to bring the generations of agricultural families into agreement on the administration of the family business in order to reduce intrafamilial stress, strain and conflict and to increase team decision making on challenging decisions. McGrath, Swisher, Elder & Conger (2001) analyzed data from the Iowa Youth and

Families Project in order to determine the ways in which farm youth find their way to college. According to this study, even though their parents know little about higher education, farm students entered college at approximately the same rate as children of parents categorized as professional/managerial (ostensibly with college experience). It was significant that the parents of farm youth were able to take advantage of their local, social capital in their communities to assist their children in their quest for higher education.

### **Conclusion**

Many first-generation, rural students share common characteristics such as low postsecondary aspirations, limited parental knowledge of higher education, difficulties with social and structural integration at college, potentially low support levels from family members and companions, and a lack of knowledge of postsecondary options. Transition programs, orientations geared toward their group, faculty understanding of their characteristics, increased middle and high school counseling, and visitations to colleges and universities appear to be valid intervention techniques for the reduction of ambivalence and the encouragement of these students toward a successful college experience. Very little information was found regarding college-going

behavior, or the first semester, for students of agricultural background.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHOD

#### *Research Approach and Rationale*

Creswell (1994) defines a qualitative study "as an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting" (p.2). It is my belief that a true understanding of the intricacies of the first semester experiences of first-generation, rural college students from agricultural families can be most accurately derived through an in-depth investigation of the event by using the voices of the students themselves.

To that end, this study employs the phenomenological, qualitative approach with attention to Alfred Schutz's (1899-1959) ontological assumption that "the social sciences should focus on the ways that the experiential world every person *takes for granted* is experienced and produced *by members*" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994, p.263). A decidedly interpretivist methodology, the phenomenological approach to this study produced a wealth of information about the first semester experience as related by the participants. Moustakas (1994) refers to the empirical

phenomenological approach as one in which "the human scientist determines the underlying structures of an experience by interpreting the originally given descriptions of the situation in which the experience occurs" (p.13). It is the meaning of the first semester experience of the participants that is the focus of this study.

This meaning-making process was facilitated by interviewing six first-semester freshmen who possess the specific characteristics of the study: first generation in the family to attend college, rural, and from a family where agriculture is the primary livelihood. According to Seidman (1998), from whom my approach to interviewing draws greatly, interviewing is a valid mode of inquiry. By way of explaining the value of interviewing as a valid means of gathering data via stories, Seidman quotes Heron (1981) on his argument that the linguistic exchange of questions between two individuals is the most basic form of human inquiry:

The use of language itself...contains within it the paradigm of cooperative inquiry; and since language is the primary tool whose use enables human construing and intending to occur, it is difficult to see how there can be any more fundamental mode of inquiry for human beings into the human condition (in Seidman, p.2).

Additionally, Piantanida and Garman (1999) refer to the applicability of the structured and semi-structured interview method for more empirically oriented studies:

...the researcher has a greater obligation to display the data in ways that make clear the correspondence between the data, its source, and the phenomenon under study... interview transcripts might be analyzed for recurring themes, and these recurring themes might be organized and presented in a table or chart prior to interpretation. In such a display, an effort might be made to cluster the themes based on the data gathering questions used to elicit information from interviewees (p. 170-171).

#### *Participants and the Site*

Participants were purposively selected based upon their membership in the study population (criterion); an attempt was made to include participants who represent diversity of race, ethnicity, and gender to enhance and expand the possibilities of a holistic outcome to the interviews. In terms of justifying this sample size, Seidman (1998) persuasively asserts that "the method of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing applied to a sample of participants who all experience similar structural and social conditions gives enormous power to the stories of a relatively small number of participants" (p.48).

The site was a small (5,000+ students) state college located in the Western United States. The college is nationally accredited and offers liberal arts baccalaureate

and graduate programs of study. Selection criteria for the college is moderately selective and there is a window through which the college may admit a percentage of students who do not meet the standard admission criteria. The majority of students depend upon financial aid; Pell Grants and guaranteed student loans are the most prevalent forms of financial aid at the college. The site school is physically quite small when compared to the majority of state colleges in the Western United States. Approximately 500 students reside in the dormitories where freshmen from out of town must live for their first two years. Four of the six participants in this study resided in campus dormitories.

Potential study participants were identified by the institutional research office of the college. Primary residence in a county that is considered rural by state standards, and first semester freshman status were the only criteria used for the location of potential participants. Likely participants were sent a letter informing them of the nature of the study and the requirements that the participants be rural, first-generation, and from agricultural backgrounds. The actual participants ranged in age from 18 to 30; one participant was a woman and five were men.

Interviews were held in a quiet, private office on the campus. The room was specifically selected for the interviews so that conditions of familiarity and comfort were enhanced, if not assured. Non-intrusive, soothing techniques such as mirroring, humor, other neural linguistic programming strategies were used to put the participants at ease and to effect a friendly atmosphere conducive to a mutually beneficial sharing of information.

#### *Data Collecting*

Upon receipt of written consent, each participant was interviewed for approximately fifty to ninety minutes per session. The interview focused on the participants' life history within the context of entering college. The rationale here was to understand how they came to be college students; what aspects and events of their preceding life led them to college; and to establish a comprehensive awareness of the individuals' school, family, work, and perhaps religious and philosophical underpinnings. Later in the process, a limited portfolio of each participant was developed to aid the researcher in understanding the experience.

The interview sessions concentrated on "the details of the experience" (Seidman 1998, p.12). Relationships with

other students, faculty, and administrators were explored. Additionally, participants were queried about a typical day, from the very first thing in the early morning to retiring in the evening. The final facet of the interview established a point of convergence where the participants were asked to explain the meaning of the college experience. "Having recreated the experiences that led up to your entering college, and your present experiences in this environment, how do you understand the meaning of being in college in relation to your life. What does it all mean to you today, and in the future?" The questions were phrased in this manner in order to extract and understand the sense of the first semester phenomenon.

It is of significant value to note that I am well trained in the interview technique of data gathering. During all of my entire professional career, I have successfully interviewed individuals and groups. In that time, I have interviewed hundreds of economically disadvantaged people, young and old, for slots in employment training programs. I have interviewed injured workers regarding their employment and educational histories and aspirations during my work as a certified vocational rehabilitation specialist. As an owner/manager of a full-scale employment recruiting and placement agency,

I interviewed prospective employees and employers in order to make a satisfactory match between the two. I have interviewed employment counselors and recruiters for positions within the firm. The position, of five years duration, as the executive director of a technical college provided me with the opportunity to interview candidates for teaching and staff positions. In my present position as college administrator and faculty member, I have interviewed numerous individuals for staff, faculty, and administrative jobs. I have also worked both sides of the desk, so to speak. As an internationally certified Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR), I have trained managers and supervisors the techniques and rationale for successful interviewing procedures; job-seeking candidates were also students of my career development seminars and courses.

This research employed mostly open-ended questions, although the interview itself was quite structured. Control of the interview process was the responsibility of the researcher in order to ensure that issues of trust, rapport, confidentiality, and privacy were appropriately established and that adherence to same was paramount. The *direction* of each individual interview, however, was determined alternately by both the participant and the

researcher. We collaboratively engaged in the process of attempting to reach an understanding that was both trustworthy and comprehensible.

Participants names were replaced with pseudonyms to identify the individuals for the research; significant care was taken to assure that confidentiality was established and maintained. Transcripts of the interviews, and the resulting files were kept confidential by the researcher at all times.

#### *Data Analysis*

The interviews were audio taped with an audio recorder with an internal microphone. Audio tapes were then transcribed. These transcriptions, along with the researcher's notes and memos, provided the "raw data" for the analysis. The specific data analysis procedure closely paralleled that of Hatch (2002) and Miles & Huberman (1994) with an adaptation by Banning (2003). The actual form of deductive/typological analysis requires the creation of a schema that includes a combination of deductive and inductive coding processes that is sometimes described as abductive coding. Some a priori codes were established before the data were analyzed. These codes supplied the framework for the facilitation of the initial understanding phase. Subsequent codes were inductively constructed from

the data itself; hence, the abductive conformation of the approach.

Before coding began, each of the interview transcripts were read and re-read several times to enhance familiarity with the material and perhaps more importantly: to firmly establish in the mind of the researcher the participants' unique styles of relating verbal information (i.e. verbiage, tone, and colloquial texture). The latter technique proved to be invaluable during cross-case analysis procedures since the aggregate data pieces tend to appear fused and inseparable. This aggregation of data necessarily creates a condition of wholeness. However, this wholeness is not entirely conducive to an approach to phenomenological inquiry where it is imperative that the individual voices continue to resonate throughout the study. Metaphorically, just as a chorus produces a musical product that is similar, yet distinct from the individual voices, each individual voice can still be isolated from the whole if the listener is attuned to that unique voice.

Immersion in the data produced patterns, relationships, and themes that evolved, devolved, expanded, and contracted as the process of coding progressed. Eventually, meta-codes were created to incorporate, encompass, and elaborate upon the meanings of the initial

codes that had become secondary and tertiary; albeit seminal to understanding the essence of the first semester phenomenon.

The actual interview questions provided the substructure for both within-case and cross-case analyses. Individual participant responses to each specific question were analyzed singularly, and in concert with all of the other informants' responses.

Initially, related excerpts were selected from the transcripts and organized according to the interview questions. The raw words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs were then arranged into categories that represented connecting threads, patterns and themes. These categorical concepts were then labeled (index coding) according to the subject, such as the importance of college to participants' life goals, impact on and from friends and family members, socialization, cultural influences etc. Memoing was utilized frequently in this stage of discovery. As the analysis progressed, the codes became nodes: vertices in a semantic network that can be linked to one another and any other code for which the researcher discovers a relationship.

The sometimes tedious, and always complex, building of semantic networks comprised of related codes and nodes was

expanded and enhanced by the utilization of ATLAS.ti. This qualitative analysis software program made the transcript material more readily available to the researcher than a common word processing program in the process of exploring, visualizing, and integrating the material.

A thematic, holistic understanding emerged from the data that displayed connections between the participants' meaning of the early college experience and phenomena such as social forces, cultural beliefs, and perhaps important relationships among people and structures in the participants' lives. This was accomplished by constant comparative analysis of the data through the continuous re-checking of emergent patterns and themes within the content of the interview transcripts in their entirety.

#### *Trustworthiness*

Validity and reliability, as defined for quantitative research, may seem on the surface to be difficult to attain in a qualitative study. However, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) maintain, allowing the participants to comment on transcripts and summaries of the interviews in order to aid in the process of sense-making and meaning-making, increases the likelihood of a trustworthy account

of the experience. Lincoln and Guba refer to this procedure as *member checking*.

The member check, whereby data, analytic categories, interpretations and conclusions are tested with members of the stakeholding group from whom the data were originally collected is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility. If the investigator is able to purport that his or her reconstructions are recognizable to audience members as adequate representations of their own (and multiple realities), it is essential that they be given the opportunity to react to them. (p.314)

Periodically during, and in some cases immediately after the interviews, participants were asked if my understanding of what they said was correct. Although the participants did not have the opportunity to read the final summaries or transcripts of the interviews, clarifying questions similar to "Help me understand, you said... and by that you mean...," and feedback inquiries such as "You said that you don't wear your cowboy boots on campus because they make too much noise in the hallways and people look at you funny. Is that what you said?" were constantly employed in order to verify understanding of the statements. When those understandings were incorrect or incomplete, participants assisted the researcher in that process by clarifying concepts and statements.

Creswell (1998) also suggests that the researcher should clarify any biases through reflection upon [the

researcher's] subjectivity, and how the researcher will employ them in the study. Participants were made aware of my background, my interest in the phenomenon, and the purpose of the study. The consent form and pre-interview meeting provided the opportunity to explain any biases and elucidate the purpose of the research.

Additionally, the researcher kept a reflective journal during and after the interviews in the form of notes within which hunches, notions, and concepts were recorded and considered. An audit trail of the analysis was also maintained.

## CHAPTER 4

### Findings

#### *Organization*

Chapter Four is arranged chronologically according to the research questions. The first section begins with the statement of research Question One, followed by an interpretation of the participants' responses. Interpretive codes, memos, and comments of the researcher are included within the text for each question to facilitate the understanding of the emergent patterns and themes. A complete list of the codes, and their attendant definitions, can be found in Appendix E.

Participant quotations are fittingly placed throughout in order to illustrate and identify the origins of the codes. Sets of individual codes are grouped together with an emergent interpretive concept (thematic code) as their hub. These sets of codes and their thematic codes are subsequently grouped again as the text reaches a point of cumulative interpretation. In this final grouping, previous interpretive concepts are aggregated around a meta-thematic code that brings all of the codes in that subsection together. The meta-thematic code is intended to arrange the interpretation of the participants' responses

for each question into a coherent, synergistic, sense-making unit that represents an understanding. The term meta-codes (see Miles & Huberman, 1994, pg. 69) will rarely be found in the literature. For purposes of this study, a meta-thematic code is an amalgamation of the categories, themes, patterns, and relationships that emerged from an analysis of specific aspects of the phenomenon. It is the third level of interpretive abstraction. The meta-thematic code is an indigenous, sense-making construct that evolved during the analysis stage of this study.

#### *Brief Profiles of the Participants*

ADAM --

Athletic, energetic, and self-assured, Adam fairly exuded confidence. His slight build was whipcord lean. His smile went all the way to his eyes; he was sincere and eager to talk. He did not appear to be a person who had difficulties with the concepts of honesty and integrity. His demeanor alternated between cockiness and sadness as we worked our way through the interview. Fiercely proud of his heritage, he once remarked with a grin that "Most of my family are cowboys and rednecks." Adam's family

raises horses and he spent many of his younger years working cattle and irrigating on a neighboring ranch.

#### BRETT

Brett is slightly older than the other participants, is married and has a daughter. His work experience is varied, but he has concentrated on working with individuals who need assistance in order to continue with high school. Like many non-traditional students, he is clearly focused on getting his college degree. For Brett, getting his degree is more than just a goal, it is a door to change that he has enjoyed opening. In his estimation, it took him a long time to reach the conclusion that he wanted to go on to higher education. Now, he gives the impression that he is unstoppable. He remarked that feeding the chickens and pigs, and doing work around "the place" are definitely secondary to his schooling. He is pleasantly obsessed with being a college freshman.

#### CARLOS

The oldest child in his family, Carlos wants to set an example for his brothers and sisters. References to the family farm keep finding their way into his answers. He appears young, like most freshmen, but he is relaxed in a mature way. He is polite, and he sees

going to college as a great opportunity to meet new people and to develop into someone different than the friends in his small town expected.

DANIEL

Daniel is acutely aware of being the first in his family to go to college. He mentions it early and frequently in the interview. He displays a dogged determination to achieve his occupational goal of college football coach and seems comfortable with the amount of time and education that this plan will take. He expresses himself with calm deliberation. His family had a hard time figuring out the financial aid process, but he wasn't worried that they could do it. It just took some time.

HELEN

Helen couldn't wait to tell her story. She appears to be lithe of frame and vibrant of spirit. The first semester has been hard for her. She says that she is conflicted about being glad to leave what she considers to be the negative aspects of her small town, but bemoans her choice of a "big school" where she feels like she doesn't fit in. The rodeo club is too small to join, and the dorm is too noisy at night. She'll stick it out for the first year, but plans to

transfer to a smaller school that has an "Ag orientation." That's the kind of college that her friends are attending.

EDWARD

Edward has found his first semester in college to be exciting and enlightening. He has had a hard time coping with life since high school and sees his decision to enter college as cathartic. He wishes that he would never have to leave campus, it's all so energizing and intellectual. Leaving the farm was not done for the purpose of attending college. His father gave him the choice to run the farm or go to college. The family relationship was getting strained. He chose neither, until a close friend convinced him that he needed to go to college. Edward says that he remains drawn to the land and hard work, but also pulled toward the intellectual and collegial aspects of higher education:

I don't know. I really like going to work. I really like working. Being like tuned in to what's going on. You know, use my hands. I really like it. I don't know if I could do it for a living, but I would like to farm one of these days. I'm like, teaching or something and be able to farm in the summer. I don't know, I really like doing these things.

#### *The Research Questions*

The first research question to be analyzed was: *"What people or things influenced you to go to college?"*

On the surface, one might expect that there would be only minimal response to such a question. However, these were in-depth interviews and most of the participants appeared to be at ease throughout. Words and concepts flowed rather freely and the resultant data yielded numerous factors and influences on the decision to go on to higher education after high school.

Quotations, or chunks of text, were codified according to their meaning with relation to each participants unique life history and perspective. The first research question about people and things that influenced the college-going decision generated themes that eventually culminated in a dichotomous coding scheme. That is, factors that exerted a positive influence on the college-going decision, and factors that were decidedly negative. The following Positive Support themes emerged:

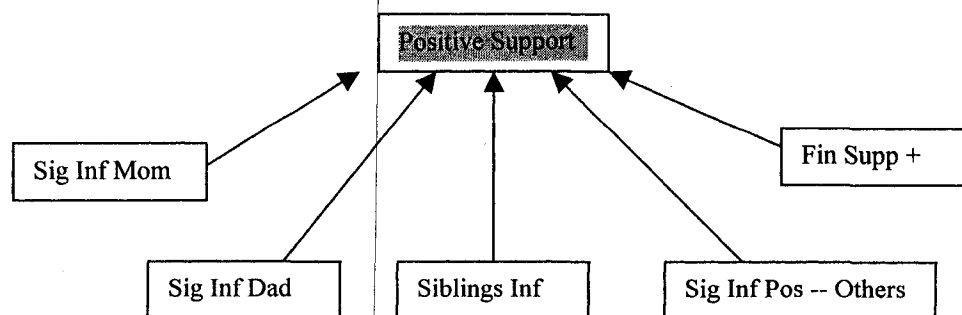


Figure 4.1: Positive Support for College Decision

Positive support for the decision to go to college (enter higher education) is varied, as can be expected, among the participants. Some participants considered their parents' influence to be significant. "I would have to say my Dad. He really pushed me to achieve whatever I wanted to," and "My Mom had a big influence on my decision. I was always a real smart kid so she always wanted me to go to school so, well, she died the year that I graduated [high school]" are indicative of parental support and the positive meaning it has on the participant.

Comments about siblings in this network of relationships ranged from positive statements about the desire to impress upon younger brothers and sisters the value of attending college, to the influence an older sister had by illustrating the benefits of higher education on the participant. Others who inspired the participants to aspire to college were high school and college coaches, uncles, friends who also decided to attend college, and in one case, an employer: "If you were a counselor you could come to work for me and you'd be making \$100 an hour instead of working for a non-profit, making no money and wondering if you're going to have a job next year." In one instance, a participant said that a friend in the weight room of the health club influenced the decision because he

had gone to college at a later age and was successful. Additionally, financial support from sports scholarships and grandparents aided the participants in their decision to seek a postsecondary degree.

Negative influences on the decision to enter higher education are described in Figure 4.2:

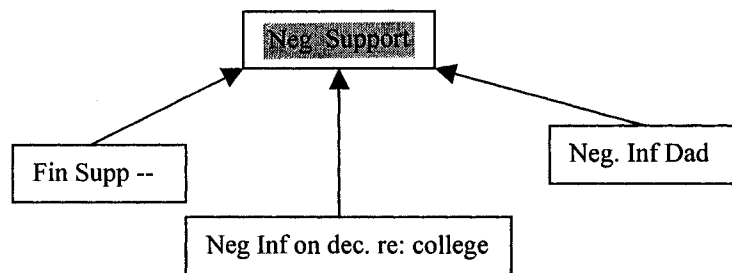


Figure 4.2: Negative Support for College Decision

Negative Support implies that these influences exerted pressure on the participant away from the decision to enter college. Mother and father show up again, this time in a contrary manner. A participant refers to this condition in a striking fashion when referring to a memory stirred by the question of influences on the decision to enter college: "[my dad was]Probably like, Jesus Christ. What the hell are you doing? Well, I was in high school I was really starting to rebel a lot because my Dad wanted me to take care of the farm." Helen related that "Dad had no idea. I'd say: 'Dad I need your little signature here,' and he says, 'What am I signing away now? Because I don't

have any more of my life savings.' So it was all up to me." Another response pointed toward the problems faced by many families when a first-generation child wishes to go to school; information about the higher education choice is minimal in many cases: "My mom had a little better idea... Mom had looked into going to school but, it never really happened... So that wasn't in the cards." The participant goes on to explain that with three children and a husband to care for, Mom did not successfully learn about, or attend, higher education.

Financial support also takes on a deleterious demeanor in the context of the decision making process. Carlos suggests that although the parental support is there, it is up to the participant to find the financial wherewithal to make the goal of higher education come true:

Yeah. They're both happy to see me here. When I left, the family [financial] situation was kind of not good I should say. But they stood behind me 100% and well, where we can help we will, but there's not a whole lot as far as financially that we can do. This is in your hands, you're going to have to talk to financial aid and get loans and whatever else you need to do. And because I decided so late, scholarships were out of the question. So it was all on loans. And they said you decided to go to college and you will pay your way through college. Since you made the decision.

In fact, all but one of the participants were relying upon financial aid and work wages to pay for their college education.

The quotes in the aforementioned section are descriptive of the participants' views on this particular aspect of the decision to enter college. They are not necessarily isolated statements, however. The quotes are intended to be examples of the pattern and as such are passages that are especially illustrative of the theme. This method of describing the emergent themes will be used throughout the findings chapter.

The following network, Figure 4.3 displays the themes that emerged from the interviews, with respect to the factors that impacted the decision to enter college, aggregated around "Decision Factors and Influences":

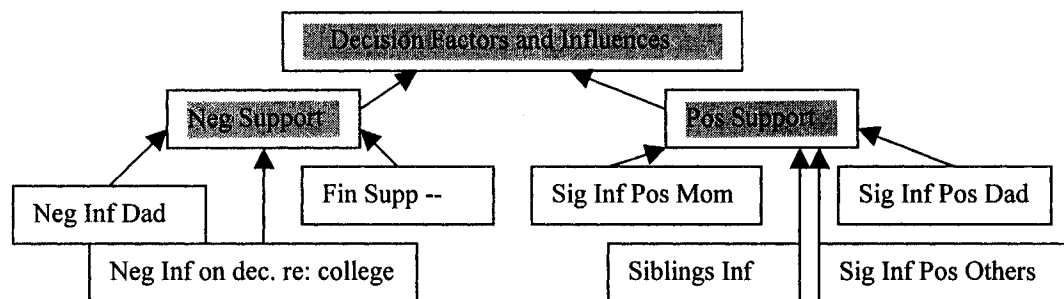


Figure 4.3: Meta-Theme: Decision Factors & Influences

The second interview question asks: *"When did you first decide that you were going to go to college?"*

The placement of this question after the question about decision influences, was intentional. The "influence" question was asked first in order to stimulate discussion and to create a linkage between the researcher and the participant. Had the question about time-orientation been asked first, it was anticipated that the responses may have been potentially more diminutive and concise, thereby setting up a condition in which the rest of the responses might also be abbreviated. The first question invited participants to think about concrete people and things; topics that seem to be easier to describe. The second question dealt with the abstraction of time. This method, of course, does not depreciate the information gained, or the import of the first question. Rather, it was a means of placing questions so that the potential for maximal participant response was augmented.

The time-orientation aspect of this question is particularly meaningful within the context of this study because it establishes a chronology of the decision making process. Participants were asked to go back in time and attempt to uncover when they first decided to go to college. The participant rejoinders did not focus restrictively on the *decision*; they hit all around the concept. I encouraged this exploration of the time-

orientation to continue in the interviews because discourse on the timeframe of the decision *process* was the principal objective of the question. The question was not intended to find out precisely at what moment the decision became reality, but where the participant was at, with whom she or he was associating at the time, and perhaps what circumstances were present when a significant portion of the decision was made.

Essential themes relating to the Decision Time-Orientation include decisions made in elementary and middle school (early), high school, during terms of participation in sports, and post-high school as shown in Figure 4.4:

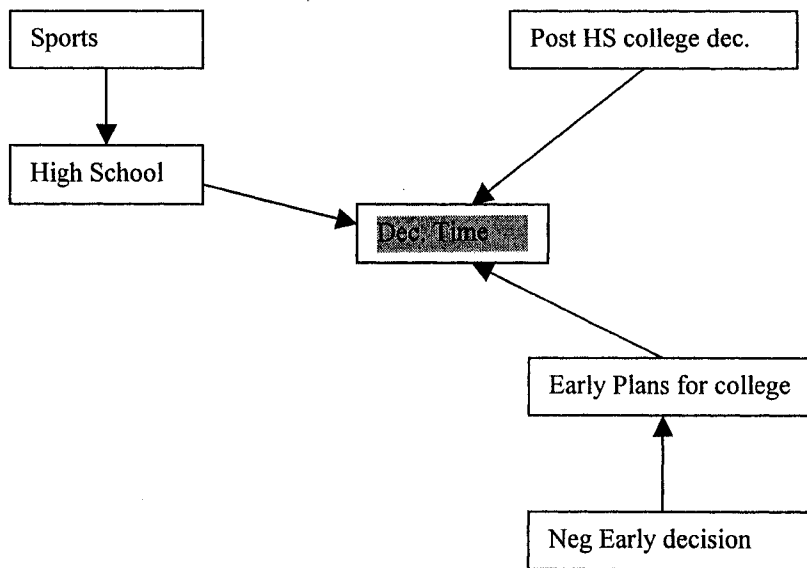


Figure 4.4: Themes Connected to Decision Time

Participants who began thinking about college early on are typified by statements like Adam's: "I decided, well of course I always wanted to go to college. So I guess the

specific moment when I decided to go to college was [middle school] probably, I guess there was no specific time, I always wanted to do it." All early plans don't necessarily work out, however. Brett had always planned on going to college, but it was not to be: "It was always my plan. I was gonna graduate and go to Louisiana State and become an engineer. That was always what I was gonna do but it didn't work." Brett dropped out of high school and worked at numerous jobs before getting his GED and applying to college. His plans were deferred for a number of years before he took the initiative to act upon them.

In some cases, early plans are antithetical to the thoughts of entering an environment where the focus is on education. Helen, for example, had no desire for more schooling:

When I was young, I didn't want to go to college. The middle of my senior year in my high school when we talked about college, I said I wasn't going to go, 'cause I had a hard enough time in high school. I hated high school; I wasn't going to go put myself through that much more torture. I took a year off and I went to work close to school, and had my own house, paid my own bills and reality hit me upside the head again and there's no way you're going to make it [in this line of work] the rest of your life.

More positively, Edward reflected upon his early thoughts of college and reminisced about how participating in sports added to the decision making process:

I've always thought about it but not like serious, it's been like, it'd always be cool to do something different. Always, cause you know we're always out

working, we're always out doing something. Like man, [farm work] is hard, you know. Sometimes it was enjoyable, but most of the time you were like, it was hard work for a little boy. But I've always thought about going to play football in college cause my dad, he was a good football player when he was in high school. I transferred schools to play football, so I've always thought about it.

Sports affected more than one of the participants in this manner. Daniel commented that his occupational goal was directly impacted by sports:

Oh it was probably in my freshman year of high school when I decided I wanted to try to be a football coach. And the best profession for me to be a coach is to be a teacher. So I thought you'd have to have a college degree, license to be a teacher, so that's why they [ostensibly, the high school coaches] pushed me to go to college.

Adam also played sports in high school and reveled in the memories of football games, and thoughts of playing in college: "...but man, I sure miss those days. Those days of sports were fun. My community was just a huge sports community. I wanted to play sports in college. But, I guess my town was just too small." For several participants, sports activities were solidly connected to a decision to enter higher education.

Figure 4.5 illustrates the numerous Other Time Decision themes that emerged around the decision time-orientation.

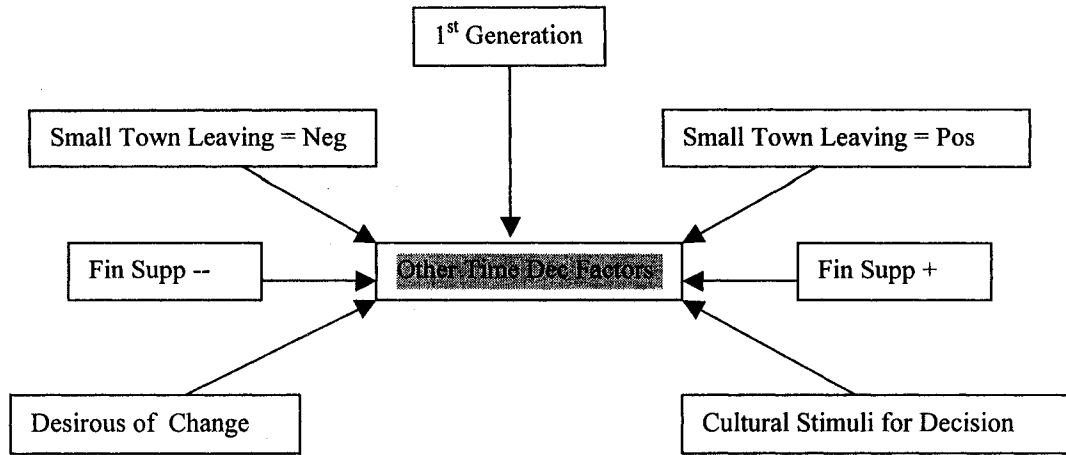


Figure 4.5: Other Time-Orientation Decision Factors

Although none of the participants referred to themselves as "first-generation students," the ramifications of membership in that group in relation to the decision to enter college were strikingly apparent. They may not have used the first-generation label, but they were nonetheless very aware of voids in information and barriers inherent in this demographic condition. For example, Daniel says that "If the opportunity arises I'd like to be a college coach... Actually mostly just by starting college. Because nobody in my family's ever went to college. That's the first thing I needed to do." And Adam remarked that "...Like I said, I was going in school blind. I didn't have anybody [in my family] like that, all my friends that went [to college] just told me yeah, you'll have fun. That's all they said."

The financial support theme encompassed both positive and negative aspects. Lack of financial support seemed to cause only mild anxiety when the interviews were conducted. But this study was completed in the participants' first semester. The relationship to the decision to enter college manifested itself in the time-orientation continuum before the admission process was complete. Low, or non-existent financial assistance from the family was something that simply had to be confronted and solved by those participants who experienced it. On the other hand, positive financial support tended to create a condition of satisfaction and comfort for those for whom it was available. Decisions regarding college were sometimes postponed very slightly by negative financial support, but in no cases did participants indicate that they were unable to secure adequate funding for their first semester. It is unknown how this group will fare financially in their subsequent semesters. They seem to be quite self-sufficient, individually and as a group. The fact that they volunteered to assist in this research is indicative of their self-directed behavior. The concept of self-advocacy and awareness/maturity are expanded upon later in the sections on academic comfort and agricultural background.

Another decision theme that surfaced was that of the desire on the part of the participant(s) to invite the changes that the higher education experience might bring. Edward remarked that he "... always thought about it [higher education] but not like serious, it's been like, it'd always be cool to do something different. 'Cause you know we're always out working, we're always out doing something hard [farming]." Brett expected to eschew the social and cultural aspects of his campus in favor of a no-nonsense approach to getting his degree. Instead, he embraced that which he formerly did not understand:

It's surprisingly comfortable. I thought I was going to feel really out of place. I remember telling friends, 'I'm just going to go, sit in the front of the room, I'm not there to socialize, I'm there to learn, I'm there to get good grades, and that's it. Strictly business.' And it hasn't been like that. I've developed a couple of, I wouldn't call them friendships yet, but I have a few acquaintances that I talk to a lot and it's been comfortable. I feel fine. I feel like I can go different places and ask people things and it hasn't been as intimidating as I thought it might be.

It is the *acceptance* of that change that is noteworthy here. Edward again: "That's the way I feel because I did \_\_\_\_\_ [expletive deleted; meaning "very poorly"] in high school. The only thing I wanted to do was go get a six-pack of beer and drive around on the back roads. So it [college] made me grow up just like a drop of the hat."

Cultural stimuli had an impact on Adam in the sense that he viewed higher education as a means of changing careers and lifestyles:

I was always the kid that kind of liked putting on a tie. I really liked putting on a tie when I was a kid, so. I kind of guess that there is my first professional view of life. You know, any excuse I could use, even the smallest excuse, I could use to put on a tie, I'd slap one on. I always wanted to wear ties, it's funny they're always way too long.

Likewise, Carlos' visualized going-to-college as a cultural abstraction that appeared to offer implied opportunities:

"I saw it [college life] in the movies, and it seemed pretty cool."

Leaving small, rural towns and moving to a larger, more metropolitan area posed difficulties for some of the participants in their first semester. Daniel is affected by the sheer busy-ness of a larger town and of campus life: " I mean it's, I like it but it is different because there is a lot more people and sometimes you'd like to be [back out] in the country where... you don't see tons of people all the time." Similarly, the way in which Helen prefers to dress, which is common in a small Western town, seems to cause her discomfort and make her feel out of place on campus: "Campus life? The way I see it, coming from a small town, and I wear my Wranglers and my cowboy

boots and people look at me funny because they're all big city kids." On the other hand, Helen welcomes the opportunity to leave her small, hometown: " Leaving Smithville [was good] because it was so small. We grew up there and everyone knows who you are, what you do, what you've done, what you're going to do; you have no private life unless you live as a hermit, which I don't like to do. Edward echoes the belief that leaving his small town is a positive change for him:

Like, the whole being on the farm in a small community is definitely like, it conforms you to [being] narrow-minded and there's nothing else out there. And like in the summer when you are in the hayfield all the time... when you get out town [to the campus and surrounding community], there are so many different people. And that's a good thing.

Figure 4.6 displays a summary of the various themes and patterns relating to decision time and the other decision-time-orientation patterns.

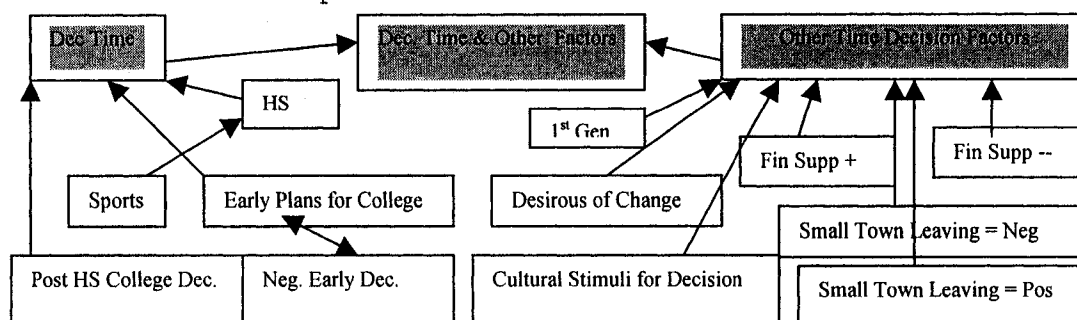


Figure 4.6: Meta-Theme: Decision Time & Other-Time Orientation Themes

The third research question asked participants to concentrate on those aspects of the first semester

experience that were *surprising or different* than what they had expected to encounter. One intent of this question was to attempt to ascertain the degree to which the first semester experience corresponded with their expectations, and another purpose was to have them try to identify those experiences that were complete surprises. The participants' responses generated cluster themes that were eventually defined as Emotional, Campus Life, Academic, and Agricultural Background. Figure 4.7 represents the first major cluster theme: Emotional Conditions.

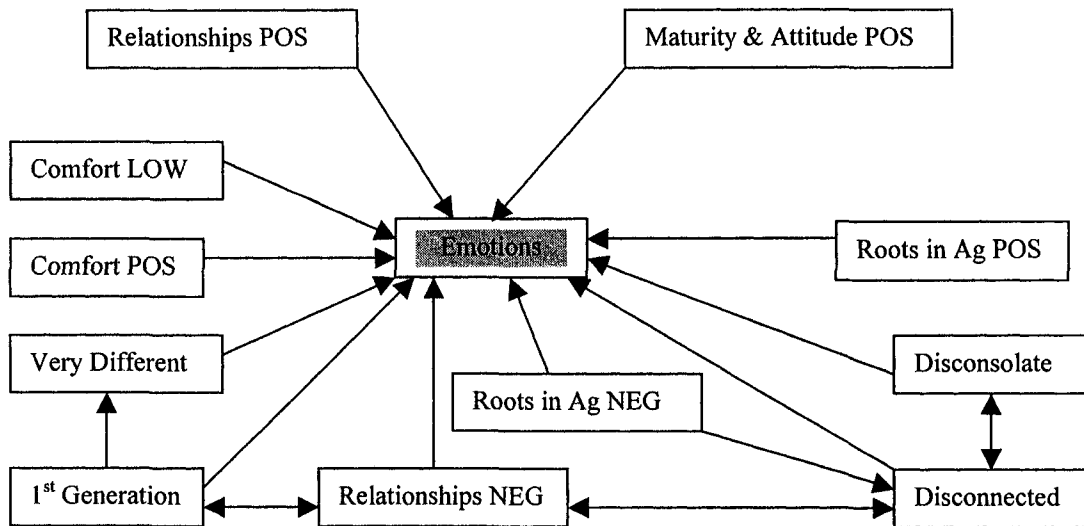


Figure 4.7: Emotion in First Semester

Several of these themes comprise rather complex, interconnected patterns. For example, the theme of *negative relationships* is associated with *first-generation status*, which in turn appears to have been the cause of

some participants viewing certain emotional aspects of their first semester as *very different* than what they had expected. Helen was surprised to learn that

It is amazing... how much college is just like high school. Everyone is so cliquey... I'm my own person, I can make my own decisions, and I notice that with a lot of the girls, they go with whoever happens to be "cool" that week and that's why I have a tight friendship with very few of them. I have very few close friends and most of them are acquaintances: 'Hi, how are you.' I'm picky about who I'm going to confide in for a year, possibly the rest of my life and so many of them aren't that way.

Her lack of close relationships with other students is a characteristic of first-generation status. She does, however, have a good affiliation with her roommate who ironically is from a much larger city and considers the college that they attend together to be "great because there's less people here [than her home city]." Helen has actually acted upon her emotional desire to be away from what she considers to be a large, impersonal campus by breaking the rules of the dorm agreement and commuting much of the time: " I go home. I've been making the commute for about the past two weeks. I got fed up with the noise. I like it quiet." She feels disconnected from the activities and considers them to be too mainstream, there is little that she is interested in: " After a class

I go back to my room, go to lunch, and then I'm bored for the rest of the day. Because there's really not a whole lot to do." Adam too, was surprised at fact that he only had to attend his courses two or three times a week. He chooses to spend his free time at the campus recreation center. Helen's emotional comfort level is low, while Adam's is high.

Roots in agriculture can be considered either negative or positive, according to the responses of the participants. Helen believes that other students consider her car to be a "hunk of junk," but she suggests that they just don't understand that it has value; it gets her back and forth to school and is also used for getting around the fields for irrigation purposes. Correspondingly, Adam refers to himself in relation to the first semester in a manner that is perhaps diminutive: "...for a country boy?... it's kind of like [a] country mouse goes to school." But, he says it with a wry grin.

Several of the participants had developed, or were in the process of developing positive relationships. Brett was beginning to open up to some classmates. Carlos availed himself of some campus resources provided by dorm students who help him with his math: "Math is my worst subject and sometimes I struggle with that but there are people in the

dorms that are good at it so they kind of help me out with that. Other students usually. I like that actually.

You're not intimidated to talk to them."

Maturity and attitude are associated with the negative or positive degree of relationship-building, as well as comfort level. Daniel suggests that "If you come in with the right attitude and put your mind to what you want to do and what you want to become, well it won't be easy, but you can do it." Edward remarked that " You know, just everyone needs to settle down with themselves pretty much from the start because everyone's from different places and some people don't agree what some people wear or what they say in class."

Phenomena that were considered to be surprises, or very different, created a reasonably large category. Adam's experience was somewhat typical in terms of things that were a surprise, things that were completely new to him. He expected his college classrooms to be like those in high school:

...it's totally different. I never expected. I mean I expected to be in a room where you just take notes through the whole period. I expected that. But I didn't expect, I didn't even know how the classes were set up. I didn't know you only went every other day.

He didn't know how to look up courses in the course schedule, and he was pleasantly surprised to find out that "as you're going through classes now, you have friends that tell you which classes were fun and which classes were easy and which professors not to take. Now I have some insight to tell some people what professors not to take as well." And about filling out financial aid applications and the cost of higher education, he remarked that "It was weird filling out your loan forms, that was weird, you had to check on your money and then the school takes it and you're pretty poor. Pretty poor when you get to school. You definitely have to watch how much money you spend..." Adam sums up the new discoveries with a word to other students who come from a background such as his:

Every day something is different than what I thought it was when I come to school. Every day there is something else new I learn. I guess expect the unexpected when you come to school [college] is all I got to say. 'Cause it won't be to you, like it will be to other people that are coming to school.

Daniel was in awe of the immensity of the change from small town, independent living to that of being in a dormitory environment, and he cognitively and affectively related the experience to socialization:

I live on campus. Oh, it's different. It's a change [emphasis on change]. I mean, I think every freshman should have to go through it just to experience it.

That's how you meet three-quarters of the people you know. I don't mind it. When it's over I'll be glad, but right now I don't really mind it.

Several of the participants noted that in postsecondary courses, they have to study; this is quite different from their high school experience. Daniel suggests that his approach to studying and writing papers is quite dissimilar to the same process he used in high school:

Mostly the way you write papers. In high school you wrote papers but they weren't critiqued at all like they are now. The way you have to study for tests. I really didn't have to study in high school. I basically went to class, did the homework, took tests, got average grades, and now I got to study to get average grades. That's more difficult. Just the studying. You have to spend a lot more time doing it.

Daniel also mentioned that he was shocked to find out that some of his professors used an andragogical approach to teaching rather than the pedagogical styles of his K-12 teachers: "I thought my professors were a lot like high school teachers where they sit there and they teach it and then they give you the homework. I mean, it's not their job to baby-sit you and see if you do it or not." Carlos expected "...the homework to be a lot harder than it was. It was like you do your homework and do it as best you can, you usually get a good grade on it [in high school]. I expected it to be really, really hard and it didn't turn out to be like that."

Lack of solitude and the related responses that some of the participants had regarding that subject is mainly covered in a later section on campus life. However, it is appropriate to this segment of the analysis to mention that Helen's discomfort upon discovering the lively night life in the dormitory environment aroused strong emotions, and indicated a learning-is-most-important maturity:

So many of them are here to party and not learn. In the dorms it's 3:00 in the morning and all you hear is the pitter-patter, pitter-patter, tee-hee, and it takes everything I have not to throw my cowboy boots at them. And do you mind? I'm sleeping!

Edward enjoys the exhilarating atmosphere and an environment where the emphasis is on learning and teaching at a higher level than he had previously experienced:

"Everything's different. I think it's really kinda intellectual. Like everyone's in the same deal. Everyone's here to learn and everyone's here to teach."

Thematic patterns associated with campus life included those phenomena that are most closely associated with the relationship between the participant and the campus milieu. Conditions that existed within and around the concepts of dormitory living and the roommate experience, cultural diversity, first-generation status, and the size of the

campus were studied within the context of expectations, or lack of expectations, of the first semester participants. Sometimes the expectations proved to be accurate; other times, not so. With respect to the lack of expectations, this was categorized as a condition created at least partially by an information void that is intuitively typical of first-generation student status. This lack of expectations/knowledge about higher education appears to be a critical element in whether or not participants were "surprised" by an occurrence or activity. The previous section on emotion-laden conditions alluded to the surprise element. Figure 4.8 depicts some of the connections associated with Campus Life.

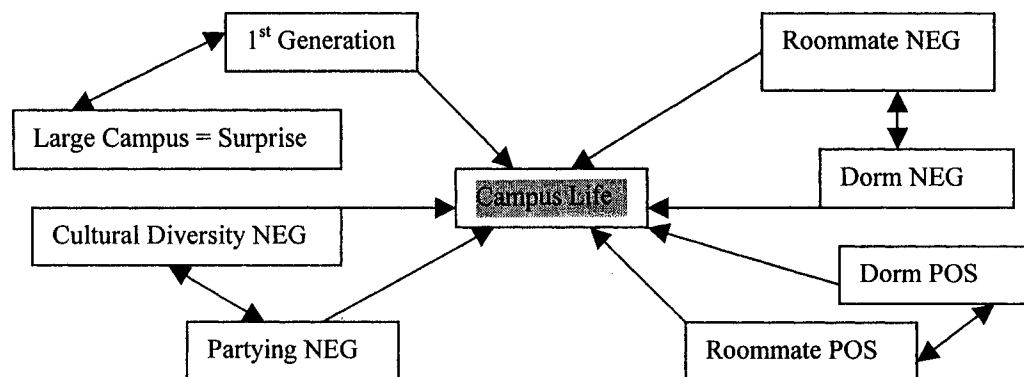


Figure 4.8: Campus Life in First Semester

First-generation status appeared to be associated with the participants' limited, or non-existent, knowledge of the size, shape, and dimensions of a college campus upon which they found themselves as a part. Indeed, for some participants, the condition of surprise emerged as being

*attributed* to first-generation status, a stronger relationship to that factor than simple association. It seems to be noteworthy that in the instance of this study, the campus was quite small in comparison to many other colleges and universities.

Adam was surprised at the physical distance between the buildings on campus: "I got here and talk about a lot of walking! You have to walk a lot. Just from your room to the class, and you're walking to the next class, and you just walk to get your lunch. The campuses are, I don't know, it's a lot different than a high school."

Daniel's comments are fairly representative of the experiences of several participants. His lack of information could certainly be common to any first-semester freshman. However, it is the depth of the surprise that is consequential here. Presumably, a student whose parent or parents had attended higher education would have been at least somewhat prepared for the physical characteristics of a college or university, and knowledgeable about the student population. Daniel remarks that

I didn't know how big the school was going to be. Actually it's a lot bigger than what I thought. Because you come down here and you just drive [by] and it doesn't really look that big. You [only] see 2 - 3 buildings, and I didn't really think there was that many students here and that was probably a big

surprise. There actually is quite a few students compared to what you see from the outside.

The relative size of the college disheartened Helen from the beginning of the first semester: "I don't like it; it's too big.. I like my little, small, tight-fit communities... If I were to look back on it and I guess if I could change anything, I would definitely go to a smaller school. One that is based around agriculture." Brett, no matter how pragmatic, was also surprised at the relative size of his classes:

At first it was a shock. Because I came from a really small high school. My only experience with school was from a little school where my graduating class was probably 40 people and the most people that were ever in a class was maybe 15 people in a class. I walk into these classes you know, with your arena seating and there's like 80 people in my psych class and that was a shock. And like not having, walking in first day and not having rapport with the professor, which you know, growing up in a small town, you knew all the teachers, they knew you, they knew your brothers and sisters.

For those participants who lived in a dormitory at the time of the interview, the experience had been one of discovery, and for some it was an awakening to the cultural diversity that may be present on a college campus.

Although a non-first-generation student may have been prepared for dormitory life and diversity, it would be naive to make that generalization. However, this study is

based upon the voices of rural, agricultural, and first-generation participants whose remarks tend to form linkages and associations between their experiences and their particular demographic backgrounds. Living in a dormitory environment places, or juxtaposes as the case may be, students within very close proximity to other students from different ethnic, racial, religious, and socio-economic heritage. Adam alternated between being angry and amused at the late night antics of certain Hawaiian students in his dormitory:

[Dorms are okay]... as long as you get away from Hawaiian people. They are the loudest, obnoxious people I have ever met. And they're happy and fun. But when they're happy and fun at 3:30 in the morning when you're trying to sleep, that makes you grouchy. I almost got, I don't know what you want to call it, but I got woke up the other morning at 3:30 from a ukulele and I was pretty mad. I was offering to put it in some places that he wouldn't have liked it. So beware of the Hawaiians.

Helen's comments mirrored Adam's. She too mentioned being awakened early in the morning by the sound of Hawaiian students' partying. Then she added a mournful, lonesome note that campus life "...is, it's [a] completely different culture here. Maybe I just don't fit into this. I don't know what it would be, I guess because I don't feel that I fit into the college scene."

All of the participants who lived in a dormitory expressed positive views of their specific roommates. Carlos displays an accepting and participative attitude of the dormitory and campus life: "I help my roommate. He has a little trouble with History and I took History in high school, so I help him sometimes. Just someone needs help; I'll help them." It has already been mentioned that Helen perceives her roommate as someone for whom she has great fondness. Adam and Daniel both express positive relationships with their roommates, although Adam appears to take a paternalistic, or "big brother" approach: "... he's still a little wet behind the ears, he's a good kid. He hasn't really enjoyed any of the full flavors of life, he's still young, he's sheltered. I like the kid you know, he's a good kid..."

Several of the participants were not particularly enamored of the idea that they were required to live on campus. In aggregate, however, all but Helen seemed to suggest that they understood the value of being immersed in the campus culture via the dormitory experience, and had positive thoughts and feelings interspersed with the negative.

Factors associated with Academic Conditions range from academic rigor to levels of comfort relative to those

conditions. Figure 4.9 displays the relationships and inter-relationships between, and among, these factors. An example of interrelated concepts clustered around academics can be found between participants' statements about a high level of academic comfort, helpful professors, and positive aspects of maturity and attitude. Since these categories emerged from an immersion in the interview transcripts and a comprehensive search for connective, explanatory modalities, no attempt has been made to explain certain behavior by professors. Rather, the emphasis here is on the participants and the manner in which they singularly and collectively experienced the academic sub-phenomena.

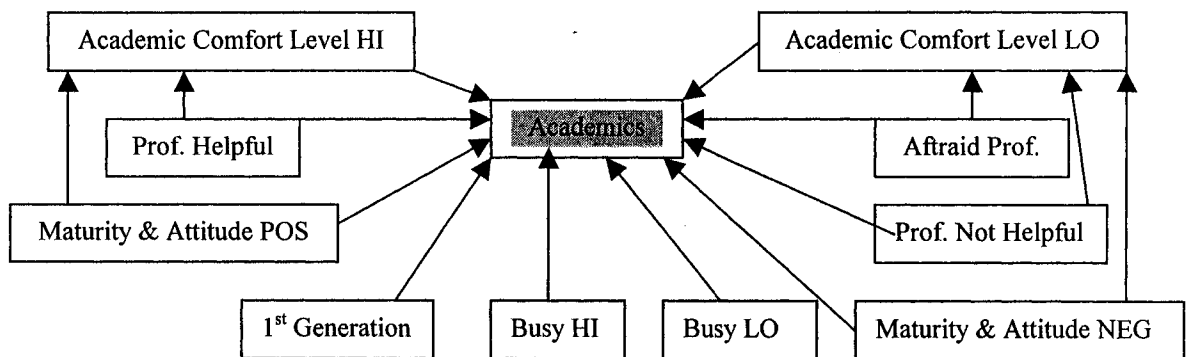


Figure 4.9: Academics in First Semester

Beginning with the positive connections that implied a high level of academic comfort, some participants found their professors to be helpful in the process of becoming acclimated to the first semester. Adam, for example, related the choice of a small college to the fact that he

attended a small high school. He was pleased with his decision to attend a smaller institution:

"I think it was a definite wise choice for me to come to this one first and that was, that's made it a lot easier being from a small class [high school], to the professor knowing my name, and being able to talk to him if you have any problems. 'Cause that really helps me 'cause I didn't really know where I stood.

Carlos replied that biology was his favorite course and that he enjoyed all of his courses and most of the professors. Helen's comments parallel those of Carlos and Adam. She believes that she has "yet to meet one [professor] that isn't willing to, if you don't get it, they'll sit down with you until you do get it, or find someone that can sit down with you." In fact, Helen had a professor for a college success course who became a mentor for her during the first semester. Edward also expressed satisfaction with some of his professors; this condition led to an elevated sense of academic comfort for himself and the others who experienced it.

Several participants expressed an interest in the subject matter and in learning about how to successfully interact with their professors. This seems to be associated with a moderate to high degree of maturity and an attitude that may be conducive to acclimatization.

A low level of academic comfort appears to be associated with conditions such as unhelpful professors, fear of professors, and in some cases, a low academic maturity level and an attitude that is perhaps antithetical to academic success: "I got this professor, [who] makes it hard, makes everything a little bit harder than it should be. [The professor] says no one has ever got an A in [this] class."

Brett expressed a theme that implied that it was primarily the first experience, the first few weeks in college classes, that was the cause of a low academic comfort level: "...that was really different. And I didn't feel like I could approach the professor or even ask questions necessarily, I just felt like I just wanted to sit there and listen." Even so, Brett related that he recognized that experience for what it was. He deduced that the professors were "laying down the law" to the first semester students. According to Brett, "...each one does it, one after the other so you see it all day long, they're all doing the same thing, laying down the law and being really strict and stuff. I was kind of like, whoa!" Continuing with the conceptualization of faculty setting the tone for the semester in the first few classes, Brett also stated that "...they're all nice and pussycats, two weeks later."

The extent to which the participants experienced engagement in the busyness of being a first semester freshman seemed to resonate for some of the participants. Brett referred to this condition as being one where school and work dominated his life: "It's very busy. Very busy. I don't have time for anything else in my life at all. Just school and work. Yeah, school and work and taking care of stuff at home." All but one of the participants remarked that they did not have to work at being a student in high school, but they did in college. At least one individual indicated that although the work load and the rigor of college classes are greater than high school, the same lackadaisical approach has been employed to the process of studying -- or rather not studying, in this case. This individual also expressed the feeling of boredom, and decried the insufficiency of the social activities on campus.

Figure 4.10 displays the connections that formed the concept of *Agricultural Background*.

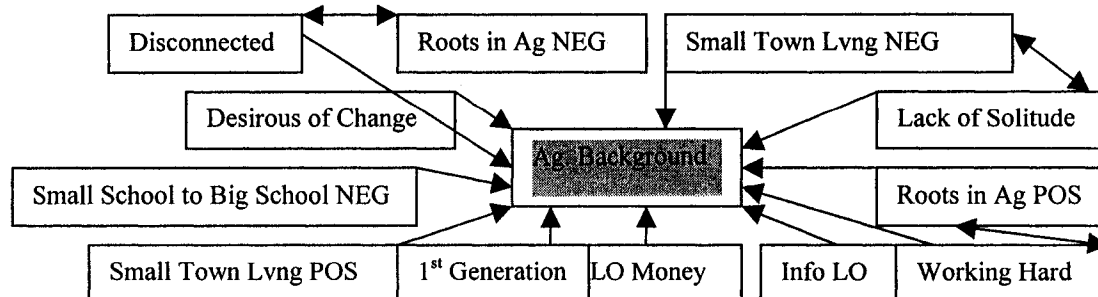


Figure 4.10: Agricultural Background in First Semester

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the distinction between rural and agricultural is difficult to define. Rural is a geographical place concept that also encompasses characteristics. Since most agricultural endeavors take place within rural areas, characteristics of agricultural background are embedded in the rural context. A study of the interview responses to the question regarding different or surprising occurrences revealed concepts that are often emblematic of both conditions. The distinction as to which is rural and which is inherently agricultural, may be moot; since both are significant to an understanding of the essence of the first semester phenomenon.

Disconnection from campus and other first semester activities and people appears to be associated, for some participants, with a belief that members of the campus population may not empathize with one's roots in agriculture. Hence, the negative relationship to one's agricultural background. Helen said that the multi-functionality of her car in the sense of being used for both work and transportation (irrigation and commuting), was important to her, but others did not understand that. She also remarked that "They don't understand why I wear the clothes that I wear and why I'd rather be sitting and talking on the porch than riding a train or plane to

Hawaii." And Adam's "country mouse goes to school" metaphor is particularly poignant in this context. At one point in the interview, Adam reflected upon his work on a neighboring ranch before entering college:

That's where I worked for pretty much every winter, for like, since my sophomore year I've worked for them pretty much. Wintertime it's feeding cows and throwing them down and tagging them as they birth. Because they birth early in the winter and ship as soon as possible to the mountain. You know, you've got branding of course, that you're still doing the old way of throwing them down and putting some metal on them. That's always fun. You've got to stand around, drink beer, and get your butt kicked by something (calf, heifer) that weighs just as much as you when you throw them on the ground. It's fun.

But then, later in the interview, Adam suggests that "I don't want to forget my heritage. It's just that [college] is just far from cows. That's all you have to say. You can't look out the windows and see cows and pigs, that's for sure."

Yet, these roots in agriculture are also considered to be positive. Several participants suggested that their agricultural roots are responsible for firm values and strong opinions. Although it is difficult for him to fully articulate this complex concept, Adam clearly believes that his "heritage" encompasses moral underpinnings: "If you're a good country person, you treat people better, and you're less likely to do things wrong. It definitely gives you

good morals. You have [understand] your moral obligation to society, and that's the way I see it."

Like Adam, Daniel relates that having an agricultural background, and working hard at tasks, assists him in his quest to persevere in his first semester: "I think it's [ag. lifestyle] helped me. These semesters are long. Actually they're not really long, but they seem a lot longer than what they are. They're really not, but when you're in the country, there's a lot of projects [to accomplish]. Building fences... But I guess it helps you to stick with it."

It was mentioned earlier in the section on time/decision factors that leaving a small town to go to college can enhance the first semester experience, as well as detract from it. Daniel states that his entire hometown has the same population as the college. Amenities near the campus has its advantages: "Oh, it's different because..., Mountainview is not very big. It's like 5,000 and there's about 5,000 in the school. I like it 'cause everything's close to you. ...Everything here is 2 - 3 minutes away. I mean Albertson's right across the road to get stuff."

The lack of solitude was a theme that emerged frequently. Participants missed being able to be by themselves, away from others, on campus. They missed the

open spaces and ability to get away for a while. Several spoke about driving off campus and getting into the country at times. One of the reasons for choosing this particular college was because it was smaller, and located in a rural area with outdoor recreational opportunities. Certainly the smallness and rural location of the college could also make it attractive to potential students who do not share demographics with this specific group, but these qualities of the college seem to be especially enticing to the study participants. Edward goes "...out in the country, to get back to the country. I like being out in the country and away from people, that's for sure."

A low level of information about college is attributable to first-generation status. All of the participants indicated that they had little or no information about college prior to entering, and that they had to learn about higher education by experiencing it.

The results of the interviews appear to formulate a circumstance wherein the agricultural backgrounds of the participants make them twice-removed from knowledge about postsecondary education(i.e. first-generation plus agricultural status). Going forward with this thought, many agricultural endeavors can be performed without college or university training, as evidenced by these

participants and their families. Although the field of American agriculture, as an industry, appears to be evolving more toward the application of scientific methods, the teaching (and learning) of those methods are not necessarily restricted to academe. Farmers, ranchers, orchardists, vintners may learn new methods by going to college, or they may not. The question of whether or not a relationship exists between low college information and the agricultural culture does not seem to be one that can be simply answered by stating that many agricultural families are also first-generation college families. Perhaps there is additional insight that can be gained by further exploration of this concept.

It has been established that all of the participants in this study were utilizing financial aid in order to attend college. Despite the fact that at least some of the participants' families were economically stable, the agricultural income was apparently not sufficient to stem the need for financial aid.

The desire for change and the leaving of small hometowns (positive) to attend higher education seem to be associated with the agricultural background in that both conditions indicate an adventurous and self-assured nature, as expressed by some of the participants.

Many geographical locations where agricultural endeavors are present have small, rural schools. Some participants indicated that there was an adverse connection between moving from their small school, where everyone knew each other, to a "larger" college environment. Ostensibly, one did not have the older, established relationships and small familiar surroundings to rely upon for support. Helen refers frequently to her "small, tight-fit communities" that seem to exemplify agricultural towns, schools, and communities.

Figure 4.11 graphically represents the connections and relationships related to Question Three and the incongruencies of the expectations of these first semester freshmen:

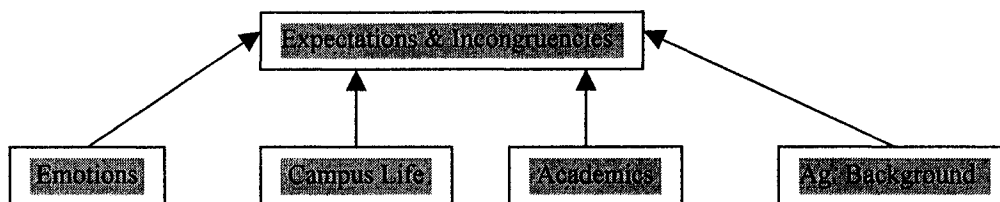


Figure 4.11: Meta-Theme: Incongruous Expectations

The fourth research question introduced the concept of meaning. Participants were asked: *"What does all of this mean to you? What is the meaning of the first semester in college for you?"* Due to its abstract nature, the question had to be phrased differently for each participant. Even though this question was posed near the end of each

interview, it was helpful for the participants for me to return to the original purpose of the study. That I was trying to understand the essence of their first semester experience from their perspective, in their words. The first theme to emerge was that of *familial connectedness*. Figure 4.12 displays that theme.

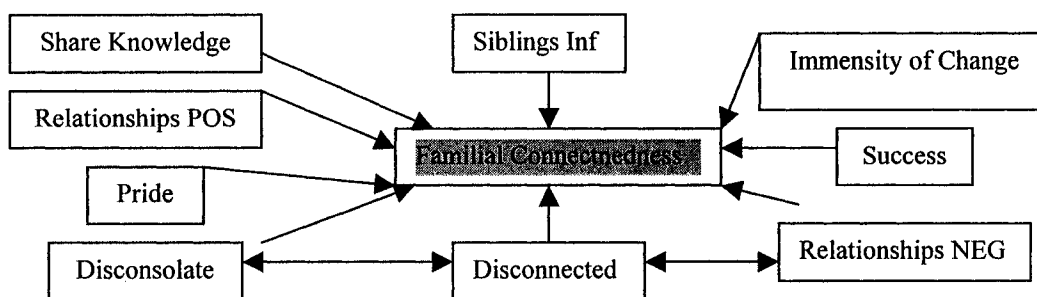


Figure 4.12: Familial Connectedness

The association of the conditions of *being disconsolate*, *being disconnected* or feeling apart from the college experience, and having a *deficit in relationships* (with students, faculty, or staff), seems to be abrogative. This pattern appears to be antithetical to those patterns that participants mentioned regarding the positive aspects of family, small towns, and small schools. These related themes appear to connote that for some of the participants, the very things that they found positive in their rural, agricultural environments may not be present for them in the college culture and structure. Or, they have not yet found them. For example, Helen's cognitive dissonance

between her expectations of college and those she actually experienced seem to be associated with her decision to commute to and from her home, rather than spend time in the campus dormitory: "I'm going to see how it goes with me making the commute and if it doesn't work with what I've got scheduled [for next semester]...we'll drop it down to part-time and go from there." Likewise, Adam is somewhat disillusioned with dorm life: " I don't like living on campus...I've not really enjoyed it too much. You have someone breathing down your back. You have an RA you know, and you know they're looking into some kind of field where they're gonna be either a teacher figure or someone with an authority problem." At the time of the interview, Adam was making plans to request to leave the dormitory and move into an off-campus house with several friends from his hometown.

Pride is another aspect of connection to family and home; in this case a positive one. Carlos considers his family in his decision to go to college. In his first semester, he is considering the relationship between his college experience and his family: "You go to school since you were very little, it all comes together, [then high school] graduation. And then it becomes your decision to

take your next step to either go or not to go [to college], and I think by going it just makes them kind of proud."

A similar theme emerged around the concept of success. Even though in some cases participants experienced a dearth of support from family, the connection to family and a sharing of accomplishment is apparent. Brett's quote is representative: "I'm going to be successful, and man, I can't wait to get that diploma. And I'm coming to graduation. And I'm inviting everybody to come see me. Because I'm proud that I'm doing it, and I'm gonna be proud of the end result too, very proud." Helen expects her higher education to assist her in becoming more economically stable than her parents. She plans to be able to help her children with their tuition costs.

Some of the participants who had developed positive relationships in the campus environment in their first semester, also maintain contact with their parents, siblings, and friends outside of the college. Carlos remarks that "I don't get to maybe see them that much, but they always call and make sure everything's going good and make sure I'm keeping up on my school work and stuff. [They] Still push me to do good. I guess there's no loss in their support by any means." Edward's older sibling successfully completed college and he feels that she may

have led the way for him. Over half of the participants referred to younger sisters and brothers who are aware that the eldest is going to college; that seems to be a motivation for success for those participants. Edward encourages his younger brother to prepare for college. Brett plans to share the knowledge with his daughter regarding the best ways to navigate getting into college, and satisfactorily completing the first semester.

Edward suggests that although he has left the farm, perhaps for good, his family and his memories are very important:

I learned a lot [from family and farmers], and it's just really rewarding. Like the memories of doing things with your family, even if you didn't like them [those things] at the time, you still have memories. Like, 'yeah, I gotta do this with my Dad and I got to hang out with these people.' It was really enjoyable. But you can always go back. It's always gonna be there.

One pattern that was shared by all of the participants was related to the immensity of the change. With little or no knowledge on the part of their parents and families regarding college, these individuals reflected upon the meaning of the first semester as a cathartic experience; as something that they may, or may not, be able to articulate to their families. Their comments on this theme provided significant insight into the meaning of the first semester

for students with their demographic characteristics. Brett suggested that the degree of change was "huge":

And it's just day to day way of life. It's like changing my way of life. Just like going to the gym every day. I go to school every day. And I learn and I write and I study and I read, yeah, exactly, there's been a change in my way of life and I'm really conscious of that. Yeah, yeah, it's huge. It really is. It's huge. It's suddenly become probably the biggest thing in my life.

Daniel thinks that the change will not completely register until some time has passed:

I really haven't had a chance to think about, I'm really a college student. I think it'll sink in this summer that I've actually went to college for one year and actually completed it. Cause nobody ever does this much, I have one Uncle that he went to school but he didn't go out of high school. He was probably 33 or 34 before he went and got his bachelor's degree. Yeah. So I mean, I'm pretty much the first one.

Edward expressed the enormity of the change as being a series of events that propelled him forward: "This is such a big, big boom since May that, it was just like one thing after another and everything was just hitting me in the face, and I was just like, all right here I go."

The next theme that relates to the comments made by participants regarding the *meaning* of their first semester, and going to college, connects patterns that can be described as Agricultural Attributes. These attributes, most of which have been explored in earlier sections,

relate here to the character, philosophy, and overall personal make-up, of the individuals. Figure 4.13 displays those attributes.

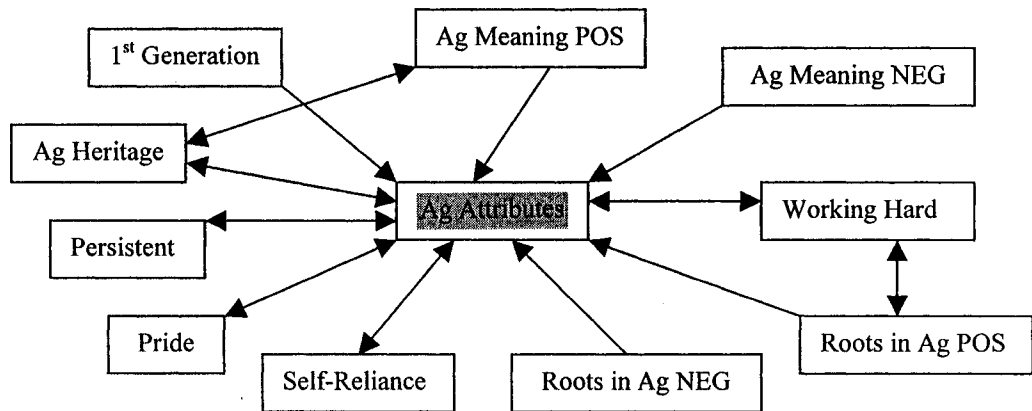


Figure 4.13: Agricultural Attributes

First, the negative attributes. Edward and Helen are interested in higher education as a means to escape farming. Not the country atmosphere, or small towns, but the act of being tied to the farm and the endless hours of work with little recreation. Helen is emphatic about working to live, versus living to work. When asked if she was referring to people who put work before living life to the fullest, she replied: "I don't think it should be anybody's goal in life to live to work. We want to live the rest of our lives [to the fullest]...Yeah, they're called farmers." Edward says that "I could just stay here (on the farm) until I die. Just like my grandfather and like my dad is doing."

Perhaps persistence is an ironic attribute of an agricultural heritage. It seems as if Edward is as persistent and strong-willed in his belief about a college education and its future benefits, as his father and grandfather are persistent in the belief that farming is their life's work. Daniel intends to complete his first semester, and then continue to get his degree: "I know if I got out of it, I probably wouldn't come back. If I did, I'd have a very slim chance. So I just gotta go all at once now."

Self-reliance is an attribute that these participants verbally displayed on numerous occasions. Helen remarked that: "...I'm not one to follow someone around like a lost puppy because it's what everyone else is doing...I'm my own person, I can make my own decisions." Brett implied that his ability to focus was at least partially the result of his agricultural background: "I'm already telling myself that rather than just focusing on the end product, it's like I'll just focus on today. And like tonight when I go home and I write an essay for Western Civilizations, that's my focus."

References made by the participants about their agricultural heritage, working hard, and their first-generation status also contributed to the agricultural

attributes theme. For all of the participants, the first semester presented an opening of a door. Continuing the metaphor, that doorway appeared as a portal, a gateway. A gateway that is together terrific, and terrible in its magnitude. Figure 4.14 arrays these doorway themes around the concept of Portals.

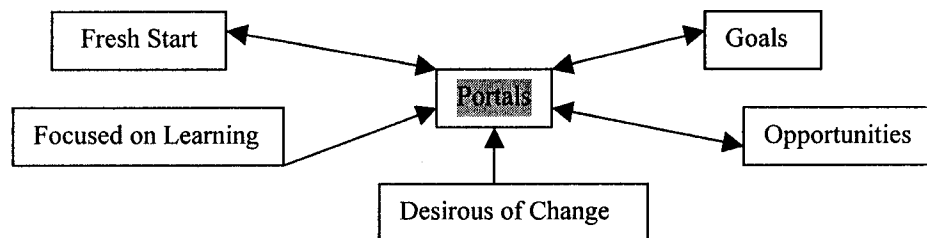


Figure 4.14: Portals

The idea of a fresh start was expounded upon by several participants. Edward stated that:

Just starting out [the first semester; college] means a higher place in society. Because you could do the same job every day for the rest of your life if you're a mechanic or a farmer... or [you could] get a piece of paper saying that you're certified in such kind of field and... More doors open [for you] than just sitting there working on your tractor.

Carlos considered the first-semester to be "Maybe like a fresh start... A chance for opportunities, to explore what you want to do...make good friends, some relationships and stuff." For Brett, the first semester means that "it's something that I can do, which I didn't succeed at high school. And I want to succeed at this... that I'm willing to... put in the time and effort. It means that I can set a

goal, no matter how lofty, and achieve it."

Helen views the first semester and college as a means to a [financial] end: "I guess I know I'm better than minimum wage. But they [employers] don't know that unless I have a piece of paper that says so."

Most of the participants made statements that indicated that the first semester created an exciting onus to learn that may have been previously dormant, or nonexistent. To Adam "It's a learning experience and I don't know where I'm gonna be living when I get my education." Helen remarked that "I'm here to learn." Brett also, suggested that a significant part of the first semester meaning has to do with learning: "And I learn, and I write, and I study, and I read. Yeah, exactly. There's been a change in my way of life and I'm really conscious of that...I'm focused on learning."

Edward sums up the portal metaphor: "I think it is just... so many opportunities in the world when you go to college and start educating yourself, that all these doors are opening. Like in your mind, and in your future."

Finally, the themes connected to the meaning of the first semester as expressed by these participants can be aggregated around the concept of Introspective

Constructions. Figure 4.15 displays that aggregated pattern.

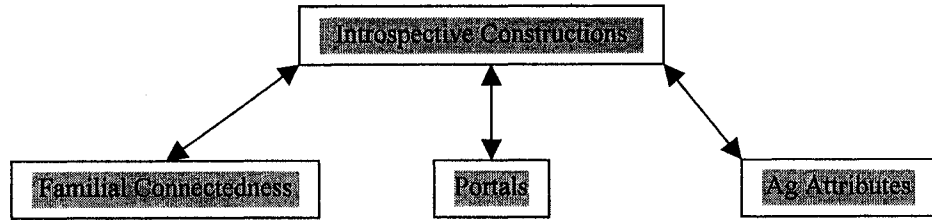


Figure 4.15: Meta-Theme: Introspective Constructions

*Summary*

The overall purpose of this study was to understand the essence of the first semester experience for students who are first-generation, rural, and from agricultural backgrounds. To that end, the findings revealed four primary understandings of the phenomenon. These understandings were categorized as decision factors and influences, decision time factors and other (time-oriented) influences, expectations and incongruencies, and introspective constructions. Figure 4.16 displays those meta-thematic structures.

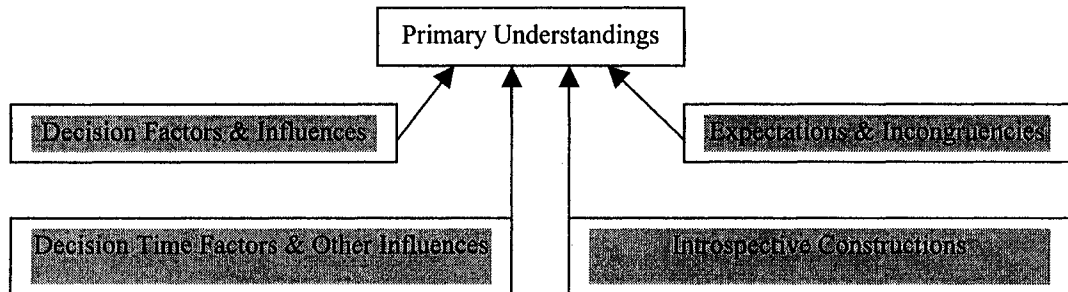


Figure 4.16: Primary Understandings of the First Semester

The first research question concentrated on those people and things that influenced the decision to go to college, for these participants. The aggregated theme that emerged became Decision Factors and Influences. Influential people included parents, siblings, relatives, athletic coaches, friends, supervisors, and acquaintances. In terms of positive support, parents appeared to be the most influential. Siblings and other individuals provided direct and indirect support for the decision. People who were negatively supportive and influential for some of the participants came in the form of fathers who were disinclined or ambivalent toward the decision. Financial support from the family was almost universally significant in its non-presence. Participants all made use of college financial aid and scholarships to pay for their college tuition and other expenses. This was seen as a detrimental influence, but one that these participants were able to overcome.

The second research question elicited responses with respect to the time orientation of the decision to go to college. The participants in this study were generally late-decision makers. Although several participants thought about college early in their lives, it was either in a negative fashion or in a very underdeveloped manner.

Involvement with sports (and coaches) late in high school, and the onset of high school graduation were the predominate decision influence factors. Other time-oriented decision factors included the leaving of the small town for a largely unknown destination, cultural stimuli such as movies and professional clothing (i.e. ties), the desire for change, and first-generation status. The desire for change, and first-generation status coupled with leaving a small town carried both negative and positive meanings. Participants were apprehensive about leaving their rural, agricultural environment but often energized by the new experience of something alien and exciting (the first semester in college).

The third research question findings were quite elaborate. The topic of this question focused upon those experiences that were different or surprising for the participants in their first semester. Responses to this question were categorized as those phenomena that were emotional, referred to campus life, academic, and related to the agricultural background of the participants. The aggregation of these themes was categorized as Incongruent Expectations.

The emotional aspects included the feelings that participants had about the relative level of associations

that students made, or did not make, with others in the first semester. First-generation status was strongly connected for some participants to their inability to form relationships, and feelings of disconnectness and disconsolation. That the first semester was a "very different" experience than what they expected, for all of the participants, was evident. Having roots in agriculture was a bipolar characteristic. On one hand, some felt very disoriented in the new environment, while others expressed the positive aspects of coming from an agricultural background.

Campus life themes included dormitory and roommate issues. Each of the participants who had roommates expressed some satisfaction with that arrangement, but only one mentioned a truly positive friendship. All but one were desirous of moving off campus and out of the dormitory as soon as possible. Cultural diversity was something that was surprising to the participants. The largeness of the campus and the complexity of the college environment was extremely discrepant from the expectations the participants had previous to entering college.

The differences between the academic expectations and the experience of the first semester for these participants were conspicuously apparent. The number and rigor of the

courses, requirements and behaviors of the professors, the amount of studying, the busyness of the typical day led to conditions of high or low comfort for the participants, depending upon their experience. All but one seemed motivated to successfully accomplish the academic requirements for the first semester.

The presence of an agricultural background for the students in this study presented some findings that are not extant in the first semester or persistence literature. Moving from a small town to a larger one, and it's inherent conditions for rural and first generation students, as well as moving from a small school to a large school, are concepts that can be found in the literature, and the findings from this section are similar. However, the roots in agriculture theme that emerged from this study includes concepts such as the misunderstandings about clothing preference that are decidedly agricultural, being isolated from farm and ranch animals, the lack of solitude, and the moral underpinnings of agronomic culture are significant. Being both first-generation and from an agricultural background make these participants twice-removed from knowledge about postsecondary education.

The fourth research question dealt with the *meaning* of the first semester in the words of the participants. The

emergent, meta-thematic concept for this section was labeled Introspective Constructions. Familial connectedness, agricultural attributes, and portals were the themes that emanated from the responses to this question.

Familial connectedness refers to the participants' strong family ties and behaviors that are indicative of them, such as staying in touch with parents and siblings, and appreciating family. Some of the participants found it difficult, impossible, or unnecessary to develop relationships at college -- resulting in the aforementioned feeling of disconnectedness. The incongruencies between many of the participants' expectations regarding the finding of nurturing relationships, such as they experienced in their small, agricultural towns and schools, proved to be disconcerting for some.

Striving for success and having pride in their accomplishments in the first semester were connected to the affirmation they would receive from their parents and that their parents and siblings would experience, in turn. Every participant with younger siblings expressed a strong intention to act as a role model for them. Another theme, the immensity of the change, was a universal construct for these students. The first semester is at once terrific and

terrible in the magnitude of the changes in the lives of the participants. Several commented that they would never be able to articulate the enormity of this life-changing experience to their parents, siblings, and relatives who have little or no knowledge of college with which to understand the first semester phenomenon.

Agricultural attributes comprised a construct that also flowed from the participants responses to the question of meaning. Personal and philosophical attributes such as persistence, pride in one's work, working hard, moral underpinnings, and self-reliance were concepts that the participants linked from their agricultural background to their engagement in the first semester. Participants depend upon these attributes in their daily life and believe that they are useful in the process of learning about and successfully navigating the first semester, and their college experience. The sense of placing one in charge of one's destiny that these attributes contribute to seem to be a help to most participants, and a hindrance to a few.

Portals, the final introspective construct, included concepts relating to the valence of the first semester. A fresh start, goals, the abstraction of success, forming of new and exciting relationships, and the pragmatic view of

college as a gateway to opportunities all contributed to the formulation of this thematic conception. Several participants remarked upon their newly found desire to focus on learning. All sought both tangible and intangible rewards for their efforts in the first semester.

In sum, the findings of this study are expansive in scope with regard to the meaning of the first semester for these participants, and the understanding of the lived experience of the phenomenon. The relevance between the condition of agricultural background and the essence of the first semester experience is particularly provocative and informative.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, & COMMENTARY

The first section of this chapter includes a summary of the purpose of the study, a brief description of the research method, and the primary findings. The second section includes interpretations and conclusions based upon the primary findings. The final section is comprised of recommendations for further research and practice, and commentary.

#### Summary

This study was undertaken because of the desire on the part of the researcher to gain a more holistic understanding of the manner in which first-generation students, who are from rural geographical areas, and whose parents, family, and/or selves are engaged in agriculture, experience the phenomenon of the first semester in higher education. One principal research question guided the research: *What is the essence of the first semester experience for college students with these demographic characteristics?*

A secondary objective for this study was to determine if the understandings that emerged from the research could form a foundation from which first semester retention

strategies for this particular student population could be configured.

The preponderance of research regarding first semester experiences has employed methods that are decidedly quantitative. Many are descriptive in nature and most tend to concentrate on a distinct student characteristic and attempt to find correlations between that feature and freshman attrition, or retention, as the case may be. The intent of this study was to attempt to understand the meaning of the many facets of the first semester experience from multiple voices of the students themselves.

A phenomenological methodology provided the overall approach to the study (Moustakas, 1994). Data gathering was accomplished through in-depth, structured interviews with students who agreed to be participants in this study (Seidman, 1998). Within-case and cross-case analyses were employed as data explication methods (Banning, 2003; Hatch, 2002; Miles & Humberman, 1994). A process of abductive coding provided the means for identifying, labeling, categorizing, and verifying patterns and themes that emerged from the raw data in the interview transcripts.

The findings are arranged in this section according to the research questions.

### *Research Questions and Findings*

Question 1. *What people or things do you think influenced your decision to go to college?*

The decision factors and influences which led up to the participants becoming first semester college students were comprised of positive and negative support themes.

Positive patterns emerged regarding appropriate financial support, significant positive influences exerted by parents (mother, father, or both), significant positive influences of other non-parental individuals, and the relationship to siblings.

Negative themes emanating from the data suggested that fathers exerting a non-supporting influence, a lack of financial support, and other themes such as limited or nonexistent information about higher education in first-generation families had an impact on the decision.

Question 2. *When did you first decide that you were going to go to college?*

Themes that were generated by a study of the transcripts relating to this question were categorized as decision time and other time decision factors. Decision time factors attended to the issues of early plans for college (including negative early plans), high school time frames, sports involvement, and post-high school. Other

time decision themes related to positive and negative financial support, being desirous of change, cultural stimuli, and positive and negative aspects of leaving a small town environment.

Question 3. *Is your first semester the same, or different than what you expected?*

Participant expectations were nearly always incongruent with what the participants experienced in their first semester. Categorical themes that emerged were centered around emotions, campus life, academics, and agricultural background.

Emotional patterns appeared in the areas of relationships, maturity and attitude, roots in agriculture, emotional comfort, first-generation status, first semester experiences that were very different or surprising, feelings of being disconsolate, and disconnectedness.

Themes relating to campus life included dormitory life, roommates, first-generation status, size of campus, partying, and cultural diversity.

Academic patterns emerged around academic comfort, professors, maturity and attitude, first-generation status, and relative degrees of busyness.

Agricultural background themes included low information regarding college, low level of money, leaving

small towns and moving to larger towns, change from small schools to larger schools, being desirous of change, disconnectedness, roots in agriculture, working hard, and lack of solitude.

Question 4. *What does all of this mean to you? What is the meaning of your first semester in college?*

The concept of meaning elicited responses that were categorized as being related to familial connectedness, agricultural attributes, and portals.

Familial connectedness themes included relationships, pride, sharing knowledge, sibling influences, success, disconnected, disconsolate, and the immensity of the change.

Agricultural attributes encompassed themes of agricultural meaning with relation to the first semester, working hard, roots in agriculture, self-reliance, first-generation status, agricultural heritage, persistence, and pride.

Portals refer to themes and patterns such as a fresh start, goals, opportunities, being desirous of change, being focused on learning, and success.

### *Interpretations*

The highest order of clustering of themes produced patterns incorporated in the concepts of decision factors and influences, decision time factors, expectations and incongruencies, and introspective constructions. These multiple-cluster themes will be interpreted and commented upon according to the order of the interview questions.

*Decision Factors and Influences.* In general, the decision to enter college was impacted both positively and negatively by numerous factors and influences in the natural environment within which the participants operated. Not surprisingly, parental attitudes about going to college, or lack of attitudes, seemed to have significant influence on the decision. Where support was offered by a parent or both parents, the decision was easier for the participant. Where one parent objected to the college-going concept, the participant was conflicted and somewhat confused about his or her decision.

The most frequent condition connected to parents and the college-going decision among these participants was found to be first-generation status and a relationship to the lack of parental information about higher education. This finding is in concurrence with a study of national

averages by the U.S. Department of Education on first-generation college students (2001):

As parents education increases, so does students' likelihood of enrolling in postsecondary education. Among 1992 high school graduates whose parents did not go to college, 59% had enrolled in some sort of postsecondary education by 1994. The enrollment rate increased to 75% among those whose parents had some college experience, and to 93% among those whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree. (pg. 7)

Several of the participants in this study experienced resistance to the decision by a father who either did not want the participant to leave the farm, or was intransigent in signing financial aid forms. This is illustrative of the difficulties that first-generation students face in the decision making process. The problem is compounded by the agricultural background.

*Decision-Time Factors.* The time orientation from which the participants made their decision to enter college varied. Some participants began thinking about higher education in elementary and middle school, but most formulated the concept of going to college in high school or later. Only one instance of negative early thoughts about going to college surfaced, and that idea remained with that lone individual even into the first semester of postsecondary. The majority of participants conceptualized

going to college in high school or later. Several participants, aided by encouragement by coaches, made the decision quite late in high school. The themes seem to illustrate that very few of the participants had concrete and substantial plans to enter college before actually taking any steps to bring it to fruition. They had thought about it, but not very seriously. For most, it was either at the end of their senior year, or later, that they began to consider themselves as college material and to take actions to apply to college.

This is in agreement with a reference made to the 1986 Attinasi study in Elliott (1989) findings that the rural students in the Attinasi study group "had almost without exception come to see themselves as college material *long before* (italics added) entering the University of Iowa" (pg. 188). The Elliott study correctly pointed out that Attinasi's subjects were comprised of rural, Mexican-American youth who had ACT composites exceeding 22. Although rural, Attinasi's students were bound for college early in their high school years. Phillips concentrated on a more general population of rural youth (without reference to gpa) and their college-going behaviors. An understanding of the decision making process for the participants in my study indicates that there may be an

additional dimension added when the participants are both rural and from "agricultural backgrounds." The agricultural background of the participants seems to have contributed to the late recognition that they might in fact be ready and capable of going to college.

Financial support was an important determinant in the decision-making continuum in this study. Across all cases, participants experienced non-existent to low levels of family financial support which seemed to add to the factors that led to late decision making. However, where even low to modest family financial support was present, there was a connection between satisfaction with the college-going decision among the participants. Yarbrough (1996) found that "[college] admissions directors perceived the lack of finances to be a primary factor in the reasons why rural students did not pursue higher education" (pg. 81).

Leaving a small town environment and moving to a larger town and a college campus was viewed favorably by a few of the participants. For the majority, this transition produced anxiety. Some of the behaviors exhibited, and choices made, by the participants in this new, larger environment in their first semester turned out to be counterproductive to a positive assimilation into their new settings. Similarly, Elliott (1989) found that "rural

students attempt to use their existing schemas to guide decision-making and predict future events. Because some rural students lack the background necessary to make sense of the unfamiliar events in the new world and respond effectively, integration into the new situation is hampered."

*Expectations and Incongruencies.* Perhaps one of the most unique findings of this study is the depth and breadth of the experiences that were different, or came as complete surprises, to these participants. It is a direct result of the phenomenological approach to this study that these surprising conditions became evident. By and large, the participants found themselves unaware of the need to build new relationships, and to cope with a college environment and culture which proved to be extremely dissimilar to that which they had known all their lives. In a few instances these aspects of the first semester (i.e. cultural diversity; dorm life) were a very difficult and emotionally charged process. Others had the requisite socialization skills necessary to aid in their assimilation. Their agricultural background seemed to be either a help, or a hindrance. But, in all cases, that background had an effect on the phenomenon.

That these participants were unprepared for the magnitude of the change between rural/agricultural life and the college milieu is not undocumented. Yarbrough (1996) reported that "many rural high school students are perceived to make decisions about higher education without sufficient professional assistance. The majority of (rural) principals [in her study] reported half-time or less than half-time high school counselors in their schools" (pg. 80).

The majority of the participants were pleasantly surprised by the culture of learning and took to it with pleasure; only a few struggled with the rigor, but some of them may have another surprise when their first semester grades are posted.

The dimension of "size" seemed to prove the most discrepant in terms of the pre-first semester expectations. The large physical size of the campus, the close quarters of the dormitory rooms, the expansiveness of the classrooms, the breadth of the curricula, the amount of money needed for school and living expenses, the scope of the change from rural/agricultural high school student status to that of being a college student, and the extensiveness of the surrounding community all produced feelings of awe, and sometimes trepidation.

*Introspective Constructions.* The meaning of the first semester provided an opportunity for the participants to be introspective about the phenomenon. This concept came last in the order of questions and produced many leitmotifs; some of which were quite abstract. The high level of abstraction is most likely due to the unstructured condition inherent in the notion of "meaning."

Familial connectedness refers to the participants' ability, as well as the desire, to form new relationships in the college environment and maintain those that already exist. This concept also included the immensity of the change -- a construction that permeated the movement of the participants from one relatively comfortable ontological view to one that is new and confusing, albeit exciting for nearly all of the participants.

Agricultural attributes emerged as a significant leitmotif that encompassed mostly positive concepts about those attributes that were drawn from a life of hard work, self-reliance, pride, and self-directed behavior.

Portals refer to the meaning of the first semester and the college-going condition as a opening up of occupational, academic, and personal opportunities. Each of the participants valued the first semester as an vehicle to first establish goals, and then to achieve them.

### Conclusions

1. First-generation status generated numerous problems for these participants in their first semester in college. Leitmotifs such as ignorance about the cost of college and financial aid; lack of parental information about college; misunderstandings stemming from ignorance about the value of relationship-building; and the "surprise" factor relating to college course rigor, course structure, and professorial expectations can all be attributed to first-generation status.

2. Rural status clearly contributed to the students' lack of experience with large towns, large campuses, and the diversity found in the college environment. Affective concepts of disconnectedness, lack of solitude, desire to "get back out in the country" from time to time, as well as pleasure, excitement, pride, and accomplishment are largely attributable to the condition of being a rural student in the first semester in college.

3. Agricultural status was the "wild card" conjuncture in this study. The absence of literature relating to the agricultural background status and its possible effect on students' meaning of the first semester in college makes the exploration of this condition provocative and unique. It is essential to understand that

the participants in this study were inexorably linked by the triple demographic characteristics of first-generation, rural, and agricultural background. Hence, a determination of which of the first semester experiences might be qualities of each specific condition was difficult.

However, the findings support a contention that there were indeed identifiable instances, or themes, that were attributable to agricultural background status. These participants spoke about their agronomic backgrounds as if they mattered to them. The farm, the ranch, the rodeos, the work that they performed, all were expressed as integral parts of their being. The essence of the person cannot be separated from the essence of the phenomenon. In this case, the first semester experience.

The pride of being a person with an agricultural background who has "worked hard" to accomplish difficult tasks was connected to the reasons why most of the participants felt like they could successfully navigate college and the first semester. Agricultural "heritage" was viewed by participants as being partly responsible for their belief that they would be persistent in adjusting to the new world of higher education. But, that heritage also seemed to create obstacles. To some, other students were perceived as not understanding their clothing preferences.

Nearly all of the participants held a belief that they had had to work harder before college than other students, creating a disharmony in relationship-building. And perhaps the most significant theme of all: participants saw themselves as being "different others" in the new college milieu. They were different because they were from rural areas, and because they were the first-generation in their families to attend college. And, they were also different because they have an agricultural heritage. Adam summed up this disparate condition when he remarked about the meaning of the first semester: "It's just being a long way from any cows. That's all you have to say."

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### *Recommendations for Institutions*

1. Recruitment Assimilation Strategy: Institutions of higher education that enroll new students who are rural, first-generation, and agricultural might improve the likelihood of early student acclimatization by having a heightened presence in rural high schools. It would be advantageous to this end for recruiters to pay special attention to late college-going-decision-makers, such as the participants in this study. College program coordinators should hold events in the evening so that

parents can attend. Although some colleges may already employ these techniques for recruitment in rural areas, this study also indicates that parents of first-generation, rural, and agricultural students may not ask questions during these sessions -- because they do not know what questions to ask. Or, because college education does not have valence for them. Anticipating that the "right" questions might not get asked, recruiters may find it advantageous to project slides or produce brochures that graphically make visible the layout of typical classrooms, dorm rooms, a professor's office, inside and outside views of the library buildings, and perhaps even aerial photographs of the school showing its dimensionality in relation to the surrounding community.

2. Extended Orientation: Colleges and universities might offer an extended orientation program specifically for incoming freshmen who are members of the multi-demographic group studied in this dissertation research. It appears that the optimal timing for such a program would be either based on a "summer bridge" model, or one that takes place *immediately before* the semester begins. Participants in this study were surprised about the "size" factors regarding the college environment fundamentally because they had apparently not visited the campus

previously. Or if they had, their tour must have been too brief or too minimal to allow them to form ideas about the environment that were rational and useful.

Selecting and providing orientation facilitators with information regarding those facets of the first semester that are most troublesome for these students could pre-empt some or many of the occurrences that were reported by participants in this study. A major topic for the orientation should include relating students' rural and agricultural, positive attributes to success in college. An additional topic would cover the concept of re-framing underdeveloped freshmen hopes and desires for success in life toward a more refined path-goal approach to encourage valence for higher education, in order to maximize the potential for postsecondary accomplishment.

3. Peer Mentors: Institutions should consider assigning peer mentors to students who are members of this multi-demographic group. By identifying first-generation, rural, and agricultural first-semester freshmen it is believed that an early intervention program such as mentoring would accomplish two desirable outcomes. One potential outcome is fundamental: Early identification of students in this group so that positive interaction and intervention can take place. The second outcome would be

an advantageous consequence of the first. Students who are the recipients of the mentor intervention in their first semester could become mentors to incoming freshmen of the same multi-demographic group after matriculating into their second semester.

4. Perhaps high school students from this group might benefit from being steered by high school counselors and coaches toward rural community colleges for their first experience with postsecondary education.

#### *Recommendations for Further Research*

1. Additional research is warranted with regard to agricultural students because they are a relatively non-studied subset of first-generation and rural demographics. Qualitative research might be used as the approach to ascertain how college-goers in this group view parental involvement. For example, a research study might concentrate on the phenomenon of parental involvement in the college decision making process for this population, with particular attention being paid to the agricultural segment of the cohort.

2. A research survey of this complex, multi-demographic population that utilizes an instrument based on the themes of college decision making factors; decision-

time orientation; expectations and incongruencies; and the introspective constructions of familial connectedness, agricultural attributes, and portals could be conducted in a quantitative manner to seek correlations between these themes and freshman retention, gpa, first semester satisfaction, etc.

### **Commentary**

The purpose of this study was to attempt to understand the essence of the first semester of college from the voices of a group of first-generation, rural students with agricultural backgrounds. A qualitative, phenomenological approach appeared to be the logical choice of methodologies. It proved to be a correct one.

The participants in this study openly expressed their reality of the first semester with respect to their specific demographic orientation. It is believed that by briefly describing to the participants my own membership in their distinct population (bias), which is appropriate for phenomenological interviewing, the conditions were enhanced for this sense-making journey. Although I rarely recounted any of my own, actual experiences in the interviews, and just a bit or a piece here and there at that, the participants seemed to comprehend that they were speaking

to someone who would at least try to comprehend what they had to say.

It is mentioned several times in this dissertation that the participants appeared to be comfortable with the interview process. That comfortable state of being was not just a fortunate happenstance, it was by design -- and by training. Building rapport and trust in an interview situation is of cardinal importance if one seeks the truth, and it can be done relatively quickly if one is possessed of acumen in the interviewing discipline. That is why I sustained the belief that interviews would be sufficient to gather enough data for this study, and to facilitate subsequent, trustworthy interpretations. Glesne (1999) states that "when a large amount of time is spent with your research participants, they less readily feign behavior or feel the need to do so; moreover, they are more likely to be frank and comprehensive about what they tell you" (pg. 151). How much is a "large" amount of time? Certainly part of the answer to that question is that the amount of time needed for the interview (observation, field work) is relevant to the researcher's qualifications.

On another note, although mention about clothing only appeared a few times in this particular study, observation indicates that students in this cohort quickly learn to

replace the apparel that is common to many rural, agricultural individuals with the more standard uniform of college students: baggy blue jeans, tennis shoes or thongs, and t-shirts. In the first week of a semester, cowboy hats and caps with agriculture-related insignias, boots, and Wrangler jeans are visible on many campuses where these students are present. By the second week however, these accoutrements are generally no longer evident. Either the students are attempting to conform to the larger culture, or they are no longer students. The former would intuitively seem to be the case, rather than the latter.

If this assumption is correct, then they are attempting to become assimilated, which is most likely a desirable motive. This behavior implies a transition in outward appearance that may be a visible artifact of a sense of being a "different other." Perhaps this is another impetus for further study of this population. If they consider themselves to be peripheral to the larger culture due to a difference in clothing styles, then the distinct possibility exists that there may also be personal epistemological and axiological contrariety between them and the overall college student culture. The findings of this study indicate that there is some legitimacy to this concept.

This study suggested that this population is indeed different -- at least according to their own lens. And that conclusion is a meaningful element of the underlying intent: to attempt to understand the essence of the first semester through their words, through their eyes, and through the themes that emerged from their stories.

APPENDIX A  
HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL LETTER

**Patrick Schutz - Upon Entering College: First-Semester Experiences of First-Generation, Rural Students from Agricultural Families**

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**From:** "McBlair, Joy" <Joy.McBlair@Research.ColoState.EDU>  
**To:** <pschutz@mesastate.edu>  
**Date:** 10/25/2002 12:44 PM  
**Subject:** Upon Entering College: First-Semester Experiences of First-Generation, Rural Students from Agricultural Families

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The above-referenced project **#02-243H** was approved by the Human Research Committee on October 22, 2002 for the period October 22, 2002 to October 1, 2003 with the condition that the approved consent form is signed by the subjects and each subject is given a copy of the form. It is the investigator's responsibility to obtain this consent form from all subjects. *NO changes may be made to this document without first obtaining the approval of the Committee.* Participants under the age of 18 years of age must have the parental assent section of the consent form signed by a parent.

**Approval is for 15 first-semester freshmen at Mesa State College.**

Hard copy of approval will follow in campus mail.

Joy McBlair  
Regulatory Compliance Office  
Colorado State University  
410 University Services Center  
Fort Collins, CO 80523-2046  
970.491.1553 office  
970.491.2293 fax

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY / MESA STATE COLLEGE  
INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

**TITLE OF PROJECT:** Upon Entering College: First Semester Experiences of First-Generation, Rural Students From Agricultural Families

**NAME OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** James Banning, Ph.D. (Colorado State University Faculty)

**NAME OF CO-INVESTIGATOR:** Pat Schutz (Colorado State University student and Mesa State College employee)

**CONTACT NAME AND PHONE NUMBER FOR QUESTIONS/PROBLEMS:** Pat Schutz, 970-248-1748

**PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:**

The purpose of this research is to gain an understanding of first semester college experiences of students who are the first generation in their family to go to college, who are from rural areas, and whose families are engaged in agriculture. It can be very helpful for colleges and universities to know how their students view their first semester.

**PROCEDURES/METHODS TO BE USED:**

You will be asked a few questions about your thoughts regarding your first semester. These questions will be asked by Mr. Schutz in a comfortable office setting on the Mesa State campus. You and Mr. Schutz will talk about things like what might have helped you make the decision to go to college, and what you think about your first experience with college life. Typical questions might be:

- a. What things or which people do you think influenced your decision to go to college?
- b. When did you decide that you were going to go to college?
- c. Is your first semester the same, or different than what you expected?

The interview will last no more than 1 hour. So that Mr. Schutz can spend time listening and speaking with you instead of taking notes, the interview will be audiotaped on a tabletop tape recorder. The audiotapes will be destroyed after the interview has been typed in order to ensure confidentiality.

**RISKS INHERENT IN THE PROCEDURES:**

Although the chances are very slight, there is always the possibility that you might feel uncomfortable about the interview process. If this happens, you may end the interview at any time. Care has been taken to design the interview so that it is as comfortable as possible. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

**BENEFITS:**

It is hoped that the information gained from these interviews can help colleges better understand their freshmen who are the first in their family to go to college, and whose families work in agriculture. As a result of learning what your first semester experience is all about, colleges might design programs to make the journey into college life more comfortable for students like you who enroll in the future.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Your real name will not appear in the interview transcripts. It will be replaced with a pseudonym; another name that is not similar to your own. The only people who will know that you are a research participant and who may have access to the records of this research study are members of the research team and representatives of Mesa State College's and Colorado State University's Human Subject Committee which approves and monitors research studies. These authorized representatives may see your name, but they are bound by rules of confidentiality to not reveal your identity to others.

When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity. When the audiotapes are no longer necessary to the research, they will be destroyed. Your name will never appear in any of the study documents, only the pseudonym (other name) will be used.

Page 1 of 2 Subject initials \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**LIABILITY:**

The Colorado Governmental Immunity Act determines and may limit Colorado State University's legal responsibility if an injury happens because of this study. Claims against the University must be filed within 180 days of the injury.

**RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS:**

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Mesa State College, 1100 North Ave., Grand Junction, CO 81501-3122; Telephone: (970) 248-1424. Or, you may contact Celia S. Walker at Colorado State University at (970) 491-1563.

**PARTICIPATION:**

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 2 pages.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant name (printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness to signature (project staff)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**PARENTAL SIGNATURE FOR MINOR**

As parent or guardian you authorize \_\_\_\_\_ (print name) to become a participant for the described research. The nature and general purpose of the project have been satisfactorily explained to you by \_\_\_\_\_ and you are satisfied that proper precautions will be observed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Minor's date of birth

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian name (printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX C

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS, INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Which people, or what things, influenced you to go to college? (Participants were probed for details)
2. When did you first decide that you were going to go to college? (Probe)
3. Is your first semester the same, or different, than what you expected? (Probe) (A tertiary question: "What is a typical day like for you?" was also asked and subsequently analyzed as aggregate data.)
4. What does all of this mean to you? What does the first semester, and going to college, mean to you? (Probe)

APPENDIX D  
LETTER TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

**Patrick F. Schutz**  
Mesa State College  
1100 North Avenue  
Grand Junction, CO 81501  
970-248-1748  
pschutz@mesastate.edu

October 14, 2002

Name  
Address  
City, State, Zip Code

Dear (student name),

This letter is in reference to research that will be conducted this fall regarding the first semester experiences of new freshmen at Mesa State who are from rural areas, engaged in agriculture, and among the first generation to go to college. The research project entails interviewing 5 to 15 new students to attempt to understand what they think and how they feel about their first semester.

Actually, the official title of the research is: Upon Entering College: First –Semester Experiences of First-Generation, Rural Students, from Agricultural Families.

I am an administrator and a faculty member at Mesa State and will be conducting this research as part of my doctoral work. This letter is on Colorado State University letterhead because that is where my doctoral classes are taken. Dr. Jim Banning, of CSU, is my advisor on this project. This letter is not an official request by the College and will not have any impact on your status at Mesa State if you decide not to participate. Rather it is my invitation to you to participate in this study and to help me understand what the first semester of college is all about, from your unique perspective.

I would welcome the opportunity to interview you on this subject. The interview will take only about an hour, and will take place in a comfortable setting on campus. If you would like to be interviewed, I will be happy to make convenient arrangements for the interview during the middle of the Fall Semester. **Please call my campus office at 970-248-1748 or 970-248-1304 and let me know if you are interested.** When you call, we'll set a convenient time to get together. I will have full details and a consent form for you to sign when we meet. Your response to this invitation is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Patrick F. Schutz

## APPENDIX E

## ORIGINAL CODING CATEGORIES

Code: 1st Gen

"1st Generation influences; "First in my family=no knowledge on the part of parents; unprepared for the rigor"

Code: Academic Comfort Level HI

"Belief that the academic segment of the 1st semester experience is high for this participant"

Code: Academic Comfort LO

"Belief that the academic proficiency and overall performance is low"

Code: AfraidProf

"Afraid of professors"

Code: Ag Heritage

"Want to retain and remember AG Heritage"

Code: Ag Mng NEG

"PERSONAL reflection on how Ag background IMPEDES understanding of 1st semester"

Code: Ag Mng POS

"PERSONAL reflection on possible connections between Ag background and meaning of 1st semester"

Code: Busy HI

"Relatively high degree of busy-ness; going all the time; almost too much for one person to accomplish"

Code: Busy LO

"Relatively low degree of busy-ness; boredom"

Code: Comfort LOW

"Low level of comfort; discomfiture with most aspects of 1st semester experience"

Code: Comfort POS

"High comfort level with most aspects of first semester experience"

Code: Confusion

"Confusion with first-semester tasks, new information, new decisions"

Code: Cult Div NEG

"Perhaps less tolerant of different cultures"

Code: Cultural Stimuli for Decision

"Cultural reasons for wanting to go to college -- "ties and dress up"; you have to go to get ahead"

Code: Desirous of Change

"To break out of the ag. mold; desirous of leaving the farm/ranch"

Code: Disconnected

"Not connected to the campus life or concepts of collegiality"

Code: Disconsolate

"Not coping well; not wanting to change from boots and jeans to tennis shoes or sandals"

Code: Dorm Neg

"Dorm life = negative"

Code: Dorm Pos

"Dorm life = positive"

Code: Early Plans for College

"Elem./Middle School; or before"

Code: Fin Imp

"financial improvement -- higher wages, professional opportunities"

Code: Fin Supp --

"negative financial support"

Code: Fin Supp +

"positive financial support"

Code: Focused on Lrng

"Participat is Focussed on learning new things; its all about learning"

Code: Fresh Start

"College is getting a fresh start after high school"

Code: Goals

"Setting Goals and achieving them = Important"

Code: HS

"Decision made in high school"

Code: Immensity of Change

"Awareness of the Immensity of the change to being a college student"

Code: Lack of Solitude

"Grieving about lack of solitude; lack of privacy; miss the wide open spaces"

Code: Lg Campus = Surprise

"Campus is larger to much-larger than the participant may have imagined"

Code: LO Info

"Lack of information re: college"

Code: LOMoney

"Lack of Money -- a surprise for some to "be broke.""

Code: Maturity & Attitude NEG

"Low maturity; neg. attitude toward changes brought about by college enrollment"

Code: Maturity & Attitude POS

"HI maturity and attitude re: college life in first semester; healthy views of 1st semester"

Code: Neg Early Decision

"Negative Early decision; did NOT want to go to college"

Code: Neg Influence on dec.re: college

"exerted a negative influence on decision to go to college"

Code: Neg. Inf. DAD

"DAD provided NEG Influence on the decision to go to college -- stay on the farm -- get real"

Code: Opportunities

"A chance for vocational opportunities; relationships"

Code: Partying - NEG

"Partying in the dorms was disruptive -- noisy -- emotions"

Code: Persistent

"Persistence -- I will finish this! I want to finish college!"

Code: Post PHS college dec.

"Post-high school decision to go to college"

Code: Pride

"Personal Pride, Parental Pride in your accomplishments"

Code: Prof Helpful

"professors helpful in transition to HE"

Code: Prof Not Helpful

"Professors NOT helpful in transition to HE"

Code: Relationships NEG

"Developing negative relationships; no relationships"

Code: Relationships POS

"Developed positive relationships with students, staff, profs"

Code: Roommate Neg

"Roommate = negative experience"

Code: Roommate Pos

"Positive experiences with roommates"

Code: Roots in Ag NEG

"People don't understand about farming, animals, irrigating, hard manual work"

Code: Roots in Ag POS

"Positive cognitive/emotional relationship between AG experience/knowledge and coping with 1st semester strangeness"

Code: Self-Reliance

"Considering oneself to be self-reliant, independent, maybe opinionated"

Code: Share Knowledge

"Desire to share knowledge with children, siblings."

Code: Siblings Inf

"Siblings depend on me to show the way to college"

Code: Sig Inf POS -- DAD

"Dad provided sig. POS influence on decision to go to college"

Code: Sig Inf Pos -- MOM

"Mother provided a significant, positive influence on the decision and emotional support for going-to-college"

Code: Sig Inf POS -- Others

"Others provided a sig POS influence on the decision to go to college -  
- Coaches, teachers, movies etc."

Code: Significant Inf POS

"Provided participant with positive significant influence on decision"

Code: Small School to Big School NEG

"Larger classes and the large campus population is a problem for some participants"

Code: Small Town Leaving= NEG

"Leaving the small town is a problem for some participants -- security issues? Loneliness? Isolation?"

Code: Small Town Leavng = POS

"Small Town Influences -- may want to leave small town and go to big town where one can be more anonymous"

Code: Sports

"football, sports as POS vehicle for transition to HE"

Code: Success

"Wants to be successful in college, in life"

Code: Very Different

"The 1st Sem. is very different than what was expected -- cognitive dissonance"

Code: Working Hard

"Participant feels like s/he is working hard to meet , or exceed, academic standards"

## THEMES AND PATTERNS

Code: ACADEMICS

"Thematic code for academic related codes"

Code: AG ATTRIBUTES

"Thematic code; Q4; attributes (neg & pos) of AG culture"

Code: AG BKGRND

"Thematic code for issues related to Agricultural background and influences"

Code: CAMPUS LIFE

"Thematic code for campus life codes"

Code: DEC TIME

"Thematic code for DEC TIME"

Code: EMOTIONS

"Thematic code for emotional issues"

Code: FAMILY CONNECTED

"Thematic code; Q4; connections to family important; sometimes participant feels disconnected in their absence"

Code: NEG SUPPORT

"Thematic code for NEG SUPPORT of decision"

Code: OTHER TIME DEC FACTORS

"Thematic code relating to Other Factors related to the decision time for entering college"

Code: PORTALS

"Thematic code; Q4; college opens doors; opportunities and goals"

Code: POS SUPPORT

"Thematic Code for positive support; node"

Code: PURPOSEFULNESS

"Thematic/Pattern code referring to desire to do well, goals are important, dedicated and hard working"

Code: TIME - COLLEGE DECISION

"META code encompassing time factors related to decision to go to college"

## META-THEMATIC CODES

Code: DECISION FACTORS & INFLUENCES

"Meta code for Q1 codes -- decision factors & Influences"

Code: DEC TIME & OTHER FACTORS

"META code for Q2 codes -- All Decision Time and Other Factors"

Code: INCONGRUENT EXPECTATIONS

"META code for Q3 codes -- 1st Semester is different than expected"

Code: INTROSPECTIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

"META code for Q4; participants' responses to "meaning" of 1st semester"

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