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DISSERTATION

A RESEARCHER'S JOURNEY: THE STORIES OF 'SUCCESSFUL' FEMALE,  
NON-TRADITIONAL, FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS AT  
THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF DENVER

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2005

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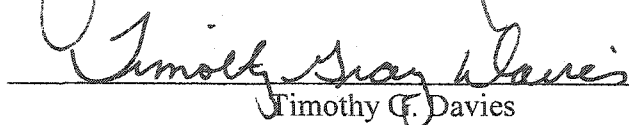
**COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY**

December 15, 2004

WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE DISSERTATION PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY LINDA A. LUJAN ENTITLED A RESEARCHER'S JOURNEY: THE STORIES OF 'SUCCESSFUL' FEMALE, NON-TRADITIONAL, FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF DENVER BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

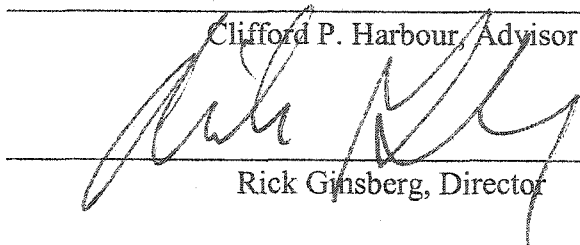
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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### A RESEARCHER'S JOURNEY: THE STORIES OF 'SUCCESSFUL' FEMALE, NON-TRADITIONAL, FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF DENVER

This narrative inquiry explored the stories of four self-identified 'successful' female, non-traditional, first-generation college students at the Community College of Denver. The researcher reflexively and subjectively shares the story of her own research journey as she tells how her research interest emerged, why it is important to hear the voices of first-generation women, how the academy assumes a hegemonic stance in categorizing groups of students as being "at risk," how the academy's policies and practices could support the success of women like her participants, and how the journey positively influenced her and her participants. Using feminist research strategies, the author conducted a group interview followed by a three-stage individual interview process during which she asked her participants to share their stories, co-interpret their stories' meanings, and discuss their experiences of being part of the research project. Each participant left a memento (letter, poem, etc.) for other first-generation women.

An interpretive framework of *relationships, resilience, reflection, and responsibilities* (the 4 R's) emerged inductively during data analysis. The author uses this framework to offer suggestions and recommendations for colleges to build policies and practices to foster success and connections with their first-generation population. As a result of her findings, she challenges colleges to build a *responsive* and caring campus culture. Another important finding was related to the positive effects and meanings the participants and researcher made of the experience of participating in the research study. It appears to confirm the importance of providing forums and venues for individuals to narrate their lives.

It is the author's belief that the findings of this study offer a counter-narrative/ counter-story to the widely-told grand narrative that focuses on a deficit model of non-traditional, first-generation students and contributes to unearthing the less-heard *Discourse* (Gee, 1996) of the *Other* (Johnson-Bailey, 2002b; Personal Narratives Group, 1989).

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# 道

*“Stand before it - there is no beginning.  
Follow it and there is no end.  
Stay with the Tao, move with the present.”  
- Lao Tzu*

A solitary journey is never taken alone. Although I have traveled far, I was never far from those whose influence and support guided and nurtured me. I used to wonder why it took award winners so long to leave the stage. Now, I think I understand.

First and foremost I want to thank my husband and life's companion, Edward Lujan, Jr., for being beside me on this long, long passage. Your patience and support and willingness to let me leave to go a-wandering made all the difference. Now we can go on the next adventure together! You are one of the smartest men I know and my being “Doctor” won't make me any better than the “Captain.” I love you.

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Safe journey.

Linda Lujan  
December 2004

## DEDICATION

For my family - Ed, Chris, Michelle, Eamon, Jon, Emily, Jenni, Aaron, Michael, Quentin, and Lyss. Your patience and support sustained me. I love you all.

## CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION</b> .....	<b>III</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	<b>IV</b>
<b>DEDICATION</b> .....	<b>VII</b>
<b>CONTENTS</b> .....	<b>VIII</b>
<b>TABLES</b> .....	<b>XII</b>
<b>GENESIS</b> .....	<b>1</b>
A Researcher's Journey .....	1
A Circuitous Route to a Topic .....	2
A Fork in the Road.....	5
The Journey's Purpose .....	7
Questions to Guide the Wanderer .....	9
Trail Markers: Demarcations of the Journey .....	10
Beliefs, Stance, and Assumptions of the Explorer.....	11
Significance of the Journey.....	12
The Researcher's Story.....	13
And Now.....	17
<b>PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY</b> .....	<b>18</b>
Learning from Other Wanderers: Learning from Myself .....	18
Another Epiphany .....	19
Deficit Perspective .....	21
Success Perspective .....	22
Alternative Stories of First-Generation Students.....	24
The Academy .....	27
Questions to Challenge the Academy .....	29
"And" Not "Or" .....	31
Other Themes.....	32
Did This Journey Matter? .....	32
Spirals .....	34
<b>MODE OF INQUIRY</b> .....	<b>36</b>
Introduction to the Journey's Methods.....	36
Synchronicity .....	37
Meeting with Merlin .....	38
Roadmap .....	40
Narrative Stance .....	40
Emergent Research Design.....	41
Landscape of the Journey (Research Setting).....	42

Definition of Fellow Travelers (Participants).....	44
Respecting, Protecting, and Honoring my Fellow Travelers (Ethics of Care).....	46
The Selection of my Fellow Travelers (Recruitment Strategy).....	48
The Researcher's Knapsack (Data Collection Tools).....	49
Collecting the Stories of my Fellow Travelers (Interview Strategy).....	50
Learning from my Fellow Travelers (Three-Phase Interview Process).....	51
Documenting and Accounting for the Journey (Trustworthiness and Credibility)....	52
Making Meaning of All those Data (Data Analysis).....	53
This Researcher is Not a Therapist.....	54
Moving On.....	56
<b>METHODS AND METHODOLOGY IN ACTION.....</b>	<b>58</b>
The Group Interview Process.....	58
Faith, Stella, Tamika, Fareeda, and Jacque.....	59
Collecting Stories.....	72
Finding Hope.....	73
Collecting More Stories.....	74
Encountering Elena.....	75
The Individual Interviewing Process.....	77
Transcribing Stories.....	78
My Journey.....	80
<b>TELLING THEIR STORIES.....</b>	<b>82</b>
Conquering Mountains of Data: Analysis and Interpretation.....	82
Identifying Pathways: Emerging Themes.....	84
So, let me introduce you to the women who taught me.....	86
<b>HOPE.....</b>	<b>87</b>
Meeting Hope.....	87
Hope's Story.....	89
Analysis.....	97
Hope's Experience.....	101
Interpretation.....	103
Relationships.....	104
Resilience.....	104
Reflection.....	105
Responsibilities.....	105
Hope's Poem.....	106
<b>FAITH.....</b>	<b>107</b>
Meeting Faith.....	107
Faith's Story.....	109
Analysis.....	116
Faith's Experience.....	118
Interpretation.....	120
Relationships.....	121
Responsibilities.....	121

Reflection .....	122
Resilience .....	122
Faith's Selection.....	123
<b>STELLA.....</b>	<b>125</b>
Meeting Stella .....	125
Stella's Story .....	126
Analysis.....	134
Stella's Experience.....	137
Interpretation.....	140
Relationships .....	140
Responsibilities.....	141
Reflection .....	141
Resilience .....	141
Stella's Poetry .....	142
<b>ELENA .....</b>	<b>144</b>
Meeting Elena .....	144
Elena's Story .....	145
Analysis.....	156
Elena's Experience.....	158
Interpretation.....	160
Resilience .....	160
Relationships .....	161
Responsibilities.....	161
Reflection .....	162
Elena's Letter .....	162
<b>MUSINGS AT THE JOURNEY'S END.....</b>	<b>165</b>
Research Questions.....	165
Elena's Challenge .....	166
Individuality .....	167
Commonality.....	168
Resilience .....	170
Relationships .....	173
Reflection .....	175
Responsibilities.....	177
Interpretive Framework .....	179
Their Experience .....	181
Participants' Advice for Colleges .....	182
Participants' Advice for Other First-Generation Women.....	183
Generalizability.....	184
Honoring Voices .....	185
<b>EVERY STEP OF THE JOURNEY IS THE JOURNEY.....</b>	<b>187</b>
A Researcher's Assertion .....	187
The Journey's Purpose.....	188

Balancing the 4 R's.....	190
Recommendations: Little Things Mean a Lot .....	191
Idea: Women's Circles .....	193
Idea: Storytelling Circles.....	194
Idea: Recognition Activities .....	195
Idea: Personal Contact with an Empathetic Listener.....	195
Idea: Check Your Hegemonic Assumptions. ....	196
Building a Responsive and Caring Campus Culture.....	197
Endings .....	199
Reflections on the Group Interview.....	199
Reflections on Methods and Future Research .....	199
Reflections on This Journey's End.....	202
Spirals .....	203
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>205</b>
<b>APPENDIX A - A BRIEF REVIEW ON FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS .....</b>	<b>220</b>
An Observation.....	221
A Brief Review .....	222
Deficit Perspective.....	222
Positive Findings .....	226
<b>APPENDIX B – PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS .....</b>	<b>228</b>
<b>APPENDIX C - RECRUITMENT FLYER.....</b>	<b>231</b>
<b>APPENDIX D - INFORMED CONSENT FOR FOCUS GROUP .....</b>	<b>233</b>
<b>APPENDIX E - FOCUS GROUP DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY .....</b>	<b>236</b>
<b>APPENDIX F – GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS .....</b>	<b>239</b>
<b>APPENDIX G - SCREENING INTERVIEW (INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE SCRIPT) .....</b>	<b>241</b>
<b>APPENDIX H - INFORMED CONSENT FOR INTERVIEWS .....</b>	<b>244</b>
<b>APPENDIX I - INTERVIEW GUIDE.....</b>	<b>247</b>

## TABLES

1	Hope's Themes	99
2	Faith's Themes	117
3	Stella's Themes	136
4	Elena's Themes	157
5	Participant Demographics	228

## GENESIS

*"The journey is difficult, immense. We will travel as far as we can, but we cannot in one lifetime see all that we would like to see or to learn all that we hunger to know." - Loren Eiseley*

### A Researcher's Journey

It all begins with curiosity and perhaps ends the same way - a sense of 'puzzlement' that influences the researcher's view (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Stake, 1995) and sends her on a quest. This research journey began many years before I was even aware I would embark on such an ambitious expedition. It began the day I started asking my mother childlike questions about "why" and "who" and "how." It continued throughout my life as my natural human curiosity pulled me in various directions. This particular journey was not planned, although as a neophyte researcher, I tried desperately to build a static roadmap early on - wanting more than anything the safety of following the path of those who had journeyed before me. Not until I left the well-worn path, did my true journey begin. Like any journey, it has had its share of serendipity, surprise, and hardship along the way. In the end, although the journey never really ends, I have learned much and can tell much about the people and places encountered along the way. Yet, if I were to undertake a similar journey in the future, I am not certain how much the story of that journey would resemble this one, for by then I will have changed, the people and places I explore will have changed, and the meanings we all make of the experience

would reflect that moment in time and not this. Such is the nature of the research journey (Geertz, 1995).

### **A Circuitous Route to a Topic**

This particular journey emerged from my professional interest in promoting high school dual enrollment as a means of improving the learning outcomes and college access rates for high school students. Initially, my quantitative goal was to compare the performance of Advanced Placement® and high school dual enrollment students with the hope of showing that the learning outcomes of the latter were as good as, if not better than, the former. For a variety of reasons - logistical, political, temporal, and emotional - that study will have to be conducted by someone else. Next, with the encouragement and support of my employer, I refined my focus to look solely at high-school dual enrollment students at the Community College of Denver (CCD) to determine how well, or poorly, they were prepared for, and able to move through, the educational pipeline on the Auraria Campus - a tri-institutional setting housing The University of Colorado, Denver; Metropolitan State College of Denver; and the Community College of Denver. As the demographic profile of the participating students was being compiled, two occurrences happened - one professional and one personal.

The professional occurrence was the form the data took. As I analyzed preliminary enrollment data, I discovered that compared to suburban community colleges in the Denver area a disproportionately low number of urban secondary students participated in dual enrollment at the Community College of Denver. Because of CCD's extensive work in promoting high school dual enrollment with the Denver Public Schools, I had expected much larger participation. Additionally, within that low number

a significant number of students could be classified as first-generation college students whose parents had never attended college or had not completed college. Given the demographics of CCD, I should have anticipated that. This development was important because it shifted my dual enrollment emphasis toward first-generation students.

The personal occurrence was attending the *2003 Title V First-generation Student Graduation Ceremony* at CCD. That day opened a wellspring of emotions for me. As a first-generation, non-traditional student who took an even more non-traditional path to employment as a faculty member at an “elite” suburban community college, I had always felt somewhat like an imposter. It was not until I came to work at a diverse, urban community college that I began to realize how much my own experiences had influenced me. Looking into the eyes of each of CCD's first-generation graduates, I saw reflected there some of the same emotions that I had carried deep within myself for well over 30 years - pride, fear, courage, shame, uncertainty, and hope. The day was an epiphany. As they told their stories of persistence and optimism against adversities, large and small, I felt as if I were at my own first-generation graduation and their stories were mine. What I could not know then was how tenaciously the first-generation thread would become woven into my own research.

In talking with my senior advisor (whom I coined Taliesin after the Welsh poet whose words reminded his listeners to uphold social ideals) about my research proposal, I shared that story. I shared, for the first time ever with a professional colleague, my many decades' worth of feelings about being a pregnant high school dropout and non-traditional first-generation student and the pathways that had led me to where I am today. In telling that story, I revisited my deep-seated feelings of shame and imposter-hood, and

when the telling was done, I realized how liberating it had been to give voice to my story. As I retold the story of my experiences at the first-generation student graduation and reflected on the demographics of CCD's students, I recognized that my dual-enrollment research focus had become closely intertwined with, and perhaps overshadowed by, the stories of first-generation, students.

After that meeting, I drove home reflecting on what Taliesin and I had explored together. I wondered about the stories of the first-generation, high school dual enrollment students at CCD. As I imagined the shape this research ultimately would take, I wondered what I would find. I realized that I was already making assumptions about these students. Then I wondered if my assumptions were correct; if I was biasing my study by forming impressions before hearing their stories. I wondered how much of my own first-generation experience influenced my thoughts and questions.

Most importantly for a neophyte researcher, this topic filled me with an insatiable curiosity and driving need to learn more. I had a passionate need to hear the stories of the experiences of first-generation students and understand their meaning, gain awareness, and share my findings with others. Intellectually, I knew that that this circuitous exploration of ideas, ending up in blind alleys, chasing notions that circled back upon themselves, and finally converging on a topic on which to anchor was a normal and expected part of the dissertation journey. With each of the prior topics, the strength of my affinity-to-topic varied, but what I did not know until it happened to me, was how strongly I would feel about this topic. I found myself thinking about the stories of first-generation students at nearly every moment of the day. I couldn't *not* focus on this topic. I was drawn to it in an almost primal way.

## A Fork in the Road

*"I shall be telling this with a sigh  
somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--  
I took the one less traveled by,  
and that has made all the difference."  
- Robert Frost*

Weeks of reading, thinking, talking with colleagues and advisors ensued. I consulted with Taliesin and my other major advisor, whom I named Lao Tzu for his wonderful Zen-like approach to problem solving. They offered many ideas and suggestions but left the decision about where to venture to me. Like many researchers, it seemed that everything I encountered was somehow related to my topic. Yet, the more I read, reflected, and learned, the more my pathway moved away from high school dual enrollment and the first-generation theme became the one in which I was most interested. It felt as if I were trying to hang onto a topic that no longer filled my heart and mind. Perhaps because of the year's worth of intensive reading and writing I had already done and because of my strong belief in the value of high-school dual enrollment, I struggled mightily to make it my path. Yet, unknowingly, I had already taken the path "less traveled" by qualitative researchers (Merriam, 2002) as I made deep emotional connections to the many non-traditional women who, like me, were successful first-generation community college students. I felt compelled to meet with them, talk with them, listen to them, and capture the essence of their experiences and to make meaning from their stories. I wanted to join their voices with mine to tell their stories. Our voices - those of 'successful', non-traditional, first-generation women - were the voices that I believed needed to be heard.

As I continued to work on my research proposal, I found myself looking at all the many women on campus and wondering, "Are you one of them whose story I will soon hear and tell? Are you one of them who will join me on my researcher's journey? Who are you? Where have you been? Where are you going? How do you see yourself? How do you want us to see you? How have we helped you? How have we harmed you?"

Although the literature I was reading provided insight into the characteristics of first-generation students (Terenzini, Springer, Yeager, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996) and noted all the risks faced by first-generation community college students (London, 1992; Mitchell, 1997; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Riehl, 1994), somehow I didn't see myself (or other successful first-generation women) there. In fact, I became increasingly concerned about the overwhelming 'deficit perspective' that stereotypes first-generation students as being at-risk (Appendix A). There is no doubt that a variety of factors may place individual students at risk, or that some studies confirm that some first-generation students are at risk. But, where were the success stories? Who was talking about and celebrating the individual persistence, resilience, talents, and stories of those first-generation women who are succeeding in college?

I began to suspect that this 'deficit perspective' is part of a dominant academic hegemony that unwittingly (or wittingly, I had not decided) marginalizes the *Other* (Johnson-Bailey, 2002b; Personal Narratives Group, 1989). Fleeting concepts like "social worker mentality," "power-over," "less-than," "care-taker," "paternalism" and more danced through my brain. I began to reflect on these embryonic ideas in relation to what I was reading as well as what I hoped to learn on my own research journey.

I also wondered about the ways that this journey would change me. The process of writing a dissertation is a life-consuming, mind-altering event anyway, but what happens to the researcher who is so engaged in her topic, identifies so closely with her participants, and cares so passionately about telling their story? Who would I be, what would I believe, and how would my values and perspectives be transformed when this journey ended?

I hoped that what I might find would inform the community college world about the experiences, thoughts, actions, beliefs, feelings, accomplishments, and dreams of a few of the many 'successful' female, non-traditional, first-generation students who begin their academic careers at two-year colleges (Phillipe & Valiga, 2000; NCES, 2001). These are the stories I tell in the pages of this dissertation. Their stories are not my story; my story is not theirs. We have lived different lives in different generations. Yet running through each of our unique success stories, are parallel themes, parallel experiences, that give voice for the untold others who have no forum.

### **The Journey's Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore narratively and interpretively (Chase, 1996; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clinchy, 2003, Personal Narratives Group, 1989), the experiences of four 'successful' female, non-traditional, first-generation, students at the Community College of Denver. Throughout, I put the word *successful* in quotes to emphasize that I would hear the stories of participants who self-identified as 'successful' rather than using traditional academic definitions of success. After eliciting their stories, I honored the participants' ownership of their stories by asking them to continue the work of co-construction of meaning (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and

asking them to help me identify the themes contained within their stories. In joining our voices together, we interpreted and made meaning of their (*our*) lives (Chase, 1996). From the themes they (*we*) identified, I returned to the literature to discover what others have already learned about those themes. I then inductively uncovered an interpretive framework in order to refine what we know, believe, and understand about female, non-traditional, first-generation community college students. This framework for interpreting the meanings of their stories - the new voices added to the conversation – provides one more signpost on the landscape that we call ‘first-generation’ and offers another way for understanding the success of non-traditional, first-generation women.

Non-traditional, first-generation women, like other under-represented groups (Ladson-Billings, 2000), usually find themselves left out of the conversations of the dominant, academic culture. By telling their stories, and interpreting the meanings of the experiences of a few of those ‘successful’ women, this study contributes to unearthing the less-heard *Discourse* (Gee, 1996) of the *Other* (Johnson-Bailey, 2002b; Personal Narratives Group, 1989). I am deliberate in my italicized use of *Discourse* - with capital ‘D’ as defined by James Paul Gee (1996) who says

*Discourses* are ‘forms of life’ or ‘ways of being in the world’ that integrate being, acting, interacting, thinking, valuing, and various sort of objects, symbols, tools, and technologies. *Discourses* are ordered hierarchically within the politics of everyday life and the privilege of dominant groups is reproduced through dominant *Discourse* (p. 39).

The dominant *Discourse* is louder and heard more than the *Discourse* of marginalized groups unless there is a deliberate effort to foreground the latter (Gee, 1996). Another purpose of this study was to provide a counter-narrative/counter-story

(Bloom, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2000) to the widely-told grand narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that focuses on a deficit model of first-generation students.

### Questions to Guide the Wanderer

As I began this study, I had a series of questions that influenced my thinking. Among these questions were: "What are the stories of these 'successful' female, non-traditional, first-generation community college students at the Community College of Denver? What has been their experience as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, friends, and women who happen to be non-traditional, first-generation students? How do they see and define their success? What do their voices and stories tell us about them as unique individuals? What do their voices and stories tell us about them as members of the group labeled 'first-generation'? What do their voices add to the *Discourse* (Gee, 1996) of the academy that would not have been heard in any other way? In what ways do their stories confirm or disconfirm the deficit perspective? How has my study personalized the face of first-generation women for the academy?"

These initial questions guided my study, but as Annie Rogers notes, "Researchable questions commonly become clear only after one has been involved in a research project for a considerable period" (2003, p. 54). The natural curiosity of the researcher and her participants lead to a desire to explore emergent ideas, themes, and questions. In narrative inquiry, as one question is answered, new questions arise. The exploratory nature of narrative inquiry (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003) is what drew me to this research. Additional questions that emerged as a result of this study included: "How has the experience of participating in a research study influenced these women? What recommendations do they have for colleges? What recommendations do they have for

other first-generation students? In what ways can colleges and higher education professionals adapt or modify practices to better meet the needs of ‘successful’ first-generation women students?”

### **Trail Markers: Demarcations of the Journey**

During this research journey, I focused solely on the in-depth stories and experiences of four self-identified ‘successful’ female, non-traditional, first-generation community college students at the Community College of Denver. As with any narrative study, it was subject to the individual “truth” of the teller (Personal Narrative Group, 1989) and the experience and beliefs of the researcher in understanding and interpreting those stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Daiute & Fine, 2003). I worked with participants during a specific time period, in a particular context, and interpretations have been based on each participant’s mood, tone, self-understanding, and beliefs at that time (Bloom, 1998). This is not a comparative study; I did not compare their school performance with others, but I found some commonality in emergent themes of *resilience, relationships, reflection, and responsibilities* (the 4 R’s), which also became my interpretive framework. My researcher’s ‘voice’ is evident throughout the study (Eisner, 1988), and I wrote and worked in the first-person, bringing my personal, professional, and political experience and perspective into the mix (Ellis & Bochner; 2000; Fraser, 1993). Although themes of “gender,” “class,” “ethnicity,” “persistence,” “resilience,” “motivation,” “self-concept,” “fear of failure,” “imposter syndrome,” “identity development,” “self-agency,” and others appeared during the preliminary literature review, I did not impose a specific framework or theme on my participant’s success stories until I heard them (Chase, 2003). As I listened for themes, met with my

participants to analyze their first interviews, and worked to see what would emerge from the data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I inductively uncovered themes and an interpretive framework (the 4 R's) that helped me to make sense of my participants' success.

### **Beliefs, Stance, and Assumptions of the Explorer**

When I embarked on this journey, I had certain beliefs about the people and places I would visit and beliefs about myself as the researcher. I believed that I would gain the trust and 'truthfulness' of the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Personal Narratives Group, 1989) although the elusive nature of truths (Daiute & Fine, 2003) makes that a post-modern proposition subject always to the skepticism of the audience. I intended to approach their stories with dignity, respect, and empathy (Chase, 2003; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Reinharz, 1992; Yow, 1994). I further believed that I had sufficient knowledge, but limited experience in conducting qualitative data gathering and analysis. To better prepare for the trip I conducted a small pilot study to assess my interview strategy and techniques. Using the data collected from the pilot, I tried several analysis strategies both to gain experience in the process and to determine which strategy worked best. The guidance and mentoring I received from my advisors Lao Tzu and Talesin and my methodologist, Merlin, also helped me hone my skills.

I also needed to define the limits and boundaries of the trek, although some of those were not known until the end when I looked back and described the people and places I had visited. Depending on one's perspective, it is either a limitation or a gift (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Merriam, 2002; Reinharz, 1992) that I brought my own experience and bias to the journey. However, my experience is as a white, non-

traditional, first-generation student, and a high school dropout from a parochial school who attended a suburban community college over 20 years ago. Those experiences did not exactly mirror those of my participants. So, I needed to work on balancing the ‘insider/outsider’ perspectives with the participants (Fraser, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Finally, I worked extensively with a small group of participants which added richness and depth to their stories, but may not satisfy those readers who want a more traditional, broad brush look at ‘successful’ female, non-traditional, first-generation community college students. As a result, this research has ‘thick description’ about people's lives rather than ‘thin conclusions’ (White, 1995; White, 2000).

### **Significance of the Journey**

All human experience is lived narratively. It is through our co-constructing stories that meaning is made and shared (Chase, 2003; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Eisner, 1991; Merriam, 2002). This journey’s story contributes to the limited narrative knowledge about ‘successful’ female, non-traditional, first-generation community college students. Narrative inquiry provides a fertile methodology (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) to bring unheard voices into the policy and practice *Discourse* (Gee, 1996) of community college professionals. The opportunity to hear, listen, interpret, and discuss the experiences of ‘successful’ female, non-traditional, first-generation community college students legitimizes their (*our*) stories and makes them (*us*) more ‘real’ (Personal Narratives Group, 1989) to the academy.

## The Researcher's Story

As the primary research instrument in this study, my own story influenced my beliefs, values, understanding, and approach to this study (Chase, 2003; Creswell, 1998; Patton, 1990; Janesick, 2000). It colored what I heard, saw, and learned. My perspective - what 'traditional' researchers might call bias - cannot be ignored. The stories I heard, the interpretations I made, the conclusions I drew, were all filtered through my interpretive and theoretical lenses and personal experiences (Janesick, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2002a). This is the gift of qualitative research, especially the narrative inquirer (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). However, it also places tremendous responsibility on the researcher to be clear with herself and her audience about her own voice. As Juanita Johnson-Bailey (2002b, p. 325) notes, "... it has to be recognized that my voice - as the one presenting - is ever present." Even as I intellectually and emotionally conceived and planned for the rest of this journey, it was important for me to acknowledge that it actually began a long, long time ago....

It began years before as I grew up in a large, loving, crazy-making alcoholic household with seven siblings, a drunken father we adored and whose approval we could never quite gain, and a prototypical co-dependent mother who gave us much more than we realized at the time. We were second-generation Irish-Americans in a working-class household where money was always desperately tight. I attended Catholic schools where the injunction was; "You are going to college." My personal mantra, a result perhaps of years of social action with liberal nuns, was "Make a difference." Yet at age 17, pregnant and married, I dropped out of high school. I was ashamed not to graduate with my peers.

That shame persisted as I saw many of them continue on to higher education, finish degrees, and enter the work world in professional careers.

Additionally, at the close of the tumultuous 1960s my dating, then marrying, a “Mexican-American boy” caused significant consternation in both our families. While not quite as dramatic as a black-white union, our brown-white marriage was definitely not the norm within our working-class worlds. Only when our first child was born did either side really accept us as a couple. My husband began a career in law enforcement, and I settled into the (not always fulfilling) role of mother and homemaker.

At age 30, when our four children were more self-sufficient, I returned to the educational world by self-advising into a Computer Information Technology program at the local community college. I was fearful, excited, and proud to be returning to school - probably as proud as my high school friends who had attended prestigious universities. Yet, when I ran into them and told them what I was doing, I carried the old shame of dropping out and now the new shame of being at a “junior college.” Like so many non-traditional students I juggled family and school, yet because I was doing what I had yearned to do, I thrived.

Near the end of my second year, the department chair asked me to teach a COBOL class. I was shocked, flattered, and scared to death. I initially told him “no.” He persisted - I don't know if it was because he saw something in me (my preferred version of history) or because he was desperate for a teacher and running out of time (the more likely version of history). Not knowing anything about the formal and informal norms of academia, I finally accepted and my community college journey really began. As an eager-to-please female in the sacred grove of academia (Long, Jenkins, & Bracken,

2000) there was nothing I would not do to support the department. I taught; I tutored; I helped manage the computer lab; I wrote lab manuals; and I met with students any time of the day all for the pay of one COBOL class. It wasn't about trying to promote myself; it was about trying to prove myself. I felt like an imposter and believed that once they really knew my story they would ask me to leave.

I taught another semester and another learning and growing into the role. My students wrote glowing evaluations about how well I was able to help them learn concepts and skills. The full-time faculty member who had been hired to run the program resigned suddenly during the first week of the fall semester, and the department chair asked me to 'run' the program (all the while collecting the stipend for doing the work he had me doing). I knew I could do the job, but felt a sense of illegitimacy so I tried even harder to prove myself. The dean noticed. When the job opened up, I applied and was turned down by the screening committee because I had not yet completed my AAS degree. The dean, who knew the quality of my work, created a half-time position for me.

The academic firestorm began. Faculty members from other areas of the college were indignant that a non-degreed individual had been hired to join their ranks. Rather than speak openly, they began a subtle and insidious whisper campaign. The whispers grew louder and I learned what they were saying. My longstanding shame at being a high school dropout and non-traditional, first-generation student flooded me, virtually obliterating my pride at being considered worthy to teach. The wounds were deep and the hurt indescribable. I believed that nothing I did could ever be enough to prove my legitimacy. The dean stood beside me and argued on my behalf. His best piece of advice, and one I use to this day was, "Hold your head high and keep smiling. They'll

soon find someone else to focus on." He was right, but the damage had been done. There were certain faculty members whose eyes I could not meet (even years later) without cringing. I was alone with my story and it shamed me.

I finished my AAS and when the full-time faculty member resigned in a year to go back to school, I applied again. This time I was included in the finalists and hired for the job. I worked hard to learn and grow. I became even more involved in all aspects of the college. Work consumed me. Today I wonder who I was trying most to please - them or myself? Even as hard as I worked, it wasn't enough. I didn't have the right credentials. So while working full-time, I went back to school and earned a BA and then an MA. My master's degree was earned at a prestigious eastern university, and when I saw that degree with my name on it, I finally started feeling like I might be "real" (Personal Narratives Group, 1989).

When I started my doctoral program, I was doing something solely for myself. It no longer seemed I had to still the voices of the critics. I had achieved much in my career at the college as faculty member, department chair, faculty senate president, chair of both the strategic planning and academic standards committees, member of numerous other committees, assistant dean and had moved from the classroom to an academic administration position. I began to believe that I had opportunities beyond my current role and the best way to prepare for those was to earn a Ph.D. Two years after I began the doctoral program, I applied for a position as an academic dean at the Community College of Denver, an urban community college, and was hired after an extensive screening and interview process. After that experience, I finally felt like I was an authentic member of the academy. But, the old feelings of imposter-hood and

illegitimacy were difficult to leave behind (Long, Jenkins, & Bracken, 2000). And, until I attended the first-generation graduation ceremony at my new college, I never realized how deeply they had been buried.

### And Now...

Here I am, finally confronting the shame that has been a constant theme in my adult life and a major contribution to my own personal narrative. I toy with the words to describe how I am feeling and what comes from deep within my being is, "I am a high school dropout, a first-generation student, and I am okay!" For the first time in my life, I comprehend intellectually and emotionally that there are others like me who are 'successful' by their (*our*) own measure, and I have told their (*our*) stories. We are here! We are real! We are legitimate! There is a place for us in the Academy and our voice matters.

*"The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you can alter, even by a millimeter, the way people look at reality, then you can change the world." - James Baldwin*

## PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

*"We live lives based upon selected fictions. Our view of reality is conditioned by our position in space and time--not by our personalities as we like to think. Thus every interpretation of reality is based upon a quite unique position. Two paces east or west and the whole picture is changed" - Lawrence Durrell*

### **Learning from Other Wanderers: Learning from Myself**

My journey into the literature took me many places and, like any good wanderer, I knew it had to take me many more. The key was in knowing when something was relevant and significant to my study (Hart, 1998). That was not always as simple as it sounds. I almost overlooked matters of extreme importance while exploring highly interesting, albeit not useful, reviews of other subjects. The trek was intellectually arduous and exhilarating, and my greatest fear was that I might miss an important marker along the journey. So, as I strode forward with courage and curiosity, I found myself looking back with trepidation and self-doubt wondering if I'd overlooked something I needed. I began to understand that I might have to re-trace my steps and revisit certain places as I began to learn more. Even now, I know my journey will never really be completely done.

I learned that the researcher's journey couldn't be rushed. Nor were there any shortcuts or cutoffs to speed me to the journey's end. Each pathway, every island, all mountains, even deserts had some value and it was up to me with my researcher's lens to

determine which of them was ultimately important (Hart, 1998; Patton, 1990). I found that when I needed something, it appeared (Jaworski, 1996). The well-trodden, clearly marked pathways might have taken me somewhere, but not where I needed to go. The navigation of the dense underbrush, deep waterways, and arid deserts of this journey was part of its purpose.

Let me tell you about my travels, why I think they are important, what others have learned in their journeys, what is still to be learned, and how what I learned along my journey might contribute the larger body of knowledge about first-generation community college students.

### **Another Epiphany**

In the beginning, like any wandering ABD, my life beyond the dissertation kept happening. I worked. I did household chores. I fell asleep with piles of books and papers strewn across our bed. I spent time I felt I could ill afford to lose with family and friends. One son got married and the other went to war in Iraq. Dealing with joy and terror and a dissertation while working full-time and raising our Marine son's daughter felt like too much most times. Impatient and frustrated, I struggled to learn to accept the pace of the journey and its unexpected gifts. One came from a well-respected professional colleague.

In August 2003 she asked how my son was doing now that he was home from Iraq. I noted that he was talking much more than I expected; that he was infinitely grateful for our freedoms; and that his outlook seemed relatively healthy, but that he was not at all comfortable to hear us discussing his experience and our own feelings about the war. She replied,

The synthesis of his experience has to come from his world. Our voices are not legitimate to him because we haven't had that experience, and we speak from a privileged, sheltered perspective much removed from his reality. When others who have had the same experience begin to share their stories, he'll finally be able to reflect on his experience and more clearly articulate his own understanding of what it all means. Then you'll be able to have a real conversation (personal conversation with Elaine DeLott Baker, August 30, 2003).

That was a defining moment in this journey and a gift beyond measure for me.

For, with only a few changes, I was able to restate her comment as,

The synthesis of her experience has to come from her world. Our voices are not legitimate to her because we haven't had that experience, and we speak from a *dominant, privileged, higher education perspective* much removed from her reality. When others who have had the same experience begin to share their stories, she'll finally be able to reflect on her experience and more clearly articulate her own understanding of what it all means. Then you'll be able to have a real conversation [emphasis mine].

It was what I had intuitively felt and believed but had struggled to articulate about my own experience as a first-generation community college student and that of the other first-generation students I was then planning to meet. Yet there it was - a gift from a wise friend birthed from the agony of a son's trip to hell. It became a critical touchstone along my journey. The obviousness of its simple wisdom awed me.

That statement resonated with me and validated in a very personal way all that I had been reading and learning about narrative inquiry. Yet, in thinking about the questions Taliesin would ask (his penetrating, not always appreciated, gift-of-a-different-sort questions) about this new "twist on the literature" (Davies, personal correspondence, 2003). I looked differently at what I was reading. I looked at the ways that the *dominant*,

*privileged, higher education perspective* discounts or overlooks the experience of first-generation students. I looked for the ‘real conversations’ of first-generation students.

### **Deficit Perspective**

What I found were studies and stories about first-generation college students that were written from the deficit perspective (Appendix A). There seems to be an underlying, and perhaps well-meaning, assumption that by the norms and standards of the academy first-generation students are “at-risk.” This deficit perspective has become almost mythic in its proportions; so much so, it was as if the terms “at-risk” and “first-generation” were synonymous among practitioners I worked with at CCD. As I reflected on this perspective, I wondered if this was perhaps self-serving and self-aggrandizing? From my vantage point, it appeared that the academy frequently assumes a hegemonic, paternalistic stance (Ladson-Billings, 2000) as it swoops in with solutions in both policy and practice to correct the ‘problems’ of first-generation students. The prevailing stance (or perhaps an unconscious, unexamined prejudice) of this literature base seemed to be that first-generation students come to us fragile, un- or ill-formed, and needy and it is our job to salvage or fix them, which is certainly a colonial notion (Gordon, 1995).

This deficit perspective ignores the rich social and cultural heritage, prior life experiences, individual history, and self-agency (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Reinharz, 1992) students bring to the academy. It is as if they are blank slates awaiting only our wisdom, enlightenment, and support systems to finally begin to flourish. Defining first-generation students as being ‘at-risk’ essentializes them in ways that removes their experiences from the conversation (Ladson-Billings, 2000). As Fuss (1989) notes, "Essentialism is most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things,

the invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity" (p. xi). In defining the real, true essence of the designation 'at-risk' in relation to first-generation students, have we in the academy assigned invariable and fixed properties to the term? Are we imposing a social construct (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) articulated from the dominant higher education *Discourse* (Gee, 1996) on individuals and groups who may not see themselves in the same ways that the academy sees them? And in all cases, does not the deficit perspective keep first-generation students from joining the "real conversation?"

### **Success Perspective**

I didn't know others considered me 'at risk' when I self-advised into a Computer Information Systems program at a community college all those years ago. In fact, I felt empowered and confident when I made the decision to go to college. Understandably, I was nervous and didn't know the first thing about being a college student. The closest experience I had to draw on was my high schooling. My own pride kept me from disclosing my dropout status to anyone (although, there it was on my application so how could I think they wouldn't know?) I thought I faked being a college student well. Had someone informed me that I was at higher risk of failing, dropping out, or not completing my intended program because of my non-traditional, first-generation status, I would have denied that characterization. I didn't see myself that way. I saw my strengths, my potential, and my self-agency. I saw my future.

We cannot view all first-generation students through a single lens. We need positive stories of first-generation students as a counterpoint to the deficit models perpetuated by mainstream researchers. That deficit perspective essentializes a group in

ways that distills their (*our*) experiences into a single theme (Fuss, 1989). That is not to say there are not first-generation students who struggle and fail in higher education. There are. Much of the literature seems to accept and treat that as the norm (Appendix A). However, there are other first-generation women (and men) from various ethnic, racial, class, geographic, and economic groups who succeed and thrive. Where are their stories? What can we know about their experience?

Who notices and writes about their (*our*) experiences and successes? Who is hearing and telling their (*our*) stories? Who appreciates the mother who gets up at 4:00AM to do accounting homework so that she'll have time to fix breakfast, make lunches, and get four children to school by eight before she has to rush off to school herself? Who tells the story of the daughter who picks up her two half-siblings at grade school before going home to make dinner for her divorced, working mother and then studies biology until midnight? Who understands what it means to be the college-going girlfriend of a high school dropout, partying on weekends with him and his friends because he gets mad if she doesn't hang with him, who still manages to stay engaged in math class on Monday morning. Who hears the bilingual daughter of immigrants try to find words in her native language to explain the exciting new political ideas she's learning to her illiterate, monolingual parents?

By many measures, each of the above examples describes behavior that might be termed 'successful.' Yet, by other measures defined by the academy these women may not be considered 'successful.' What if the working mother earns only a 'C' in Accounting? How about that daughter who stops-out for a semester to work? And, suppose the girlfriend gets pregnant? What about the bilingual daughter who needs

counseling for depression related to her dual identity? How would the academy define those events? How would they categorize the students? How would the students categorize themselves?

### **Alternative Stories of First-Generation Students**

Of greatest interest to me were the 'success' stories of first-generation students, yet reading much of the extant literature left me feeling that first-generation students were being talked *about*, not talked *with* (Appendix A). That literature analyzed and dissected, but did not invite first-generation students to speak. Where were the 'real conversations' *about* first-generation students *by* first-generation students? As I continued looking, I found alternative stories.

Two dissertations had a strong influence on my thinking. In her qualitative study of first-generation white working class women, Kim Poast (2001) explored the higher education experiences of these women. She detailed both the positive and negative aspects of their experiences and developed strong empathy for her participants based on her own first-generation status. She ended her study with a deeply personal thank you letter to the college advisor who greeted her with the comment, "You look lost," early in her own higher education career. Reading this dissertation, which exemplified a highly-reflexive study written from a feminist stance, told an alternative story and gave a face and voice to her participants.

Kelly Clark's (1999) study of successful women who had been first-generation students was meaningful on many levels. Her treatment of the topic presented a counter-narrative to the deficit perspective. She approached participants as individuals with rich stories and provided thoughtful, feminist-based strategies and analysis. She, too, was

clear about her own first-generation status and the ways it influenced her perspective. And, her dissertation form and format was a refreshing and liberating counterpoint to the dry, dull, standard formats I had been slogging through. She adopted an artistic metaphor for her research lens. For each of her participants, Clark, an artist, created a painting representative of the themes emerging from her stories. These appear in full color in the finished tome.

The purpose of Clark's study was to

Explore the stories of six women academics that were among the first generation in the economically poor or working class families to attend college. [Her] primary interest was to better understand how identity development intersected with their experiences in moving through traditional systems of higher education (p. 2).

In so doing, Clark uncovered themes of "privilege, resistance, resilience, and knowledge construction relative to [her participants'] classed, gendered, and ethnic positionings" (p. 2).

The richness and connected-ness of these two research stories were compelling. The research strategies were liberating for me as I was still wrestling with my quantitative tendencies at the time I read them. My frustration with the overwhelming deficit perspective finally crystallized after reading these dissertations. Here were two first-generation women, like me, who not only were successful in the academy, but who had met with and studied other successful first-generation women.

I continued to search the literature for stories of other women like these. In one article, Julia Lara (1992) recounted her experiences as a first-generation community college student who transferred to a university. She described the ease in which she fit into the community college because it was much like high school in that she was able to

remain in her neighborhood and stay fully engaged with her family. Her challenge came when she left home for the university and encountered a world for which she was not prepared. She referred to those experiences as "valuable lessons that have influenced my life and work since college" (p. 69). Her point in sharing her story was to motivate and "reassure youths by showing them that others have met these challenges successfully" (p. 69).

Jacquelin Scarbrough's dissertation (1997) focused on welfare women attending a community college. Her qualitative study explored the ways that education and welfare policies help or hinder their self-transformation. She discussed factors that led to the women's self-agency and success. Her findings included the ways in which their life experiences (including education) helped some of the women "rethink and rewrite self" (p. 2). Her methods honored the stories of her participants and sought to legitimize their voice.

In another dissertation, Arlene Jorgensen (1993) sought to understand successful Native American community college students (both female and male). She identified seven categories of campus hegemony; cultural ignorance, language, absence of Native American staff, isolation from campus life, academic advising, curriculum that was not culturally relevant, and stereotyping. She uncovered resistance strategies grounded in Native American identities that successful students used to prevail against these hegemonic factors.

Related to this study was an article discussing the intriguing successes at tribal colleges where virtually every student is first-generation (Stein, 1992). Although Stein did not highlight individual stories, his study examined the success of groups of students.

Stein noted that the mission of these colleges is "to help promote, preserve, promote and teach its tribe's culture and language" (p. 90) for women and men. He noted a variety of approaches to student success ranging from transportation and childcare to personalized instruction and family involvement. He asserted that tribal colleges are "the embodiment of American Indian self-determination and the best means of gaining some measure of control over their lives" (p. 95).

Finally, one of the more widely-cited stories is that of Laura Rendón (1992) whose journey from the barrio to the academy details positive themes of self-agency and success, but also negative themes of cultural alienation and disconnects. Her criticisms of the deficits of the academy reinforced my own beliefs. She turned her critical lens back onto the institution and away from the student. In a different article, Rendón (1994) discussed how first-generation students often enter college with an expectation of failure yet start to believe in their own capabilities. Rendón (1992) issued a challenge to the dominant, privileged, higher education world by asserting "We will change the academy, even as the academy changes us. And more and more of us will experience academic success - with few, if any regrets" (p. 63).

### **The Academy**

While I talk as if I am outside of the academy, I cannot ignore that part of my identity. During the last 22 years, I have been both a student and a teacher. I embrace the academic world and am passionate about reaching learners and helping them to improve their lives. I believe that America's higher education system has done much to enrich the lives of many students and contribute to the advancement of knowledge. My criticisms may strike some as hypocritical because I am part of the academy I now

question. What I challenge is our *dominant, privileged, higher education perspective*. I want us to change the ways we define, describe, and work with first-generation students. I want us to think differently about first-generation students. I want us to *be able to have a real conversation*.

The academy's overwhelming deficit view of first-generation students may be influenced by its own mythology (Appendix A). As Merisotis and Phipps (2000) note,

Those halcyon days when all students who enrolled in college were adequately prepared, all courses at higher education institutions were "college level," and students smoothly made the transition from high school and college simply never existed. And they do not exist now (p. 69).

The institutional memory of the "traditional," white, middle- or upper-class, male, full-time, 18-20 year old student is just that, a memory. In fact, 'traditional' now means being a person of color, female, poor or working-class, part-time, employed, and older (Baxter Magolda & Terenzini, 2003; Zwerling, 1992). Yet, when we meet these students at our doors, we all-too-quickly categorize them with labels such as "at-risk," "first-generation," "under-served," and "non-traditional" and continue to doggedly persist (Baxter Magolda & Terenzini, 2003, p. 4) in delivering education and services in the way we've offered it in the past

Today's students have different life and economic circumstances that "produce different attendance patterns" (Baxter Magolda & Terenzini, 2003, p. 2) including part-time attendance, intermittent study, stop-out behavior, and transfers among institutions all of which send the message that "college attendance is not the central or defining activity of their lives" (p. 2). But are we listening? In what ways have our institutions responded

to these changing attendance patterns? Does the academy continue to hope that things will get back to 'normal' soon? Are we biding time until the 'real' students come back?

The learning needs of the new 'traditional' student may be different as well. Not only do they bring multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993) to the academy, their gender, age, and ethnicity, and life experiences have imbued them with diverse learning styles and preferences (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). They are shaped as much by their out-of-classroom experiences as by the experiences we design for them (Baxter Magolda, 1992). They (*and we*) live in a world that demands different skills from those that sufficed for the traditional student of the past. These include "critical and reflective thinking... if students are to get beyond relativity to make informed judgments in a world in which multiple perspectives are increasingly interdependent" (Baxter Magolda & Terenzini, 2003, p. 2) as well as coherent self-identity, cognitive complexity, application of knowledge to real-world problems, appreciation for differences, and practical skills (ACPA, 1994). Yet, many of our teaching practices and assumptions about learning are largely unchanged from the ways in which we educated the traditional student of old (McGrath & Spear, 1991).

### **Questions to Challenge the Academy**

Is it not patronizing and hegemonic to label the new 'traditional' students in ways that emphasize their differences from the 'traditional' students of old? Perhaps the 'deficits' are not within the students, but within the academy. Have we altered our beliefs and values to account for the needs and characteristics of these new 'traditional' students? In what ways have we modified our understanding of the attendance patterns, learning needs, and educational goals of the new 'traditional' student? How have we

adapted our teaching styles, assessment strategies, support services, schedules, delivery modes, and campuses for the new 'traditional' student? Are we still wistfully insistent that students fit into a mold developed long ago for one type of student? Do we persist in ignoring the reality right in front of us that today's 'traditional' students are multi-hued and white; female and male; gay and straight; differently-abled and able-bodied; old and young; part and full-time; married and single; immigrant and native-born; poor, middle-class, and wealthy; first- and second-generation; and much more?

It is naive to assert that all students would succeed if only the academy would change. However, I do not believe it is naive to assert that the way the academy regards knowledge, authority, and learner capability (Hutchings, 1997) has a strong influence on its philosophies, culture, and teaching and learning practices. As Baxter Magolda and Terenzini (2003) note, there are no simple answers for changing the academy's "long-standing assumptions" (p. 5), but critical self-reflection on these philosophies and our teaching and learning practices may help not only the students we serve, but the academy itself make "... informed judgments in a world in which multiple perspectives are increasingly interdependent" (p. 2). Among the many ways the academy can critically self-reflect is by thoughtfully attending to the multiple stories of the new 'traditional' students. A few of those stories have accumulated along this journey and now reside within the pages of this dissertation and have messages that may help impel the academy into critical self-reflection and different understandings about what it means to be a 'successful' female, non-traditional, first-generation community college student.

As George Rosenwald (2003) notes, "Members of a particular culture [higher education] tend to share a commitment to certain preferred story lines and types of

explanations" (p. 146). So, what I am suggesting is a need for a counter-narrative (Ladson-Billings, 2000) that offers another perspective based on critical theory (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000) as to how groups see themselves and are seen by others. In this way, I seek to challenge the dominant culture's "story lines and type of explanation." This counter-narrative provides a new perspective that says there are 'successful' first-generation students; their definitions of 'success' are varied; they are not as unusual as the literature might suggest, their 'success' can inform our policies and practice; their stories can legitimize their 'success' as normal, not an occasional aberration; and their stories can shift, if even just a little, the lens through which the academy views first-generation students.

### **"And" Not "Or"**

Finally, lest I be faulted for some essentialism that I criticize, these stories and this study should not be used to perpetuate a dichotomous view of first-generation student success: they are 'at-risk' OR they are 'successful.' Every story is important. We should hear those that thoughtfully analyze the ways that some first-generation students struggle AND we should hear those that tell the other story. There is room for all stories. Each has potential to increase our knowledge and awareness of first-generation students over 60% who begin their academic career at community colleges (Phillipe & Valiga, 1996). In our rush to analyze and categorize (which is not what we should be doing), we must remember that each first-generation student is a unique individual who falls, like any other student, somewhere along the 'success' continuum. In the end, I cannot help but believe that our real achievement will come when the stories of first-generation students are no longer considered remarkable.

## **Other Themes**

As I continued along this journey, I was mindful of Ruthellen Josselson and Anna Lieblich's caution that narrative inquirers must have "broad intellectual background and wide-ranging reading habits" (2003, p. 272). In reading about first-generation community college students, a number of other themes emerged: self-agency, resiliency, persistence, motivation, self-identity, support factors, and socio-cultural influences. As well, themes related to age, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality surfaced. These themes were interesting and some proved invaluable at a later point, but early on I was fearful of imposing deductive thinking by using them as too-easy categories in my quest for stories and my analysis of experiences (Ochberg, 2003). Therefore, I saved that literature for later when I began the challenging and thought-provoking work of qualitative data analysis (Chase, 2003; Riessman, 1993). I knew that new (and newly reconsidered) books and articles would fill my nightstand, desk, and briefcase and engage my mind and heart. As I progressed, I was excited to discover those themes. They represented newly discovered frontiers for this explorer.

## **Did This Journey Matter?**

As with any study, a valid question to ask the researcher is, "So what?" My answer was that by the end of this journey I expected to have learned much more about my participants and myself. I was also open to other serendipitous discoveries, events, and findings. The role of wandering researcher suited me. This was no heroic journey (Campbell, 1973). It was a woman's voyage of discovery.

Along the way, I added 'success' stories to our collective knowledge about female, non-traditional, first-generation community college students. I particularly

wanted to add our voices to the *Discourse* (Gee, 1996) so that awareness of us as a population would be heightened so that we could stand on a more equal footing with others. I wanted us to be invited and included in the 'conversation' that tells our stories. We have been 'talked about' by many experts. Now it is time for the experts to hear something from us. I believe that our voices will affirm some of what we already know and add new ideas to what we are still learning about 'successful' female, non-traditional, first-generation community college students. This knowledge can inform community college policy and practice in regard to meeting the learning and student development needs of this specific population (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Currently, too many of our policies and programs are built solely on the unitary assumption that first-generation students are "at-risk." Another aspect of my journey was in learning as much about myself as I did about my participants. My connected-ness and passion (Clinchy, 2003; Reinhartz, 1992) for this topic stemmed from personal experience and my journey was as much about knowing myself in new ways as it was about knowing others. I acknowledged the criticism that narrative inquiry is self-absorbed and "confessional" (Van Maanan, 1988) yet believed that only by being open and honest about my own story could I effectively conduct this research. One of the many ways in which women can contribute to the research world is by analyzing and describing their own roles in the process (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Merriam, 2002; Safarik, 2003). Conversely, I had also read about the risk of the narrative researcher revealing more of herself than typical thus being too vulnerable (Fraser, 1993) and struggled with my fear that in the end you will know me too well. In that regard, I was like my participants (Oleson, 2000) who faced many of the same feelings and concerns (Bloom, 1998) during the journey.

Along the way, both my participants and I were changed by the experience (Bloom, 1998; Chase, 2003; Oleson, 2000; Reinharz, 1992). The very act of sharing stories and engaging in human interaction affected all of us (Clinchy, 2003). Long after the interviews were over, the act of storytelling influenced and changed who we are and how we see ourselves (Bloom, 1998; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Reinharz, 1992). At the beginning of the journey, I dared not predict the self- and other-transformations (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Oleson, 2000) engendered by this type of research. Now at the end, I know how much it influenced my participants and me. What I observed and commented on can inform others who plan to embark on a similar journey. This awareness and reflexivity also adds an authenticity and credibility to narrative research (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

In conducting this journey, I knew that narrative inquiry was as much a theoretical framework as it was a methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Daiute & Fine, 2003). I believe that this study and its methods will add, in some small way, to the theoretical and methodological knowledge about the process of narrative inquiry. This is the kind of knowledge that evolves every time another wanderer puts her foot on the path; her ear, mind, and heart to the meaning and nuances of others' stories; and her pen to paper.

### **Spirals**

I could not presume to believe that I had all the knowledge necessary for this journey. As a qualitative researcher, I knew that what I learned on my research journey would send me back to the literature time and time again (Hart, 1998; Merriam, 2002; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990). I have heard this journey likened to a funnel, but I believe it is more like an infinite spiral in which certain patterns repeat, while others

appear for the first time and then become recognizable and familiar at a later point when they inevitably reappear in some new form. For me this spiral model is analogous to the ways in which researchers might view and interpret another's life. For as Sartré notes, a participant's life "develops in spirals; it passes again and again by the same points, but at different levels of integration and complexity" (1963, p. 106).

A funnel narrows and constricts the human experience while a spiral broadens and encompasses the past, present, and future along with the inevitable unexpected. As I listened, observed, and made meaning of the stories of my participants, I watched the spiral embrace themes related, but unanticipated at the journey's inception (Josselson, Lieblich & McAdams, 2003). When that happened, my journey into the literature followed new pathways to learn what others had already learned about those themes (Hart, 1998; Patton, 1990). In the end, all that I learned along this research journey - my newfound knowledge about my participants along with the knowledge gleaned from previous wanderers - is contained within the spiral of this dissertation. Thus, future wanderers may find useful markers for their research journeys.

*"The growth of understanding follows an ascending spiral rather than a straight line" – Joanna Field*

## MODE OF INQUIRY

*“We have a habit in writing articles published in scientific journals to make the work as finished as possible, to cover up all the tracks, to not worry about the blind alleys or describe how you had the wrong idea at first, and so on. So there isn't any place to publish, in a dignified manner, what you actually did in order to get to do the work.”*  
- Richard Feynman

### Introduction to the Journey's Methods

Once I set my course, the way in which I intended to journey through my approach to the research changed. With my post-positivist, quantitative roadmap I had planned for an efficient, tidy comparative study between two groups - define variables, identify a suitable sample, develop appropriate instrumentation, collect data, select the correct statistical tools, analyze data, write results, journey done. I was technically competent for such a voyage, but it would have been almost pro forma, not the adventure I needed if I were going to learn and be changed by the journey. It was as if I were planning to navigate the coast without ever losing sight of land. More importantly, my mind and heart were not committed to that journey. Since that was the journey I had planned and prepared for, I found myself ill prepared for a qualitative journey. Although I had studied qualitative research methods and learned much about analyzing qualitative data, I had not expected to use them for this trip. I had the spirit for heading into the open seas and across uncharted territories, but knew I was lacking the deep philosophical

understanding and the tools and equipment needed for the odyssey upon which I was embarking.

### **Synchronicity**

It was a chance comment by Taliesin that led me to my methodology. He stood at the whiteboard making notes as I described the direction my research interests were taking. He wrote "narrative inquiry" and "phenomenology" and casually made reference to several authors. Then he said, "You should go back and look at your theoretical framework and read what the literature says before you read anything more about methodology." I dutifully nodded as I took notes, then I packed up my books and promptly rushed to the library to see what they had in the way of narrative inquiry and phenomenology. That weekend I inhaled Moustakas (1990, 1994), Connelly and Clandinin (1990), Josselson, Lieblich, and McAdams (2003), Eisner (1991), and Merriam (2002). I did literature searches on methodology and found examples of studies that had used narrative inquiry and phenomenology. I read, re-read and read some more. The more I read, the more drawn I became to narrative methods. It fit with my talents and aptitudes; it fit with my beliefs and values; it fit with who I am: a woman with stories to hear and tell, a woman who needs connected-ness to others to feel complete, a woman who knows and learns relationally. I had read about how important it is to take a philosophical stance (Creswell, 1998) when selecting a method and had fretted over that particular injunction. Then, as easily as that, the tenets of narrative inquiry finally allowed me to articulate my stance. My methodology found me when I wasn't looking for it. And it fit.

## Meeting with Merlin

Although I eschew the classic male-oriented quest metaphor (Campbell, 1973), I couldn't help but stretch my woman's voyage of discovery allegory just enough to describe my methodologist as Merlin. He is infinitely wise, and has a lovely irreverence for scholarship that takes itself too seriously. I am charmed by his brazen attitude toward certain aspects of research, yet, whenever I mistakenly swerved in a too-casual direction, he gently steered me back on the right path. As a mentor, teacher, and qualitative researcher, his favorite expression is "What the hell?" (In other words, "What is going on here?" "What can we understand?" "What can we learn?" "What's up?") He fosters curiosity and fun in the research process. Humbly, he takes himself least seriously of all.

As soon as I drafted my newest version of chapter one, I sent it, with my Taliesin's permission, to Merlin. When I talked with him by phone, I was delighted and excited to hear that he supported my ideas and even suggested that I move some of the more traditional elements of this dissertation to appendices. He reminded me that he too was a first-generation student. I felt a new affinity and began babbling to him about how it has taken me so long to overcome my sense of imposter-hood, thinking it to be common ground between us. Before I got too far down that path, he brought me up short by commenting that his dominant, white-male status had automatically conferred upon him a privilege that first-generation women and members of other under-represented groups could never have. Even so, he was interested in the first-generation theme. He suggested that I keep reading and writing.

In another month, I was ready to ask him to critique my methodological approach. At that meeting, I sat with him as he reviewed my summary. He nodded and agreed that I

had really gotten clearer and more focused. We discussed some of the details, and then he hit me with a powerful question. "Why don't you recruit women who define themselves as 'successful' by their standards? If you are critical of dominant, higher education privilege, why are you using traditional academic definitions of success as your selection criteria?" (I had decided that I wanted women with a certain GPA, a certain number of credit hours, and a certain number of semesters at CCD). To say I was flabbergasted at my own hegemony is an understatement. Merlin, you are magic! How could I not have seen what I was doing?

We finished the meeting with a few other details. He liked my three-phase interview strategy, but suggested that I consider making the third meeting optional or instead ask participants to write a poem about being 'successful' so as to "get an emotional sense of their journey in their own words" (Banning, personal correspondence, October 2003). Ideas I reflected on as I read Richardson's (2000) discussions on poetic representations and Brady's (2000) work on anthropological poetics. In the end I did both.

I asked Merlin's permission to conduct a small pilot study as suggested by Josselson and Lieblich (2003) to test-drive my interviewing and analysis skills and to demonstrate to my committee that I was capable of undertaking this type of research (p. 269). He agreed. I was thrilled to be able to actually 'do' something (as if the voracious reading and writing I'd been engaged in hadn't been 'doing'!) It felt like I was finally setting off on the true journey.

As I prepared to take my leave, we drifted into conversation about being first-generation members of the academy. He shared his own story about riding to college as

his father drove. He was browsing through some informational materials that said something like; "The typical student has a 15-hour schedule." He recalled exclaiming something about, "Fifteen hours? That's a long day!" His father, knowing no different, agreed. It wasn't until Merlin got acclimated that he learned the difference between credit hours and contact hours. He noted that his parents could never have understood his collegiate experiences. I asked if he could have talked with them about it. He replied, "No, never." I imagined the young man he had been and wondered about his journey. I was intensely curious about his success narrative. His storytelling fascinated me and I wanted to stay and hear more. Just then his phone rang and our time was up. As I walked to my car, I wondered just how many of us are in the academy. And, why aren't we more visible and public with our own first-generation stories? Is it not important for our students to know we're there? What can we learn from each other? What can we give to each other through our stories?

## **Roadmap**

### *Narrative Stance*

We live storied lives. We make meaning with our stories. Whether a fictional story as portrayed through movies, books, and television; a graphical story as portrayed through art and photographs; a true story as portrayed through in-depth interviews, stories are the way humans organize their lives and make meaning of their experiences (Chase, 2003; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2003; Rosenwald, 2003; Silverman, 2000). This is important to me. To paraphrase Rishoi (2000), "Narratives perform the cultural work of exposing the painful contradictions faced by

[first-generation students] as they navigate the academy and suggest the multiple subjectivity that is ultimately the source of individual power" (pg. xx).

In narrative inquiry the researcher is the instrument of research and co-creates meaning as she hears and interprets her participants' stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Merriam, 2002). This type of research is personal and meaningful to the researcher, her participants, and the audience (Richardson, 2000). Or, as Eisner (1988) says in his criticism of traditional methods of presenting research:

We write and talk in a voice void of any hint that there is a personal self behind the words we utter: "the author," "the subject," "the researcher," or, miraculously, we somehow multiply and write about what 'we' found. All of these linguistic conventions are, paradoxically, rhetorical devices designed to persuade the reader that we, as individuals, have no signature to assign to our work (p. 18).

I find that I cannot *not* sign my work. It is as much a part of my being as breathing. Narrative allows me to do that. My voice along with the voices and stories of my co-participants legitimizes our experiences for us and for you. "Only then will we be able to have a real conversation."

### ***Emergent Research Design***

This research design evolved and continued to evolve as the journey progressed. For example, initially I had thought to conduct two or three in-depth interviews, run the transcripts by the participants for a 'member check' (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002), analyze the data, write preliminary findings which I would share again with participants (Reinharz, 1992), and write my final results (Richardson, 2000). The more I read and learned about narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Josselson & Lieblich, 2003) and feminist research methods (Bloom, 1998; Madriz, 2000; Oleson, 2000;

Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Reinharz, 1992; Safarik, 2003), the less comfortable I was about following that path. I wanted to give my participants more opportunity to help shape the analysis and define the findings (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). Although ultimately I was the one who did the final write up (Chase, 1996; Richardson, 2000; Rogers; 2003), these stories were co-created with my fellow wanderers, and their agency in shaping what they (*we*) tell you is important (Personal Narratives Group, 1989).

Another way in which the design evolved was due to the emergent nature of qualitative research (Creswell, 2000; Merriam, 2002). I was mindful of Meloy's (1994) caution against attempts to plan out a qualitative research project in a way that attempts to answer last questions first:

Those of us who have completed at least one major research project using qualitative methodologies have learned that it is only AT THE END of the experience that we begin to see the whole we constructed. To committees and graduate students, such last minute knowledge is not yet acceptable-- "What are the a priori foci?" and "What will you have when you are finished?" are examples of questions that we have been led to believe we should be able to answer from the very beginning (p. 1).

Although my research questions guided and shaped this journey, new questions emerged along the way (Rogers, 2003). During data analysis new themes emerged (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ochberg, 2003), and throughout, I remained open to exploring new paths in new ways.

### *Landscape of the Journey (Research Setting)*

The landscape of a research journey greatly influences its outcomes and interpretations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Another wanderer in a different setting would find similarities and differences between each setting (Geertz, 1995). However, knowing the context of a narrative inquiry is a critical aspect of understanding (Kincheloe

& McClaren, 2000). To grasp the contours of this journey, you should know more about the Community College of Denver

The Community College of Denver is one of 13 community and junior colleges in the Colorado Community College System governed by the State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education. The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools accredits CCD. CCD is a member of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities and designated a Hispanic Serving Institution by the U.S. Department of Education (CCD Office of Institutional Advancement, 2003).

The Community College of Denver is the leading point of access for higher education for the citizens of the City and County of Denver. Fifty-six percent of CCD's students reside within the City and County. In 2002-2003, CCD's annual student headcount was 13,529 and its full-time equivalent enrollment was 5,041, the largest in the school's history. With a minority, urban population of 58 percent, CCD is the most ethnically diverse of all 28 public colleges in Colorado. In 2002-2003, CCD's student population was 41 percent Anglo; 32 percent Latino/Hispanic; 16 percent African American; six-percent Asian/Pacific Islander; two-percent Native American; and three-percent international (CCD Office of Institutional Advancement, 2003).

During 2002-2003, 27 percent of the students were full-time. Seventy-percent of CCD's full-time students worked an average of 23 hours per week while 86 percent of the part-time students worked an average of 30 hours per week. Forty-one percent of the student population was low income. Forty-five percent of CCD's student body was 18-24 years' old; 38 percent aged 25-39; 15 percent were over 40; and the remaining two-

percent were under age 18. Of CCD's student body, more than two-thirds qualified for financial aid; over 63 percent could be categorized as first-generation; nearly nine-percent had a disability; and for more than eight-percent, English was a second language (CCD Office of Institutional Advancement, 2003).

In 2002-2003, CCD's in-semester retention rate averaged 80 percent and the college had a 70 percent persistence rate from fall to spring for first-time, full-time, degree-seeking freshmen. At any one time, 44 percent of CCD's total student population was enrolled in developmental studies. Over 90 percent of CCD's graduates in 2001, 2002, and 2003 were satisfied with CCD and CCD's teaching. Thirty-six percent of CCD's transfer students enrolled at Metropolitan State College; 36 percent enrolled at the University of Colorado, Denver; and 29 percent transferred to other public or private universities (CCD Office of Institutional Advancement, 2003).

### *Definition of Fellow Travelers (Participants)*

The literature on first-generation students is frequently told from the 'deficit perspective' (Appendix A). Because I reject the essentializing generalization that first-generation students are at-risk, and because the term 'first-generation' does not even come close to describing the many racial, ethnic, gender, intellectual, philosophical, lifestyle, and socioeconomic variations among the group we call first-generation, I wanted to meet, talk with, and tell the individual stories of first-generation community college women who did not go straight to college after high school and who by their own definition were 'successful' at the Community College of Denver. To that end, I proposed that my participants be women who were at least 22 when they came to college;

fit my operational definition of first-generation; and who self-identified as 'successful' community college students.

Regarding the first selection criterion, the standard definition of 'non-traditional' college students is someone who is at least 25 years old and who is working and attending college part-time (Ely, 1997). For this study, I was interested in using 'non-traditional' to define women who had been out of high school at least five years, which would make them at least 22 when they came to college. While it might seem arbitrary, five years is the amount of time in which some of their college-bound peers would have been likely to have finished a four-year degree and the time during which my participants might have started thinking (as I had many years before) "If only...." I was less interested in their employment status as a selection criterion because it seemed reasonable that some of them might be non-working mothers. Additionally, college attendance patterns (full- or part-time) were not an important selection criterion because I wanted to meet each participant where she was at that moment and hear from her why she had decided to go to college, why she was taking the courses she was, and why she had elected to be a full- or part-time student.

There are varying definitions of the term 'first-generation' (Appendix A). For this study, 'first-generation' describes students whose parent(s) did not graduate from college. This is a less limiting definition than ones classifying them as students whose parents never attended college or students who are the first in their family to attend college. Because CCD uses the former definition in providing first-generation services to students, I elected to be consistent with the college's use of the term.

Finally, 'success' is a term that has many different meanings. Until I talked about success with my participants, I suspended a precise definition. Historically, we in the academy have defined success by measures such as high school and college grade point average, scores on standardized exams, enrollment status, persistence toward degree, and time-to-completion. I suggest those measures, while meaningful, represent a hegemonic, essentializing definition perpetuated by the academy. Success may mean something very different beyond GPA or retention to the individual student. For the woman who has been at home raising children, success may mean finding affordable daycare and gaining the support of family to leave the neighborhood in order to take one class per term. For the woman who has been working two jobs in order to pay rent, success may mean qualifying for enough financial aid to attend full-time while doing work-study in the library. For the woman who barely struggled through a consumer math class in high school, success may mean working diligently with a tutor to earn a 'B' in a college algebra class.

### *Respecting, Protecting, and Honoring my Fellow Travelers (Ethics of Care)*

One of the hallmarks of feminist research is its ethical, caring focus (Bloom, 1998; Oleson, 2000; Reinharz, 1992). That is not to say that other types of research are not ethical. Rather, it is to say that the ethics of feminist research place particular emphasis on working with, caring for, and building relationships that honor the wisdom and agency of participants (Bloom, 1998; Oleson, 2000; Reinharz, 1992; Personal Narratives Group, 1989). Additionally, the ethics of working with my fellow human beings compelled me to follow guidelines of informed consent; confidentiality; full disclosure of risks and benefits; integrity in conducting data gathering; honesty in

reporting results; and use of appropriate methodologies. To that end, I reviewed and followed the requirements posted on the Colorado State University web site ([www.research.colostate.edu/rcoweb](http://www.research.colostate.edu/rcoweb)).

As I worked through the details of my research design, I grappled with the best way to recruit participants. Because of my professional role at the Community College of Denver, I worried about exerting undue influence on potential participants. I originally had planned to work with the coordinators and case managers of the various first-generation student support programs at the CCD to ask them to distribute my invitation letter to students in their programs. Once I made this decision, something continued to nag at me. I worried that the case managers and coordinators might feel that they needed to push students to participate. I also worried that participants might feel pressured by virtue of receiving such a letter from someone they perceived to be in authority.

A related concern had to do with having too many volunteers. Because I had decided to work with no more than six participants in-depth, I worried about what I would do if I got five, ten, forty, or more volunteers. I did not want to subject any volunteers to rejection and its associated feelings. I wanted to design a recruitment strategy that allowed those not selected to feel as if they too were contributing something valuable.

When I met with Taliesin and Lao Tzu to discuss a proposal defense date, I talked extensively with them about these concerns. As we dialogued, they offered some helpful suggestions and a number of thoughtful and thought-provoking questions. That

conversation helped me clarify my goals. Of utmost importance was being respectful to the volunteers (Reinharz, 1992).

### *The Selection of my Fellow Travelers (Recruitment Strategy)*

I decided to use a two-stage strategy. In stage one, I solicited volunteers, via flyer (Appendix C) to attend a meeting where I explained my study, collected demographic data, and held a group interview session (Appendix F). The design of the group interview was based on Esther Madriz's (2000) guidelines and recommendations for focus groups in feminist research. During this session, I elicited participant comments regarding being a 'successful' student at CCD. On the demographic survey (Appendix E), I asked each group interview participant if she were interested in a follow-up interview. If she was, the survey had a space for her to leave her name, phone number and/or email address. If she was not, she could leave it blank. To honor the contributions of the group interview volunteers (Personal Narratives Group, 1989), I have used the data collected from the demographic survey and group interview as part of my research and include it in my results.

In stage two, I contacted each woman who volunteered for a follow-up interview and talked with her to see if she was willing to participate in the lengthier, three-phase interview process. After that first screening interview, I had five suitable participants so I did not have to use the strategy I had so carefully worked out beforehand. In that strategy, if I had more than six participants, I had planned to select the ones whom I wanted to work with based on their meeting the selection criteria along with their rapport, openness to communication, ability to provide information-rich stories, and researcher intuition. I had planned to talk individually with each of the remaining volunteers. I

would have thanked them for their willingness to participate, explained that I had more volunteers than I needed, and let them know how valuable their contributions to the group interview and demographic survey had been. I had even considered what to do if they were especially disappointed or insistent, I would have spent additional time talking with them about their opinions about being a ‘successful,’ non-traditional, female first-generation student at CCD. Had I needed to use this strategy, I intended that my final results would have included a summary of these additional conversations. That did not happen, but I note it here for those of you considering a similar approach.

While this two-stage recruitment strategy extended my data collection timeframe, it satisfied my ethics of care. I believe this strategy honored each volunteer and allowed her to give something of herself and her story to this research (Bloom, 1998; Oleson, 2000; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Reinhartz, 1992).

### *The Researcher's Knapsack (Data Collection Tools)*

In narrative, the primary data collection instrument is the researcher (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Merriam, 2002) and the primary method is the in-depth, unstructured interview (Chase, 2003; Reissman, 1993; Yow, 1994). Using the recommendations and guidance provided by Yow (1994) and Chase (2003), I spent considerable time crafting my interview guide (Appendix I). To tease out their stories and elicit themes related to success, I decided that I wanted to focus first on the participants and their families, followed by information about their high school experience and then their college experience. Lastly, I wanted to move into their stories about being first-generation and about being ‘successful.’ My strategy was to move from the rapport-building, getting-to-know-you types of questions (Chase, 2003) to the more complex and evocative questions

(Dey, 1993). Because I opted for an unstructured interview format (Yow, 1994), I was also aware that my guide was not a script so much as a framework and reminder for me as each participant's story was co-created (Chase, 2003) through our dialogue.

### *Collecting the Stories of my Fellow Travelers (Interview Strategy)*

In addition to the data generated from the demographic survey and group interview in stage one, major data sources were the in-depth interviews that I audiotaped and transcribed (Yow, 1994). This made the interview design an important aspect of this process. I designed a three-phase interview strategy (detailed in the next section). After the first in-depth interview, I asked participants to work with me to review their transcripts and help me identify the major (and minor) themes related to their stories. This second meeting also was taped and transcribed. A third data collection point occurred when I met individually with each participant to discuss the experience of participating in a research study. In all three interviews, my overarching goal was to gather data that were substantive and evocative (Dey, 1993) and respectful of the participants (Bloom, 1998; Chase, 2003; Reinharz, 1992). To do that I used interviewing strategies that allowed participant elaboration where one question led naturally to another and which induced the participant to paint vivid pictures of her experiences (Chase, 2003; Dey, 1993). Despite a well-crafted interview guide, it was more important to feel confident in following a participant's lead, recognizing her legitimacy as a human with beliefs, feelings, and her own self-agency (Sampson, 1993).

### *Learning from my Fellow Travelers (Three-Phase Interview Process)*

It was important for me to use feminist research methods. These included dialectic engagement and intimacy with participants; focused attention and non-judgmental validation of participants' responses; an assumption that participants' motives were honest and their stories truthful; and respecting each participant's editorial wishes in crafting the final product (Bloom, 1998; Oleson, 2000; Reinharz, 1992). During stage one of the recruitment process, I was guided by Esther Madriz's (2000) suggestions regarding focus groups in feminist research. In stage two, I selected my participants for the in-depth interviews. With them, I used a three-phase research process in which I heard the stories of participants, included them in the interpretive process, and discovered the ways in which the process of telling and interpreting their stories had influenced them.

During phase one of the in-depth interviews, I conducted a 1 - 2 hour unstructured interview at a location convenient to the participants. I used my interview guide (Appendix I) to elicit their stories of being a 'successful' female non-traditional first-generation student at the Community College of Denver. During phase two, I honored the wisdom of my participants (Oleson, 2000; Personal Narratives Group, 1989) by engaging them as interpreters of their stories. I met with them individually, asked their help in reviewing their transcripts, and identified major (and minor) themes related to their stories about being a 'successful' college student. Finally, in the third phase, I engaged each participant in a follow-up interview to share my overall analysis and to debrief on her feelings about the research process, thoughts on how being a part of this study influenced her, and any other comments she wished to make (Bloom, 1998; Oleson,

2000; Personal Narratives Group). At the close of the final meeting, I asked each participant to leave a memento - letter, poem, drawing, - to tell me in a very individual way (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000) whatever she thought was most important for others to know about being a 'successful' non-traditional first-generation female students at the Community College of Denver.

### *Documenting and Accounting for the Journey (Trustworthiness and Credibility)*

The traditional notions of reliability and validity do not fit well into qualitative inquiry, but the ideas of trustworthiness and credibility made sense to me (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). One way to do that is to document the process itself through extensive journals and field notes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I decided that not only did I need to keep these types of records for my own reference, but also I wanted to leave markers and signposts for other wanderers. Even before finalizing this topic, I had been keeping research journals and notes of my own day-to-day activities, thoughts and feelings, sudden insights and 'aha' moments, to-do lists, and reminders to follow up on new resources. Once I had my first-generation epiphany that journaling activity became even more important in helping me crystallize my thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Writing is how I think (Richardson, 2000). These journals and notes gave me a way to document the journey and provided for me an audit trail of the expanding spirals (Sartré, 1963) of this dissertation journey.

Although I was on a singular journey, I also had other people who will help me puzzle through my trip. Lao Tzu and Talesin provided thought-provoking critique and support that pushed me to define and defend my choices. They set impossibly high standards of quality (Lincoln & Guba, 2003) and then gave me tools and insights for

reaching those standards. For peer review (Creswell, 1998), I had a wonderful colleague whose dissertation journey was unfolding at the same time as mine. Her topic and approach differed, but her advice and questions always kept me honest. Finally, for thoughts and ideas about how to adapt my research strategies as this journey unfolded, I often called on Merlin my methodologist.

Another aspect of trustworthiness and credibility is ensuring that participants' words, thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and stories are represented in an authentic, ethical, believable manner (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). To that end, my research strategy of engaging participants in helping to develop the major themes, asking them to review findings, and discussing their feelings about the research experience lends 'believability' to the final product (Richardson, 2000).

Lastly, the quality of my writing and the ways in which I shaped their stories, engaged the audience, and presented my assertions and recommendations is another aspect of trustworthiness and credibility (Richardson, 2003). My responsibility was to be truthful with you, the reader, about what I thought, felt, believed, and learned about this journey. In the final writing, continuous, critical self-reflection and frequent and deliberate returns to the data and my field notes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) helped to keep me on a path of integrity and honesty.

### *Making Meaning of All those Data (Data Analysis)*

Qualitative research typically produces copious amounts of data (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Riessman, 1993). I talked with Lao Tzu and Merlin about my concerns regarding data analysis. To prepare for the work of sifting, analyzing, understanding, looking, confirming and disconfirming meanings, and seeing the data

from a variety of perspectives I continued to read. I looked at a number of data analysis strategies (Chase, 2003; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Janesick, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Ochberg, 2003; Riessman, 1993; Richardson, 2000; Ryan & Bernard, 2000) and began to play with the data from my pilot interviews to practice different strategies and styles of data analysis. I was certain that I had a neophyte's understanding of what it means to do data analysis with messy, contradictory, ordinary and extraordinary, and incomplete data (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Riessman, 1993). Of great comfort was the knowledge that as I slogged through pages and pages of transcripts and mountains of ideas, I had Merlin (and other members of my committee) with whom to consult. In the end, the data yielded its treasures.

### **This Researcher is Not a Therapist**

One of my ongoing concerns had been the ways in which people are influenced, in helpful or harmful ways, by being the participant of a research study (Bloom, 1998; Chase, 2003; Reinharz, 1992 ). The more I read and learned about the narrative process, the more I fretted about the ethical and moral responsibilities I had toward my participants. It is one thing to ask women to fill out a 150 question survey and quite another to ask them to spend hours over multiple interviews talking about themselves and their lives. Long after the interview is over, the act of telling their story has influenced and changed who they are, and how they see themselves (Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Reinharz, 1992). Like many wanderers before me (Bloom, 1998; Clinchy, 2003; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Reinharz, 1992), I explored ways to minimize the unintended consequences associated with my coming into participants' lives, awakening

ideas and feelings, and then leaving. At the same time, I clearly recognized my limited knowledge and experience with psychology and human behavior. Back to the literature!

I was fortunate in discovering a branch of psychology called 'narrative therapy' that seeks to use storytelling as a method to shape self-understanding and awareness (Morgan, 2000; White, 1995; White, 2000). Moreover, while it has strong theoretical underpinnings, it is relatively easy to understand and use compared to other branches of psychology. In exploring this topic, I found Alice Morgan's definition (2000) which states:

Narrative therapy is an approach to counseling and community work. It centres people as the experts in their own lives and views problems as separate from people. Narrative therapy assumes that people have many skills, competencies, beliefs, values, commitments and abilities that will assist them to reduce the influence of problems in their lives. The word 'narrative' refers to the emphasis that is placed upon the stories of people's lives and the differences that can be made through particular tellings and retellings of these stories. Narrative therapy involves ways of understanding the stories of people's lives, and ways of re-authoring these stories in collaboration between the therapist / community worker and the people's whose lives are being discussed. It is a way of working that is interested in history, the broader context that is affecting people's lives and the ethics or politics of therapy. These are some of the themes that make up what has come to be known as "narrative therapy." Of course, different people engage with these themes in their own ways. Some people choose to refer to 'narrative practices' rather than 'narrative therapy' as they believe that the phrase 'narrative therapy' is somewhat limiting of an endeavour which is constantly changing and being engaged with in many different contexts (p. 2).

The phrases "community worker" and "narrative practices" and "engaged with in different contexts" in the above definition provided me with realization that I could place myself most comfortably along the "well-informed community worker engaging in narrative practice with 'successful' first-generation females in a research setting" end of the continuum. While I did not intend to engage in a prolonged course of study for the

purpose of becoming a therapist, I knew that a side journey into the literature on "narrative therapy" would provide the tools I would need in this journey. My goal was to become conversant enough that I could safely practice thoughtful, ethical interviewing with participants.

Once I had a better understanding of the tenets and application of narrative therapy/practices, my concern about the welfare of my participants remained, but I felt better qualified to understand and deal with the ways in which my interactions affected them. My fear of causing unintended harm to the women I met and talked with was minimized. More importantly, I felt much more competent in making their participation a very positive experience for them (White, 1995; White, 2000). I was also prepared to refer a participant for counseling with a professional at the college if she exhibited distress or behaviors beyond my limited knowledge and abilities. I never had to use that option.

### **Moving On**

*"Life is complex. Each one of us must make [her] own path through life. There are no self-help manuals, no formulas, no easy answers. The right road for one is the wrong road for another. The journey of life is not paved in blacktop; it is not brightly lit, and it has no road signs. It is a rocky path through the wilderness." – M. Scott Peck*

As well as I could, I planned for this qualitative journey. As a neophyte researcher, I was warned by more experienced trekkers that I had much to learn about doing qualitative research (Dauite & Fine, 2003; Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2003). Paradoxically, in true qualitative fashion, the path of the experienced researcher is

as filled with surprise and serendipity as was mine (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I believed I had the right mind and heart to expect the unexpected, seek touchstones and markers, take time to reflect on where I had been and where I was going, and to savor the journey's lessons. I was consumed by curiosity about what I would learn. I was ready to move forward to meet my participants.

## METHODS AND METHODOLOGY IN ACTION

*"Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose."  
- Zora Neale Hurston*

### The Group Interview Process

I had posted my recruitment flyer all over the college and handed it out in locations where I knew many of first generation students congregated. As I waited for the date, I vacillated between worrying that no one would come and fearing that 40 or 50 participants would show up. Either extreme would be difficult. On the day of the group interview I assembled the consent forms, copies of the group interview questions and demographic survey, writing pads, green gel pens, note cards, post-it notes, and flip charts. I arrived an hour early to set up the conference room. I arranged a light buffet dinner on a side table, hung flip charts on the wall, set packets of materials at each place and positioned note cards and gel pens on top. And then I waited... 4:30, 4:35, 4:40... then two women walked in together followed shortly by a third. They were nervous and quiet, but when I offered dinner they eagerly walked over to fill their plates. As they started eating a fourth woman strode confidently into the room, told me very firmly that she had to leave in one hour to pick up her child and helped herself to a plate of food. A fifth woman peeked around the corner and asked, "Is it ok for me to come in?"

### Faith, Stella, Tamika, Fareeda, and Jacque

Faith walked in with Stella, although as it turned out neither yet knew the other. Faith was dressed in dark blue jeans and sweatshirt and wore her shining dark hair caught up in many braids. Her earrings grazed her shoulders and swung rhythmically as she talked. Her smile lit the room and she spoke clearly and calmly. When I indicated the food table, Faith said, "Thanks. I haven't eaten all day. That looks great," and headed straight over to fill a plate. Once she had what she wanted, she grabbed a chair near the head of the table and methodically set out her napkin and silverware before starting to eat.

Stella, a slender, older woman with a shy smile and expressively sad eyes, wore a tan jacket over her dark sweater and jeans and pulled a wheelie book bag, which she parked carefully near the door. Stella held back and watched Faith gather her meal before walking gingerly to the food table. She was hesitant and quiet. Her mannerisms suggested some discomfort or nervousness with being there. She glanced shyly in my direction as she filled her plate. She walked back and slipped quietly into a chair at the head of the table next to Faith.

Shortly after Faith and Stella came in, Tamika entered. She was a large, beautiful, dark-skinned woman dressed conservatively in pressed jeans and a starched white blouse. Her metal-framed glasses accentuated her self-assured demeanor. Tamika had a heavy backpack slung casually over her shoulder and walked with a confident lope into the center of the room. "Where would you like me to sit?" She asked. I indicated that she could sit anywhere so she circled the table and settled next to Faith on the far side of the

table. She confidently introduced herself to her neighbor. After getting her food, she pulled out her own notebook and pen and waited expectantly.

Jacque strode briskly through the door and announced that she had only one hour because she had to leave to pick up her child. She noticed the food and helped herself. Her short, curly, dark hair was caught back over her ears in two barrettes and she wore a loose white t-shirt un-tucked over her jeans. She seemed somewhat tense and edgy as she glanced at her watch before quickly eating her food. Faith said, "I know you. I know you. Where do I know you?" A quick conversation confirmed that they attended the same church. Although they didn't know each other, it turned out that they had numerous friends in common. The common bond seemed to calm Jacque who leaned back and relaxed a bit.

Fareeda came next. She peeked around the corner and asked, "Is it ok for me to come in?" She was young with long, thick, curly auburn hair and shining brown eyes. Fareeda spoke with an accent I couldn't place and measured her words carefully as she talked. She was dressed in a stylish pair of jeans, a logo t-shirt, and a leather jacket. She wore lovely gold and silver bracelets and earrings that jangled melodically whenever she moved. She too headed to the food table to fill a plate and thanked me effusively for the food. Her words were a cue to the others who also expressed gratitude. Fareeda settled comfortably opposite Tamika and introduced herself to the others.

We waited expectantly for other women to join us and when it seemed as if just these five were to be my fellow travelers, I decided to begin. My original plan had been to use the flip charts, note cards, and post-it notes and stand at the front of the room and function as a facilitator as I asked my questions. After meeting these women, that felt too

contrived and artificial, so I threw out my plan. Instead, I decided to sit within their circle and treat it more like a conversation than an interview. Although I was the researcher, I was also a fellow first-generation student and wanted to respect and honor their wisdom and agency as ‘successful’ women. Standing seemed to reinforce my authority, sitting brought me among them.

I explained my research study and the informed consent process. I began by telling them about myself, my experiences, and why the stories of self-identified, ‘successful’ first-generation women are so important. Then I talked about how the academy defines success and explained how I believed that success is a very individual matter. When I mentioned that A’s are not the only indicator of success, quiet Stella suddenly blurted out, “You don’t know how much I needed to hear that today!” The rest of us laughed with delight at her candid statement.

We reviewed the informed consent form, and they had many questions about the research. As I answered I found that we were talking with an ease and comfort that felt very natural. None of them was shy about speaking and each had a comment or idea to share during this process. They signed and returned my copies.

Then I asked them to fill out their demographic survey. The room was filled with sounds of quiet chewing as they continued to eat while they responded to my written questions. Each of them seemed comfortable with disclosing their personal information and expressed no concerns about answering. This ease and comfort only increased as we moved into the group interview questions. I decided to ask each woman to fully answer each question in a round-robin format. As each talked the others affirmed and confirmed the speaker’s words.

Starting with Tamika, I asked, “Describe what ‘success’ means to you.” She answered, “Being able to complete tasks... doing my best.” Tamika then went on to describe how she had not always been focused, but now academic success was a huge priority in her life. She described herself as a straight A student but noted that it had not always been that way. It had taken awhile to put herself mentally into the category of good student, but now that she was, she was determined to remain so. Tamika also felt that success enriches her life and changes how she views herself and how others view her. She added that even when others might not see your success, you know in your heart and believe in yourself. She closed by talking about her drive and ambition and how that really fostered her success.

Faith answered next by saying, “When they labeled me, I was gone!” She elaborated by telling how she had had both success and failure in school, but the labels that were placed on her in high school turned her off from school for a while. Faith added, “I’ve been the rebel.” But she stated that she had never let grades turn her off from striving toward her own goals. She was adamant that she didn’t need others (or their labels) to define her own success. Faith described how her biggest motivator toward success was in finding her own passion and purpose. If she had that, she had all she needed. She offered some advice for others in stating, “We all need to find our passion and purpose and work on our own happiness.” Finally, Faith stressed how important it is for the ‘successful’ person to ignore the critics and trust herself.

Stella, who had been nodding and agreeing with Tamika and Faith, spoke up next. She took us back to her earlier comment by emphasizing that success is “Not grades!!” She then told us that it had taken her 30 years to come back to school and right now it

was feeling like grades were “the only way that I can be special.” She talked about the feelings of wanting to quit and noted that she felt like that almost every day at CCD. She emphasized that just coming back to school was a success and wondered why that wasn’t good enough. Stella then described a time when she had successfully run a youth organization and had felt good about that. She also talked about how doing something she is good at and enjoys makes her feel ‘successful’ and gave cooking as an example. Stella delighted the group by inviting them to her soul food restaurant – a long-term goal that she hopes to realize after she finishes college. She noted that being a role model to her granddaughter also made her feel ‘successful.’

Jacque followed by saying that much of what Faith said she agreed with 100%, especially the part about not needing others to define her success, “I don’t need anyone else to affirm me.” She subscribed to the theory that, “You can do anything you put your mind to.” Jacque added a new theme when she noted that sometimes success just finds you even when you’re not looking and that having some success brings more success. For her, coming back to school was seen as one of her biggest successes, motivated in large measure by her child and by wanting to better herself for her child. She talked about the importance of goals and purpose. Jacque closed by describing how she must first feel success from within before it manifests itself in school and in life.

Finally Fareeda spoke. She told the others how grateful she was to be in America because in Afghanistan, where she had come from, there had been no schools for girls. She described that as a tremendous loss and talked about having no opportunities. She was thrilled to be in the United States and discussed the “Great opportunity to do anything... go to school... be successful... read... learn. As a girl that is wonderful.”

She noted that for her success was a combination of factors – her grades, her family’s opinions, and her own view of herself. She identified striving for achievement as success. Fareeda believed that success both is your goal and a by-product of achieving your goals. Finally, she elaborated that without success you feel unfulfilled and having success fills a basic human need.

The next question asked, “What are the things that help you be ‘successful’?” Tamika answered by stating, “My Mom. She is my biggest supporter. She pushes me.” She elaborated on how much her entire family, especially her children and her sister, motivated and supported her. Tamika also attributed much of her success to CCD’s TRIO Scholars program and shared how much they had motivated her to stick with it even when it got hard. In talking about how her instructors helped with success, she qualified it by saying that not all of them had helped, but noted that the “right” teachers had really helped. When pressed to define what that meant, she noted that that supportive, encouraging teachers really helped her be ‘successful.’ Tamika also identified her personal attributes of determination, perseverance, and perfectionism as being major contributors to her success. She added that her willingness to take risks, even when she was fearful of failure, made a big difference.

At Faith’s turn she shook her head and laughed. “Oh my,” she said, “I think it’s my attitude.” She then proceeded to talk about how her self-determination helped her overcome many challenges and that she was just stubborn enough to say, “I’ll show them.” Faith also described how much she depended on tutoring and advising on her school journey and agreed with Tamika about the critical importance of the TRIO Scholars program. She wistfully said, “I wish there were more programs like that for all

students.” Unlike Tamika, Faith described her mother as not being a reason for success. “She was no help and no support, even when I needed her most.” Faith added a new theme about financial comfort and security being a measure of success and one that she was still striving toward. She talked about the feeling of “getting somewhere” as she described her long progression through college. She said, “It finally clicked and now I am successful.”

Stella began to speak and then choked up. Faith and Jacque reached to comfort her, and we all sat quietly waiting and honoring her tears. It was not an uncomfortable moment, rather a communion of women supporting someone else’s pain. When she composed herself she talked about how her mother had recently died. Stella described wanting to please her mother as both a stress on, and a factor of, her success. She talked about her pain and confusion about what her mother would want her to do right now. “My mother always said, ‘Don’t do it for me, do it for yourself.’ ” Stella then laughed and told the group about another family member, her “bossy sister,” who was a big factor in her success. Then, with a loving smile, she told us about her granddaughter, “She is my mirror. I tell her the lessons I need to learn. She helps me listen to myself.” Finally, Stella gave much credit to the support and scholarship programs at CCD for helping to keep her motivated, especially during this difficult emotional time.

Jacque methodically ticked off the three factors that contributed to her success: family, community, and self. In discussing her family she noted that they were all important but that what really pushed her was her child and wanting to provide for her child. She attributed much of her success to the support of her community, especially the various college programs that provided financial, emotional, and academic support to

single mothers. She gave herself much of the credit in her own success and described how she had had to learn conflict resolution in order to get along in the world. That had provided her with skills that influenced her success. "Now I know there are always alternatives. And now I am determined to be successful."

Fareeda followed Jacque's lead by listing the two factors that made her 'successful': family and self. She described how much her family encouraged and supported her, but talked about how there was never an option for failure. Their expectation was for success. She further discussed how having many family responsibilities actually increased her success by making her very reliable and conscientious from a very young age. In talking about herself, Fareeda noted, "I have dreams and wishes and hopes that I might be successful." These aspirations motivated and drove her to do well in school. She also talked about how important it was for her to have role models to show her the way through the American college system. Her gratitude at being able to go to college and get an education seemed to be an overarching thread throughout her descriptions of success.

The next question turned the tables by asking, "What are the things that keep you from being 'successful'?" Tamika had many reasons. First she told us, "Fear of failure!" And described how if she let it, fear kept her from success. She also described her mother's criticism as another factor and elaborated by saying, "When she compliments me I want to do better. When she criticizes me, I feel like I can't do anything." Tamika also talked about how being wrong in public inhibited her ability to be 'successful' and described two examples. The first, during a math class an instructor had her work a problem on the board, and then pointed out all her mistakes to the rest of the class. The

second, during an English class, an instructor had her read her writing and also criticized it publicly. Finally, Tamika spoke at length about how she let the opinion of others all-too-frequently influence her own belief about her success.

Faith spoke first about her own fear of leaving her comfort zone and how she could not feel 'successful' unless she felt safely within it. For her another big factor was lack of praise. "Is it so hard for people to tell you when you're doing good?" she lamented. She discussed how she finds herself waiting and waiting for the approval of others as an affirmation of her success. Faith also talked about how the college's decision to close the Women's Center left her somewhat adrift and unsure of herself. She strongly agreed with Tamika about fear of failure and stated that it also affected her success. She emphasized how important it is for students to have places to go to where they feel safe and empowered. Finally, Faith disclosed that when she feels alone she also feels unsuccessful.

At Stella's turn she said, "I haven't always given myself a lot of praise, but I'm trying to learn how to do that. It's easier to know when you've failed." She then ticked off all the factors that kept her from being 'successful': always trying to please others, negative self-talk, fear of failure, fear of taking chances, lack of approval from others, criticism, feeling alone, not caring about herself, letting others influence her, rebellion, and nasty attitude. She wryly described how she often "dug her own hole" and had only herself to blame when she was unsuccessful. Stella then talked about how the world was unforgiving and told us that, "It's scary and rough out there," as she talked about her past failures. Stella, too, discussed how the Women's Center had provided a place for her to regroup and gain her courage and self-confidence. She added that the TRIO Scholars

program now filled that gap. Finally, Stella adamantly stated, “And don’t tell me I’m ‘at-risk.’ I hate that term. I am not at-risk, I am just me!”

Jacque had less to say, but she agreed with that fear of failure, especially in front of others was a huge factor. Like Tamika, she gave a specific example of having to do board work during a math class and making mistakes that the teacher pointed out. “I felt like such a failure.” Jacque also identified strongly with the feeling of being alone. She also noted that with the closing of the Women’s Center, the college did not have enough support systems specifically for women and felt that sometimes women needed a place only for them. Finally, she wondered why she so often let others influence her. “I shouldn’t. I know that, but I still do.”

Fareeda talked first about how family problems were a major factor. She elaborated that factors like illness, lack of money, lack of food, lack of work, and other life events either personally or within her family interfered with her ability to be ‘successful.’ She then talked about how her own fear sometimes paralyzed her and that she struggled often with that fear. Finally, she said, “Sometimes people tell me I am successful, but I feel like they don’t really know. If they knew they would think I am fake... a liar. I don’t feel successful. I feel like trickster.” Her comment resonated with all the other women who nodded vigorously and added similar statements. They insisted that even if they looked ‘successful’ from the outside, they often felt like imposters on the inside. If others knew who they really were, they would see their fears and failures.

The final question asked, “What would better help students like you be ‘successful’ in the future?” Tamika stated firmly, “Don’t let negative people hold you back.” She also discussed how hearing and sharing success stories was inspirational and

thanked me for being interested enough to share their stories. She described how mentoring and support was important. She suggested that students who are timid might want to take classes with friends and family. She also noted that organizations like Phi Theta Kappa and the Honors Institute recognized and fostered success. Tamika was dismayed that unmarried, childless women were frequently left out when support systems were offered. "There's a lot for single parents, but what about single women who don't have anyone to lean on?" Finally she counseled other students to, "Recognize your own situation and your role in it. Have a will to change... block out negative... change the way you think... believe in yourself." She returned to her previous example of the math instructor who humiliated her by asking her what she was thinking when she answered his question and noted that if she had let it, that would have caused her to give up, but she blocked it out and persevered.

Faith advised students to set their own pace and not be influenced by others. She described how important it is for women like her to reach back to help others. She also advocated more college and personal resources and talked about how the emotional and financial challenges faced by many students could be factors keeping them from success. And then she garnered a fervent reaction from all the participants when she said, "It feels like I'm always holding everybody else up. When is somebody going to hold me up? I need help!"

I asked them what that meant and all five described work and family responsibilities that felt overwhelming. They also talked about needing to be the emotional support within their immediate and extended families. The sense was they all carried a heavy load that wore on them. In turn, none of them felt they had anyone to

lean on. I asked them if they ever told others that they couldn't do it anymore and they each said they didn't feel they could do that. Their sense of responsibility to others was unanimous.

At Stella's turn, she said, "I need to take 'will' out of my vocabulary and use 'am.' I need to stop fixing everybody else's problems and take care of myself. I need to do this [school] for nobody else but me!" She also advised CCD to minimize its red tape and paperwork suggesting that they can be barriers to success. Stella mused that colleges need to realize that there are many single women and single mothers coming to school. "What are you doing to make them more comfortable? Do you even know they're here?" She asked. She enjoined women to realize that "you're never too old" and noted that it's important for CCD to get that message to older women students. She believed that she was frequently embarrassed about her age by professors or other students who seemed surprised that a woman over fifty was attending college. She vigorously stated, "Ninety is not too old! Stop making me feel dumb for being here at my age." Stella admitted that when she is having a bad day, she takes a timeout and wondered if that strategy might work for others. Finally she stated, "I would love to have myself to call for help. I'm a good caretaker to everyone but me."

Jacque praised support systems like TRIO Scholars, the Academic Tutoring Center, case managers, and caring faculty members for her success and noted that other students should take advantage of these systems. She suggested that 'successful' students should be asked to give back. She added that she gives back by speaking at local high schools to do recruitment and mentoring of students like her. Laughingly, she shared that when she does that she is frequently mistaken for a high school student. Jacque spoke

eloquently about the community needing to provide real resources that are easy for student to access yet help them keep their pride. “Don’t bounce me around and don’t make me demean myself to get them.” She closed by reiterating that these resources need to be more abundant, need to be accessible, need to be all over the community, and need to help the recipients keep their pride.

Next, Fareeda offered several ideas. She talked about the MESA (Math, Engineering, Science Achievement) Program, funded by the United States Department of Education, which supports high school students interested in careers in math, science, and engineering. She also noted that ‘successful’ women have to become their own “cheerleader” and learn to be ‘successful’ even without support from others. Finally, Fareeda talked about how important it is for colleges to listen to and understand others and value the differences that students bring. She was very clear that too often teachers favor those who look, dress, and talk a certain way and that students who don’t fit that model feel left out or un-valued.

Faith surprised us all by bursting into tears and telling Fareeda, “I think I have troubles and then I hear about you. I really admire the women from your country... they’ve dealt with so much adversity.” The other three women echoed the sentiment and Stella added, “Even with my troubles, I don’t know how you do it.” Fareeda countered by saying, “But I don’t have children and my parents help me. I think what you are doing is hard.” They continued to praise each other and discuss whose lot was the more challenging. I was humbled by their support and compassion for one another.

Two hours had flown by and I was done with my questioning, yet no one, not even Jacque (who had been so insistent about having only one hour) made any move to

leave. The women were comfortably talking back and forth. Finally, reluctantly, I thanked them for their time and told them I would be contacting them to schedule individual interviews.

After the group interview I was elated. It had been successful beyond my expectations, and I was thrilled at the level of openness and comfort shared within our small group. I had data and it felt as if I were truly on my way. I rushed home to summarize the demographic surveys and begin writing up the interview summary. One mistake I made was not immediately following up with my participants to schedule interviews. I felt that I needed to finish the group interview summary before I could proceed. As always, life intervened and my journey took another turn. I was assigned additional responsibilities at work, which was a huge professional compliment but a gigantic pull on my time. It seemed all-too-easy to delay scheduling individual interviews when I was so busy at work. Three months came and went.

### **Collecting Stories**

Finally, I scheduled individual interviews with Faith, Stella, and Jacque, but when I contacted Tamika, her numbers had been disconnected and nobody seemed to know where she had gone. I felt the loss of her participation, but more importantly I worried that something had happened to her. Only later did I learn that she had withdrawn for personal reasons. Next I talked with Fareeda who informed me that she had taken a full-time job and didn't feel that she had time to participate. Again, I felt a sense of loss because I had really wanted to hear her stories.

Faith's was my first interview. Her stories appear in a later chapter. The interview went better than I could have imagined. She sat right down, opened up and

trusted completely as she eagerly shared her stories. I was surprised and excited by the ease of the process. She confirmed to me that rapport we had established during the group interview was one of the main factors in her willingness to be so free and open.

My next interview was scheduled with Jacque. She did not come on the day we had scheduled and when I contacted her to see if we could re-schedule, she offered vague excuses. Finally we re-scheduled. She was a no-show for the second interview session as well. I was unable to reach her until the following week and when we finally talked, she admitted that she was failing her classes and no longer felt 'successful.' I suggested that course failure did not exclude her from the study, but she was fairly adamant that she did not want to participate. I left it open and told her she could call me at any time if she changed her mind. She has never called. I find myself wondering and worrying about her.

With less optimism, I scheduled an interview with Stella who was difficult to contact by phone, so I had to resort to leaving messages for her in the TRIO Scholars office. In the meantime, I met Hope.

### **Finding Hope**

Hope came into my study in a very different way. I had already held my group interview and had identified willing participants when one of the Title V First Generation Case Managers approached me to say, "There's a young lady who I think you should meet. She's had a rough time academically, but now she's feeling really 'successful' and is interested in telling you her story." I had already confirmed my participants and was concerned about expanding the total number if it meant that I would delay my projected completion date. I was also concerned about not having met her through the group

interview protocol, but the woman who suggested that I meet with her was so excited about this student's progress that she had already told the student all about my study and told her that I would be interested in her story. Based on my ethics of honoring the voices of these women, I felt I couldn't turn her away if she were willing to tell her story. I agreed to meet with her only on the condition that the student not feel pressured or coerced by me or the case manager to come to meet with me. As I waited to see if she would contact me, I continued my interview work with Faith and Stella.

### **Collecting More Stories**

Stella appeared as scheduled and like Faith, she displayed no hesitation or reservation in sharing her stories. She too made reference to the group interview process and talked about how much it had meant to her. She also noted that she now stays in contact with a couple of the participants. She told me that meeting the other women and hearing their thoughts had made all the difference in her life. Her stories appear in a later chapter.

Meanwhile, Hope contacted me and agreed to come in the next day. Her interview was scheduled for 1:00 and she called me at 12:45. My initial fear was that she was canceling, but she merely wanted to ask if I minded if she was late. Mind? She would never know how excited I was that she was still coming. She stood quietly outside my office waiting for me to notice her. Hope was young and pretty, with a delicate face, high cheekbones, a beautiful smile, and large brown eyes that glanced nervously away from me as she talked about herself. Her voice was gentle and quiet. Because Hope volunteered herself for my study after I had already conducted the group interview, I spent considerable time describing my study and research protocols. She seemed

interested and flattered that I would even consider learning about her. I asked my screening questions and groaned inwardly when she told me that she had first started college at age 19. Hope did not fit my criteria for being a non-traditional student. Yet there she was in my office and so very willing to talk with me. Based on my woman's values for honoring the stories of my participants, there was no way that I could send her away. Even if I ended up not using it, I had a responsibility to listen. Hope completed the consent form and demographic survey. I did not ask her the four questions from the group interview, but went straight into the individual interview protocol. Because we had not yet spent time together, Hope took awhile to warm up to the process. She spoke cautiously and was initially reluctant to volunteer information. Despite her innate shyness, she eventually shared amazingly private details about her life. As I listened, her story took a surprising twist that perhaps qualified her as non-traditional. I later discussed my reasoning with Merlin and he agreed. Her stories appear in a later chapter.

### **Encountering Elena**

During the summer I held another group interview session to try to recruit one or two more participants to make up for the loss of Tamika, Fareeda, and Jacque from my study. As before, I brought consent forms, copies of the group interview questions and demographic survey, writing pads and blue gel pens. I skipped the note cards, and post-it notes, and flip charts because this time I intended to have another "conversation" with my participants. I arranged a light buffet dinner on the side table, set packets of materials at each place and positioned writing pads and gel pens on top. And then I waited... and waited... and waited.... Nobody came.

I was incredibly discouraged. And, the calendar reminded me that time was on its inexorable march. I was tempted to appeal to my committee to allow me to proceed with just Faith, Stella, and Hope, but when I hinted at the idea with Lao Tzu, he gently reminded me that four really was the number. I began to plan another group interview in late August. I was utterly disheartened and feeling as if I might be on a never-ending journey. Like so many doctoral candidates, I had forgotten that the way is frequently more challenging than planned and that the unanticipated paths sometimes yield the greatest adventure.

Near the end of August, I got an unexpected email from one of the other Title V First Generation Case Managers telling me about a woman who felt very 'successful,' but who had been unavailable during my second group interview. She asked if I would be interested in meeting with her. I eagerly said, "Yes." I knew nothing about the individual other than she was Latina and had just finished her degree at CCD. I set the wheel in motion and waited for her to contact me.

Elena emailed me to see if she could come in the following Tuesday to hear more about my study. Promptly at 12:15 she appeared.

Elena was a thirty-ish woman who appeared very confident and comfortable with herself. She carried herself well and had amazing posture, erect but not stiff. She was average size and dressed in conservative, casual clothing with large gold hoop earring peeking from her thick hair. As she talked her large brown eyes and expressive mouth provided non-verbal reinforcement to her moods. She appeared to be focused, serious, and organized.

Elena chose her words carefully and precisely and talked with very few verbal pauses or fillers. Her thoughts were well organized and she seemed to take great care in presenting them in a coherent sequence. At one point, when I mentioned transcribing her interview, she talked about how challenging it can be to be accurate when you're bilingual and translating between two languages. Until then I had detected no accent, but once she disclosed that Spanish was her first language, I caught only the slightest hints in the lilt of her voice.

She had many questions for me and read the informed consent form closely. As I further described the study and my interest in the topic, she interrupted frequently to get clarification about the what, why, and how of the process. She was interested in participating, but wanted to get complete information before agreeing to continue. Once she was satisfied, she shared her stories. Again, I was amazed and delighted that a woman who had just met me was so willing to talk about the details of her life. Her stories appear in a later chapter.

### **The Individual Interviewing Process**

All the interviews were comfortable and easy. Although I was nervous about making a mistake with the tape recorder or saying or doing something to offend or harm my participants, they approached it with an ease that put me at ease. I was amazed and honored at how open all my participants were. Granted, some were more forthcoming and others required a gentle push to talk about themselves, but in all cases they were willing to share the most intimate details of their lives with a relative stranger.

I used my interview guide as just that, and let the participants take their stories in the direction they wanted (Yow, 1994; Chase, 2003). As I listened I sometimes found myself wanting to ask follow-up questions that would have detracted from the flow of their stories, so I remained silent. I often found myself verbally affirming their stories with phrases like, “wow,” or, “that’s great,” or “that makes sense.” Yet I never sensed that they were seeking affirmation. Rather, it seemed an appropriate way of letting them know they had been heard. It seemed to increase the bond and comfort that we shared during the telling.

I had read that the process of telling one’s story could be therapeutic or cathartic (White, 2000), and I had intended to ask them about the experience during their last interview with me, but all of my participants pre-empted my question by telling me during their first interviews how good it felt to talk about themselves. Hope went so far as to tell me that it had calmed and relaxed her. Faith and Stella both indicated that the group interview had also been a very positive experience. Their final interviews merely gave us an opportunity to affirm that aspect of the interview process.

### **Transcribing Stories**

At the end of each interview, I transcribed their stories. In addition to the verbal affirmations which I remembered making, I was surprised when I listened to the interview tapes to hear how often I had said “uh huh” or “hmmm” as I interviewed my participants. I had read the injunction for interviewers to avoid the normal conversational sounds we make in listening to another (Yow, 1994) and yet, when it finally began – when I was actually interviewing and listening intently, it appears that I couldn’t *not*

interact with my participants. Their stories were so compelling and their telling of them was so intense that I think I would have felt too distant and removed – too academic, if I had not provided some affirmation of their openness and honesty. From my perspective, it had felt as if I had been much more silent than normal during dialogue, but the tapes told me that I had not been able to totally silence myself.

Finally, I had hours of real data. I lived in mortal fear that something would happen to my tapes, so I made copies of each and put one set in my desk at work and another in my desk at home. I obsessively saved my work as I typed and even more obsessively made back up upon back up as I began the work of transcription. This time I had the de rigueur machine with foot pedal, not the flimsy little desk model used in my pilot study. It made a difference in my transcription skills. Even so, the work was tedious yet strangely exhilarating. Although I had been careful about placing the recorder close to each participant, the normal rise and fall of the human voice coupled with the inevitable background noise, had made some of their words less intelligible than others. As I strained to hear clearly, I also struggled to find the right punctuation and annotation to convey the vocal range, inflections, and meaning behind the flat words on the page. Their thoughts and ideas unfolded before me in ways that weren't obvious during the initial interview. As I transcribed, *hearing* and *seeing* their words at the same time added new dimensions of meaning. I found that the more I listened and re-listened, the more I heard. My excitement grew as my mind danced with emergent themes. Even as I grumbled about the time this was taking, I couldn't have imagined handing my tapes over to a transcriptionist. I would have missed so much.

I wanted to immerse myself in the work and in their stories, yet I found that I could process only so much in a single day. My mind was brimming with ideas, but my ability to think clearly and deeply took tremendous energy. I needed time and space to rest from my thoughts before returning to the work of thinking, writing, analyzing, and understanding. This was not a rote activity. It was intense and time consuming. Seat time didn't matter; processing time did.

The most amazing occurrence was that I found the voices of my participants running through my head over and over and at the oddest moments... as I was showering, driving, drifting off to sleep, or sitting quietly. It was as if I had become the processor of their data, and it was imprinting on my memory banks. I found myself observing the world and the college through their eyes, a very different perspective. It was if in knowing them - processing their words and stories - that I began to understand their thoughts and feelings about other aspects of their lives.

I felt a distance from them that surprised me, and I felt a closeness that did not. I had never lived their experiences, and some parts of their stories were foreign to my knowledge and cultural base. Yet, I too had been a struggling, frightened, determined girl/woman who knew what adversity felt like and who knew that she had within herself the ability to succeed. Their experiences became part of me.

### **My Journey**

Already, I was changed by meeting these women and my journey with them was just beginning. Each, in her own way, was teaching me something. I was learning humility and trust and awe and love for women whose stories were complex and incomplete, from extraordinary women whose lives were ordinary and hard, from

‘successful’ women whose successes were fragile and fraught with self-doubt even in the midst of heroic determination, from women who bore a tremendous responsibility to others even as they strove to better their own lives. I was learning how meaningful their stories and experiences were to each other and to me.

I was learning something about myself, too. I was learning that my journey, while solely my own, is shared everyday by women like these whose stories illuminate and educate us as to what it means to be a ‘successful’ female, non-traditional, first-generation community college student. I learned that the moments, the stories, the silences, and the tears shared with these women influenced and changed my understanding of all the other people I encountered. I was looking with new eyes and listening with new ears at strangers, friends, and colleagues. I became a story collector, listening for the nuances within conversations, making meaning and sense of even the most inconsequential stories. I became softer and more tolerant, less impatient with ambiguity and change and stories that had no end. I liked what I was becoming.

*“The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed.”*  
- Carl Jung

## TELLING THEIR STORIES

*"We are lonesome animals. We spend all our life trying to be less lonesome. One of our ancient methods is to tell a story begging the listener to say - and to feel - 'Yes, that's the way it is, or at least that's the way I feel it. You're not as alone as you thought.' "*  
- John Steinbeck

### **Conquering Mountains of Data: Analysis and Interpretation**

As I moved into the work of telling their stories I found that I had mountains of incredibly rich data. The daunting challenge lay in the analysis and interpretation of these wonderful stories that had been so freely and generously shared. In Chapter Ten, I talk in much greater detail about my subjectivity and the difficult choices about what to include and exclude. Before then, in the next four chapters, you are going to meet the women. Each has her own chapter. I decided to honor and preserve the wholeness of each story by presenting it individually. The format of each of those chapters is the same. I start by introducing each woman and giving you my impressions of her. Then I tell her story as summarized from the first interview. The next section describes our co-analysis and co-identification of major and minor themes from the second interview. In the fourth section, I use the data gathered during the third interview to discuss her descriptions of the experience of being part of this research project. The following section deductively uses my interpretive framework to summarize her stories. Finally, the chapter ends with the memento that she left behind to tell us what is most important for others to know

about being a 'successful' non-traditional first-generation female student at the Community College of Denver. I would caution you to remember that my strategy of sharing my "results" fits within what Polkinhorne (1997) would call experimentation with narrative formats because "by changing their voice to storyteller, researchers will also change the way in which the voices of their 'subjects' or participants can be heard" (p. 3).

An "objective" analysis of their stories might note that these women have unrealistic and unattainable expectations for themselves, that the obstacles they face are almost insurmountable, that their personal and emotional resources are inadequate for success, that their pathways toward their goals are convoluted and long, and that they represent the classic "at-risk" first-generation student. This deficit perspective and hegemonic view are plausible and represent one way of analyzing and interpreting stories. I eschew that viewpoint and ask you to see the 'successes' contained within their stories. And I suggest you ask yourself if your own story could withstand "objective" analysis? How would you be categorized? How would you categorize yourself?

I can't be "objective," nor can I critique women who have come further than some might have predicted when they were living their very real lives and dealing with all the events, good and bad, contained within those lives. To analyze and interpret all the ways that Hope, Faith, Stella, and Elena might not be or should not be 'successful' is to dishonor the trust that they have placed in me, and in themselves. In analyzing their stories I find a self-awareness and hopeful belief that their tremendous courage and determination supported by their relational circles and their sense of duty will steer them toward a future that finds them realizing their dreams. To believe any less is to discount

their stories and their overwhelming determination. Some, with an academic lens, might jump straight to “reality” and find reasons to explain their future. I will not do the same. Hope’s, Faith’s, Stella’s, and Elena’s past, present, and future are theirs alone and their stories paint a picture of women who believe firmly in themselves and in their success.

### **Identifying Pathways: Emerging Themes**

In retrospect, the group interview foreshadowed the four primary themes that emerged from these stories. Those themes are *resilience, relationships, reflection, and responsibilities* (the four R’s). When I first wrote up my notes from the group interview, those themes were right under my nose, but I didn’t see them clearly. It was only as I worked and re-worked the data from the individual interviews that the 4 R’s emerged so clearly that when I looked back I saw the same four thematic beacons shining brightly all throughout the group interview. They emerged inductively and became the interpretive framework for synthesizing the data. I will talk more about the 4 R’s in Chapter Ten.

As you meet Hope, Faith, Stella, and Elena watch and listen for these major themes. Once you finish seeing them in the context of the individual women’s stories, we will revisit and reflect on them in Chapter Ten. At the most simplistic level the dictionary (Merriam-Webster, 2004) provides the following definitions:

**Main Entry: re·sil·ience**

Pronunciation: ri-'zil-y&n(t)s

Function: *noun*

1 : the capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape after deformation caused especially by compressive stress

2 : an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change

**Main Entry: re·la·tion·ship**

Pronunciation: -sh&n-"ship

Function: *noun*

1 : the state of being related or interrelated <studied the *relationship* between the

variables>

2 : the relation connecting or binding participants in a relationship: as a :

KINSHIP b : a specific instance or type of kinship

3 a : a state of affairs existing between those having relations or dealings <had a good *relationship* with his family> b : a romantic or passionate attachment

**Main Entry: re·flec·tion**

Pronunciation: ri-'flek-sh&n

Function: *noun*

Etymology: Middle English, alteration of *reflexion*, from Late Latin *reflexion-*, *reflexio* act of bending back, from Latin *reflectere*

1 : an instance of reflecting; *especially* : the return of light or sound waves from a surface

2 : the production of an image by or as if by a mirror

3 a : the action of bending or folding back b : a reflected part : FOLD

4 : something produced by reflecting : as a : an image given back by a reflecting surface b : an effect produced by an influence <the high crime rate is a *reflection* of our violent society>

5 : an often obscure or indirect criticism : REPROACH <a *reflection* on his character>

6 : a thought, idea, or opinion formed or a remark made as a result of meditation

7 : consideration of some subject matter, idea, or purpose

8 *obsolete* : turning back : RETURN

9 a : a transformation of a figure in which each point is replaced by a point symmetric with respect to a line or plane b : a transformation that involves reflection in more than one axis of a rectangular coordinate system

- re·flec·tion·al /-shn&l, -sh&-n<sup>&l</sup>/ *adjective*

**Main Entry: re·spon·si·bil·i·ty**

Pronunciation: ri-"spän(t)-s&-'bi-l&-tE

Function: *noun*

Inflected Form(s): *plural* -ties

1 : the quality or state of being responsible: as a : moral, legal, or mental accountability b : RELIABLILITY, TRUSHWORTHINESS

2 : something for which one is responsible; BURDEN

Definitions provide one level of understanding, but the lived experiences of these women illustrate the contextual meanings of the 4 R's. In every case strong aspects of *resilience, relationships, reflection, and responsibilities* are found interwoven through the stories of the past, present and future of each of these four women. How a particular theme plays out in each individual life varies, but the underlying theme remains. One

wonders if those themes are as strong in each of our lives or if there might be something about being a self-identified 'successful,' non-traditional, first-generation female that makes those themes more prevalent. I do know that I learned much from working to understand these women, their stories, and their resilience in the face of challenges large and small; their relationships both good and bad; their reflective thoughts both spoken and unspoken; and their tremendous emotional, spiritual, and physical responsibilities to themselves and others.

**So, let me introduce you to the women who taught me....**

## HOPE

*“Forgiving does not erase the bitter past. A healed memory is not a deleted memory. Instead, forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember. We change the memory of our past into a hope for our future.”*

*- Louis B. Smedes*

### Meeting Hope

Hope is a small woman with a hesitant, quiet demeanor. Although it is June when we first meet, the weather has been chilly and wet, so she is dressed in a warm sweater and a powder blue jacket that she leaves on for the first 20 minutes of our interview. Hope is African-American, with a delicate face, high cheekbones, a beautiful smile, and large brown eyes that glance away from me as she talks about herself. Her voice is gentle and quiet. Hope has a habit of laughing nervously as she answers and she seems shy about volunteering information perhaps because she is private or perhaps because she doesn't believe her stories are interesting. She leans toward me and clasps her hands nervously in front of her as we begin. Unlike other participants, I have to work to draw out her words. She appears to be an internal processor. Once she answers she stops and waits and not until halfway through the interview do I realize that if I wait another 60 seconds she will fill the void with more of her story. As we progress, she also begins to connect with me a bit more and to trust that I am truly interested in her story. I am reminded of Merlin's injunction, "Rapport, rapport, rapport!"

Hope, who came into my life after the group interview, knew little about the actual study. So I spent more time at the beginning of our first meeting describing its purpose and my research procedures. She is surprised, shy, and flattered to think that her story is interesting. As I asked my screening questions and learn that she was 19 when she started college, I am disheartened because she does not fit my criteria for being a non-traditional student. She had made a special effort to meet with me and was here in my office ready and so very willing to share details from her life. I could not send her away. At that moment I wasn't sure if I could use her story, but I felt a responsibility to treat her with respect and care. As I listen, her story takes a surprising twist that could perhaps qualify her as non-traditional. Listen....

The defining theme in Hope's life is her first love. She came to CCD at age 18 – a 'successful' student who loved school and liked learning - a girl with the goal of becoming an accountant. Her first few semesters at CCD were good. Then, for the first time in her life she fell in love and, as the story often goes, he was all wrong for her. She describes the agony of the relationship. She tells of how she tried to change to please him and it was never enough; how he was threatened by her success in school; how she let him shift her from her focus and goals; how the pain of everything had her attempting suicide. Yet ultimately it was his words that caused her to look at herself and realize what had been happening and gain the courage to walk away.

In January 2004, at age 22, Hope took a long look at her life and her goals and decided to take charge. Now, she is back at CCD with a new purpose and determination. She was here the first time as a girl. Now she is here as a woman who is hoping to be re-born as a 'successful' student. She intends to do well. She is determined and focused.

The pain and bitterness of that failed love remains an overarching theme in her life. She comes back to it again and again and is very much processing the meaning of that “failure” as she gets on with her life. Intellectually she has a number of answers for herself about the relationship and the effect it had on her academically, emotionally, and physically. She does acknowledge that it will be awhile before she is able to get over it, if ever. At the core, despite the heartbreak and failed dreams, Hope has hope for her future.

### **Hope’s Story**

One of Hope’s earliest memories of being ‘successful’ has to do with school. When she was in elementary school, she learned she was on the honor roll and she liked the feeling, “Wow this is good, they praised me for being on the honor roll, I really like this.” She described always liking school, always doing well in school because, as she said, “I knew that I had to be there, so if I was going to be there I might as well do the best that I could.” She always did well in school.

Hope’s family moved several times during her childhood and despite that, Hope was a good student who loved school. Her experience left memories.

I cried a couple of times when I had to move. We moved a lot. I was born in, ah, Chicago and then I moved to Louisiana when I was about seven... so I’ve been to so many different schools and leaving all the different schools I’d cry for these teachers that I would miss. So, I really liked school.

When asked if she liked high school, Hope recalled, “Yes, I did. I was on the honor roll a lot. I liked school. I would never miss a day. My mom would try to get me

to miss days when I was sick but I didn't like to miss school." It was in high school that Hope took an accounting class that crystallized her career goals.

I took an accounting class at Mandeville High and I liked it. Accounting is something I was good at. My major right now is accounting and that's just something that I have deep feelings for and so it didn't change and I don't think it will change.

And when asked about the significance of doing well, Hope observed, "I think being successful in high school prepares you for college. You know, if you decide that you want to go to college the best thing is to do better in high school."

Hope talks lovingly about her parents and acknowledges that they provided a solid foundation with strong values of "work hard," "do your best," "try harder." But Hope also talked, sometimes wistfully, of her parents not pushing her.

My parents never cared, though, if we were on the Honor Roll or not. You know, being on the Honor Roll to them was something good and if... they never pushed us to really do the work, or... I don't know... I can't remember one time that my parents have ever, you know, since I've been... since I went to high school that my parents have ever asked me, "Do you have homework?" or anything. And it was much... most of the time it was in junior high. And in high school they kind of like, "Okay, you guys are teenagers. You're almost young adults." You know? "You're responsible. If you don't want to get the grades that you think you need, then don't."

Hope has six siblings, but only one she is really close to, a younger sister with whom she currently lives. Her other siblings disappointed her parents by not doing well in high school, not finishing high school, and not making the best life choices. Hope watched them and decided, "I'm not going to be like that."

It was important for Hope to do well in school because of her parents' disappointment about her siblings. She relates,

Well, I have one brother to graduate from high school and then the three after, you know, didn't graduate, and then I was next in line. So, I thought, "Oh, I need to graduate," you know, "I want to make my parents proud. I want to have... I want them to have to have something to talk about and be happy about." So I graduated from high school, and then... I was like ... I don't have any... I'm not doing anything else... I don't have any friends. I might as well try to be all that I can be, you know, by just enrolling in college and just working really hard to do the best I can.

She notes that her parents brag about her being in college and are excited that she will be the first to earn a degree.

Her family had relocated to Denver from Louisiana and Hope finished her last year of high school here. She had already applied to a four-year college when her high school counselor suggested that she get her deposit back and come to the Community College of Denver. Hope believes that's because the counselor didn't know her very well, had little knowledge of her abilities, and didn't know her real talents. She also acknowledges that she didn't make time to go visit with the counselor until the end of her senior year. However, she does not regret coming to CCD.

I think it's actually better starting at the community college because I think at community colleges advisors have more time to actually get more involved with their students and they prepare you to go off to another college or university.

Hope also had an opportunity to take college classes in high school. She described taking her first college class in high school.

I took English 121 and another... I think it was CPR... and something else at Manual. So I took two classes... two college classes at Manual. It was very exciting. There were other children in the classroom and they would tell us... they were telling us over and over again that we were top scholars... and that we were... I felt good hearing that and I was like, "I'm glad I'm able to take these classes at Manual," because now, if I hear people telling me over and over again that I can do it, that I can achieve,

that I've come so far as to take college classes in high school, then I knew that I was ready to attend college and I knew that I could not fail at this.

Hope's major in college is accounting. She is focused on finishing her two-year degree in order to go to work in the field. Eventually she intends to continue on and earn her four-year degree with a goal of becoming a CPA. This career meets two of her needs. One, she really enjoys accounting and likes doing something she is good at. Two, she is practical and pragmatic about having a career that allows a woman to support herself. She describes other students and teachers trying to get her to explore other options beyond accounting and her stubbornly insisting that accounting is what she wants. She does acknowledge that other areas interest her, like history and math, and she relates that she loves learning and likes to do her best.

While attending college, Hope also started working and says,

I work at Burger King now. I'm a shift manager there and I've been there five years since I started I guess. And I don't want to be there forever. I don't want to be working as the cashier or the manager forever. I want to experience new things and I want to be able to move on. Because I know working at... I've been there five years... it seems like I'm afraid to experience new things, but really it's something that I can't wait to get into. I just stay there because it's something that, you know, I don't see any reason or any point in just changing jobs... like job to job to job.... So, I'm comfortable there and for where I'm at I think it's good money. I think the money is really good being a shift manager until I can get a better job or career in something that I like.

Hope describes being a good employee who is better than most at managing and motivating employees. She is confident and competent at work. During a subsequent interview, Hope shared her good news about a promotion at work. She had been selected out of a large applicant pool to move into an administrative assistant position at the corporate headquarters where she is also able to use her business skills. She misses working with people at her store, but is proud of her accomplishment.

Initially Hope did very well at CCD until she met a man and fell in love. It was her first love and she relates,

I think it was 2002 or 2001, anyway when I turned 21 years old. I was here attending college and then I met... I met this guy and this was, you know, my first time ever dating because I was always busy just doing whatever I had to do. And so I took a chance.

It was also her first heartbreak and the dominant story in her young life. Even as she talks of other topics, during each interview she comes back to it over and over. Her lost love is painful. And now Hope is reflecting on her relationship. It is the first and major trauma in her life and one that took her to the bottom. She still struggles to put it in perspective, but she is proud of herself for walking away.

During this relationship she moved out her parent's house, cut her hours at work, isolated herself from her sister, gave up listening to gospel music, and ignored her schoolwork. "When I fell in love... and I had my heart broken I let go of it... I forgot about everything that I had worked towards." She let him dictate what she did, who she hung out with, and where she went. She worked only to please him and when that wasn't enough, she tried harder. He was threatened by her success and in response, although she didn't realize it at the time, she failed her classes. They would break up and get back together over and over. To keep him, she tried to change herself. That wasn't enough. He blamed her for everything and she accepted the blame. She thought if she only tried harder, did more, changed more she could keep him happy.

During the worst of it, Hope attempted suicide.

I took a lot of pills and I thought that it would get rid of how I was feeling... because I don't want to be in any more pain. I don't want to be in any more pain. And then eventually I started thinking, "Well I don't want to be in anymore pain, so what can I do to myself so I don't have to

go through this anymore?" But everyone goes through it. And why should I be any different?

She is not proud of her suicide attempt, but wants to share it as a way of telling other women not to let any man take them to that extreme.

In the midst all of this, Hope shared little with her parents. They knew she was in a relationship but she believes they had no idea how painfully serious it had become. She hid her failing grades, her reduced work hours, and her attempted suicide from them. Even today she has not talked with them about what transpired. She does not think they would understand or take it seriously. She believes they still view her as a child.

Ironically, it was her boyfriend's words that finally motivated Hope to change.

The best advice that he ever gave me was, "When you're hurt... when someone hurts you the best thing to do is get back up and start over don't just let everything just fall apart." And that was the advice that I actually took because again you listen to, "Nobody wants to be with someone like that. Nobody wants to be with someone that can't handle their emotions." And I'm thinking, "Well, that does kind of sound like me and I am kind of behaving like a baby, so you know I'll try... I'll... I'll get myself together and I'll try to be what I can be." And that's what I've been doing.

After three failed semesters, Hope returned to CCD in January with a new resolve.

I decided to try to get back on my feet and try to do really good in college and continue where I've left off. Not let anything get to me and I kind of feel like I've done better, but not as good as I want to do. So, I'm working at graduating now and becoming an accountant and that's just something I really want to do.... I feel great! It feels really good and brings back old memories, I guess, of just being able to be there and know that this is what I want. I want to be here and I can do great. I can do what I've been doing. I can get the grades that I've been doing. I don't want to see anymore F's or AW's or D's or anything on my report card.

Hope recounts that she still sees her former boyfriend on campus. At first it was hard, but now she faces him with determination and pride that he was not able to defeat her. She relates that he continues to tell her that she will not be 'successful' but she says,

I feel really good about myself now, and him telling me that I can't do it, and everything, and I just... because when he keeps telling me, "You can't do it." I'm not going to let anyone tell me what I can't do; I'm going to show them what I can do.

Today Hope is doing well in her classes. She is on track to graduate Spring 2005 with her associate's degree. Despite having to repeat classes and refocus on studying and learning, she is pleased with herself for sticking with it. She is sad that her relationship sidetracked her from her goals, but grateful for the self-awareness and insights that she gained. She is proud to have walked away from a man who was all wrong for her. She is aware that her future is in her hands. She is relatively pragmatic about her experience and notes,

I figured this was good for me because if I hadn't gone through it now... I don't want to be 27- 30 years old going through it for the first time not knowing how to handle it. This is good going through it early and at a young age where I can now be ready for anything. It feels [like] this has really changed my life. I think it's changed my life in a good way and I feel good about ever meeting him because it's taught me a lot and it's helped me to really, really grow up. And it is something that's important to my success and it should be something that is brought out. And I shouldn't just keep it all bottled up inside.

Hope's dreams and plans for the future include finishing her associate's degree, taking a break, going back to school, becoming a CPA, finding a better man, and perhaps having children. She has dreams, plans, hope, and determination.

Hopefully I'll be... well, I'm going to be a CPA in ten years! I don't want to stay in Colorado, so I'll probably move somewhere, but of course I'll always be the CPA that I want to be. Of course I have to be married in ten years. I plan on being married by the time I'm 25. But, I'm not sure about

kids. I want to... because with kids... my parents had seven. If I have kids it will be one or two. That way I can devote more time to them and I don't have to worry about not being able to... or neglecting them or anything. So, I don't think that I'll have too many kids to where I can't just be involved in their lives and know what's going on around them at all times.

Hope reflected on first-generation students,

I think first generation students are very determined to be what they want to be. I think they have... they've gone through a lot because they are the first one... they have to go through so much and they have to try to be the best because they are the first ones to go to college, and they want to be the first ones to graduate from college. And they feel that there's a lot of pressure on them to do...to do what they want... they need to do and be the best at everything and they feel like they can never give up until they have accomplished what they need to.

Hope then offered the following advice,

Just work really hard and don't let anything get in your way. Try to overcome what you have to go through. Sometimes something may bring you down but you need to pick yourself back up immediately to go on with your life. I think no one should ever drop out of school. I think once you have enrolled, it's something that you really want to do and I think that an education is something that everyone needs. Everyone needs something to fall back on. Everyone. And they don't want to be kept down forever.

And if they encounter problems, Hope recommends,

Take some time, you know. Calm down. Take a couple of deep breaths. I would say not to panic too much, you know. Not to just let go of everything. If there's something good that you can find in your life even if you have to talk to yourself and tell yourself, "This is something good that I've got going on." Continue to do that until you feel comfortable with doing whatever it is... whatever else that you want to do or going back to the way that your life was.

In talking about the college, Hope said,

I think that students have to go through a lot and professors don't really see that...you know most of them are too busy to understand what students go through and I think that it's important to understand that despite everything... even though I'm in class everyday or even though I'm doing... I'm not doing the homework just don't think that I'm being lazy. There is really something going wrong in my life, or in every student's life. You know, I think they are there for a reason... they're just not there just to... because college is a choice that you make... no one's forcing you to go. So they're there and they're enrolled and everything. I think that professors should be aware of that. Take into consideration that there are other things going on in your life. There is not just school. There is not just work. There are things outside of that... that I think that no one has control over. Because I certainly didn't have control over it at the time, but I think I do now.

*“Hope is both the earliest and most indispensable virtue inherent in the state of being alive. If life is to be sustained hope must remain, even where confidence is wounded, trust impaired.”*  
- Erik H. Erikson

### **Analysis**

Approximately a month after our first meeting, Hope was the first participant to schedule her follow-up interview. She arrived and walked down the hallway toward my office with a confidence that was lacking during our first interview. Perhaps it was because she was now familiar with me, or perhaps it's because her life was better than the last time we met. She seemed different, more substantial and less fragile. She projected an air of self-assurance and certainty that had not been apparent during our first meeting. She seemed more eager to talk and was very willing to engage in conversation about her first interview. Hope was neatly dressed in coordinated powder blue t-shirt and hooded sweatshirt and had a matching scarf covering her hair. Her large silver hoop earrings rested gently against her neck as she tilted her head first one way and then the other while

talking. I told her that I had been reading and reflecting on her stories and asked her permission to call her “Hope” because wrapped up in the sad story of her broken heart is an overriding hope for the future. She smiled shyly and said, “I like that. That would be nice.” I had set out markers, post-it notes, and highlighters in preparation for annotating the transcript of her previous session.

Once I had transcribed each woman’s first interview, I had been anxious to move into data analysis and interpretation, but because I had decided to ask my participants to help me identify the major themes in their stories, I waited. As I read and re-read their transcripts my fingers itched to grab highlighters and pens and begin marking up the pages. I waited. I had created a new electronic document and had copied each raw transcript into a table that would enable me to copy/paste major themes and phrases in the blank space next to the running narratives. Despite the ease with which I could have done that, I waited. As I read and re-read the transcripts, I saw threads and themes that I was anxious to explore. And still I waited. It was a fascinating exercise in restraint that made me question about my resolve to allow the participants such a major role in data analysis. It would have been so easy to analyze and interpret and seemed as if it certainly would have allowed me to progress at a faster pace than I experienced in the long lulls between meeting with my participants.

Yet when I finally met with Hope and laid her transcript in front of her, my original intent was vindicated. By working through the theme identification process with her, she told me more than I could have ever determined from an isolated, researcher’s perspective. In some cases she affirmed what I might have interpreted myself; in other cases she elaborated upon a theme, enriching its meaning. Occasionally she added

something new that would not have emerged had she not been being part of the process.

Here is what we discovered as shown in Table 1. Later, I attached the primary themes of *relationships, resilience, reflection, and responsibilities* (the 4 R's) to each of her themes.

<b>4 R's</b>	<b>Major Theme</b>	<b>Minor Theme</b>	<b>4 R's</b>
Relationships Reflection Responsibility	<b>Childhood</b> Liked school; If I'm going to be there, I'm going to do the best that I can; Honor roll in elementary, liked that way that felt; School was a good challenge; Never wanted to lose – always wanted to be the best	<b>Childhood</b> Moving around a lot; Not liking to leave school Not liking to leave teachers;	Resilience Relationships
	<b>Friendships</b>	<b>Friendships</b> Not many; Friendships form at an early age, or not at all; Knowing that friends would go off to college	Relationships Reflection
Resilience Reflection Relationships	<b>Success</b> Become successful mostly on your own; Good to be successful; “I was never taught to just give up – I was always taught to try harder”	<b>Success</b>	
Relationships Responsibility Reflection	<b>Parents</b> Mom; Lessons learned from; Limited involvement in school; Not wanting to disappoint parents	<b>Parents</b> Dad; Lessons learned from;	Relationships Responsibility Reflection
Relationships Reflection Responsibility	<b>Siblings</b> Brothers/Sisters – second to graduate from HS, first to go to college; Friction with some; Mentor younger sister Live with younger sister	<b>Siblings</b>	

<b>4 R's</b>	<b>Major Theme</b>	<b>Minor Theme</b>	<b>4 R's</b>
Responsibility Relationships Reflection	<b>High School</b> Liked school; Liked math; Most of my classes were a little too easy; First accounting class; Took first college class in high school	<b>High School</b> Counselor advised a community college;	Responsibility Reflection
Responsibility Relationships Reflection Resilience	<b>College</b> Being successful in HS prepares you for college; Moving to Denver, trigger for college – no hope in Louisiana; Classes were easy – did well; Three failed semesters; Return to college	<b>College</b> Better starting at a community college; No “bad” classes or “bad” teachers;	Relationships Reflection Resilience
Responsibility Relationships	<b>Work</b> Worked at same job for 5 years; Didn't let personal life interfere – needed one stable place; Pays the bills; Am a competent, good manager; Recent upward move within company	<b>Work</b> Easier to stay in one place;	Responsibility Relationships Reflection
Responsibilities Reflection	<b>Career Goals</b> Accounting; CPA; Economic Stability – something to fall back on	<b>Career Goals</b>	
Resilience Reflection Relationships Responsibility	<b>Personal Characteristics and Factors</b> Smart; Reflective – talks to self; Determined; Stubborn; “Typical” Capricorn; Focused; I am my own person; Loves learning	<b>Personal Characteristics and Factors</b>	

4 R's	Major Theme	Minor Theme	4 R's
Relationships Reflection Resilience	<b>Man</b> First love; Failed love; Changing to please a man; Never enough; Failure; Threatened by my doing well in school; Caused me to fail; Suicide attempt; Dragged Hope away from her goals;	<b>Man</b> Counseling didn't work; His childhood influenced how he is – father left at a young age; He refuses to keep a job; Still can't talk with others about it	Relationships Reflection Resilience
Reflection Resilience Responsibility Relationships	<b>The Future</b> Become CPA Marriage	<b>The Future</b> Leave Colorado Maybe kids	Responsibility Relationships

**Table 1. Hope's Themes**

### Hope's Experience

*"Things do not change; we change."  
- Henry David Thoreau*

At our last meeting, I am most interested in learning what Hope has thought about the experience of participating in this study. She replied,

I think it was a good experience. I don't know. I've never been interviewed, really interviewed about something like this before. I mean, I've done maybe a job-interview or something. It's completely different. You know, most of [it] is focused on "What can you do for the company?" and not really about you. So, I've never really been interviewed so, I think it was a good experience for me. You know, a good learning experience first of all to be able to talk about how I feel or how I felt about certain things and to be able to learn from whatever mistakes were made then and be able to try to change it.

Hope talked about how it felt to share intimate details of her life during the research process.

Umm... it's never easy, but if you talk about it more, it makes you comfortable being able to talk to other people and being able to do interviews, just any kind of interviews. If you keep it all bottled up inside, it's kind of hard to just really sit down and have a really true conversation with someone because you can't express anything. You can't express how you feel about anything, so I think being able to express it to other people that you don't really know... it's easier to express it [now] to family or friends... anybody, because you have talked about it already and whatever feelings you have about it... you know, they're out already.

I asked Hope how she felt about sharing her story for others to read about. She replied,

I know that there is someone that goes through different... that has different points in their life that are not always good... things and if they get a chance to read about or hear about someone else's bad times or hardships, then it makes them strive to do better.

She added her own experiences with her mother as an illustration.

.... And then she'd tell me a story, you know, about her first love or something and I'm like I don't know if it was a story to try to make me feel better or just to tell me that... but it did make me feel better because I'm knowing, okay, well other people have the same kind of story.

As she reflects on her story, Hope notes,

I think that everyday my life is changing and it's for the better. There is nothing in my life that I can honestly look at, like last week and say, "Oh I want this to change." I think that every day I'm trying harder and I'm trying to make my life... I guess I'm trying to get my life back to where it was before all of this because before all of this I was just "happy Hope"... I was just Hope that nothing could stop me and now it's just like, "Okay, well, I know where I need to be heading." And I'm trying to get there, but I know that there are some things that are keeping me back and I try everyday just to, you know, I want to be the same Hope that I was. I miss that Hope.

She then talks about how talking with me had helped her to think through and understand some of these issues. She added that she has no one she can talk with about these topics.

When asked if telling her stories makes her feel self-conscious, Hope replies, “Sometimes it... I think that it makes me self-conscious because... I don’t think anyone cares... So, just talking about myself isn’t going to do any good. I don’t know... I think it... I’m comfortable if someone asks me.”

In closing, after the tape had already stopped, Hope added, “This felt so good to get this off my chest. You have no idea how much this helps. I haven’t even been able to speak to anybody about it, so, I’m happy that now I can just... I feel relaxed now and calm.”

We rise and I place my hand on Hope’s shoulder and thank her again. She is smiling and happy. As we walk to the front of the office suite, she thanks me for listening. Despite her new self-assurance, she still seems so delicate and vulnerable. I resist the urge to hug her.

### **Interpretation**

*“Youth is easily deceived because it is quick to hope”  
- Aristotle*

Hopes interviews are the briefest of all the women, even so I have pages of transcripts and many notes and journal entries from my encounters with her. From that data I have interpreted much of Hope’s life for you (Riessman, 1993; Richardson, 2000). As the primary research instrument (Chase, 2003), my own experiences and biases influence how I construct and recount her narrative (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). The challenge lies in maintaining the essence of Hope even as I decide what to tell and

what not to tell (Janesick, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2002a). In this section I summarize my perceptions of Hope within the framework of the 4R's. I have arbitrarily listed them in order of importance, based on my analysis of their meanings in Hope's life.

### *Relationships*

Dominating Hope's life is her failed relationship. Although she demonstrates strength and resolve in having left it behind, it appears to still influence many of her thoughts, words, actions, and goals. She is still very much processing what it means. Her story of first love is the story. Hope is still in pain, but determined to move on. She is trying to put this relationship in context. I have no doubt she will. Less prominent, but important nonetheless are her relationships with her parents and sister. She is negotiating a new relationship with parents who still view her as a child when she very much wants to be seen and heard as an adult. They are in flux. With her sister, she has stepped into the role of mentor and guide helping her to succeed. This relationship feeds Hope's self-concept and agency as someone with wisdom and knowledge to share.

### *Resilience*

Unlike many women who never quite find the strength to extricate themselves from a bad relationship, Hope has closed the door on the man who broke her heart and moved on. Her resilience in the face of the loss is one of the reasons she is back at CCD. Hope displays a quiet, fragile, but determined, resilience that has allowed her to reconnect with the girl she once was and find the strength to carry on. Her success at leaving a bad relationship fosters a belief in her ability to be 'successful' in other areas.

The source of this resilience seems to come from Hope's early years as a 'successful' child. She goes back to what she was as she looks at what she wants to become.

### *Reflection*

Hope is extremely self-reflective but somewhat shy about sharing her thoughts with others. She is not sure anyone else cares or is interested. Her failed relationship dominates her thoughts and she works hard to analyze, dissect, and understand its nuances. She thinks and feels deeply. At the same time, she edits and corrects her thoughts with phrases like, "get over it," "move on," "grow up." One senses that she is growing and maturing into a woman who will someday be more comfortable with being totally honest and at peace with herself. Although she is self-reflective, right now Hope's inner critic seems to be easily influenced by the opinions and advice of others. There is no doubt that will change as she gains more confidence in trusting herself.

### *Responsibilities*

Hope has the fewest responsibilities of the women interviewed. That is due primarily to her stage in life. She is single, lives alone, has no mortgage or major debt, and has no children. Despite her youth, she is a hard and highly motivated worker. She feels a sense of duty to her sister, whom she advises and mentors. She is refocused on her school responsibilities. And she has a pragmatic view of the world and work derived in large measure from her childhood injunction "try harder." She does not shirk responsibility. Perhaps her greatest responsibility right now is to herself. She is learning how to care for herself as an adult.

## Hope's Poem

After much contemplation, Hope decided that she did not want to write anything for her chapter. She was nervous and self-conscious about her work and words. We talked about why. I urged her, gently, to reconsider and she demurred. We talked about what message she wanted to share with other first-generation women and she returned to her primary theme by saying, "Don't let a man make you change yourself." Together we selected the following poem, which is found all over the Internet (with authorship claimed by many) and aimed at women who have lost a significant relationship.

### Comes the Dawn

*After awhile you learn the subtle difference  
between holding a hand and chaining a soul.  
And you learn that love doesn't mean leaning  
and company doesn't mean security.  
And you begin to learn that kisses aren't contracts  
and presents aren't promises.*

*And you begin to accept your defeats with your head up  
and your eyes open  
with the grace of a woman, not the grief of a child.  
And you learn to build all your roads today  
because tomorrow's ground is too uncertain for plans.  
And futures have a way of falling down in mid-flight.  
After awhile you learn that even sunshine burns  
if you get too much.*

*So you plant your own garden and decorate your own soul  
instead of waiting for someone to bring you flowers.  
And you learn that you really can endure...  
that you really are strong and you really do have worth.  
And you learn and learn and learn...  
with every goodbye you learn.*

*- Author Unknown*

## FAITH

*“On a long journey of human life, faith is the best of companions; it is the best refreshment on the journey; and it is the greatest property.”*

*- Gautama Siddharta*

### Meeting Faith

Faith strides with confidence into my office at 12:30. She has just come from a weight training class at Metropolitan State College of Denver (MSCD) on the Auraria campus and is dressed comfortably in sweats and t-shirt. Her long, braided hair extensions are caught back in a headband and gently frame her face. She is a large woman with warm, brown eyes and a ready smile who looks much younger than her 38 years. She makes a disparaging comment about her size and then shrugs it off. Because she had mentioned coming straight from class, I had a sandwich and beverage ready for her and she thanks me as she eagerly begins eating. I review the research protocol, thank her, share the informed consent form, and ask her if she had any questions. She shakes her head, smiles, and willingly signs everything. She tells me that she enjoyed the group interview and is excited to be part of this study and that she had been looking forward to talking about herself. She also makes an obscure comment about how CCD has disappointed her... failed her at the end of her journey... and I regret not having the tape

recorder going for this part of the process. I make a mental note to follow up on that idea.

Faith is animated and expressive as she talks. Her face is mobile; her vocal tones rise and fall dramatically as she tells her stories. She laughs frequently – sometimes nervously, sometimes exuberantly, and sometimes bitterly. She freely uses her hands and other body language to clarify and elaborate on her words. Words flow easily from Faith almost as a stream of consciousness. Her voice is rich, warm, and full. She occasionally stops herself to think, but for the most part she is able to take an idea and build her thoughts as she talks. She is self-reflective and does not mind letting me eavesdrop as she thinks aloud. She has a lovely sense of humor and can laugh as easily at herself as at others.

The major theme in Faith's life is her faith. She firmly believes, despite challenges and adversity, that God has a plan for her and that his hand is in all aspects of her life. He led her to Denver. He guided her to CCD. He is with her now as she deals with success and challenge. And he is guiding her feet down the road to the future. Faith believes utterly that he has a plan for her and Faith tries very hard to follow that plan even when she doesn't agree with it.

Faith's abiding faith comforts and consoles her and helps her to make meaning of the events in her life. However, she is no meek believer, waiting patiently for signs. She takes an active role in steering her own course and acknowledges that she doesn't always pay attention to the path God has placed before her. Faith takes great pride in her own determination and independence. She is also proud of her ability to step forward and speak out about wrongs and injustice. She likes her courage and is not shy about making

her thoughts known. In the end, however, Faith always goes back to her belief in a God who is always there for her and who has a plan for her life.

### Faith's Story

Faith grew up in Texas and moved frequently. She does not talk much of her childhood other than to note that she was the oldest of three children and that she and her two brothers lived with their mother and her second husband.

He wasn't a father to us. He was the kind of guy... in the room in the back... and just come out when he gotta go, and none of that. So we didn't feel like we were important. And I didn't feel close to her at all because she was trying to please this man and not her kids.

Faith describes a turbulent adolescence and a quarrelsome relationship with a mother who was dealing with poverty, divorce, and a disability. Her ongoing relationship with her mother is a love-hate relationship that leaves Faith perplexed. She acknowledges that she gave her mother considerable grief during her teenage years. She ruefully says, "I have apologized to her." With some frustration, Faith relates how she has told her mother, 'That was my childhood. Appreciate me for who I am now. Why is that so hard? I'm not a child anymore, you know? Look at me! Look at the way I'm grown.' " Faith talks of all the ways that her mother criticizes and rejects her but then notes that her mother also supports and encourages her. "She's my biggest fan.... when I started going to school, she gave me a party and it was a party called, 'Faith Got Her Wings.' "

She is actively working to change the relationship to a positive adult relationship and notes,

It's another challenge in my life and I said that I'm just going to just stay in the challenge and just be around her as much as I can much as I can whether she likes it or not, you know, until I turn 40 and then I'm going to give it up... I'm going to give it up. But I always have to look back and say, "At least I tried... I tried."

When asked her earliest memory of being unsuccessful, Faith said,

I guess when we were growing up in the projects.... I was what, nine... eight, nine? It was growing up there, you know, just being in that environment. We didn't become a product of that environment. We had lived there due to my mom's situation... her status... her job situation, or whatever. But we never acted like those people, you know, we never got into the street... never shot anybody, you know... the things that was supposed to be done in the projects, you know? So, that, to me was just like my most unsuccessful... because ... we didn't belong there.

Faith also described another failure.

I failed the ninth grade, though, in my high school year due to just being rebellious, you know, with my mom and all and got into the drug scene a little bit. I was out there. I was doing, and um, so I failed. Like, I started... my teachers... I was in a dance class, I was very outgoing and then my teachers... I just drew back and my teachers was like "Well we're giving you all F's." And I was like, "F's? But I've been coming." I'd go every day to class but I didn't do anything, you know, so they failed me of course.

Faith made a decision after that failure. "I failed but I said, 'Okay, I gotta do something for myself.' So, I got out there and I went to summer school, I caught up with my grades, I started being successful in my grade.... I graduated on time."

After she graduated from high school, Faith attended business school to learn typing and computers because she had an interest and aptitude in that area. Her first job after business school was with a city in Texas. She started as a Clerk I and soon advanced to Clerk III because of her determination and talent. However, she described her work pattern as "moving on... moving on..." because, "Once I accomplished what I

wanted to accomplish in each job, I leave. I was bored.” Even now, Faith believes that moving from job to job is a good way to keep her skills up and make her more ‘successful’ and she acknowledges that she likes the fresh start of a new job.

At age 23 Faith had her first child, a son, and realized that she could no longer move from job to job. She needed to make a change in her life. “Okay, I can’t do that anymore. I have to have some type of stability.” She followed her mother to Colorado because,

I found myself missing her, you know, because I’m a new mom and I need mom, and this type of thing. Like I said, I never was really the kind that attached myself to other people ‘cause I was always in my own little world, so I followed my mom up here.

This was also that point at which she recognized God’s influence in her life as she describes,

So when I moved here I felt like God led me here. My mother... stayed in a high rise and it faced the mountains. And one night when I had moved up here, I was just like “Where do I go from here? I don’t know what to do. I don’t know anybody here.” I just looked towards the mountains and there was this cross shining on the mountain, and that was my sign that I need to be here. And I just dropped on my knees and start praying... “Okay Lord, I submit, I surrender... what is it I’m supposed to do?”

Shortly after arriving in Denver, Faith went to work for a temporary agency. She laughingly recounts how that fit with her earlier work pattern of “moving around... moving around” and that it met her need of not staying at one place too long. The agency placed her at a doctors’ office where she stayed for a long time and gained the respect of those who worked with her. It was at this job that her goal of studying psychology and becoming a counselor crystallized. When she learned that she would not be eligible for a promotion because of her lack of a degree, she quit that job and decided to go to college.

Faith indicated many regrets about leaving that job. She returns to it several times in the conversation and wonders what it would have been like if she had stayed.

When asked about her college experiences, Faith states simply, "Through my journey through CCD, I found me." Faith recounts how the experience of coming to college as an older adult was challenging, but she was determined to succeed. Her years at CCD have been both good and bad. She described several bad classroom experiences with teachers who belittled her and made her feel incompetent. In two cases she initiated complaints against instructors because she felt that if she didn't stand up, no one else would. She also describes good experiences and teachers and staff who nurtured and supported her academically and emotionally. She discussed the subjects she enjoyed and was good at. "All the OGY's" and the ones that she was not so good at "Math... English... Speech." She discussed how badly she wants to learn and how good it feels.

Faith gave special acknowledgement to the TRIO Scholars program and her mentor, the director of the program, for keeping her in school and supporting her during the tough times. It was at CCD that Faith first learned that she was dyslexic and she described the impact that has had on her.

So now I'm a dyslexic person. And that almost knocked me down. I almost said, "Well forget it, I can't learn." But I didn't let that bother me. I asked her [person who diagnosed the disorder], "What are ways I can do to help me with this? How can I learn, you know, how can I this...?" I never let anything beat me down, you know? Because I always knew there was something in me that was stopping me from learning, but I just didn't know what it was, you know? And she helped me to understand what that was about... dyslexia. So I'm working with that.

Also at CCD, Faith gained a new identity as an artist. Her TRIO mentor pushed her into taking a painting class. Faith balked and complained almost the whole semester,

yet finished the class with an “A” and a new self-concept, “Yeah, I don’t know what’s coming over me. My hand would not stop. So now I’m a painter! I paint now.” Her final project hangs at her mother’s house and her mother announces to anyone who will listen, “Faith’s a painter.”

Most troubling for Faith, was her final experience at CCD. Despite her tremendous success and personal growth, she left CCD quietly and with a bitter taste in her mouth. During her final semester at CCD, the college discovered that an employee in the records office had changed some grades for friends and family. As a result, the college audited all grade changes entered by this employee. Faith’s was one of the records they examined. Ultimately they determined that Faith was one of the many innocent individuals, but her church association with this employee prolonged the investigation. Through it all, Faith felt indignant and hurt that anyone could believe that she would have been involved. She felt tainted by the suspicion of wrongdoing and embarrassed to be investigated. Both during and after the process, she believed that everyone was talking about her and looking at her. As a result, she decided not to participate in the graduation ceremony and wanted only to move on. She feels let down by CCD. Nothing the Director of the TRIO Scholars Program, or anyone else could say has eased the pain of her final semester.

Faith is a fiercely protective mother who seeks for her sons the opportunity that she herself did not have. She speaks often and lovingly about them. One is 15 and in the midst of adolescent turmoil that leaves her perplexed and worried. In some ways, Faith finds herself in her mother’s shoes as she deals with his struggles. She is very aware of that and works hard to be a better mother than she feels her mother was. Her younger son

is eight and for now, “He likes how I am and, of course, I’m just, the sparkle in his little eyes.” She describes them as being one of her main motivations for success. She is thoughtful, analytical, and reflexive as she talks about what works and doesn’t work in raising children. She laughingly notes that her studies in Psychology have helped her become a better mother.

Faith discussed how she is now living in low-income housing while going to school and laughed about having come full-circle from her childhood. But she knows she doesn’t belong there and once she’s done with school she will have the opportunity to move on.

Because I feel like now that [even though] I’m in this situation going to school and being low income, I am successful. I feel like I’m successful even though I’m in that project environment... because me and my kids... we’re not like them. I know I’m there for a short period of time. That’s not my lifestyle. And, I will be moving on, you know, just like I did with my mom... my mom did it... we don’t belong there. And, it’s funny because... I feel like other people should know better... grown people should know better.... And it’s like, “But they don’t know any better because they’re low-income and they live like this. This is their lifestyle.” And I’m not there... I’m not there. I know physically we are because [of] my status, but mentally we’re not... so that’s what makes us different. I feel successful being there. We’re not a product of our environment.

Faith is currently unattached and talks somewhat wistfully of someday finding the right man but she is firm in her resolve that it has to be the right man.

I will not bring a man around my house that’s just going to lay up and do nothing because I’m working too hard here. I’m coming into my own so I’m supposed to give up all of this that I’ve made and give it over to him and submit myself? Oh, I don’t think so! I’m not at that point right now. I’m not at that point right now, so I guess I’ll be single for the rest of my life. I don’t know what kind of man God will put in my life, but it’s not working and I just say [to my mother], “Because he’s still working with me.” Because I won’t accept anything less than what I am. “If you don’t have any accomplishments in your life [and] you’re not doing anything, you will NOT come and live in my home and my kids see you laying on

my couch and I'm working hard. Oh, no, no, no! I can't do that. You have to come with something. You have to come with something, anything, you know. Sweep me off my feet. That's what it's going to have to take. You're going to have to be a hell of a man to make me submit to you because I will not give up anything to anybody," and so that's what I'm saying.

Faith graduated with her Associate of Arts on May 12, 2004, and recently transferred to Metropolitan State College of Denver (MSCD) where she intends to finish her BA in Psychology with an ultimate hope of completing an MA and perhaps even a PhD at a later point. She has a goal of being a counselor and perhaps opening her own business called, "Just a Sister Away" where she can work independently and continue her counseling work. She faces the world with faith, humor, and determination.

Of her transfer experience, Faith notes that it's been very smooth. With the exception of Financial Aid, which continues to be a struggle, she has had no trouble at all. She states that her CCD classes prepared her well. "I'm adapting well. I'm using what I learned at CCD and applying it here. It's been easy." She is pleased to be at MSCD and moving closer to her goals.

Faith's advice to first-generation students is to believe in yourself, never give up, and don't listen to critics. For colleges, Faith offers the following advice about dealing with students.

First of all they need to recognize students that are coming in that are willing and ready to learn... they're determined students... they're serious students. Support them... show them that you care... I think those types of students should be recognized by the administration and teachers... to give them their support...when people are recognized they'll do better, you know, as far as their accomplishments. And I just think there needs to be more recognition of things, when people are doing good... not so much on the negative. I think they should show more compassion and support to their students because they know they're really trying.

*"Back of every creation, supporting it like an arch, is faith. Enthusiasm is nothing: it comes and goes. But if one believes, then miracles occur."  
- Henry Miller*

### Analysis

Faith arrived early for our second meeting. She was waiting for me in the foyer and having a lively conversation with my administrative assistant about how much she was enjoying the process of being interviewed for this study. She was nicely dressed in slacks and a navy blouse and carried a notebook. She was smiling and relaxed and talked excitedly the whole way down the hallway. Faith sat comfortably in the same place she had before and picked up her copy of the transcript exclaiming,

I'm just smiling and looking at all of this right now... when I'm looking at all of this... how you transcribed and all.... [her mentor and the director of the TRIO Scholars program at CCD] always tells me, "You need to write a book, Faith. You need to write a book." And, this is a book! My God, this is amazing to see it all on paper. And, just to see this on paper and my thoughts... it just brings back when [her mentor] was telling me, "You need to write a book." I mean these are all my thoughts that I've kept inside...just to see the stuff on paper is just amazing, so forgive me if I'm smiling.

We talked about my research process and I told her that I wanted to use the pseudonym "Faith" in telling her story and she beamed as she said, "Of course. That's my name. That should be my name because that's how I feel. I like that."

As I described how I wanted her to work with me to identify the themes from her stories, Faith was already making notes in the margins and underlining phrases. She understood what I was asking her to do and provided complete access to her thoughts and ideas as we talked. Faith quickly clarified concepts or ideas and added new information when necessary. Together we identified the following major (and minor) themes as shown in

Table 2. Later, I attached the primary themes of *relationships, resilience, reflection, and responsibilities* (the 4 R's) to each of her themes.

4 R's	Major Theme	Minor Theme	4 R's
Reflection Relationships	Found myself at CCD	Younger years as related to failure and Mother	Relationships Reflection
Relationships Resilience	God/Faith	Siblings	Relationships
Resilience Reflection	Positive Traits/Beliefs - Independence, Determination, Observer, Leadership, Reflective, Impatient, Likes challenges; Pushes herself all the time; "I'm in charge"	Coming to Colorado	Relationships Responsibility
Relationships Resilience Reflection	Negative Traits/Beliefs - concerned about what others think/don't care about the opinions of others, shame, fear of failure, felt like a fake, "destroyer," deals with a lot at one time; something always happens; feels overwhelmed – but almost always successful and a lot of self-confidence, but it's hard and she gets tired; trouble-maker; sensitive student	Jobs/Work	Responsibility Relationships Resilience
Responsibility Relationships	Moving on – here for awhile and then I move on – a fresh new start – challenge of getting to know the new place and earning the respect of people in the new place	Wanting to go home to Texas	Relationships
Relationships Reflection	Mother	Regrets	Reflection
Reflection	Goals – school and psychology	Ethnicity	Relationships
Resilience	Dyslexia	Age in coming to college	Resilience Relationships
Relationships Resilience	Negative college experiences	Positive college experiences	Relationships Resilience
Relationships Responsibility	Children	Someday perhaps a man, but not going to accept just anybody	Relationships Responsibility

4 R's	Major Themes	Minor Themes	4 R's
Responsibility Resilience	Art/ painting		
Relationships	Wants/needs recognition		

**Table 2. Faith's Themes**

**Faith's Experience**

*"The more faithfully you listen to the voices within you,  
the better you will hear what is sounding outside."  
- Dag Hammarskjold*

Even before our final meeting, Faith talked about the experiences of being part of this research study. During our first individual interview she emphasized that the group interview had helped her to see that she had common bonds with other women students. During the course of the first interview she laughed and said, "Oh, Linda, you'll have me talking for days. I feel like now, because I have so much to talk about and so much... it feels good to let all this out." At the conclusion of our first interview, Faith again tells me how useful and valuable talking has been and how it is important for her to focus on herself at this time of her life. She is effusive and glowing. She tells me that she is looking forward to our next meeting. So was I.

As we set up for our second interview, Faith caught me off-guard by going straight from small talk to an impassioned observation about how valuable the first interview had been for her, how nice it was to share it with someone and how good she had felt after the interview. I asked her to wait for a moment and to repeat it on tape. Once the tape rolled, she reiterated, "I said it felt nice to tell it. It felt great to really get all that out. You know, that's the great thing. I really enjoyed telling it to somebody

that's willing to listen." At the close of that interview, Faith confirmed that it had also been positive and almost cathartic.

I have all this in me. Can you believe that I have all this in me? And to know that somebody wants to hear my story.... Wow, it's amazing, just amazing. And I feel... I know I will feel better because I told this.

Our final interview was postponed numerous times because Faith had a variety of personal issues, including the burglary of her apartment. In the end, we scheduled and then rescheduled at least four times. By October we still hadn't met, but Faith had more positive news to report, she had many good things happening in her life including a successful transition to MSCD, moving into a new apartment, and getting a job. As part of her work-study arrangement at MSCD, Faith had gotten a job as a half-time receptionist at Denver Human Services and now barely had time for work, school, and home much less time to spend with me. She was excited to be working in the field for which her education was preparing her, but admitted that she was overwhelmed by her new responsibilities. We discussed how best to proceed and decided to try a late-evening telephone interview. I was sad about not being able to see her one last time before finishing this work, but Faith said, "I can come to see you. We're on the same campus. Just because I'm disappointed by CCD doesn't mean I can't talk to you."

During our final interview, I asked Faith specifically about the overall experience. She reiterated that it had been a very positive experience. One of the most important ways it had helped her was to allow her to learn more about herself and her thoughts and beliefs. She noted that until she said it and saw it on paper, she hadn't integrated much of what we talked about. She described the process as almost therapeutic.

Some of the stories awakened painful memories. For example, in telling the story of working with the doctors and leaving that position, Faith acknowledged that she had to reprocess her feelings of failure and regret. Ironically, as she was packing to move she had come across some of the old paperwork from that job. As she noted, the process of reliving that experience caused “a lot of deep thoughts.” Ultimately, she decided that it was a good reminder that “You need to do what your heart wants even if it’s painful.”

Overall, she reported the experience was more good than bad. “It felt good. Thank you for listening.” She described feeling overwhelmed in reading and seeing the sheer volume of her transcribed stories. “I can’t believe I had all that in me, so much stuff. That was my whole life story. It helped me to see what... what I really can do if you put your mind to it... and all through storytelling. Amazing.”

Faith closed by reminding me that she still needs somebody to talk to. As she told her son who asked her why she was bothering with the third interview when she was so busy, “I need to talk. This may be for a paper, but it’s good for me. It’s important for me.” I tell Faith that she can come by my office anytime she needs someone to talk with. She says she will. She ends our phone conversation with heartfelt thanks. I tell her the thanks are all mine and mean it. I am sad to say goodbye.

### Interpretation

*“Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that a man could stake his life on it a thousand times.”*

*- Martin Luther*

From hours of interviews and my notes and journals I have already interpreted much of Faith’s life for you (Riessman, 1993; Richardson, 2000). Choosing what to tell

required that I also choose what not to tell. This filtering with my subjective researcher's lens (Janesick, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2002b) is what allowed me to create a meaningful narrative (Personal Narratives Group, 1989) for you to read. Arguably there is much I could have included or excluded. My interpretation is strongly influenced by my bias (Gergen, 1995). In this section I summarize my understanding of Faith within the framework of the 4R's. I have arbitrarily listed them in order of importance, based on my analysis of their meanings in Faith's life.

### *Relationships*

Under girding Faith's entire story is a deep abiding faith and confidence that God has a hand in her life. Her relationship with him is one of utter trust. Even when she doesn't take his advice, she has no doubt that his plan was the best one. Her faith is a foundation that keeps her going and her is her primary sense-making strategy. Additionally she has strong family relationships. Her sons are the center of her life and she is a thoughtful, careful, loving mother determined not to repeat some of the mistakes she thinks her mother made with her. She has an interesting relationship with her mother. On one hand she is still seeking the approval she felt denied; on the other hand she had told herself and her mother that the past is the past. Get over it. Faith's relationships are an integral part of her being.

### *Responsibilities*

A second important theme in Faith's life is a lifetime of adult responsibilities and overwhelming determination despite numerous challenges and setbacks, arguably some of them caused by Faith's own choices. Of all the women interviewed, Faith feels most

overwhelmed by her many responsibilities to others. She wonders when someone will care for her as she has for others and notes that she gives others the advice she most needs to hear her. She is anxious to get to a place in her life where she won't feel so burdened by her many responsibilities. She believes God is directing her feet toward that place but accepts her current load.

### *Reflection*

Faith's self-reflection is striking. She uses it as a way to problem solve her life and she's always analyzing, dissecting, and interpreting events, people, and herself. It fits with her goal of wanting to go into counseling. She laughs as she talks about how often she will over-analyze an issue. She talks often to herself and finds that she can work through issues and problems by doing so. She knows herself very well and is amazingly honest with herself even when the truth is less than flattering. She uses her reflective moments to regain her balance. She is also very open about sharing her reflections with others.

### *Resilience*

Her faith is what keeps Faith resilient. She credits God with her strength, courage, and determination. She gives herself credit too. One of her most enduring characteristics is an ability to laugh at her. This also keeps her balanced when life gets tough. Interestingly, Faith also loves a good challenge and finds that she is energized when faced with adversity. She is pragmatic about life's ups and downs and seems to understand that down is a temporary state. She has many reasons to feel discouraged, but she faces problems with a grace, courage, and humor that is inspirational.

## STELLA

*“There are realities we all share, regardless of our nationality, language, or individual tastes. As we need food, so do we need emotional nourishment: love, kindness, appreciation, and support from others. We need to understand our environment and our relationship to it. We need to fulfill certain inner hungers: the need for happiness, for peace of mind for wisdom.”*

*- J. Donald Walters*

### Meeting Stella

Stella walks into my office. As I greet her she is calm and smiling and seems eager to tell me her story. Stella is fifty-one, a slender woman with lovely dark skin and sad, expressive eyes. I hardly recognize her from the woman I first met in February. That woman was tired and discouraged and in pain from the loss of her mother. Today she seems years younger than she did then and radiates energy and confidence. She smiles her slow, easy grin frequently. Stella is reflective, and speaks hesitantly but with certainty as she answers my questions and tells her story. Her voice is soft and well-modulated. She watches me carefully throughout the interview. Stella's stories are many and complex. Her event-filled life has been both challenging and rewarding. In the telling, one thought leads to another and she weaves a new strand into the fabric of her life almost before I can process the first.

Stella has struggled most of her life with her own emotional demons and self-defeating behavior and is very open about how she has worked to get herself on track to face the world with a stronger outlook. During this interview, Stella re-introduced the cooking theme that had emerged so strongly during the group interview. She also described the ways in which she soothes and comforts herself when life gets hard. I was enchanted to hear her tell me that if it got really bad, she'd "cook up a storm" and watch the movie, *How Stella Got her Groove Back*. I later asked her if I could use the pseudonym "Stella." She delightedly agreed.

The defining theme in Stella's life has been her relationships – with her mother, siblings, daughter, granddaughter, and self. She is a relational woman who feels deep, strong ties to those she loves even when her life is not going well. She has struggled with her own interpretations of some of those relationships. And she is dealing, at many different levels, with the death of her mother in November 2003. The pain is fresh, but she states that she has not yet allowed herself time to grieve, "I try to keep myself from grieving because I'm not ready to grieve right now because if I do... I might fall backwards.... I'm not ready to really, really to cope with it right now because I've got things that I'm trying to beat. And...I mean, sometimes I do, but right now my main thing right now is school. It's everything."

### **Stella's Story**

Stella grew up in Denver and attended public schools. She left East High School because as she said, "I played around a lot, so I really didn't graduate." Stella's parents divorced while she was in high school, "But they always remained good friends." At 19 Stella got pregnant and had a daughter. As a single mother, she decided that she needed

to finish high school, so she decided to go to Emily Griffith Opportunity School and get her GED. This was a long journey and she completed it at the same time, and coincidentally on the same day, that her daughter celebrated her continuation into middle school.

In her second interview, as we talked about her lifetime of responsibilities, Stella also shared the incredible pain of her son's four short years.

I had a son that was spina bifida, cerebral palsy, just hydrocephalus... a number of things. I couldn't get [anyone] to watch him, so I was home twenty-four/seven. He had seven surgeries by the time he was four. He went to maybe six different clinics within a week. He didn't have use of his bladder, his bowels, his legs... he had tubes in his head. It was a long process. I mean sometimes I wondered, I mean I'd say.... I just didn't want to wake up the next day. It was hard. And my daughter... at... it would have been four to eight, because he lived to be four and they were four years apart, so from the point he was... let's see she was five, to the point where she was eight years old, she was helping me. She had to catheterize and empty his bladder, pump his urine... all kinds of stuff. So she was really stuck in there with me for a long time. So that's why I said, it goes way back. But, I figure, if I can get through that, I can get through this. If I don't, it's my own fault.

Stella stayed very busy raising her daughter and did not go directly onto college after finishing her GED. She talks lovingly of her daughter and describes many years of supporting her by working with kids and youth groups and doing daycare at home. When asked during a subsequent interview of what she is most proud, Stella replies,

My daughter, because she has stuck with me through everything.... Because of the fact we're so close. We've always lived together and now we're next-door neighbors. She watches out for me just like I watch out for her and we're inseparable. That to me is special, especially since I've seen other people with their kids and the drama... you know, I'm so blessed and thankful. And she played a part in helping getting me back to school. We talk very openly and we... we're just honest with each other. If there's something we can see in her, we're going to tell the other person, but the decision is hers or mine. And I love that. I wouldn't give it up for nothing.... She's been through a lot... a lot. Actually she's been... she

stuck with me through my son. She stuck with me through bad relationships... she's still there. She's just my best friend.

Stella was putting her daughter through college and getting ready to start the next stage of her life when her daughter became pregnant. Stella went to Tennessee and picked up her three-month-old granddaughter and brought her home to live with her. Her granddaughter is nine and still lives much of the time with Stella. At some point, Stella's daughter left college just a semester away from graduating and moved back to Denver. She first lived with her mother, and they have since moved into a duplex where Stella occupies one side and her daughter the other. With no regrets, Stella took on the work of supporting and caring for her granddaughter. Stella's granddaughter is central to her life – *“that's my heart... that's my baby”*- and Stella's primary focus is on helping her do well, finish school, and be 'successful.' They study together, cook together, and spend considerable reflective time together. As she talks about their relationship, she notes that her granddaughter gives her as much support and advice as Stella gives to her. It's a loving and close relationship that is very special and meaningful to Stella.

Stella describes the next turning point in her life,

I had decided, 'Ok, I've got everybody situated and settled.' So, I wanted to go to college. It's always been something I wanted to do... live in a dormitory and go to college.

Stella fondly recounts 20 year's of longing to have a dorm experience and finally having the opportunity to stay in a dorm when she visited her daughter,

Because I thought it was so cool, you know, me living in a dorm. I spent the night with my daughter in her dorm when I went to see her and it was so much fun, so I said this is what I want to do. I didn't get to stay in the dorm but I did go back to college.

Stella has worked with children and young adults in a variety of areas all throughout her adult life. She describes being a 'successful' youth group leader as well as a competent daycare provider. In talking about this aspect of her life she is focused, direct, and speaks with authority. One senses that this is a realm in which she is in control. Recently a friend approached her about being the director of a group home, but Stella declined for the time being so that she can focus on finishing school. It is with some pride that Stella tells this story. It affirms her feelings of worth, success, and of being in charge of her life.

Stella has been attending college for a while. She first started in her forties with varying success. Coming to CCD as a non-traditional student was hard for Stella, "I was scared because... here I am being as old as I am and in class with 18-, 19-, and 20-year olds. And I thought I was just literally... I was going to fall on my face." It was a comment by a younger student that stayed with her, "So one girl told me, and I know she got it, she said, 'Don't be afraid to take a chance.' And that stuck with me and I'm like, 'Here's a kid telling me not to be afraid.' So I kind of hung with her. We got a study habit together and I kind of got in the groove."

The death of her mother was pivotal to Stella's thoughts about finishing college.

I told my Mom that I'm going to do this. I'm going to finish... but then I was beating myself up because I'm thinking that I've got to do this for my Mother and I have to do it the way she would want me to do it... and finally, I think I just beat myself up so much until I just started realizing that, okay she did want me to finish -- because I've been known to just quit in the middle of stuff -- [but] she didn't mean her way, she meant finish, but do it my way regardless of how long it takes.

That awareness, coupled with some stern counseling from one of her two sisters has given Stella a new determination to succeed.

I've made a lot of adjustments... a lot of adjustments so far, and if I just keep this frame of mind, then I'm going to be successful. I'm going to be okay and I'm going to pass it on to somebody.... My Mother's smiling. She's like, "It took her this long to realize what I was trying to tell her!" But then, she's smiling... she's proud. And lives going to be good. It's going well. And I'm going to be at graduation!

In August, Stella and her siblings held a memorial service for their mother. As she notes, memories of her mother, "Keep me pumped up and motivated."

Stella and her siblings have always been close. She tells of spending every holiday and major family event together and relates, "I've lost boyfriends because of the closeness of my family." It was in dealing with her mother's death that Stella renegotiated her relationship with her siblings, "We've all really bonded. We talk daily and tell each other we love each other." She describes her older brother and two younger sisters as always being more 'successful' than she, "Because my brother and my sisters are very talented and I always felt like... like a failure... horrible... I didn't feel like I was as good as they were." She can intellectualize those feelings, but still recalls vividly all the ways it affected her. Today they are an important part of Stella's support system. Stella's relationship with herself is challenging. She describes her own self-defeating behaviors and notes that she has been that way most of her life. She attributes that to nothing in particular except a vague childhood belief that because she was so different in height from her parents and siblings that she must have been adopted. She relates example after example of how she hurt herself and others through her own bad choices and then firmly notes that things are different now. Today she is more at peace with herself and is aware and focused on overcoming her tendencies to quit. She is pleased

with her progress in school and life. She will be 'successful.' This time she will finish school. "I'm going to try to stay on that level. No, I'm going to stay on that level!"

Cooking is a central activity in Stella's life. She tells stories of learning to cook from her two grandmothers and happily relates one of their lessons, "And I always wondered how did you know how much to put in because she said, 'A good cook does not use a measuring cup... just a pinch of this and a pinch of that.' And that's how I cook." Stella uses cooking in a variety of ways. Firstly, as a way to relax and soothe herself when life isn't going well; secondly, as a way to give her love to others through food; and lastly, as a way to earn extra income by catering events or selling individual meals. She describes spending most of her time in her kitchen,

I live in my kitchen. I have a table in my kitchen. I have a TV and VCR. Everything's right there in my kitchen. I'm hardly in any other room in the house and if I'm bored I will cook everything that's in the freezer, so that's how they got to eating this weekend. They had turkey legs. They had hot links. Then the fire was still going good on the grill so I went back in and I took down some steaks and I just started cooking. And that relaxes me.

Stella relates that she and her granddaughter spend a lot of time together in the kitchen. She is teaching both her granddaughter and daughter how to cook. And they are both doing so well that she finding herself with time on her hands as she no longer has to do all the cooking. She is proud of being a good cook.

Another way in which Stella deals with life is by writing. She shared that she first started journaling in 1988 and added, "It's about 300 pages now... so I've got pages everywhere... so, what I'm getting ready to do now is start a Volume II... and just title it, A New Beginning." Stella recounted that she also puts her thoughts and feelings into

poems and shares those with family. When I asked Stella how she feels as she is writing, she said,

Good... because I might wake up... I might have something come across my mind when I'm in deep sleep, or when I'm cooking, or just riding down the street I'll hear something... and I'll say, "Hey, that would make a good poem." And that's how I write... just... when something just comes across me and I write on whatever's available at the time. Did you see the ink on my hand? I was writing on my hand the other day because something came across my mind so I wrote on it.

Because she can no longer call her mother and say, "Mom, guess what?" She has started putting her conversations with her mother into her journal.

When she came into the group interview in February, Stella was at a low point academically and emotionally. Her heartfelt, "You don't know how much I needed to hear that!" comment in relation to grades not being the only indicator of success indicated her state at that time. Later in the summer, during our first individual interview, Stella related that school was going very well and that she finally had declared a major in Human Resources with an emphasis in Human Services. When she finishes she will have both an associate's degree and a certificate. She is on track to receive her certificate in May 2005. Originally, she intended to reward herself with a trip to Las Vegas, a place she had not yet been, but more recently she has decided to go on a cruise. "I've never been on a cruise, so my birthday's in January and that's my present to myself... I'll see what I can afford first. Then start there and maybe the next one I can splurge a little bit."

In response to a question about what makes her feel 'successful' in school, Stella noted three examples – "When I can answer a question and get it right... a good paper just always makes me happy... [and] I like getting into good discussions.... I like that." She added that a number of teachers have been excellent and that their pushing and

believing in her has made a big difference in her success. Many of her classroom experiences have been outstanding and she is enjoying being in school and feeling 'successful.' She tells of her English teacher's determination to help her succeed,

And I walked up to him one day and I said, "I can't do this. I can't keep up this pace." And he said, "Well I'm not letting you quit, so I guess we need to sit down and figure out what we need to do." So there's a lot of good teachers... and a lot of wonderful instructors... and it just seems like everybody's you know, doing their best at giving help when we're getting frustrated with something.

As a measure of her success, Stella recently applied for and received one of the Daniel's Foundation scholarships for community college students. She is proud of that accomplishment. Throughout the interview, Stella attributes much of her success, including her scholarship, to the support and encouragement she receives from CCD's TRIO Scholar's program, especially the director and her assistant.

As Stella discussed the ways that she feels less than 'successful,' she placed the blame squarely on three things – herself, a system that's hard for older students to negotiate, and teachers and advisors who demean or demoralize her. She recognizes that in the past she has been her own worst enemy by starting and stopping school over and over with varying success. But even then, she credits herself for trying. In describing college systems, like financial aid and advising and registration, Stella wryly notes, "The system's tough [to negotiate]." Stella's experience with some teachers has her wondering if they even recognize that students have lives outside of the classroom. When she tried to explain her situation to one instructor she was met with the comment, "Well, maybe you shouldn't have come back to school."

When asked where she is going to be in five years, Stella replies,

In five years? I'm going to be sitting inside "Stella's Soul Food Café." That's just what I want. My granddaughter already titled it. That's where I want to be, somewhere cooking. And secondly, I'll be working with pregnant teenagers, which is my second love, the second thing I want to do. So if I can, I'll do them both. I'll feed them and counsel them.

Based on her own experiences as an older first-generation student, Stella has the following observations,

It's hard and that saying, "If at first you don't succeed; try, try again," it's true. Because I started so many times, you know, this is the first time I've gone this far... the first time. And being first-generation you come in and like I said, old as I am with a bunch of kids, and I'll say, "Oh this is embarrassing." But I'm determined now ... really determined.

And Stella offers this advice to other students by saying,

That it's going to be okay... it's going to be okay. Let them know that I came through these doors, terrified, dumb... you know... and trying to do it my way. You just have to relax... relax and take it in... don't be afraid to take knowledge from a young person. Because if this girl hadn't told me, "Do not be afraid... why don't you go ahead and take a chance... take a chance." If that girl hadn't said that to me, I probably wouldn't be sitting here... I probably wouldn't be in school... so, now I try to tell others.

As we closed the first interview, Stella repeated her desire to help others – both in her dealings with pregnant teenagers, but also in her willingness to reach back to newer students at CCD.

*"The qualities of an exceptional cook are akin to those of a successful tightrope walker; an abiding passion for the task, courage to go out on a limb and an impeccable sense of balance"*  
- Bryan Miller

### Analysis

As Stella and I tried to re-connect to analyze her stories, she canceled several times. Her life is filled with many responsibilities, obligations, and stresses and finding

time to meet with me was often difficult. We finally met again near the end of September, and I was as glad to see Stella as she me. She looked happy and calm and there was a bounce in her step and an enthusiasm in her words that was even stronger than it had been during the prior interview. Stella described herself as making great progress in dealing with her own self-defeating behaviors. She was excited to be in school for the fall term and was enjoying her classes. Her granddaughter was doing well. And because her daughter was doing more parenting, Stella finds herself with more freedom from responsibility than she has ever had in her life. Right now, Stella is working in the college daycare center and happy to be in a field where she feels competent and ‘successful.’ If all goes as planned, she will graduate this spring with her certificate and the following year with her associate’s.

We reviewed the transcript of the first interview and Stella was amazed at seeing her thoughts and words on paper and all the themes that emerged from her stories. She knew that she had many themes, but seeing them on paper was very meaningful. She noted, again, that the process of being part of this research project affirmed her sense of worth and her sense of giving back to the college. She laughed and cried as she read her words. As we reviewed the transcript, Stella provided new elaboration, clarification, and examples. Within her stories, it was hard for us to delineate between “major” and “minor” themes. They all seemed important.

Together we identified the following major (and a few minor) themes as shown in table 3. Later, I attached the primary themes of *resilience, relationships, reflection, and responsibilities* to each of her themes.

<b>4 R's</b>	<b>Major Theme</b>	<b>Minor Theme</b>	<b>4 R's</b>
Relationships	Mother/Mother's death	Directing group housing	Responsibility
Reflection Resilience	Setting my own pace	Daycare	Responsibility
Resilience Reflection	Doing it for me	Dormitory	Reflection
Relationship Responsibility	Granddaughter	Grade school, high school, Opportunity School, GED	Reflection Responsibility
Relationship Responsibility	Daughter/Son	Daniels Scholarship	Resilience
Relationships	Siblings – early relationships, current relationships	Family therapy – didn't help	Reflection
Resilience Relationships Responsibility	Cooking/kitchen/ grandmothers	Religion	Relationship Resilience
Responsibility Relationship	School		
Reflection	Journal/poetry		
Responsibility Reflection	College major – double major		
Responsibility	Working with pregnant teenagers		
Resilience Relationship	TRIO Scholars		
Responsibility Reflection	Coming to CCD		
Resilience Reflection	Determination, feeling successful, push forward, keep going, feeling like I am somebody		
Resilience Reflection Relationship	Fear, self-defeat, feeling like failure, horrible; feeling sorry for myself, repeating the past, enjoyed being mean, sabotage self		
Relationship Resilience	Family bonds		
Resilience Relationship	Support systems		
Relationship Resilience	Good teachers/advisors		
Relationship Resilience	Bad teachers/advisors		
Resilience Reflection Responsibility	Classroom success: knowing the answer, doing a good paper, getting into a good discussion		

4 R's	Major Theme	Minor Theme	4 R's
Relationship	Fellow students		
Resilience Responsibility	Having goals: degrees, restaurant, home for pregnant teenagers, Las Vegas or cruise, time off from school – makes a difference		

**Table 3 Stella's Themes**

### **Stella's Experience**

*"Success is not final, failure is not fatal; it is the courage to continue that counts."  
- Winston Churchill*

Even before our final meeting, Stella had shared her thoughts about being part of this research project. During the group interview she remarked about how much she had needed to talk with people that day and how good it had felt to talk with the rest of us. At the beginning of her first individual interview, she spoke again about the experience of participating in the group interview.

Yeah and it was like a bonding for all of us. We see each other, we hug each other, I see them here and there... and a couple of the girls ask me, "How are you doing these days?" Because you know I had my crying moment .... None of us really knew each other that day... and after that we just...it's like we've known each other forever. So that was good. Everybody got to really hear and see what each other was going through.

During a subsequent interview, I asked Stella what CCD could do to help students like her. She replied,

For one, keep this going on. Because even though I'm not the only one that said it...some of the other girls said that it was great having people come in like that because a lot of times people won't open up. I mean they have a lot to say, but it stays bottled inside of them and it kind of helped me realize a lot of things. It helped me declare a major... meeting positive people and, you know, and just to have somebody put their arms around me and say, "It's okay, and you're going to finish and you're going

to be alright.” And a lot of stuff that came out that day made a big difference, a real good difference. Because like I said, when I met each of them, I didn’t even have a major... and a girl sat down with me and we got my transcript and we saw where I was at that point and we sat down... about two hours and we went over the whole thing and then we looked at the book and we got my plan going. We registered for fall and, I declared my major. So that one day was huge. I think they should make this a part of the program.... And I just want to say that I appreciated you. And it’s really helped and maybe one day they’ll consider, making this available not just to a few people, because there’s a lot of people out there feeling like I was feeling – a lot of people.

Stella called to postpone her last interview. She was sick in bed with a bad cold.

The following week she called again and sounded no better. She explained that because she is working around children she catches all their bugs. I worried first for her health, but then, selfishly worried that we would not be able to connect. Her prior interviews had yielded rich description of the many positive ways that the research study had influenced her and I wanted to opportunity to bring the conversation to closure. The following Monday Stella dropped by my office to talk about the experience.

I asked her about the experience and she answered,

I think, this ought to be a part of someone... an older person coming in... to have somebody to just open up and talk to... tell them how you truly are feeling, “I’m scared. I’m terrified,” because, I was. Just [to] have somebody to talk to, to really get you through it. And I was explaining it to my father and he thought it was really nice and he said, “Is this a program that you have to go through when getting into college?” And I said, “No, I was selected, but I think they should have it.”

When I indicated that I was glad that it had been so useful to her, she replied,

Well, it has, because like I said, you’ve seen where it came from. I mean the first time I saw you I was a basket case. I was crying... I was... I didn’t know half of what I was even talking about. Yeah and some things I felt embarrassed to say or I couldn’t say something without crying, but I’ve come a long way. I appreciate you and I appreciate what you’re doing, because even though this is a project for you, right? It’s helped me.

It's helping me... be able to open up and really talk about how I really feel instead of what I think people might want me to say.

Stella is effusive in her praise for the type of research I am doing. As she has in previous interview, she continues to give me credit for her recent successes.

But you helped bring a lot of it out. I mean because talking to you and then hearing myself say it... in the back of my head, I'm like "Okay, now you realize it." I guess I had to hear myself say a lot of this stuff for me to realize what I really have to do. This would be perfect for the campus for some people – people like me.

I tell Stella about how I will have an opportunity to offer recommendations in my final dissertation chapter, "I get to write my recommendations and I know you mentioned that during our last interview, but I'm definitely going to put that in there."

She replies,

Well a lot of us, we've talked about it and it was fun just meeting up like that. We've never... we'd seen each other, but we'd never talked... really sat and talked. And it was special. These people didn't even know me and they just hugged me, you know, and felt so supported.

I respond, "Good, well I'll definitely put that in there - from Stella - and I think it's great advice." Stella grins and says, "Yeah, cause Stella's getting her groove back!"

At the end, as we bid our farewells, Stella tells me, "You can't just drop us, Linda." And I have tremendous guilt pangs wondering how to stay connected in her life. She is strong and fragile, independent and dependent, and most of all we have a bond that should not end just because I've finished my research. I tell her to come to see me whenever she wants. She seems surprised, but promises that she will. As she walks down the hallway, she meets a former instructor and tells her all about being in my study and how wonderful the experience has been. I flinch inwardly in knowing that her

confidentiality is surrendered. Later, I ask the instructor to respect Stella's privacy. She agrees and adds, "I am so glad Stella is in this study. She really exemplifies the kind of first-generation woman I see in my classroom. She'll give you good stories." I have to agree.

### **Interpretation**

*"We construct a narrative for ourselves, and that's the thread that we follow from one day to the next. People who disintegrate as personalities are the ones who lose that thread."  
- Paul Auster*

By telling Stella's story, I have already interpreted much of her life for you (Riessman, 1993; Richardson, 2000). What I focused on in the telling reflects my researcher's lens complete with bias and blinders (Janesick, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2002b) and filters the raw data of her interviews into a meaningful written narrative (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). The challenge is trying to distill her wonderfully rich interviews and stories into the pages you are reading. In this section I summarize my sense of Stella within the framework of the 4R's. I have arbitrarily listed them in order of importance, based on my analysis of their meanings in Stella's life.

### ***Relationships***

Relationships are the strands that bind Stella to the world. Although she spoke about some of the struggles in her relationships with her mother, siblings, and self, her primary view is that they are rich, valuable and as much a part of her life as breathing. Her deepest relationships are with family. But she builds other relationships with the people she cooks for, the youth that she cares for, her teachers and advisors, and the students she attends class with. As I read and re-read Stella's transcripts I was struck by

how strongly her relationships are the overarching theme in her life. She is a strongly relational woman.

### *Responsibilities*

A major portion of Stella's life lies in being responsible for others, whether it's her daughter, son, granddaughter, mother, father, siblings, the children and young people she has cared for, or the people she cooks for. Her current responsibility is primarily to herself. She appears to recognize the ultimate importance of maintaining that focus. Her secondary responsibility is to her granddaughter. Many of her life lessons and goals are precipitated by her awareness of her influence on an impressionable child. Unlike other participants, she never seems to view her responsibilities as a burden. They are merely ever-present and a taken-for-granted fact of life.

### *Reflection*

Stella is thoughtful and self-aware and has been for a long time. Her recollection of early instances of self-reflection demonstrates a strong capacity for examining her life. She sometimes wonders if she overanalyzes things. Her poems and journals are another exercise in reflection. She is compelled to write. Some of her earlier life experiences found her running from what she saw in herself. Today she looks into an internal mirror and generally likes what she sees, although her constant battle is with her inner critic.

### *Resilience*

Stella's resilience is the most tenuous of the women interviewed. But the mere fact that she coined herself 'successful' speaks volumes about her self-concept and agency. Despite a lifetime of struggle, she draws strength from herself and her

## My Family

My family, we are different  
we're close and we're there for each other.  
Our faith to achieve the goals each one sets  
is a reflection of our Father and Mother.

They taught us everything they knew  
so we can make it on our own.  
And now it's time to pass the knowledge on  
to our children to pass once they're grown.

At times I didn't listen, I thought I knew it all  
even though I knew I was wrong.  
No one turned their backs or turned me away  
my family was there all along.

We were raised to love, to respect and to guide  
each other should one of us fall.  
Now our children can achieve problems out  
no matter how big or how small.

We get mad with each other  
but we work things out  
and the anger, it doesn't last long.  
We were taught to love, and we were taught to forgive  
and our faith in each other is strong.

Now we're grown, with children growing up.  
What we learned as children, our kids see  
that what they now call child abuse  
was discipline to me.

That's why my family is different  
together we shall always be.  
With our heads to the sky, and our faith in God  
that's my family, they're special to me.

relationships. She has two primary mechanisms for fostering her resilience. First, she knows to seek affirmation and support from siblings and college personnel. Second, she takes herself to places where she feels competent, like cooking. Being ‘successful’ feeds her resilience. Having goals seems to give Stella renewed determination.

### **Stella’s Poetry**

In the end, Stella left not one, but two poems for other first-generation students. She did not write them specifically for this purpose, rather she wanted to share poetry she has written for her family as a way of sharing her heart and soul with you.

#### **Goals of a Child/Yet Dreams of the Mind**

Goals of a child, yet dreams of a mind  
With dedication and sincerity, accomplishments you’ll find  
Dreams as a child, examples to be set,  
To make it in this world, some goals must be met  
BECAUSE...

Goals of a child, yet dreams of the mind

Carry on my darling for decisions you must make  
Through wisdom you can conquer whatever it may take  
The abundance of love your heart will find the path is at your feet  
My baby, you are growing up the standards you set, you must meet  
I won’t be here forever when the Lord calls me I must part  
But until that day I’m with you, forever my child, your heart  
You know I love you baby, our faith is golden you know  
Achieve your goals and dreams and set standards,  
Your worthy efforts will show

REMEMBER

Goals of a child, yet dreams of the mind

Your family we are behind you, not one, not two, but all  
We know you’re strong and can make it, but we’ll be there should you fall  
Time waits for no one, and this you will see, your education is a must  
It’s up to you, raise the next generation, in you they must find trust  
So march down that aisle, holding your head up high, that diploma is a goal  
One which you’ve achieved, be proud of it – I am!  
Our bond is as one, as a whole  
BECAUSE...

Goals of a child, yet dreams of the mind

## ELENA

*“Vow to be valiant;  
Resolve to be radiant;  
Determine to be dynamic;  
Strive to be sincere;  
Aspire to be attuned.”  
- William Arthur Ward*

### Meeting Elena

Elena arrives early for our first interview and follows me confidently into my office. She is a lovely 32-year-old Latina with incredible posture, huge brown eyes, and a brilliant smile. She is dressed conservatively in a white sweater and crisp slacks. Her simple gold jewelry highlights her warm complexion. Elena carries herself with grace and appears very comfortable within her own skin.

Because she came into study late and did not participate in a group interview, she is somewhat skeptical and cautious as I describe my study and my interest in the topic. Her main concern in agreeing to participate in the research study is whether or not her words will make a difference. She explains that she is a very private person and is careful with whom she shares her stories. She reads my forms and asks many, many questions before agreeing to continue. Satisfied with my intent, she signs. I turn on the tape recorder and begin. Now that she has agreed to talk, the words flow like water and she fills my tape with stories.

During our first interview she chooses her words carefully and precisely. She takes great pride in being organized and methodical and presents her thoughts in a coherent sequence that make reading and understanding them a delight. She falters occasionally to search for the precise word, and explains that because she grew up the bilingual daughter of monolingual parents, she sometimes thinks first in Spanish. With the exception of her pauses to search for a word, she uses few verbal fillers. Her accent is barely noticeable.

A defining theme in Elena's life is her resolute determination and focused goals. She has incredible self-awareness and is filled with confidence that she has the ability to achieve whatever she seeks. She has tremendous pride in her Latina/Hispanic identity. She likes herself. In meeting her, one is as confident as she that her future is going to be very bright. She has a lifetime of learning and many mottos, aphorisms, and injunctions stored in her head and uses them effectively to navigate her multiple, multilingual, multicultural identities of mother, fiancé, daughter, sister, aunt, student, employee, and friend. She peppers her stories with her sayings.

At our second meeting I ask if I can use the pseudonym Elena, which translates to "bright one" or "light" in Spanish and Greek. She smiles and agrees. Elena seems flattered that I see in her the same qualities that she sees in herself.

### **Elena's Story**

Elena's story is one of a 'successful,' American-born daughter of hard-working, semi-literate Mexican parents who immigrated to California to provide opportunities and a better life for their children and then returned their family to Mexico when their

physical health deteriorated. She is very much a woman of both cultures and is intensely proud of her Latina heritage. During our first interview she schools me in the reason that the Census Bureau uses the term “Hispanic” and notes that it should really be “Latino.” She adds that the terms are too generic to describe the many variations of those cultures.

Elena is the third child in a family of five children. She describes a childhood of hard work, strong family ties and values, school, church, and community. Elena’s parents are monolingual and have no high school or college experience. They worked hard jobs doing manual labor. Both parents wanted more for their children than they had. They provided well for their family, and Elena describes their status as “upper lower-class” with food and clothing and some money for extras. She describes her father as old-fashioned and strict – a man who believed the primary role of women was in the home cooking and cleaning and serving their families. Her mother practiced a quiet defiance and told her daughters, “No. Prepare yourself. Always study. Always study.”

Another major influence in Elena’s life was her godmother who inspired Elena by going to a college at a relatively late age and progressing to a master’s degree. Her advice to a teenaged Elena was instrumental in Elena’s later decision to attend college.

My godmother said, “Knowledge is the only thing they can’t take away from you. It’s never too late for an education.” So, yeah that really stuck to me. You think as a child, things don’t stick, and you think they go in one ear and out the other and they don’t. They come back.

Her move to Mexico at age 14 was a shock. When her parent’s lifetime of hard work resulted in physical disabilities that prevented them from continuing to work their usual long hours, they decided to take their family home to a place that was less

expensive and offered more family support. When Elena got there she discovered that not only was there no Mexican equivalent to an American high school, there was also a strongly rural environment without the amenities and conveniences of the city.

At the time she hated being in Mexico, although today she is glad to have had the experience.

Those memories are something I wouldn't change because I think that's made me appreciate and value things that in the U.S. you live and you take for granted. You don't see people's hard work or where you come from... where your culture... and you let go of your culture... or you let go of your family ties... a lot of times... you... being independent is perfectly fine as long as you don't let go of what your culture is... and your upbringing... and your faith and your family and all that. So that made me part of who I was... from being from California to then being in Mexico... completely different class in life. But it made me who I was.

While in Mexico, Elena attended a private business school for two years and learned business administration. At age 16 she obtained a job as a bookkeeper at a factory in Mexico. She worked there for ten months. But she was anxious to return to the United States, and when her recently-divorced older sister asked Elena to come to Colorado to help care for her children while she went to real estate school, Elena eagerly accepted. As part of the deal, her sister wanted Elena to go to school. At 17 ½ Elena did not want to go to high school, so she selected Emily Griffith Opportunity School to study for her GED. While there she also decided to study accounting since it cost nothing extra because she was technically still high-school aged.

Once she completed her GED and technical certificate at Emily Griffith, Elena started working for a temporary agency. She worked at Kraft and IBM and enjoyed the responsibility, but realized she wasn't being challenged to her full potential. At the same time she met her fiancé, the man who fathered her son. With her new responsibilities as a

mother and her interest in finding something more challenging, she decided to attend real estate school.

After she graduated, Elena and her sister worked together and had a fairly successful real estate business. Elena purchased her first and then her second home while in the real estate industry and tells of being financially secure and able to buy nice things and take nice trips, but the long hours and working evenings and weekends were more than Elena wanted. As she says,

But then it got to a point as my son got older and I said, “Okay, this isn’t fun.” I was having problems with my fiancé. Things had gotten to a point where we broke off because I never had time. I didn’t have evenings. I didn’t have weekends. It demanded all my time. And I says, “You know what? I’m not happy anymore.” And I said, “It doesn’t matter how much money you’re making.”

It was during this time that Elena suffered her first and only bout of clinical depression. She attended therapy sessions and took anti-depressants and worked her way through the pain and confusion. She decided to make some changes in her life. She exerted her independence in her relationship with her fiancé, made a decision to change her lifestyle, and focused on herself and her son. She realized that much of her struggle had to do with her not feeling valued and valuable. She also realized that money is not the path to happiness. Elena was still in her twenties, but had already resolved many issues for herself.

Elena made her next career move by going into the telecommunications industry as a call center employee. While there she worked her way up to a supervisory position. She enjoyed the work but didn’t feel that it was her life’s work. During her last six

months she began working in the IT department and was beginning to think about another career move when the economy changed and her company downsized her out of a job.

Elena made the decision to come to college. She had been toying with the idea prior to the layoff, but couldn't figure out how to afford college. It was during her outplacement from the telecommunications company that she began to find out how she could do that. As she learned about tuition grants and scholarships and loans she said,

Darn, if I would have known all that stuff back when I was 17 years old things would have been so different. But you know what? My godmother... I remembered back... it took those many years for me to remember my godmother was saying, "You know what? It's never too late to always better yourself. Education's the only thing that you're going to keep and without it... I mean that's the only thing that somebody can't take from you."

Fearful about taking the next step but motivated by those memories, Elena found her way to CCD and was referred to one of the first-generation advisors.

I started off with two classes that had nothing to do with... with my field. And I kind of knew what I wanted. So, I kind of knew that I wanted computers because I figured it's going to be challenging. It's going to always challenge me.

Being challenged is important to Elena.

She did very well her first semester but struggled with balancing family and school. She describes many sleepless nights spent studying. She drew inspiration from the success of others. As she noted,

And then there was always that mentality, the words my godmother always told me, you know, how it was never too late and that education is the only thing that you kept and there's nothing else. And then other words of wisdom, you know, things that I would read and what people would say sometimes. That would get my attention. Everything in the news... things about people in the spotlight and how they became and all those kinds of things I became more and more attracted to. And

everybody that I would hear had a story somewhat that was going to be similar in the journey that I would be taking. I would start paying attention and I would say, "Well, how'd you do it and how did you go about it? And, you know, how?" And it was just asking, asking. And it became always that people were getting... probably getting tired of me because all I did was just ask, and "How'd you do it... and what... and what made you decide for this and that... what's the difference?" Because I do know that I was pretty much illiterate when it came to how the whole education... higher education system worked. And I didn't know the difference of a bachelor's and master's, you know, Ph.D. and what it involved and how the associate's was before, and transfer, and the credits, and you know, differences. So then I became more knowledgeable and I was leaning toward science.

Of coming back to school and selecting a difficult major, Elena relates,

So, you know, I felt very dumb, but there's one thing that I have. I says, "You know what? I can learn it." I say, "It's going to be hard. It's going to take me probably twice as long... or three times longer. But you know what? If I learn and I accomplish it, no one's going to take it away from me. It's going to be mine and it's going to be mine forever." I says, "You know, if I don't do this... if I don't demand more of me, how am I going to be able to demand more of my son or be able to demand more of others? I gotta be able to demand more from me and be able to give that in order for me to be able to demand and expect from those around me."

While in school, Elena works 16 hours per week at IBM. She got her internship job in a competitive interview process through INROADS, a program aimed at developing and placing talented minority students in business and industry to prepare them for corporate and community leadership. She is pleased and surprised to have been selected because she is not as knowledgeable in the technical skills area as some candidates.

That's my weakness is that I don't have the technical background. But this is the field I want to study. However I do have the dedication. I am mentally prepared, and my maturity towards that – I do have some business knowledge, some corporate background – that I've been in that environment before. That's going to be my strength.

Elena is pleased that the job pays well and is using the money to help support her while she is in college.

And it was a blessing and I was very happy and when I saw that [it pays over \$14 per hour], that was also another push – that was a push and you know what, if this is happening it's because I'm in the right track. I was in the right place at the right time, but it's also because that's the decision I made.

As part of her internship she has an assigned corporate mentor and participates in community service projects. She is grateful for the opportunity, but credits her talents and abilities along with her strong work ethic for keeping her there.

Today, Elena lives with her son, fiancé, and disabled mother in the home she purchased while working in real estate. Her mother helps with childcare and housework. She helps her mother with translation and driving. Elena and her fiancé have been together off-and-on for the past 14 years, but she is in no rush to marry. She says, "I don't believe in divorce, so because I don't believe in divorce MORE than what I believe in marriage, I have not gotten married because of that." She describes his having to learn to be accepting of her independence. While she is in school she is grateful for any help he is able to provide but very clear with him that her priority is school and not him.

In May 2004, Elena finished her AS degree at CCD and transferred to the University of Colorado, Denver (UCD) in Fall 2004 where she is studying Computer Science and Engineering. During our first interview, she described her fears about making the transition.

Because I just transferred and it's new and I'm taking some of the hardest courses right now, which is Physics, Physics lab, Calc... and then my first programming class, too. And, you know, I keep on telling myself, "Oh gosh." But, you know what? I came to accept where first it was a 4.0 and then it kind of dropped to a 3.8... 3.7 and I'm like, "Okay. It's okay."

The hardest thing is saying, "It's okay" at certain times because I'm also a perfectionist. I demand a lot of myself. That's not always good, but it gives me that desire and need that also makes me who I am and I accepted that, but I've always told myself, "You know what? If this is the semester where, darn it, I don't get A's and B's then oh well, let it be."

Elena's earliest memory of being 'successful' is when she ran for class treasurer in fourth or fifth grade and won.

That was amazing and that's probably the first time that I felt like, wow. You know? Because I had already been on the honor roll and stuff, but to be able to have... be in that competition to... something that I thought I would not be able to attain.

She relates that she has always done well in school and loves to learn, but school was hard for her.

It was very hard for me for the reason that I didn't have any help from my parents because they didn't read or speak English. So, I wasn't ever able to... I always had a hard time studying and I still do and it's because I didn't grow up in an environment of having resources to help me. I had to figure things out on my own so that just meant that I always had to study twice, or probably three times harder than what a regular person did that if they just asked their parent, their parent would be able to answer the question. I probably had to do it ten... 15... 20 times by the time I figured it out. So I always did feel sometimes that I was a step behind because I didn't have the help. And had to do it on my own, but also that I had to push myself because I didn't want not to know, or not to understand.

She notes that she still struggles with that feeling of having to work harder than other students.

And up until this date I can still relate because sometimes having a child I can't be at campus all the time like all the other students and going in and meeting with all the professors as much because sometimes their office hours is the time that I need to go pick up my child and that's extremely difficult to me to be able to always get the resources and so forth.

However, she is pragmatic about having to do that and states that hard work and determination is what carries her forward when it gets difficult.

When I ask about her earliest memory of being unsuccessful, Elena offers a school-related third-grade playground incident in which she was jumped and beat up by some older African-American girls for getting into a fight with a third-grade African-American boy. She states that it was her first experience in being picked on because of her ethnicity and it left deep memories. She shares that for a long time she didn't trust or like African-Americans and was intimidated about activities where she would be together with them. She didn't try out for cheerleading because most of the girls were African-American. Today she able to view the episode in a positive light.

And as an adult I'm able to see that your success does come from interacting, becomes a stronger bond, with other minorities. And that's one thing that I've enjoyed more. You know, that one bad thing, now as an adult, has allowed me to be more successful because of that experience.

Elena is always analyzing her options and has set what she believes are realistic plans for the future. When asked where she sees herself in five years, Elena responded,

Five years from now, my goal is to be working at IBM where I intern. And, I'll still be in school for another almost three years, so in those additional two years that I have a full-time position hopefully it will be with that company since I've been interning, but already been able to, hopefully, orchestrate everything I've learned into a career and in those first two years I think that I'll be able to find out where my strengths are. Very ambitious to learn more and more and more and probably in five years I'll be out of college with my bachelor's, hopefully two years out. Thinking about going and getting my master's as well and doing a lot of community work. And I've been very involved with my son's school and I want to continue to do that.

Elena is pragmatic about the next five years and notes that she is always looking at the next milestone and evaluating her options. She further notes that if she is not happy where she is, she is ready to change.

And always have a backup plan – maybe one or two backup plans - because if you're not happy when the time comes then you need to be willing to make the change and you need to be willing to accept it also and do something that you know you're going to be happy. And there's no sense of me graduating, having a career, having a decent income if I'm not going to be happy with what I'm doing.

I asked Elena what advice she had for other first-generation women. She replied,

No matter what anybody tells you, that you *can't* – all the *buts* and the *ifs* out there – more the reason for you to be determined and stick to being... to accomplishing your degree, not only your degree, but to continue on, community service, be a leader outside of just your education. Give back to your community.

She cautions parents not to focus on school to the detriment of their children, “You won't be able to balance everything – but to where you think you can at least manage making sure that your son, or your child, is cared for school-wise, then you go for it.” But she also notes that families need to be accepting of your need to be in school.

You know, your children, your family's always first, but you can't put your family's “wants” - because most of them are “wants” over “needs” - over your “needs” and what I mean by “needs” as your family, “Oh, I want this. I want that.” And you just discredit your education sometimes. But you don't realize that education's not a “want” it's a “need” because there's no way that you can support that child unless you have an education.

Elena also offers sage advice about staying committed,

Deal with it as it comes, but stay on that road. You've gotta stay on that road! That's the only road that's going to take you to success. So that's my mentality and I hope it works for other people.

And she credits numerous advisors, mentors, and role models with helping her and other first-generation students succeed.

And with my advisors and mentors and just seeing what's going to be for my future and where I want to see myself and that I'm going to want the same for my children and that's the only thing that's kept me on track, because boy, there's days that I just want to give up.

When asked what advice she had for colleges, Elena was effusive and articulate in offering the following,

A lot of orientation! The number one issue that I've been faced with, and other people that I've spoken to, that they don't know how to get started. They don't realize that sometimes it is easy. Yes, there's struggles when you're studying and when you're overwhelmed and everything, but just getting started they don't know how. They don't know that there's resources out there. They don't know that there's financial aid. And these are people that because their parents never went to college and they don't have cousins or... that also never went to college they don't have that information and by me being able to educate them and tell them that this is everyday and give them the individual advising that I got from CCD – being able to meet with my advisor and stay on top and being able to discuss and look at my schedule and what would work with what class and being able to accommodate the upper ones with one that wasn't so demanding to ones that are and really balance those classes is where we probably need the most help. And if we're able to get more of that kind of little bit of undivided attention and somebody dedicated to just first-generations we'll learn and then we'll pass it on to other people because then we'll know what advice to give. Because we're first-generation, we know a lot of other first-generation students also. And we can educate them once we've been educated, but we need to be able to have somebody give us the right tools, the right information, put us on a track or see the track – where it is and where you need to be. We'll get short-term and long-term goals and as long as we get that and we're ready for it, then we're going to continue along that track. But a lot of times, if we don't know we can easily get side-tracked and then you feel it's impossible to get back on the track again to follow that road to being able to continue – not just for an associate's – but continue on and get your bachelor's degree

and even a master's degree. So we will learn and we'll pass it on to other that we know, because if we're first-generation, we know many.

*“Obstacles cannot crush me. Every obstacle yields to a stern resolve.  
He who is fixed to a star does not change his mind.”  
- Leonardo daVinci*

### **Analysis**

Elena misses our second interview because she is dealing with her coursework at the University of Colorado, at Denver (UCD). She calls, apologetically, to reschedule. On that day she calls to tell me she is running late and will be there as soon as possible. I am relieved when she appears in my doorway. Today she is dressed in a gray sweater and black slacks with her thick hair pulled back into ponytail. I am anxious to hear how her life is going and selfishly, I am also thinking about my own deadlines. Compared to our first interview, Elena seems slightly more subdued and less confident, and she tells me that the transition from CCD to UCD has been much more difficult than she expected. Again, she is direct, open, factual, and filled with stories. She describes being overwhelmed by the transfer from CCD to UCD. She had to drop her Calculus III class because it was too much taken along with Physics and Science. She also learned too late that a CCD class she had registered for inter-institutionally was not going to count toward her degree at UCD. Had someone at UCD met with her prior to registration she would have learned about both before making those mistakes. She has now tracked down her advisor, but was disappointed about the lack of outreach from UCD during the transition. At several points during the interview, she commented, “And it’s okay to fall apart every now and then.... It’s okay to fall apart every now and then.”

We spent some time further debriefing her feelings about the rough transition and then together we worked to identify the following major and minor themes as shown in Table 4. Surprisingly, of all the women Elena is the least proactive about identifying themes. She seems content to listen to my analysis and comments, “Well you’ve analyzed me really well.” Later, I attached the primary themes of *resilience, relationships, reflection, and responsibilities* (the 4 R’s) to each of her themes.

<b>4 R’s</b>	<b>Major Theme</b>	<b>Minor Theme</b>	<b>4 R’s</b>
Relationships Reflection Responsibility	<b>Childhood</b> School Hard work United States Mexico	<b>Childhood</b> Los Angeles	Resilience Relationships
Relationships Reflection Resilience Responsibility	<b>Family</b> Son Mother Father Godmother	<b>Family</b> Siblings Grandparents Aunts, uncles, cousins	Relationships Reflection
<b>4 R’s</b>	<b>Major Theme</b>	<b>Minor Theme</b>	<b>4 R’s</b>
Relationships Resilience	<b>Fiancé</b> 14 years Off and on Traditional values	<b>Fiancé</b> Eventually marry	Relationships Reflection
Relationships Reflection	<b>Culture</b> Latina La Familia Language	<b>Culture</b>	
Reflection Responsibility	<b>School</b> Love learning Good at school Successful	<b>School</b> Fight with African-American girls	Resilience Reflection
Responsibility Resilience Reflection	<b>Work</b> Past jobs Hard worker Needs challenges	<b>Work</b> Layoff	Resilience
Resilience Responsibility	<b>Goals</b> School Career Self-sufficiency Happiness Community service	<b>Goals</b>	

4 R's	Major Theme	Minor Theme	4 R's
Resilience	<b>Personal Characteristics</b> Independent Proud Determined Resilient	Personal Characteristics Smart	Resilience
Responsibility	<b>Values</b> Hard work Productive member of society Strong family ties	Values Balance Time for me	Resilience Reflection Relationships
Resilience Reflection Relationships	<b>Inspiration/Motivation</b> Stories of successful people Godmother Mother	<b>Inspiration/Motivation</b> Faith Culture	Resilience Relationships

**Table 4. Elena's Themes**

### **Elena's Experience**

*“Rest satisfied with doing well, and leave others to talk of you as they will.”  
- Pythagoras*

At our first meeting, Elena is all business and very serious about getting her story told in an organized, sequential fashion. She makes few comments about the experience of being interviewed or telling her story. At the end of that interview she does express amazement that she had so much to say. “Wow, I can't believe I had that in me. I talked a little bit too much.”

When we meet again, Elena talks more about the experience of being part of this research study. In her careful, practical way she notes,

Well, if it's going to be written out and somebody's going to benefit from it or it's going to put out more knowledge out there for whoever is in charge of preparing things for first-generation students – that was my primary reason. If it's going to be just in a stack and nobody's going to read it or benefit from it or nobody's going to be able to be able to make a change about it, I'm like, “Oh well.” I'm not going to be very happy about it. But, my hope is that... and you know that by yourself, and being in a position that you can get more involved in, and whomever you have

that's going to read it as well, get their motivation... get them [to say], "We can start doing something to incorporate these things for other first-generation students to make it easier for them" And that would make it worth my while to say, "Hey, I spent this time here and everything, and they're going to do something." Or, "They're going to get more involved." Possibly not a complete change, but any little involvement to help somebody that doesn't realize what a first-generation student is. To have an understanding of what it is and then for them to want to go out and do something on our behalf, then I'll be blessed. My work's been done for me.

She also shares that she is usually not very comfortable sharing personal aspects of her life.

There's privacy issues. I like to be a very private person.... So, sometimes it does help to self-analyze or to reiterate your own beliefs, which is good. But, still the privacy – you like to keep your person al kind of... you know there's personal things that sometimes you feel somewhat uncomfortable talking about. However, I also believe that the more you talk about yourself, the easier it is to overcome anything that you've had in your past. And if you don't speak out about them or if you don't discuss them... if it helps you analyze and re-focus what your thoughts are and what you want to do and if it reinforces that, it's great. People need to do that more, that's why advisors and things like that help because you can't go home with certain issues sometimes.

At our last meeting Elena opens up a little more about the experience.

I've always believed in therapy and self analyzing and speaking openly, but sometimes if you don't have the right people that you can go to, when you're only surrounded with immediate family, that you can discuss things in an open manner that you can sometimes with an advisor – somebody outside – it's weird that you can sometimes feel a little more comfortable speaking about those types of personal things. But, regardless it is your personal life and it is uncomfortable. But, you know, it helps. And, sometimes not saying anything, somebody can't recommend you the options you have out there or the resources that you have available to you to fix your problem and you can drown in them, so there's a... very little negative on it as long as you know who you're speaking with and you feel comfortable with that person, then I think people need to do it more.

Elena thanks me for the experience and agrees that it has been helpful to talk, especially about her hard transition to UCD. And she adds that she wants to see my dissertation when it's done. She tells me that she'll stay in touch to let me know how her life is going.

### **Interpretation**

*"There is no chance, no destiny, no fate, that can circumvent or hinder or control  
the firm resolve of a determined soul."  
- Ella Wheeler Wilcox*

In taking the pages of interview transcripts and distilling them into a story, I have already interpreted much of Elena's life for you (Richardson, 2000). What I chose to tell as I summarized and synthesized reflects my own researcher subjectivity and biases (Janesick, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2002b). It was challenging to filter the raw data of Elena's interviews into a meaningful written narrative (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). What to tell? What to omit? What to emphasize? It was not easy, but I used my skills and judgment in deciding what to highlight. In this section I summarize my impressions of Elena within the framework of the 4R's. I have arbitrarily listed them in order of importance, based on my analysis of their meanings in Elena's life.

### ***Resilience***

In many ways, Elena is the perhaps the most resilient of the four women interviewed. She has an inner fire and resolve that may have always been there or that may have been flamed by her lifetime of hard work and determination. Certainly her family values and heritage have strongly influenced her self-concept and agency. Her success as a student from an early age has also fostered her belief in her own abilities.

There is also an intangible, elusive quality to Elena's fire that leaves me wondering if I would ever be able to understand its origin. She is a strong-willed, independent, determined woman who is very aware of her resolve. She is proud to be so resilient. One senses that not much keeps her down for long.

### *Relationships*

Elena is deeply connected to the people in her life. Her most important relationship, and the reason she gives for all her goals, is with her son. They are very close and she is an intensely hands-on mother who has definite ideas about the goals and values she wants to pass along from her own upbringing. Elena is also strongly connected to her parents and siblings, although she laughingly talks about her father's old-fashioned beliefs. Her cultural heritage of *La Familia* is genuinely meaningful and real for Elena. Her relationship with her longstanding fiancé is important, but she defiantly refuses to be trapped in a marriage unless she believes it is forever. Another important set of relationships for Elena are the ones she has forged with her many mentors starting with her godmother and progressing to the women in her workplace. She learns much from them.

### *Responsibilities*

Like all the women, Elena's life is one of responsibility. She has always worked, starting from an early age when she worked in the home while her parents were out earning a living. Today she balances school and work and spends many late nights studying. She is not over-burdened with her responsibility and talks of occasionally being able to take "me time" when she needs it. There is a resolute acceptance of her

responsibilities within Elena. Her family values or hard work have promoted a strong work ethic and that shines clearly within Elena. But it is not all about work with Elena. One of her major goals is to have a job that allows her to contribute in meaningful ways to the community. She has a strong sense of wanting to give back.

### *Reflection*

Elena is both intensely private and deeply reflective. Although she shares many stories and is abundant with her words, there is a guarded, hard-to-pin-down quality to Elena. During our interviews, she is the least publicly self-reflective of the four women interviewed although she talks about how much she thinks and analyzes herself. Her most private thoughts are not readily accessible. What she does choose to share about her reflective moments paints a picture of a woman who is always thinking, analyzing, planning, problem solving, looking ahead, and wondering about many, many things. During her reflective moments Elena is often inspired by the stories and mottos of ‘successful’ people. Her inner critic is both encouraged and chastised by childhood injunctions.

### **Elena’s Letter**

It is appropriate that Elena, whose life is highly organized and filled with mottos, injunctions, and aphorisms, decided that she was not “creative” enough to leave some poetry, music, or art. Instead, Elena left the following letter, which includes aphorisms meaningful to her.

November 1, 2004

I have attended many development and leadership workshops over the past few years that have helped me become more self-analytical and responsible for my own actions. I would like to share just a few [sayings] that I try to live by. The speakers that motivated and inspired me were people I could easily relate to. They themselves had to overcome a lot in order to be where they are today, successful professionals and leaders within their communities.

I have learned that the road to success is always under construction, with many bumps and turns. There may be times when we have gotten off this road, but we are solely responsible for getting back onto it no matter what obstacles we are faced with.

Success comes in many ways and it is important to take pride in our successes' without having to sacrifice our values. It is very difficult as a Hispanic female to balance family, health, school, work and responsibility towards our society; however, it is not impossible. As long as we do not betray our values, we can achieve all this with pride and happiness.

Yes, it is a lot of hard work and there will be many days you will not want to get out of bed. This is normal and it is OK to have an occasional breakdown, but I keep telling myself that I am too busy for a nervous breakdown and there's no time on my schedule to have one ☺. So instead I try to have an occasional "ME" time which is a must to survive.

The day will come when I will achieve success and all my sacrifices will be compensated. I believe I was put on Earth to be a productive person and to grow knowledgeable in everything I am involved in. Nonetheless, achieving success will have to include a healthy balance within my family, health, community, and career.

"What the mind of man can conceive and believe, it can achieve."  
-- Napoleon Hill

"If you can imagine it, you can achieve it; if you can dream it, you can become it."  
-- William Arthur Ward

"Having once decided to achieve a certain task, achieve it at all costs of tedium and distaste. The gain in self-confidence of having accomplished a tiresome labor is immense."  
-- Thomas Arnold Bennett, [Dr.]

"You can have anything you want--if you want it badly enough. You can be anything you want to be, do anything you set out to accomplish if you hold to that desire with singleness of purpose."

-- William Adams

"What looks like a loss may be the very event which is subsequently responsible for helping to produce the major achievement of your life."

-- Srully D. Blotnick (b. 1941)

"There is no such thing as can't, only won't. If you're qualified, all it takes is a burning desire to accomplish, to make a change. Go forward, go backward. Whatever it takes! But you can't blame other people or society in general. It all comes from your mind. When we do the impossible we realize we are special people."

-- Jan Ashford

"Every achiever I have ever met says, "My life turned around when I began to believe in me."

-- Dr. Robert H. Schuller (b. 1926).

Elena

## MUSINGS AT THE JOURNEY'S END

*"Every story excludes.  
Every story is not alone.  
No story is ideologically neutral.  
Every story presents a hierarchy of relationships.  
Every story lives and breathes its meaning in a web of other stories.  
Every story legitimates a centered point of view, a worldview, or an ideology.  
Every story self-deconstructs since it is embedded in changing-meaning contexts."  
- David M. Boje*

### Research Questions

Now that you've met the women and read their stories, it's time to talk about how I understand and frame them in this study. As I began this study, I had a series of questions that influenced my thinking. Among these questions were: "What are the stories of these 'successful' female, non-traditional, first-generation community college students at the Community College of Denver? What has been their experience as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, friends, and women who happen to be non-traditional, first-generation students? How do they see and define their success? What do their voices and stories tell us about them as unique individuals? What do their voices and stories tell us about them, as members of the group labeled 'first-generation'? What do their voices add to the *Discourse* (Gee, 1996) of the academy that we would not have heard in any other way? In what ways do their stories confirm or disconfirm the deficit

perspective? How has my study personalized the face of first-generation women for the academy?"

In addition, the following questions emerged during the research process: "How has the experience of participating in a research study influenced these women? What recommendations do they have for colleges? What recommendations do they have for other first-generation students? In what ways can colleges and higher education professionals adapt or modify practices to better meet the needs of 'successful' first-generation women students?"

### **Elena's Challenge**

You may recall that Elena was initially the most skeptical about participating in this research project. She didn't want her stories to just end up on a shelf. She wanted to know that her time with me was well spent on something that could make a difference. During our final interview, Elena turned the tables on me by challenging me with the question, "So, what have you learned?" I found myself defending and explaining my findings to her as if I were the student and she the professor. An apt relationship given my values and beliefs in giving voice and power to the *Other* (Johnson-Bailey, 2002b; Personal Narratives Group, 1989).

Having to frame and answer her question forced me to think and re-think what I was seeing and hearing. It helped me focus my thoughts and ideas. Elena was a good teacher. So, Elena, I shall try to answer your questions here.

## Individuality

*"In the end we are all separate: our stories, no matter how similar, come to a fork and diverge. We are drawn to each other because of our similarities, but it is our differences we must learn to respect."*

*- Anonymous*

Every story is unique. In hearing and telling the stories of these women, I was struck first by their individuality. These are complex women with story-filled lives. Hope's defining theme is her failed relationship. Hers is a story of a young woman finding her adult identity (Josselson, 1988). She had always been a 'successful' student and had her first experience with 'failure' recently. She didn't like it. Faith's theme is her tremendous trust and faith in God. Hers is a story of a woman burdened by a lifetime of responsibilities yet filled with trust that her future holds more than her past (Gilligan, 1982). Her first major 'failure' was during her high school years and she turned that into a 'success' because of her determination. The major influence in Stella's life has been her relationships. Hers is a story of a mature woman who is finally trusting her relationship with herself and taking time for her needs (Marcia et. al., 1993). Her academic 'success' has been hard-won, but her personal 'successes' are many. Elena's defining theme is her resilience, agency, and determination. Hers is a story of an immigrant daughter who has taken the gifts of her heritage and used them to shape her future and her goals (Morgan, 2003). She has always been 'successful' and even when dealing with her recent bumpy transition to the university, knows she will continue to be 'successful.'

In sharing their stories within their individual chapters, my intention was to share with you their distinctive stories. In order to honor their individuality and preserve the "evocative nature of their stories" (p. 758, Ellis & Bochner, 2000) I kept their stories

separate. Like so many qualitative researchers before me (Bloom, 1998; Chase, 2003; Personal Narratives Group, 1989), each of these women has imprinted on me, and I will know, speak of them, and remember them as unique and special individuals always. I wanted you to do the same.

Even the tables that I developed to organize the individual themes of each woman are different. Although the general format is similar, the content is unique to each interviewing experience. In the case of Hope, who was very focused and organized her story around a single major theme, an outline of topics developed in a very linear fashion. Faith talked and talked until her many themes sifted up through the words. In the case of Stella, whose life has been long and complex, her themes emerged in a circular, dialogic fashion. Elena, the most methodical of all, surprised me by letting me tell her what I thought I saw and then affirming or disconfirming my observations.

### **Commonality**

Paradoxically, the other way that these women are memorable is in their commonality. I dare not generalize, but based on the themes within their individual stories, I will suggest an interpretive framework that I developed to use in understanding their success. As I read, re-read, and analyzed their transcripts, especially their own identification of the major and minor themes in their lives, I struggled to find an organizing framework to help me understand the meanings of their wonderfully rich and complex stories. Additionally, when I reflected back on the group interview, much of the information gathered foreshadowed themes that appeared repeatedly during the individual interviews.

As I returned over and over to the data, I was reminded of Merlin's assurances that I should trust that the data would yield their treasures. I resisted imposing a deductive framework and had faith that something would emerge. My reward for mucking about in the mountains of data was an inductive interpretation and interpretive framework that emerged from the data and made more sense to me than any of the ideas I'd toyed with at the beginning of this journey. The data did yield their treasures and what I found makes sense to me.

I would remind you that interpretations are always subjective because as Riessman (1993), citing the Personal Narratives Group, noted interpretive narratives require interpretation:

When talking about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths. These truths don't reveal the past "as it actually was," aspiring to a standard of objectivity. They give us instead the truths of our experiences.... Unlike the Truth of the scientific ideal, the truths of personal narratives are neither open to proof nor self-evident. We come to understand them only through interpretation, paying careful attention to the contexts that shape their creation and to the worldviews that inform them. Sometimes the truths we see in personal narratives jar us from our complacent security as interpreters "outside" the story and make us aware that our own place in the world plays a part in our interpretation and shapes the meanings we derive from them (p. 22).

The cornerstones of my admittedly subjective interpretive framework are the 4 R's – *resilience, relationships, reflection, and responsibilities*. These four thematic strands were woven within the group interview and the individual interviews so strongly that they have formed the way I look at and make meaning of the experiences of these women. Let me explain.

## *Resilience*

*"That which does not kill me, makes me stronger."  
- Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche*

*"Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall."  
- Confucius*

The first area that popped out was their amazing resilience. Hope, Faith, Elena, and Stella each had a quiet, consistent courage and a striking determination in spite of challenges and struggles and setbacks. Each was aware of her own strength and resolve. Some were more tentative about trusting it, but in every case it was present.

Resilience is a positive adaptation in response to adversity (Wang & Gordon, 1994) or the ability to overcome life's challenges (Walsh, 1998). How one defines challenge or adversity varies. Risk factors such as teen pregnancy, poverty, alcoholism, abusive relationships, delinquency, dropping out of school, depression, and others (Jessor, 1993) can be termed adverse situations that can undermine an individual's coping mechanisms. Conversely a resilient individual exhibits protective factors that buffer them against adverse situations (Werner & Smith, 1992). They show positive adaptation in response to adversity.

The study of resilience is not new. It arose from the study of adversity and risk (Fraser, 1997). Researchers examining the lives of "at risk" children discovered that some children thrive in the worst of circumstances and become stable, healthy adults (Bernard, 1991; Matsen, Best, & Garnezy, 1990; Werner & Smith, 1992). Conceptually, resilience was seen to be the result of personality traits or coping styles that allowed some children to have a positive developmental path even in the midst of considerable adversity

(Garmezy, 1994). Originally resilience was seen as atypical, but continued research has shown that every human being has the potential to be resilient (Valliant, 1993; Werner, 1992). Despite expectations of potential negative outcomes, most individuals who face adversity have more positive outcomes than one might predict (Bernard, 1991; Garmezy, 1994; Masten, 1994; Vaillant, 1993).

Personal characteristics are part of the story of resilience. For resilient people, life has meaning and they are said to show evidence of high expectations and strong self-efficacy (Benard, 1991; Masten, 1994). Some researchers have noted that resilient individuals have dispositions that make them attractive to others, who then work with them in positive and helpful ways (Masten, 1994; Werner & Smith, 1992). Resilient people are reported to be intelligent (Anthony 1987; Masten, 1994; Werner & Smith, 1992) and to have traits of optimism, self-confidence, and goal orientation (Benard, 1991; Masten, 1994) that make them easier to interact with and support. Miller (1987) notes that women often have psychological strengths that they don't even know they have.

Structural and institutional characteristics are another part of the study of resilience (Fraser, 1997). In studying the resilience of women, Reis (1998) noted several structural factors that contributed to the development of resilience – a passion to do what they love and systems that supported them, strong family and relationship ties, friendships with women and men, and love of learning with an opportunity to do so. Equally important to the development of resilience was the self-awareness that defeat sometimes provides an invaluable learning opportunity (Reis & Diaz, 1999). Carla O'Connor (2002) insists that institutions play a significant role in fostering and supporting the resilience of women and suggested that rather than focus on personal

characteristics, colleges should look inwardly to determine how we foster (or inhibit) the resilience of all our students, not just the ones with the traits noted above. For as Butler (1997) notes,

What we call resilience is turning out to be an interactive and systemic phenomenon, the product of a complex relationship of inner strengths and outer help throughout a person's life span. Resilience is not only an individual matter. It is the outward and visible sign of a web of relationships and experiences that teach people mastery, doggedness, love, moral courage and hope (p. 26).

I believe our failure to understand the role of resilience in these women's lives, however, is hegemonic and reinforces the dominant culture perspective. For example, from the dominant culture, poverty or teenage pregnancy is viewed solely in pathological terms without an appreciation for the aspects of the situation that may contribute to survival, identity development, and resilience. There is also a risk of suggesting that resilience is a personal trait or characteristic and that institutions of higher education have no role in fostering (or inhibiting) resilience. For us in the academy, if we can understand the resilience displayed by our non-traditional first-generation women students we can shape policies and practices that recognize the strength of their coping strategies and support them in their determination. Certainly we cannot presume we have a large role in developing that resilience. It was present in our students in some measure before they arrived on our doorsteps. Nor should we try to dampen it. We should be looking at the ways we erect institutional barriers that erode or impede women's resilience.

## *Relationships*

*“One realizes that human relationships are the tragic necessity of human life; that they can never be wholly satisfactory, that every ego is half the time greedily seeking them, and half the time pulling away from them. In those simple relationships of loving husband and wife, affectionate sisters, children and grandmother, there are innumerable shades of sweetness and anguish which make up the pattern of our lives day by day, though they are not down in the list of subjects from which the conventional novelist works.”*

*- Willa Cather*

As I looked closer, I saw in all of their stories the importance of their multiple relationships. Hope, Faith, Stella, and Elena had a variety of relationships that at different points in their lives have sustained and tormented them. They value the strength of their relationships with many of the people in their lives and lament the hold that other relationships have had. Their relationships are central to their identities and a major aspect of each of their lives.

Much more than men, women are relational creatures (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1987). Our myriad relationships enrich us, define us, sustain us, and overwhelm and burden us (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Boyd-Franklin, 1993) sometimes all at once. Women’s relationships take many different forms, and at various stages in our lives typically may include daughter, sister, wife, partner, mother, friend, mentor, peer, student, employer, employee, customer, member, and stranger (Barnett & Rivers, 2004; Miller, 1987). There are good and sometimes great relationships that provide emotional sustenance and there are bad and sometimes devastating relationships that defeat, demoralize, and occasionally kill us (Gallant, Keita, & Royak-Schaler, 1997).

Relationships can play an integral role in a woman’s success. In some instances, the family and community can provide the inspiration and support necessary to get

through the challenges associated with college. Having people in our lives to provide meaning and purpose; people to care for and who care for us makes a critical difference in many women's coping mechanisms (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1987; Nelson & Burke, 2002). Relationships fill our lives. Additionally, when Rosalind Barnett and Janet Hyde (2001) conducted a study of women (and men),

We found that men and women benefit from multiple roles. They gain a sense of success and well-being from balancing work and family. And whatever stresses arise can be eased by the buffering effect of multiple roles: failure in one role can be balanced by success in another role (p. 3).

The core of women's personal development emanates from forging complex relationship with others. Women intuitively know that the primacy of relationships provides the connections for growth, understanding, and rewarding relational experiences. All our actions must be interpreted within our relational contexts and within and along the edges of these relationships. These relationships are primary to personal development and mental health. (Boyd-Franklin, 1993, Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, 1997; Miller, 1987; Nelson & Burke, 2002).

Not all about relationships is good. American women are balancing numerous roles and relationships (Marks & MacDermid, 1996). Conflict between these roles and relationships places enormous stress on women to the detriment of their physical and mental health (Miller, 1987; Gallant, Keita, & Royak-Schaler, 1997). Significant psychological damage can result from unequal power and status in relationships or whenever one person is considered subordinate to the dominant personality in the relationship (Miller, 1987).

For us in the academy, if we focus on understanding and appreciating the many relationships in the lives of our non-traditional first-generation women students we can

shape support strategies that help them effectively juggle multiple roles, foster positive relationships, and have the self-knowledge and courage to leave the bad ones behind. Certainly we cannot persist in believing that school is the primary relationship in their lives. Nor can we expect that they will ignore their other relationships as they seek to meet their academic goals.

### *Reflection*

*"[A person] is a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and, as it seems to me, essential to it: It being impossible for any one to perceive, without perceiving that he does perceive."*

*- John Locke*

A third area of commonality was in their reflection and self-awareness. From the persistent analytical preciseness of Elena's reflectiveness to the tentative nature of Hope's self-reflection, all four women used reflection to think, analyze, problem solve, understand, and increase their own self-awareness. None of them were shy about allowing me to see and hear their self-talk. Each of them was willing to discuss how it helps them navigate the world. Several of them appeared to diminish their reflectiveness by making self-effacing, modest, humorous or derogatory comments about thinking too much, too deeply, or talking aloud to themselves.

Women (and men) are sentient beings. We cannot *not* think. How deeply we think and how actively we self-reflect depend in large measure on our self-awareness and self-trust (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1997). Life is a continual process of thinking and learning (Mezirow, 1991). To achieve mastery, we must act on new insights and reflect on our experience over a significant period of time. Reflection helps

a person create a protected time and space to make meaning out of how their lives have been and where they are going. This ability to stop, think, analyze and understand helps to guide them emotionally to a "safe" place (Miller, 1987; Saleebey, 1997). This requires solitude and patience. As Clarissa Estes so eloquently notes,

Eventually every woman away from her soul-home tires. This is as it should be. Then she seeks her skin again in order to revive her sense of self and soul, in order to restore her deep-eyed and oceanic knowing. This great cycle of going and returning, going and returning, is reflexive within the instinctual nature of women and is innate to all women for all their lives (p. 265).

In their landmark book, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997) describe the ways that women progress through developmental stages of listening to the voices of others, listening to the inner voice, searching for self, listening to the voice of reason, and integrating the different voices. Self-reflection can provide a way for women to move from a dependent position of relying on the received knowledge from others to the point where they are able to listen to and trust their own subjective knowledge. When women learn to listen to their inner voice and not the external critics they find their "inner source of strength" (p. 54). The process of reflective thinking allows women to focus on dreams, fears, beliefs, and hopes; revisit and re-author their life stories; analyze critical issues; problem solve; engage in self-awareness and personal discovery; and understand how external events have affected their lives (Estes, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1987).

As Elliot (1992) notes, in the midst of self-reflecting, women need to still their inner critic – that internal voice that is the source of negative messages including imperative "shoulds," disparaging thoughts about self, and negative predictions. Women who can't temper or silence that inner critic may be overcome by feelings of

defectiveness, shame, guilt, inferiority, and magnified fear. Such feelings paralyze the individual and are the worst extreme of reflection.

For us in the academy, if we can understand and appreciate the reflectiveness of our non-traditional first-generation women students we can shape strategies that help them effectively strengthen their internal voice both in and out of the classroom. We can increase our own awareness of their reflective abilities and devise mechanisms and instructional approaches to let them know that reflectiveness is a wonderful intellectual and philosophical gift. Certainly we cannot persist in believing that our voice is primary in their thinking. Nor should we expect that they silence or ignore their own internal voice as they navigate higher education.

### ***Responsibilities***

*“I am responsible for everything ... except for my very responsibility, for I am not the foundation of my being. Therefore everything takes place as if I were compelled to be responsible. I am abandoned in the world ... in the sense that I find myself suddenly alone and without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, to tear myself away from this responsibility for an instant.”*

*- Jean-Paul Sartre*

Finally, I was struck by the tremendous responsibilities carried by all the women. From having to deal with children, grandchildren, parents, siblings, significant others, ex-lovers, friends, work, school, households, and self, these women all had lives that were filled with responsibilities. While there was an awareness of these responsibilities that varied from Faith's strongly worded lament, “I wish somebody would take care of me,” to Stella's quiet acceptance of life's burdens, none of these women denied their responsibilities. They are a part of their lives and they carry them always.

This *responsibilities* theme parallels some of the research about women returning to school (Bauer and Mott, 1999; Benshoff & Lewis, 1992; Terrell, 1990) in which the women deal with strong aspects of feeling guilty about not "being there" for their children; concerns about quality and expense of childcare; feelings of responsibility for maintaining their role within the family; making compromises in careers due to family considerations; minimal individual free time; perceived lack of credibility when returning to college; insufficient support from family for returning to school; and experiencing the competing pressures of child care, financial, and school responsibilities. Additionally, Lillian Rubin (1994) discusses the tremendous pressures and responsibilities of working class families and notes that the burden continues to fall primarily on the women. For many women it feels like there is never is not enough time to do everything, which places enormous stress on their physical and mental health (Repetti, Matthews, & Waldron, 1989).

Conversely, there is an old saw about "If you want something done, give it to a busy person." Which, in this context means that somehow each of these women has developed a masterful ability to juggle their many roles and responsibilities. For many women, this juggling act has become the norm. This learned experience reinforces their feelings of self-efficacy and success (Bandura, 1997). And, for many women, time spent at school has the potential to provide women with much-needed respite or distraction from the responsibilities of caregiving (Brody, 1990). This may be one place where their competence and talents are acknowledged and valued. It is important to recognize that in regards to responsibilities, both positive and problematic role experiences are likely to coexist for any woman.

For us in the academy, if we can understand and appreciate the many responsibilities of our non-traditional first-generation women students we can shape support strategies that help them effectively deal with their multiple roles and responsibilities. Certainly we cannot persist in believing that school is the primary focus of their busy lives. Nor can we expect that they will ignore their other responsibilities when they overwhelm and overshadow their college experience.

### *Interpretive Framework*

Their individual themes led me to my interpretive framework and conversely I checked my thinking by looking back to see if those individual themes could be categorized within that same interpretive framework. As I reviewed the results of our co-interpretation and theme identification, I found that I was able to categorize all the women's individual themes under one or more of the 4 R's. So, these four major thematic areas of *resilience, relationships, reflection, and responsibilities* (the 4 R's) became the framework that helped me to make sense of their stories and themes.

As I looked at the work of other researchers and mulled over my own understandings, I discovered that the four themes are inexorably intertwined and connected. That is appropriate for lives that are also complex and interconnected. For example, one cannot look at these women's relationships without seeing the ways that those relationships influence their resilience, reflection, and responsibility. Nor can we look at any other aspect of the 4 R's without noting how each impacts the other in both positive and negative ways. I struggled with ways to diagram that complexity and failed to find a mechanism to satisfactorily depict how it appears to me. What would you draw?

How does it look to you? Perhaps a web or intersecting circles? I am not sure. And the minute I draw the picture it forecloses other imagery.

Arguably, my framework, however it appears to you, is subjective and biased (Janesick, 2000; Gergen, 1995). You, with your own background, values, beliefs, and education might analyze the same transcripts and see entirely different patterns or see the same themes as I and interpret them very differently. Subjectivities are “always constructed and stitched together imperfectly” (Haraway, 1991, p. 193). That subjectivity is both the gift and the challenge of doing qualitative research (Richardson, 2000; Riessman, 1993) and “No one is detached or ‘neutral’ ” (Nespor & Barber, p. 53). Because of that subjectivity and because the number of participants is small, I would suggest that the 4 R’s represent not so much a theoretical framework as a mechanism to make sense of and learn from individual narratives.

Even so, my interpretive framework is imperfect for as Denzin (1992) notes,

There is no clear window into the inner life of a person, for any window is always filtered through the glaze of language, signs, and the process of signification. And language, in both its written and spoken forms, is always inherently unstable, in flux, and made up of the traces of other signs and symbolic statements. Hence, there can never be a clear, unambiguous statement of anything, including an intention or a meaning (p. 14).

With that caution in mind, an important use I found for the 4 R’s was doing the sense making and meaning making and understanding of the lives of these women. Additionally, I believe the 4 R’s provide a useful sense-making framework for understanding other ‘successful,’ non-traditional, first-generation women. I am finding that as I meet, work with, and listen to other women, I am able to sort their experiences into one or more of the 4 R’s. I also find that as I reflect on my own life experiences as a

'successful,' non-traditional, first-generation woman, I too have a remarkable resilience, numerous relationships, a deeply reflective nature, and many responsibilities.

### **Their Experience**

Intuitively I believed that my woman's ethic of care would provide a positive experience for the participants, but even so I was cautioned that the process of telling stories can also be painful and awake long-buried memories (Morgan, 2000; White, 1995; White, 2000). At the same time I worried that the process would be difficult, I hoped that it would be valuable for my participants. I think it was. Seemingly, each one shared difficult and sometimes painful stories with complete trust that I would honor and value her thoughts and words.

In the individual chapters, I shared each participant's perceptions of the experience. Here I summarize the highlights of that experience. This summary provides a glimpse into their overall impressions of the experience. All the women reported that it had been a good experience. For some, the process had been almost therapeutic. Almost all noted that by talking, telling their stories, reading their transcripts and listening to themselves talk, they found it to be a valuable learning experience and a good way to understand themselves. Several noted that there is no one they can go to talk with about these things. Many related that knowing that other people have similar stories was very helpful. All were surprised and delighted that someone was interested in them and their stories. It made them feel valued and as if they were contributing something to the academic community. All of them thanked me.

This mirrors some of the findings of other researchers, particularly those in the field of narrative psychology (White, 2000). Telling one's story is therapeutic, cathartic,

and empowering (Gersie, 1997; Morgan, 2000). The experience of storytelling is powerful and the act of storytelling influences and changes who we are and how we see ourselves (Bloom, 1998; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Reinharz, 1992). I believe that done thoughtfully and carefully, this type of research is valuable to the participant.

### **Participants' Advice for Colleges**

I would suggest that we have much to learn from women who are living the experience of being 'successful,' non-traditional, first-generation students. When I asked, none of the women was shy about offering advice to us. They have a good understanding of themselves and their needs and strong empathy for other students like them. I like their advice. Some of it we may think we already know, but do we really "know" it from the perspective of our students? In this section, I call on their expertise, not that of academic experts, to tell us what we should consider.

Hope reminded us that students are there because they want to be, and we should respect their motivation and dedication. However, she asked us to remember that students have lives outside the classroom and that there are often life events going on over which students sometimes have little control but which influence their ability to be good students. Faith echoed Hope's thoughts by reminding us that students coming in are willing and ready to learn. She asked us to support them, show them that we care, and recognize them when they are doing well. She added that we need to show more compassion and support to students because they are dealing with so much. Stella's primary advice was to provide a venue, like this research venue, where students could come together and talk with each other about school and what's going on their lives. She

stated that there are many women like her who would benefit from such an experience. Elena told us that students like her need a lot of orientation and information because as the first college-going members of their family they frequently don't have the knowledge they need to successfully navigate financial aid and other college systems. She reminded us that a little bit of undivided attention goes a long way with students. She suggested that we use the services of students like her to reach back and reach out to other first-generation students.

### **Participants' Advice for Other First-Generation Women**

In addition to advice for colleges, each woman had advice for other first-generation women. In many ways I think their advice is more powerful than ours because it is situated within a lived experience that gives incredible authority to their voices. We need to listen and we need to find ways to let their advice reach other women who would welcome their voice.

Hope acknowledged the determination and hard work of first generation students. She reminded us they feel like they have to be the best because they are the first in their family to attend college. Her advice to other women was to work hard, don't let anything get in your way and if it gets too hard don't panic and let go of everything. Calm down, tell yourself that you can do it, and find the good in the bad. Faith advised other first-generation women to believe in yourself, never give up, work hard, and don't listen to critics. She noted that they may not get the recognition they need, but advised them not to let that stop them. Stella reminded first-generation women that it's hard, but don't give up or be embarrassed about being older or "dumber" than other students. She also reminded them not to be afraid and to be willing to take a chance. Stella noted that

'successful' first-generation women need to reach back to help others. Elena told students not to listen to the people who tell them that they can't do this. She is firm in her advice that women should be determined and stick to their goals. At the same time she reminded women not to neglect their responsibilities to their children but she noted that families also need to support women who are going to school. She exhorted first generation women to "Stay on that road. That's the only road that's going to take you to success." Finally, Elena advised first-generation women to find advisors and mentors who can help and encourage them.

### **Generalizability**

Narrative interpretations are always retrospective. In narrative research there is rarely an attempt to develop generalizable laws that remain constant when similar conditions are replicated. Polkinhorne (1988, p. 171) characterizes the narrative interpretation as "retrodictive" rather than "predictive." Predictive interpretation allows us to make probabilistic statements based on past events. Polkinhorne asserts that narrative interpretations cannot make that claim. Retrodictive interpretation is the researcher's attempt to build a believable and reasonable explanation of the story's meaning after the fact. I would caution you to read my words with Polkinhorne's perspective in mind. Conversely, Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 751) note, "A story's generalizability is constantly being tested by readers as they determine if it speaks to them about their experience or the lives of others they know." So, I would urge you also to read my words with Ellis and Bochner's perspective in mind.

These voices contained within these pages do not presume to speak for all 'successful,' non-traditional, first-generation women at community colleges. They are

the stories of four remarkable women who may or may not represent a larger whole. Their uniqueness is a major part of the story. I will not generalize from their stories. However, my interpretive framework – the 4 R’s – may provide others with a mechanism to understand and appreciate the lives of these and other ‘successful,’ non-traditional, first-generation women. And my recommendations surrounding the 4 R’s may provide institutions with a way to create *responsive* campus cultures.

### Honoring Voices

Finally, it is important to remind myself that one of my major goals was to hear and honor the voices of these women (Bloom, 1998; Oleson, 2000; Reinhartz, 1992). Often, as I listened to their stories and read their transcripts, I am shamed to admit that I had to resist the urge to analyze, categorize, and judge. My traditional research training kicked in almost before I could still it. I wrestled with admitting that here and decided to share that inexcusable tendency with you as a caution that even the most careful, thoughtful, empathetic researcher must be aware of her own background and biases.

So, I took special care not to analyze, categorize, and judge from the traditional sense. From that perspective one might say that each of these four women has as much “wrong” in her life and her choices as she has “right.” It would be easy to strike a hegemonic, academic stance and evaluate their stories from the deficit perspective (Ladson-Billings, 2000). I will not do that. I cannot do that. To do so would violate the trust they have placed in me to tell their stories and honor their voices. I sing their praise, I value their words, I believe their stories, and I believe in them. Could you do the same? Would you do the same? I suggest that we need our academic theories, but we also need the humility to recognize that we do not know it all, cannot know it all, and that these

voices – frequently unheard in the *Discourse* (Gee, 1996) – have much to teach us about the individual women coming to our colleges. More importantly, they have much to teach us about ourselves and how we view, judge, and categorize them and how we theorize the individuality right out of their stories. These women are the experts in their own lives. Their voices have much to teach us about how we might foster continued success for other first-generation women if we would only listen and hear.

*"We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed."  
- Peter Brooks*

## EVERY STEP OF THE JOURNEY IS THE JOURNEY

### A Researcher's Assertion

*"We all have ghosts, remorse, dreams, things we love and hate. One day something in life - a word, a phrase, something in a book, a beautiful woman - clicks, and part of that world takes on a special meaning. And you realize you have a story to tell."*

*- Arturo Perez Reverte*

I am a first-generation community college graduate who apparently, if the vast literature on first-generation students is true (Appendix A), defied the odds by continuing my education to the graduate level. And I am delighted and excited by the qualitative dissertations that have surfaced success stories similar to mine. We 'successful' first-generation alumni may be more prominent in the academy and in society than we realize and instead of quietly blending in, perhaps we should be loudly celebrating our successes and being role models for the first-generation students who are coming behind us. We have a story to tell. Our stories matter, our voices belong. We each have something to offer to each other, to the academy, and to the future.

Each of us is different. Each of us has stories to share. Each of us has the ability to shift the thinking and perspective of the academy by standing proudly and declaring our success. Each of us has the ability to shift the thinking and perspective of the next generation of students by reaching back to take their hands as they transition into a world that offers opportunity and hope for their future.

## The Journey's Purpose

*“Each of us has the right and the responsibility to assess the road which lie ahead and those over which we have traveled, and if the future road looms ominous or unpromising, and the road back uninviting, then we need to gather our resolve and carrying only the necessary baggage, step off that road into another direction. If the new choice is also unpalatable, without embarrassment, we must be ready to change that one as well.”*  
- Maya Angelou

The purpose of this journey was to explore narratively and interpretively the experiences of four ‘successful’ female, non-traditional, first-generation, students at the Community College of Denver. In collecting their stories I also honored the participants’ voices by having them co-construct meanings and identify their success themes. In joining our voices together we interpreted and made meaning of their (*our*) lives. From the success themes, I inductively uncovered an interpretive framework in order to refine what we know, believe, and understand about ‘successful’ female, non-traditional, first-generation community college students. This framework for interpreting the meanings of their stories - the new voices added to the conversation – provides one more signpost on the landscape that we call ‘first-generation’ and offers another way for understanding the success of non-traditional, first-generation women.

Non-traditional, first-generation women, like other under-represented groups, usually find themselves left out of the conversations of the dominant, academic culture (Ladson-Billings, 2000). By telling their stories, and interpreting the meanings of the experiences of a few of those ‘successful’ women, this study contributes to unearthing the less-heard *Discourse* (Gee, 1996) of the *Other* (Johnson-Bailey, 2002b; Personal Narratives Group, 1989). Another purpose, then, was to provide a counter-

narrative/counter-story to the widely-told grand narrative that focuses on a deficit model of first-generation students.

This is not an empirical study. Nor is it one that can make broad generalizations or enormous theoretical claims. But I can advocate for change based on my findings. My plan in sharing my journey was four-fold. One, I brought you the stories of four remarkable women in the hope that what you learn from their stories will influence your (sometimes hegemonic) view and (sometimes hegemonic) practices in working with women like them. Two, I brought you the story of this journey in the hope that you will learn something methodologically useful for your own research journeys. Three, I brought you my own story in the hope of personalizing and feminizing the research practice. Finally, I brought you my interpretation of these stories and my recommendations for change in the hope that what I found can influence our colleges to incorporate a *responsive* perspective of care that focuses on *resilience, relationships, reflection, and responsibilities*.

Sharing my story along the way has been liberating, painful, joyful, and cathartic. It has offered me an incredible reflective opportunity and has fostered unimaginable intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth (which I think is perhaps one of the goals of any dissertation journey). My story, like any, is complex and situated. The hermeneutic circle of my life spirals ever upward toward an end point that can only be imagined. Whatever time I have left on this planet has been made richer and fuller for having taken this trip. If my journey inspires even one other person to try the same, I will have made the impact I hoped.

## Balancing the 4 R's

The interpretive framework that emerged as a result of this study provides a method for understanding and making meaning of the lives of these four women. I would suggest that the same framework might be useful for understanding other 'successful' non-traditional, first-generation community college women. I would also suggest that the framework of the 4 R's provides us the ability to introspectively evaluate our own beliefs and practices for the purpose of becoming more aware of and *responsive* to the students within our walls.

Using such a framework provides a richer, more complete way to understand 'successful' non-traditional, first-generation community college women's lives and their success. Viewing them as "at-risk" or "first-generation" or "non-traditional" or "female" essentializes and trivializes the complexity of their lived experiences (Fuss, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Realizing that each of these women might be understood within the context of being a person who is remarkably resilient, has meaningful relationships, is deeply reflective, and is carrying multiple responsibilities could be useful to those of us developing policies and practice for their success. It could make our colleges more *responsive* to these students.

Additionally, by using the framework of the 4 R's, I tentatively suggest that women who deem themselves 'unsuccessful' might be helped if we would find ways to work with them to build resilience, strengthen relationships, improve reflective strategies, or find better coping mechanisms for their many responsibilities. And frankly, which of us couldn't use a little help in all four of these areas? I would recommend that future

research with other populations might seek to investigate the 4 R's as an appropriate framework for understanding larger groups and other types of groups.

### **Recommendations: Little Things Mean a Lot**

*“When peoples care for you and cry for you, they can straighten out your soul.”  
- Langston Hughes*

Every life is important; every story matters. We may become so busy dealing with groups of students, that we forget the individual. In today's higher education climate of efficiency and effectiveness (Cohen & Brawer, 2002), we need to now, more than ever, find ways to honor and support the individuality of students. The pressure to do more with less cannot lead us away from the core mission and value of education. We still educate people one-student-at-a-time and we still need to find ways to let each one of them know that they matter.

How we do that may vary. For example, for the women in this study, feeling heard made a tremendous difference. During the group interview they shared stories and experiences that made each of them feel valued and a little less alone. The individual interviews expanded on that experience and provided a forum for sharing. In all cases, not only did the participants share stories, but they all offered advice to other first-generation students and to us, the academy. They are the experts in their own lives and stories. They are the experts in knowing themselves and what works for them. They are the experts in offering advice from the perspective of 'successful' female, non-traditional, first-generation college students. If we can honor their expertise, perhaps we can refocus the hegemonic lens through which we have viewed their lives. Their expertise can guide us in building practices and policies to increase success for women like them.

From listening to these women and analyzing and interpreting their stories, I came up with some ideas for colleges and higher education professionals to consider. These are to be viewed as recommendations for improving how we support and encourage students like Hope, Faith, Stella, and Elena. These seemingly simple, small steps provide an opportunity for colleges to respond to the needs and continued success of students who deem themselves ‘successful.’ Beyond that, the same simple, small steps have potential to influence the culture of our campuses to become more *responsive* and caring for all students.

I have no grand revelations; no sweeping generalizations merely an observation based on a conversation with Merlin that in dealing with ‘successful,’ non-traditional, first-generation, female students **little things mean a lot**. During the course of this journey, I was struck over and over at how little it took to touch the lives of all the women who participated – the three who chose not to continue and the four whose stories appear in this dissertation – and how significant the experience was to each of them. At numerous times during the research process every single woman talked about how meaningful being part of the process had been; or talked about how specific individuals within the college had touched their lives; or talked about how words of support from other students had made a difference for them. In each case, what they remembered or talked about was seemingly inconsequential in relationship to some of the elaborate, extensive support systems that we sometimes believe we need to build. So I decided, in an age of shrinking educational resources, to focus on seemingly small and simple little things that mean a lot. I offer the following ideas to help us touch the lives of other women like them. None of them require great amounts of money or time. Yet each of

them offers profound opportunity to touch individual lives and to shift the campus culture toward a *responsive* and caring perspective.

*Idea: Women's Circles*

Both during the group interview and the individual interviews, I heard how valuable it was to talk with other women. With the closing of CCD's Women's Resource Center, the venue to bring women together for dialogue and other support activities went away. I was struck by the comments from participants about its loss. I would suspect that other colleges, in these tight budget times, are also closing the door on specialized centers and support services focused solely on women. With the growing numbers of non-traditional female students accessing community colleges (White, 2001) this might be a shortsighted decision and I would suggest that CCD and other colleges reconsider.

In the meantime, I would suggest that with little additional resources, interested individuals and colleges could begin "Women's Circles." These would be informal gatherings of women. I would recommend that the initial meeting be somewhat structured and conversational. Don't act as the "expert." Invite and engage women to talk with you. It might be useful to begin with the four questions I used in my group interview: "Describe what success means to you." "What are the things that help you be successful?" "What are the things that keep you from being successful?" "What would better help students like you be successful in the future?"

The answers to those questions will certainly be instructive, but more importantly, I suspect that once you begin you will find, as did I, that sometimes all women need is simply someone to listen, support, and understand their complex lives and experiences (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; Duff, 1999). I would suggest that

ongoing meetings of the Women's Circle with topics suggested by the women and the flexibility to adapt based on the participants' interests and needs at the time would provide a shared space where women would feel valued and connected.

I believe Women's Circles would foster or support the resilience and reflectiveness of the participants and provide a place for them to build relationships and share their stories of their responsibilities.

*Idea: Storytelling Circles*

A related strategy might be "Storytelling Circles." The use of storytelling circles is not a new idea. They have always been a way that particular cultures informally or formally share unwritten stories (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). They are also used in spiritual, medical, and artistic environments to sustain, help, and heal individuals and provide a venue for people's stories to matter (Gersie, 1997; Stone, 1996). There has always been a movement to collect the stories and wisdom of the aging members of populations before their stories are lost (Yow, 1994). The use of storytelling is also a powerful mechanism for engaging people in the act of learning and assimilation into groups (Pellowski, 1991).

I am suggesting college-sponsored storytelling circles as a way to honor the individuality and agency of each woman. I think it would be valuable to provide a place where women can tell their stories. Where else do women go to tell their story and to feel important and valued? How do we let them know that the "little" stories matter – perhaps more than the big stories in our classrooms? The act of storytelling empowers the teller because her story matters (Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2003). Furthermore, I think listening to and honoring each other's stories would be a way for

women to feel less alone. I certainly heard that echoed in the group interview and again during the individual interviews.

Like the first idea, I believe Storytelling Circles would foster or support the resilience and reflectiveness of the participants and provide a place for them to build relationships and share their stories of their responsibilities.

***Idea: Recognition Activities***

Most colleges have formal student recognition activities. I support and applaud those, but what I suggest is finding ways to recognize more students more often and more informally. When women's lives are filled with responsibility, sometimes all they need is someone to say, "Good job." or "I noticed." This recognition does not have to be elaborate or expensive. And it should be meaningful to the individual (Vella, Berardinelli & Burrow, 1998). Generic "atta girls" have less power than feedback that is relevant, specific, timely, valuable, and accurate (Herzberg, 2000). Find ways to incorporate recognition into the everyday fabric of the classroom and the college. Encourage faculty and staff to remember that little things mean a lot (Atstin, 1993; Tinto, 1993).

I believe that recognition activities would increase and improve the relationships that women have with us in the college and perhaps foster resilience and reflectiveness and along the way help students deal with their responsibilities.

***Idea: Personal Contact with an Empathetic Listener***

Even without formal gatherings of women, it is still possible for individuals to make a difference in the lives of learners simply by being attuned to them as people.

Sometimes all a student needs is personal contact with an empathetic listener (Chickering & Gamson, 1991; Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Whether it's in our classrooms, advising centers, specialized support units, or the cafeteria, having faculty and staff who are aware of learners as people makes a difference. One way to build this culture is by deliberate and intentional work at the college level to remind employees about the importance of connecting with students individually. Another way to build this culture is to develop places and spaces where students know they can find and talk with someone.

I believe that knowing that someone cares builds an important relationship for a woman and provides opportunity to increase one's resilience and reflectiveness. Additionally, an empathetic listener can be a support for women who feel burdened with responsibility.

***Idea: Check Your Hegemonic Assumptions.***

Finally, this last bit of advice is both the easiest to say and the hardest to do. I recommend that we become deliberate and intentional in checking our hegemonic assumptions about first-generation students. People live up (or down) to our expectations (Bamburg, 1994; Baxter Magolda & Terenzini, 2003). I suggest that we assume that students are going to be 'successful.' Build beliefs and practices that are not patronizing or hegemonic. Reduce the psychological distance between yourself and your students. Create "psychological homes" (Saleebey, 1997, p. 203) where students feel supported, empowered, and respected as competent, knowledgeable human beings as we "reinforce natural social bonds between young and old.... between friends" (p. 203) and between learners and the academy.

Learn to see students as very real people with lives, stories, and strengths. Acknowledge your own biases and weaknesses. Step off the pedestal. Come down from your ivory tower. Look at systems, practices, and policies through the eyes of students. In the end we are more alike than different and I believe that 'successful' women have much to teach us about their resilience, relationships, reflection, and responsibilities. I believe we have much to learn about our students.

I believe that by doing so we would enhance our relationships with students, become more reflective about who they are and what it takes to foster their success. Additionally I believe that by looking critically at ourselves, we will change the ways in which we meet our responsibilities to students. Finally, I believe that by checking our hegemonic assumptions, we will become more resilient institutions and better prepared to meet the new 'traditional' students on our doorsteps.

### **Building a *Responsive* and Caring Campus Culture**

Community college mission statements pronounce our intentions to provide opportunities to students within our academic communities (Quinley, 1991). Although typically developed collaboratively, those mission statements are still written by members of the dominant higher education culture. As members of the academy we bring our biases and hegemonic perspectives to the task. Embedded in most mission statements are broad statements about our role, beliefs, and values (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991). What we live, believe, and avow within those mission statements, although well intentioned, is often colored by our unintended, patriarchal, hegemonic views. This profoundly influences campus culture.

I suggest there is a critical element missing within the writing and enacting of those mission statements. That element is our own ability to view our students holistically from a perspective that honors their wisdom, agency, lived experiences, and voice. I challenge all of us to use the stories and ideas presented within this dissertation to shift our views and consider our institutional mission from a different perspective. This perspective is one that I call “building a *responsive* and caring campus culture.”

Although the five ideas I presented in the section above are seemingly simple and small, I believe they offer an opportunity to effect campus culture in a much larger way. Systematically and deliberately enacted, they would communicate our intention to respond to our students from a perspective of respect and care. Furthermore, by using the framework of the 4 R’s to analyze and change our institutional policies and practices I believe we would shift our view from the typical dominant higher education perspective to one that is more *responsive* and caring for all students. This *responsive* and caring campus culture should overlay an institution’s mission and goals and become an integral part of its values and beliefs. This perspective would recognize and accept students (*and the rest of us*) as complex beings enmeshed in relationships, managing multiple responsibilities, maintaining resiliency despite challenges, and reflectively assessing and understanding themselves (*ourselves*) as individuals in the world of higher education.

My five ideas should be just a starting point. As you reflect on your own beliefs and values along with the unique characteristics of your own institution, what ideas come to mind? What would you do to engender *responsive* and caring activities within your classrooms and on your campus? How would you support students (*and each other*) in developing healthy resilience for the challenges of our worlds? How could this

*responsive* and caring culture foster success for your students? In what ways would this perspective shift your institutional mission and change your own campus culture?

### **Endings**

*"If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop your story."  
- Orson Welles*

### ***Reflections on the Group Interview***

Although the primary research focus was on the four individual participants, I do not want to overlook the value of the group interview process. The group interview provided opportunity to select participants, but it became much more than that. It was the first introduction to many of the themes that ultimately emerged from the individual interviews. And, it was a place where participants felt heard, honored, and valued. I learned as much about interviewing as I did about the content of their interviews. However, the content does provide rich material for further research ideas and I believe my group interview questions were the right ones. In retrospect, I wish I had gathered the four participants together for one last group interview. I think it would have brought a nice closure to the experience and provided good summation to the themes uncovered.

### ***Reflections on Methods and Future Research***

This journey is nearly ended. I made deliberate (and sometimes inadvertent) choices about which paths to follow. I can't look back and regret the choices I did not make. Nor can I vainly suggest my choices were the "best." They were the right choices for me at the time and they yielded discoveries that will stay with me for the rest of my life. I do not presume to suggest that my way should be your way, but I can suggest to

you some insights to guide you in making decisions about what to do along your own journey.

I leave my roadmap for the next wanderer, but it should be used only as a loose guide for someone setting out on a similar journey. My map will not take you to exactly the same places I have been. Roads change, new people appear along the way, each wanderer's focus is different, and the number of miles traveled is dependent both on the researcher's pace and the interesting milestones and roadblocks that unexpectedly appear (Geertz, 1995). That said, I would encourage adventuresome souls to consider a similar trek. The act of gathering and making sense of the stories of particular groups provides rich, deep, and meaningful information for the rest of us and unbelievable learning experiences for the traveler (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). As I finish this trip, I find myself thinking of other voices that I would like to hear. I suggest that other researchers consider narrative inquiry with other groups. Among the many unheard groups in our colleges, I think it would be interesting and instructive to hear the stories of 'successful' first-generation men, especially given the alarming decrease in the percentage of male students accessing higher education (Mortenson, 2003); the stories of 'unsuccessful' first-generation women (and men); the stories of first-generation students who elected not to attend college; the stories of other researchers who embark on journeys like mine; the stories of first-generation community college transfer students; and the stories of all the other groups not typically heard from in the *Discourse* (Gee, 1996).

And as I pause to look back, I also wonder about my own research decisions and choices. Did I really need three individual interviews per participant or could I have collected my data in two sessions? What could I have done to increase the number of

participants in my group interviews? Was my individual interview too unstructured? Could I have devised a strategy for doing follow-up in a year, two years, or five years? Should I have handed more control to each participant by asking her to write her own story for inclusion in this document? Would it have been meaningful to craft a poetic interpretation of the major and minor themes? Should I have landed more in the post-positivist camp by doing a stronger within and cross-case analysis of themes? Should I have brought the participants back together for one final group interview? What would you have added to the process to get to the answers I have not given you?

It feels sad to put the data away. There are so many ways it could continue to be used. Although I approached it with one analytic strategy, another researcher might focus on a different aspect of the same data to uncover other meanings. Although qualitative data is “mushier” than quantitative (Reinharz, 1992), it too can be worked and re-worked in many ways (Denzin, 2000). I think that although this journey is done, I may go back to my notes, journals, and transcripts at a later time to ponder and reflect on what it means from that new vantage point (Geertz, 1995). And certainly, I think it might be good to make the data from studies like these accessible to others, so I offer my tapes and transcripts for others to use in helping to make additional meaning from all that data. On the other hand, perhaps it’s time to move beyond Hope, Faith, Stella, and Elena to the next group of women (or men) who can further illustrate what it means to be ‘successful,’ non-traditional, first-generation students at our community colleges. There are so many of them and we have much to learn from each of them.

### *Reflections on This Journey's End*

This is not Hollywood, this is life. Stories are situated, contextual, messy, and incomplete (Chase, 1996; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clinchy, 2003, Personal Narratives Group, 1989). There are no scripted endings. In narrative inquiry, we have a glimpse into the lives of another and we make subjective meaning from what we are told and what we hear. The participant's perspective is primary (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, Fraser, 1993; Reinharz, 1992). Yet what we learn is situated and bound by one moment in time. So we are left wondering. Will Stella open her restaurant? Does Hope find love with a stable man and become a CPA? Will Faith finish her degrees and become a counselor? Where does Elena end up and does she ever marry? The optimist believes they will and do. The pessimist says not. The realist says, "We will never know."

What I do know and believe is that these four women have something to tell us about life and success and determination and pride and fear and failure and faith. What I do know and believe is that these women and others like them exist in all our colleges and have seemingly ordinary yet complex stories of 'success.' What I do know and believe is that this journey has forever changed the way I see myself and my "first-generation-ness" and my beliefs and values as a researcher and a community college administrator. What I do know and believe is that by hearing, telling, and understanding their stories, we in the academy may be able to have a better understanding and a 'real conversation' with them and other women like them.

There is nothing "remarkable" about these women. They exemplify the women that you and I see walking through our doors every day. We often don't even "see" or "hear" them because there are so many of them (Fuss, 1989). Or worse, we essentialize

them by clustering them into all-too-easy categories of first-generation, at-risk, single mother, and non-traditional (Ladson-Billings, 2000). They represent the “new” community college student (Baxter Magolda & Terenzini, 2003). And, each of them, in her own way is ‘successful’ and believes in her success. I believe that these four women, and possibly many others, have factors of *resilience, relationship, reflection, and responsibilities* that contribute to their successes. And I am left wondering when our institutions will adapt and change to become more *responsive* to students like them.

I believe it is our duty to understand the factors that help to make non-traditional, first-generation women feel and be ‘successful,’ affirm their beliefs, build policies and practices that support their work towards goals, understand the nuances in their lives, recognize their agency, listen to their voices, and honor their stories. They have much to teach us. Even at the end of this journey, I find I cannot say goodbye. These women will always be on my mind and in my heart.

### **Spirals**

*“Never regard study as a duty, but as the enviable opportunity to learn to know the liberating influence of beauty in the realm of the spirit for your own personal joy and to the profit of the community to which your later work belongs.”*

*- Albert Einstein*

The spiral of life continues. I used to believe that it was only the big stories that mattered – that the small stories of individual lives were included, perhaps, in the big story but, often as not, were not even part. Now I think that the small stories are THE story. Those with the power to make a story big perpetuate the big story. Yet in reality, the small stories are the ones that each of us live everyday. Every story matters. Every story has meaning. Every story has the power to influence. Every story was once small.

Some stories fade into oblivion; some become part of a collective consciousness; some instruct; some have the power to change lives; and all stories matter to their teller. The telling of a story is our primary meaning making activity (Clandinin & Connelley, 2000). The hearing of a story is another meaning making activity (Richardson, 2000). The writing of a story is what adds it to the collective spiral of stories that evolve into the big story (Madriz, 2000). Stories untold, unheard, and unwritten may never join the spiral. I hope these small stories I shared with you become part of your own story.

The journey never ends. It is a spiral (Sartre, 1963). Within the spiral are folded the stories of each of us who joined together for this portion of the journey. You too are part of this journey. The journey leaves none of us unaffected. What I take from this journey is mine and as best I could, given the subjectivity and situated-ness of understanding and the imprecise nature of the English language, I shared with you my learning and insights. What you take from this journey is yours. What we have shared together in this spiral is a brief interlude and a glimpse into the stories of four remarkable women. Thank you for joining me. Safe journey, my friend.

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**APPENDIX A - A BRIEF REVIEW ON FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS**

### An Observation

The literature review nearly did me in. I had a neophyte's understanding of what one does for a literature review and mistakenly believed that I must find every piece of information ever written about "first-generation," "success," "academic hegemony," "narrative inquiry," etc. Once I began to accumulate, file, and catalog what I was acquiring I discovered that I was drowning in a sea of words and an ocean of ideas. I needed a life vest. It came in the form of my methodology. As I read and learned more about narrative 'epistemology' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) I realized that it is important to have a solid grounding in the extant literature, but it is naive to assume that what will be reviewed and reported on represents all there is to know on a given topic. In fact, as I turned it over in my mind, the whole 'knowing' concept becomes problematic. For even while doing a literature review, was I not, as a narrative inquirer 'co-constructing' a story of sorts? By filtering other studies through my theoretical and personal lenses I was subjectively deciding the meaning and value of other works and words (Richardson, 2000). For that matter, how could I be certain that what I 'knew' from reading matched the 'knowledge' the author intended to convey? Furthermore, no two people come at knowing in quite the same way -- knowledge is personally constructed and influenced by a host of factors (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). For example, because of my background, experiences, and worldview, I may have read themes of *hope* and *opportunity* in a given work, while another colleague may have read themes of

*despair and loss*. We may both have used the same citation in our literature review, but in very different ways for very different purposes. Whose interpretation is right?

The ideas we cite, the words we quote, the works we choose are subjective (Riessman, 1993). Furthermore, how do we know that in reading them, our audience will understand what we intended in our choices? A conundrum for sure! Deciding what to not to use is as powerful as deciding what to use. Yet one of the characteristics that differentiates narrative research from mere journalism is the ways in which the researcher uses theory and grounds her work in existing literature (Richardson, 2000). So, to help others make their own meaning from what I found about first-generation college students, here are some of the things I read (filtered, of course, through those lenses of mine).

### **A Brief Review**

#### ***Deficit Perspective***

Higher education institutions are being called upon to serve an increasingly (by the academy's standards) diverse student population (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998). This change includes increasing numbers of women, lower class, non-traditional, part-time, ethnically diverse, first-generation, gay, lesbian, and bisexual students as well as students with disabilities (Hsaio, 1992). This diversity challenges higher-education's self-concept of serving the nation's 'elite' students. Within community colleges, the more egalitarian open-door philosophy purports to serve all who come, but even there, by virtue of *our dominant, privileged, higher education perspective*, a subtle form of hegemony persists. Upon reflection, the mere fact that we in higher education have to deliberate about diversity tells me that we still have far to go until these differences among students are

not apparent or obvious to us -- until we take for granted and accept as the norm all the groups that make up our student body.

The definition of the group called 'first-generation' varies (McConnell, 2000). Some studies define them as students who are the first in their family to attend college (Hellman & Harbeck, 1997; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Terenzini et. al., 1994; Ting, 1998; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Other studies define the group as those whose parent(s) did not attend college (Billson & Terry, 1982; Brooks-Terry, 1988; McGregor & Associates, 1991; NCES, 1998; Pratt & Skaggs, 1989; Riehl, 1994; Terenzini et. al., 1996; Williams, 1998). In older studies, they are defined as students whose fathers did not graduate from college, but newer studies acknowledge both mothers and fathers, and define first-generation students as those whose parents did not graduate from college (Chaney & Associates, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 1996; Willett, 1989). For this study, 'first-generation' will describe students whose parent(s) did not graduate from college because that is the definition used at the Community College of Denver.

Today, over 60% of all first-generation students attend two-year colleges (Phillipe & Valiga, 2000; NCES, 2002). Their reasons vary. Some studies looked at first-generation students' choice of colleges and found that they are more likely to look at proximity and cost, speed of completion, and program availability when deciding where to go (Brooks-Terry, 1988; NCES, 1998). Interestingly, in one study, first-generation students at a community college focused more on location and low-cost than on overcoming poor academic records as their reasons for attendance (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Brooks-Terry (1988) reiterated that job-related skill training continues to be

important. NCES (1998) reports the critical reliance on financial aid and work study for helping first-generation students decide where to go to college.

In recent studies, the following demographic characteristics of first-generation students emerged. They are more likely to be an ethnic or racial minority; female; older; low-income; married; have children; have more personal income, but less family income; have smaller households, but more dependents; and have delayed college attendance (ERI & IHEP, 1997; Inman & Mayes, 1999; London, 1992; NCES, 1998; Terenzini et. al., 1996).

It is not that first-generation students do not recognize the importance of college (Pratt, 1989), but a number of studies have found that their aspirations for a baccalaureate degree demonstrate otherwise (Billson & Terry, 1982; ERI & IHEP, 1997; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Pratt & Skaggs, 1989; Riehl, 1994; Terenzini et. al., 1996). In at least two studies, first-generation students appear to be more pragmatic in their identification of educational goals. Financial stability and career growth are their two primary reasons for attending college (Billson & Terry, 1982; NCES, 1998). At the same time, several studies assert that many first-generation students appear to have parents who do not think college is important (Pratt & Skaggs, 1989) and to perceive that their parents are less supportive of their college-going decisions (ERI & IHEP, 1997; Hsaio, 1992; Terenzini et. al., 1996; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991).

The research is mixed regarding first-generation students' pre-college knowledge and behaviors. One study found that first-generation students had limited knowledge of what steps to take to enroll and how to pay for college (ERI & IHEP, 1997). A different

study found no significant difference between first- and second-generation students' pre-college knowledge (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991).

As to their preparation and self-agency for college, much of the literature suggests that incoming first-generation students start college in a deficit mode. Among the findings are the factors related to aptitude, attitude, and preparation. First-generation students have lower GPAs and SAT scores (Riehl, 1994) and were less involved with teachers and peers in high school (Terenzini et. al., 1996); have more doubts about their abilities (Pratt and Skaggs, 1989; Riehl, 1994); bring lower math, reading and critical thinking skills to college (Hsaio, 1992; Terenzini et. al., 1996); lack time management and financial skills and have a poorer understanding of higher education bureaucracies (Hsaio, 1992); and have lower scores than second-generation students in such affective attributes as self-esteem, social acceptance, humor, and creativity (McGregor & Associates, 1991).

The literature indicates that once enrolled, first-generation student deficits seem to persist. Their academic performance is lower than that of their peers (Chaney & Associates, 1998; ERI & IHEP, 1997; Hsaio, 1992; London, 1992; Riehl, 1994; Williams, 1998; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Many have lower grades (Billson & Terry, 1982), take fewer classes in the social sciences and arts, complete fewer credit hours and report spending less time doing home work than their peers (Terenzini et. al., 1996). First-generation students are at higher risk of dropping out during the first semester (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Riehl, 1994) and are less likely to complete any degree (Billson & Terry, 1982; NCES, 1998). Additionally, their integration into the college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) is poorer, with more of them participating in few on-

campus activities and have little or no involvement with teachers and peers outside of class (Billson & Terry, 1982; Brooks-Terry, 1988; ERI & IHEP, 1997; NCES, 1998; Terenzini et. al., 1996). The external pulls on first-generation students seem to contribute to their academic and integration problems. More of them attend community colleges and less likely to live on campus (ERI & IHEP, 1997). They are more likely to live at home with parents, spouses, and/or children and more likely to work off-campus and work over 35 hours a week (Billson & Terry, 1982; Brooks-Terry, 1988; NCES, 1998). First-generation students are more likely to leave college because of the conflict between the world of colleges and these competing external demands on their time and energy (ERI & IHEP, 1997). Additionally, whether they stay or leave, many of them experience the cultural dissonance of living in two worlds (Hsaio, 1992; London, 1992; Rendón, 1992).

### *Positive Findings*

In addition to the qualitative studies noted in the body of this dissertation, there have been quantitative studies that produced some positive (or at least not negative) findings. Most of these studies have compared first-generation student performance to that of their second-generation peers. The seemingly contradictory findings between various studies are probably due a variety of factors including differences among participant demographics, study methodologies, and data analysis strategies.

For example, Inman and Mayes (1999) found no significant differences in GPA or number of hours earned of first- and second-generation students after their first year. Similarly, Strage (1999) found no significant differences between the grades of first and second-generation students. Although, Terenzini and Associates (1996) reported poor

reading gains, they did find first generation students gaining as much in critical thinking skills and math as second-generation students.

As noted earlier, York-Anderson & Bowman's 1991 study at a community college found no significant differences in the pre-college knowledge of first- and second-generation students. The scores of students who perceived familial support were higher than those of students who perceived less, regardless of generational status. Riehl's 1994 study found no significant differences in the class ranks of first-generation and second-generation students. Surprisingly, one study found that first-generation students were no more likely to be taking remedial/developmental classes than their second-generation peers (NCES, 1998).

In one of the more positive studies, Pratt and Skaggs (1989) found that first- and second-generation students value on-campus activities and college friendships equally. Additionally, they found that math ability, academic ability, high school experiences, and intellectual self-confidence were virtually the same for first-generation and second-generation students.

As you have perhaps noted, the deficit section of this review is lengthier than this section. I believe these researchers designed their studies to be fair, unbiased, and objective. However, by focusing on the quantitative results, at the expense of the underlying stories of individual students, they lost or overlooked important data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). That data - the narrative stories of these students - is one more way that we have of understanding first-generation students. Those stories have strong potential to provide a counter-narrative to the prevailing deficit perspective of first-generation students (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

**APPENDIX B – PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS**

### Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Tamika	Faith	Stella	Jacque	Fareeda	Hope	Elena
<b>Age</b>	28	38	51	35	24	22	32
<b>Ethnicity</b>	African American/ Native American	Black	Black	Black	Afghani	Black	Hispanic / Latina
<b>Social Class</b>	Working class	Working class	Not working, poor, but happy	Middle Class	Working Class	Working Class	Working Poor
<b>Live With</b>	Mother	Children	Self, supporting grand-daughter	Myself and my child	Parents	Sister	Child, disabled mother, and partner
<b>Mother's Education</b>	High school graduate, vocational training	Some college	Some college	GED	Didn't attend HS	High school graduate	Second grade
<b>Father's Education</b>	High school graduate	Some college	Some college	Don't know	Didn't attend HS	High School Graduate	Third grade
<b>Work</b>	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b># of Hours</b>	Up to 15	20-30	0	10	25	20	16
<b>Where Work</b>	Off-campus	On-campus	N/A	On-campus work study	Both on-campus and outside	Off-campus	Off-campus
<b>High School</b>	Sky View HS, Thornton CO	Lanier HS, Austin TX	East HS, Denver CO	Aiken HS, Cincinnati OH	Afghanistan and Pakistan	Manual HS, Denver CO	Mexico and Emily Griffith HS
<b>Year Graduated</b>	1994	1984		1989	1998		
<b>GED</b>			1984				1991

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Tamika</b>	<b>Faith</b>	<b>Stella</b>	<b>Jacque</b>	<b>Fareeda</b>	<b>Hope</b>	<b>Elena</b>
<b>CCD First Post-secondary Experience</b>	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
<b>If Not, Where?</b>	Emily Griffith Opportunity School	Business School in Texas	Emily Griffith Opportunity School				Vocational College in Mexico
<b>How Long at CCD?</b>	2 ½ years	4 years	2 years	3 semesters	2 years	3 years with break	3 years
<b>Enrollment Status</b>	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time
<b>Educational Goal</b>	Degree to transfer to 4-year college	Degree to transfer to 4-year college	To get my AA degree	Degree to start my own business	Degree to start my own business	Degree to start my own business	Degree to start my own business

**Table 5. Participant Demographics**

**APPENDIX C - RECRUITMENT FLYER**

**Are you a successful female student whose parents do not have college degrees AND who first started college when you at were at least 22 years old?**

***INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY:  
The Stories of Successful Female, Non-Traditional,  
First-Generation College Students at the Community College of Denver***

***What is the purpose of the study?***

- *To understand the ways in which you are successful*
- *To understand the factors that help you be successful*

***Who can participate?***

- *Any first-generation female student at the Community College of Denver who first started college when she was at least twenty-two and who believes she is a successful student*

**If you are interested, I invite you to attend a 90-minute interview meeting with other students like you. This meeting will be held Thursday, February 26, 2004 from 3:00-4:30pm in South Classroom, Room 145.**

**Refreshments will be served. Childcare will be available.**

***What will the interview meeting involve?***

- *I want to ask you to complete a brief demographic survey about your age, ethnicity, social class, family status, high school, and college background. (Your individual demographic information will remain confidential and will not be shared with anyone else)*
- *I want to hear you talk with other students like you about your experiences as a successful female non-traditional first-generation student at the Community College of Denver*

***How can you contact me if you are interested and/or have questions?***

- *Please call Linda Lujan at (303) 556-xxxx or (303)669-xxxx*
- *You may also email me at: [linda.lujan@ccd.edu](mailto:linda.lujan@ccd.edu)*

***Your participation is voluntary and will remain confidential. If this work is published, your identity will be disguised.***

Research is supervised by Dr. James H. Banning,  
Colorado State University, 970-491-xxxx

**APPENDIX D - INFORMED CONSENT FOR FOCUS GROUP**

**COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY  
INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT**

**TITLE OF PROJECT:** A Researcher's Journey: The Stories of "Successful" Female, Non-Traditional, First-Generation College Students at the Community College of Denver

**NAME OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS:** James H. Banning Ph.D.

**NAME OF CO-INVESTIGATOR:** Linda Lujan (Doctoral Candidate)

**CONTACT NAME AND PHONE NUMBER FOR QUESTIONS/PROBLEMS:**

Linda Lujan  
Home: 303-979-xxxx  
Cell: 303-669-xxxx

**PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:** The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate through interviews, the experiences of participants at the Community College of Denver to describe the meanings and interpretations of their success.

**PROCEDURES/METHODS TO BE USED:**

Each participant will participate in a group interview meeting lasting 1 1/2 hours. The group interview will be conducted by Linda Lujan, the co-investigator. You will be asked to complete a demographic survey about your age, ethnicity, social class, family status, high school, and college background. (Your individual demographic information will remain confidential and will not be shared with anyone else). You will also be asked to talk with me, and other group interview participants, about your success and factors that have helped, and not helped you, be successful. I will be making notes during the group interview. These notes will contain summary information about the group interview topics, but will not identify individual students.

Stage two: participants who indicate their willingness to participate in a series of follow-up in-depth interviews will be contacted for a screening interview. Selection will be based on the screening interview. If you are selected for the in-depth interviews, you will be informed about the exact nature of the project, time expectations, use of information, assured of confidentiality, and provided with full disclosure of possible risks and benefits.

**RISKS INHERENT IN THE PROCEDURES:** We do not foresee any risks or discomforts associated with your participation in the study. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but we have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown risks.

Page 1 of 2 Participant's initials \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**BENEFITS:** There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this project. However, the researcher hopes that you will enjoy sharing your experiences of being a successful first-generation student, and find satisfaction in the process.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** All participants in the group interview will be asked to keep information discussed confidential, but that cannot be guaranteed. The Co-Investigator will protect the confidentiality of participants in the following way. Only Principal and Co-Investigator and Colorado State University's Human Research Committee will have privilege to all content of interviews. Dissertation committee members may be allowed full access to all content as determined by Principal Investigator or Co-Investigator. Your name and other information that might identify you will be masked or changed in the final copy of the dissertation and any publications based on this study. However, you may be recognized in the descriptions of your stories and experiences. Demographic surveys will be secured in the researcher's office and destroyed a few weeks after the dissertation defense.

**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.

**PARTICIPATION:** Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in this study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information state and willingly signed 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

*Questions about participants' rights may be directed to Celia S. Walker at 970-491-1563*

Page 2 of 2 Participant's initials \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX E - FOCUS GROUP DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY**

**Successful Female Non-Traditional First-Generation Students at the Community  
College of Denver - Group interview Demographic Survey**  
*Please write or print clearly*

1. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_
2. How you define your ethnicity/race (Latina, Hispanic, Anglo, Nigerian, Native-American, Black, White, African-American, Jewish-Irish, etc).? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. How you define your social class (working-class, welfare-mom, middle-class, working poor, upper-class, blue collar, etc).? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Who do you live with (parents, spouse, children, siblings, friends, partner, other relatives, etc).? \_\_\_\_\_
5. What is your mother's highest education level (did not attend high school, did not finish high school, high school graduate, some college, etc.)? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. What is your father's highest education level (did not attend high school, did not finish high school, high school graduate, some college, etc. )? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Do you work while going to school? \_\_\_\_\_ How many hours per week do you work? \_\_\_\_\_
8. If you do work, do you work on- or off-campus? \_\_\_\_\_
9. What high school did you attend? Where? \_\_\_\_\_
10. When did you complete high school? \_\_\_\_\_ If you did not complete high school, have you completed a GED? \_\_\_\_\_
11. Is CCD the first college you have attended? \_\_\_\_\_
12. If not, where else have you attended college? \_\_\_\_\_
13. How long have you been at CCD? \_\_\_\_\_
14. Are you part-time (six credits or less) or full-time (12 credits or more)? \_\_\_\_\_
15. What is your educational goal (certificate, degree to prepare for a job, degree to transfer to a four-year school, etc). \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



## **APPENDIX F – GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

**Successful Non-Traditional First-Generation Female Students at the  
Community College of Denver – Group Interview Questions**

**Individual:** Describe what "success" means to you

**Positives:** What are the things that help you be successful?

**Negatives:** What are the things that keep you from being successful?

**Improvement:** What would better help students like you be successful in the future?

**APPENDIX G - SCREENING INTERVIEW (INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE  
SCRIPT)**

Hello \_\_\_\_\_

My name is Linda Lujan, and I am a Ph.D. student at Colorado State University. You recently participated in my focus group interview about Successful Female Non-Traditional First-Generation Students at the Community College of Denver. On your survey, you indicated that you would be interested in meeting with me individually to talk more about your experiences of being a successful non-traditional first-generation female student at the Community College of Denver.

If you do participate, you will be asked to meet with me for an in-depth interview (approximately 1-2 hours) at a quiet location convenient to you (e.g., somewhere on-campus, restaurant, library, your home, etc). During the interview, I will ask you a series of questions about being a successful female non-traditional first-generation student. I will tape-record our conversation.

Within a few weeks, I will ask you to meet with me again (approximately 1 - 1 1/2 hours) to go over the transcript of that interview so that you can verify that I got your thoughts and ideas accurately. At that time, I will ask you to help me identify the major ideas and themes from your interview. I will tape record this conversation.

Then, within another few weeks, I will ask you to meet with me for one last interview (approximately 1 - 1 1/2 hours) to review my notes from our second meeting and to talk about your thoughts and feelings about participating in the first two interviews. I will tape record this conversation. At the close of the final meeting, I will ask you to make a memento - letter, poem, drawing - to tell me in a very individual way whatever you think is most important for others to know about being a successful female non-traditional first-generation student at the Community College of Denver. I will return all interview tapes (or destroy them) after the study is done. The information you share with me will be confidential. I will not share it with your instructors, advisors, case manager, fellow students, or family. Any publication of the study, including dissertation or articles, will not identify you in any way. I will not use your name or any identifiable information about you in my writings. You may ask me to exclude or disguise any part of your interviews from my study.

Now that you know what is involved in this research study, are you interested in participating?

**If NO** - Thank you for volunteering and I completely understand. What you have already shared during the first interview meeting was very helpful and will contribute much to my study.

**If YES** - Thank you for volunteering. If you are interested in being part of this study, I'd like to ask you a few questions:

Q: How old are you now? \_\_\_\_\_

Q: Did either of your parents attend college? \_\_\_\_\_

Q: Did either of your parents graduate from college? \_\_\_\_\_

Q: Is CCD the first college you have attended? \_\_\_\_\_

Q: How old were you when you came to CCD? \_\_\_\_\_

**If participant fits selection criteria** - Thank you, I think you would be a good participant in this study. I would like to ask you to consider being one of the women in my study. If you do participate, the information you share with me will be confidential. I

will not share it with your instructors, advisors, case manager, fellow students, or family. Any publication of the study, including dissertation or articles, will not identify you in any way. I will not use your name or any identifiable information about you in my writings. You may ask me to exclude or disguise any part of your interviews from my study. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate, you may stop your participation at any time. Are you still interested in participating in this study?

Thank you! I'd like to schedule our first interview. What's convenient for you?

**APPENDIX H - INFORMED CONSENT FOR INTERVIEWS**

**COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY  
INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT**

**TITLE OF PROJECT:** A Researcher's Journey: The Stories of "Successful" Female, Non-Traditional, First-Generation College Students at the Community College of Denver

**NAME OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS:** James H. Banning, Ph.D.

**NAME OF CO-INVESTIGATOR:** Linda Lujan (Doctoral Candidate)

**CONTACT NAME AND PHONE NUMBER FOR QUESTIONS/PROBLEMS:**

Linda Lujan  
Home: 303-979-xxxx  
Cell: 303-669-xxxx

**PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:** The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate through interviews, the experiences of participants at the Community College of Denver to describe the meanings and interpretations of their success.

**PROCEDURES/METHODS TO BE USED:** You volunteered for a follow-up interview and were contacted and asked to participate in a series of in-depth interviews. These interviews will be conducted by Linda Lujan, the co-investigator. The types of questions in the interview will revolve around you, your family and friends, your high school experiences, your college experiences, your first-generation status, and your success as a college student. The interviews will be audio taped in order for the content to be transcribed. Within a few weeks, I will ask you to meet with me again (approximately 1 - 1 1/2 hours) to go over the transcript of that interview so that you can verify that I got your thoughts and ideas accurately. At that time, I will ask you to help me identify the major ideas and themes from your interview. I will also tape record and transcribe this conversation. Then, within another few weeks, I will ask you to meet with me for one last interview (approximately 1 - 1/2 hours) to review my notes from our second meeting and to talk about your thoughts and feelings about participating in the first two interviews. At the close of the final meeting, I will ask you to make a memento - letter, poem, drawing - to tell me in a very individual way whatever you think is most important for others to know about being a successful non-traditional first-generation female students at the Community College of Denver. I will also tape record and transcribe this conversation. I will return all interview tapes (or destroy them) after the final dissertation defense.

**RISKS INHERENT IN THE PROCEDURES:** There are no known risks. However, it is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any recognized and potential, but unanticipated, risks.

Page 1 of 2 Participant's initials \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**BENEFITS:** There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this project. However, the researcher hopes that you will enjoy sharing your experiences of being a successful first-generation student, and find satisfaction in the process.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** All information obtained from research participants will remain confidential. Only Principal and Co-Investigator and Colorado State University's Human Research Committee will have privilege to all content of interviews. Dissertation committee members may be allowed full access to all content as determined by Principal Investigator or Co-Investigator. Participant names, places, or other identifiers will be masked or changed in the final copy of the dissertation and any publications based on this study. However, you may be recognized in the descriptions of your stories and experiences. Audio tapes will be returned to the participants or destroyed a few weeks after final defense of dissertation.

**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.

**PARTICIPATION:** We do not foresee any risks or discomforts associated with your participation in the study. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but we have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown risks.

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information state and willingly signed 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

*Questions about participants' rights may be directed to Celia S. Walker at 970-491-1563*

Page  2  of  2  Participant's initials \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX I - INTERVIEW GUIDE**

## **I. First Interview**

Thank you for agreeing to be part of this study. If you recall, I am interested in this study because I too attended a community college. I was thirty when I started college. I was a married high-school dropout with four children and decided that I wanted to go to college. I went to the community college near my home and started taking classes. At that time, I never dreamed I would ever end up here -- a doctoral student. I never imagined that I would be doing research and talking with other women about their experiences in college.

Neither of my parents have college degrees. That makes me what is called a 'first-generation' college student. When I met with you the first time, you told me that your parents did not have college degrees, so that makes you a first-generation student too.

When I look at what other researchers have written about first-generation college students, I do not see a lot of stories about the experiences and thoughts of the many first-generation students like you and me. As part of my research, I would like to tell your story, along with mine and other first-generation women, as a way of helping colleges better understand us.

I am looking forward to talking with you. I am going to be recording this interview so that I can catch everything you say. I am not going to take notes while you're talking so that I can really listen. I have a series of questions related to you, your family, your high school experience, your college experience, your experience as a first-generation student, and your success. You may stop this interview at any time.

### **Self-Focus:**

Tell me about yourself.

1. Name, age, hobbies, interests, interesting stories, etc.
2. Where do you live? Can you describe it.
3. Where did you grow up? Can you describe it.
4. What is the most unique thing about you? Tell me how that looks.
5. What is the one thing that you are most proud of? Can you give me an example?

### **Family Focus:**

Tell me about your family.

1. Size, ethnicity, class, attitudes, values. Can you describe your family?
2. Relationship with parents? With siblings? With spouse? With children? With extended family? Give me some examples.
3. A typical day at home. Describe it.
4. Familial attitude toward you. How did they see you?
5. Familial attitude toward education? Family of origin? Spouse/children? What happened to make you think that?
6. How does your family feel about you attending college? Give me an example.
7. What support do they provide? (financial, emotional, space/time for study)

**High School Focus:**

Tell me about your high school experience.

1. What high school(s) did you attend? Describe your school.
2. What classes did you take? What did you do in those classes? Describe your experience?
3. How much did you study? What kind of grades did you get? How did that feel?
4. Did you work while in high school? Where? Doing what?
5. Teachers/counselors who influenced you? How? When? Why? Can you give me an example?
6. Peer groups? Activities? Can you describe an example of what you did and with whom?
7. How did you feel about high school? Can you give me an example that made you feel that way?
8. What were you like in high school? Describe yourself.

**College Focus:**

Tell me about your coming to CCD.

1. When was the first time you decided to attend college? Why? What happened to make you decide that?
2. Why CCD? What was your path to CCD? How did you end up here?
3. Academic goals? What made you select those goals?
4. What classes have you taken? Tell me about your experience in those classes.
5. How much do you typically study? What kind of grades do you get?
6. Describe your learning experiences as a student. Give me an example.
7. What does CCD do to help you be successful? Can you give me an example?
8. Are you working right now? Tell me about that.
9. Teachers/advisors/others who influence(d) you at CCD? Describe an example?
10. Peer groups? Activities? Examples of what you do and with whom?
11. Most important college event? Tell me about that event. What stands out?
12. How did you feel about being at a community college?
13. What would you like your instructors to know about you as a person?

**First-Generation Focus:**

Tell me how being first-generation influences you.

1. What does being 'first-generation' mean to you? To your family and friends?
2. Can you tell me about a time when you felt unique or special because you're first-generation? Tell me about it?
3. Was there ever a time when you felt bad about being first-generation? Tell me about it?
4. What would you like to tell CCD/instructors/advisors/etc. about being 'first generation'?
5. What would you like tell other students about being 'first generation'?
6. What would you like tell me about being 'first generation'?

**Success Focus:**

Tell me why you call yourself successful.

1. What's your earliest memory of being successful? Can you describe that?
2. What's your earliest memory of being unsuccessful? Can you describe that?
3. Why do you think you're successful at CCD? Can you give me an example?
4. What makes you feel most successful at school? Can you give me an example?
5. What makes you feel un-successful at school? Can you give me an example?
6. What would you like to tell CCD/instructors/advisors/etc. about being successful?
7. What would you like to tell other students about being successful?
8. What would you like to tell your family about being successful?
9. What would you like to tell me about being successful?

**Closure:**

Tell me about any other thoughts you have about yourself.

1. How do the ideas, values, and activities at college fit with your life outside of college?
2. If you had it to do all over again, what, if anything, would you do differently about college?
3. How has being at CCD changed you?
4. What are you going to be doing in five years? What does it look like?
5. How do you feel about talking about all of this with me?

Thank you! This has been remarkable. I really enjoyed meeting with you and learning more about you.

If you recall, I am going to transcribe this tape. Once I'm done and have it on paper, I'd like to meet with you again and ask you to help me identify the major ideas and themes from this interview. What is the best way to contact you?

**II. Second Interview**

*NOTE: Each interview will be situational and tailored to the individual participant based on the previous interview(s), but an example of the kinds of discussion might be the following:*

I've finished transcribing our interview and now I'd like to go over it with you to see if you have anything you would like to add, change, or delete. You probably know that we humans usually talk much more informally than we write, so I am not concerned about incomplete sentences, incorrect verb tense, or pauses and interruptions in the transcript. The ideas and concepts that you shared in your stories are the important part of the interview. So, don't be worried about fixing the grammar or phrasing. Let's focus on the ideas.

And now let's try to identify those major ideas that relate to your success. Are there events or people described in these stories that stand out as being more important than others? What about you? What are the traits or characteristics about yourself that make you successful? Are there other factors in your stories that are related to your success?

### III. Third Interview

**NOTE:** *Each interview will be situational and tailored to the individual participant based on the previous interview(s), but an example of the kinds of discussion might be the following:*

I am so grateful for the wonderful stories you've shared with me and for the help you gave me in analyzing your stories and the themes and ideas they contained. What we have talked about will really contribute to our knowledge of successful female non-traditional first-generation students. I cannot begin to thank you enough for your amazing stories.

Now that we've talked about you and identified your ideas and themes about being successful, I'd like to hear from you about what you're thinking and feeling about being part of my study. What has it meant to you? In what ways has it influenced how you see yourself? Were there any surprises or difficulties?

Finally, one of the ways that you can share with others your thoughts, ideas, and feelings about being a successful female non-traditional first-generation student is to use your creative talents to make a memento for me to share with others. That memento might be a letter, a poem, a drawing, or whatever you think will best tell me, in a very individual way, whatever you think is most important for others to know about being a successful non-traditional first-generation female students at the Community College of Denver.