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INVOLVEMENT PATTERNS OF HIGH ACHIEVING
FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGIANS

by
Georgia Kouzoukas

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts in Higher Education Administration
of
The Graduate School
at
Rowan University
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Thesis Chair: Burton R. Sisco, Ed.D.

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ABSTRACT

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INVOLVEMENT PATTERNS OF HIGH ACHIEVING
FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGIANS
2010/11
Dr. Burton R. Sisco
Master of Arts in Higher Education Administration

The purpose of this study was to investigate the involvement patterns of eight selected high achieving first-generation students at Rowan University during the Spring 2011 semester. Participants took part in three separate interview sessions to examine past high school experiences, current college involvement, and future aspirations. Interviews were transcribed and data were analyzed through content analysis. The study found that the majority of students were involved in a campus related activity while also achieving academic success. Students were encouraged to be involved by individuals in the environment and they attributed their transition and success in college to specific mentors. The majority of participants believed involvement to be important for all collegians, especially those deemed first-generation. The perceived importance of involvement encouraged the majority of participants to continue their involvement in the future. Participants' overall college experience has led all students to have future aspirations, including the obtainment of advanced degrees.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Higher education institutions are made up of diverse groups of students with different factors affecting their collegiate experience. First-generation students is one group that many colleges and universities are beginning to pay closer attention. These specific non-traditional students in particular are found to perform less well academically, differ in terms of their level of involvement in the college environment, and have lower retention rates. However, some first-generation students defy research trends by excelling academically. It is important to examine these specific students to determine their patterns of involvement and implement programs to ensure that they are involved in other arenas of the campus besides the classroom. Ultimately, involvement in both academics and activities outside of the classroom can positively impact overall satisfaction with the environment and most importantly improve retention for first-generation students.

Statement of the Problem

According to Gofen (2009), individuals tend to mirror the educational level of their parents, making them less likely to attend college if their parents have not done so. Students who attend a college or university are referred to as first-generation students since their parents did not graduate or attend a higher education institution. While first-generation students are breaking this trend by entering the college environment, they tend to experience difficulties. More specifically, they struggle with academics and

transitioning into the environment, resulting in lower persistence and graduation rates (Ishitani, 2006).

However, the implementation of student involvement theory in the college environment is beneficial in rectifying these specific issues (Astin, 1984). The amount of physical, as well as psychological energy that a student exerts in social, academic, and extracurricular activities can predict a student's satisfaction and achievement in the environment. Academic involvement is critical for first-generation students and can lead to involvement outside the classroom (Astin, 1993). Through research studies on both first-generation students and the impact of involvement, institutions of higher education have been better able to target and possibly rectify certain difficulties. Ultimately, specific programs created by university administrators may in turn allow students to have a positive experience, to grow both personally and professionally, and to remain in college until degree completion.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine selected high achieving first-generation students and their involvement patterns in a higher education institution; Rowan University, specifically. The study also determined the reasons why high achieving first-generation students became involved in the collegiate environment and whether academic involvement led to involvement outside of the classroom setting. Moreover, the study investigated whether level of involvement impacted their future aspirations beyond college.

Significance of the Study

Examining high achieving first-generation students and their involvement patterns allows college administrators to better understand factors that contribute to their success in the collegiate environment. Since these students have broken the mold of the typical first-generation student and have been able to succeed academically, administrators could determine other ways to encourage personal involvement outside the classroom and ultimately make the most of their experience. Further, high school counselors may be able to help those first-generation students who they believe will succeed academically in college, by determining specific involvement activities that are provided at the institution prior to entering. Pre-college programs allow these students to be involved in the environment immediately, thus contributing to their satisfaction within the institution and potentially increase their likelihood of persisting until graduation.

Assumptions and Limitations

This study was conducted through the use of multiple interviews, in which participants were assumed to be open and honest. Since the study was conducted with a small number of participants strictly from Rowan University, findings cannot be generalized to the entire population of first-generation students. Moreover, not all departments within Rowan University identify students as being first-generation. Hence, purposive sampling was used, thus restricting all possible first-generation students to be considered for the study. Further, the use of interviews may have contributed to researcher bias. The researcher's personal background and experiences as a first-generation student may have biased the study. Moreover, the researcher's passion for the

topic and experience with studies similar to the current investigation may have impacted aspects of the study, including the interview process.

Operational Definitions

1. Academic Involvement: The number of hours a student spends partaking in the following activities at Rowan University: studying course materials, completing homework assignments, being interactive in the classroom setting, and studying with fellow students.
2. Degree Completion: Attainment of a bachelor's degree at Rowan University, through a minimum cumulative grade point average of a 2.0 and completion of a minimum of 120 semester hours, as indicated in the institution's policies.
3. First-Generation College Student: A college student enrolled at Rowan University during the 2010-2011 academic year, with neither parent (biological or not) or guardian having completed a degree program upon the start of the student entering college.
4. Full-Time Student: An individual enrolled at Rowan University during the 2010-2011 academic year and completing the 12-17 credits of course work within one semester, as required by the policies at Rowan University.
5. High Achieving Student: A student who has received a grade point average of 3.4 or above after the Fall 2010 semester. The grade point average of 3.4 was determined by calculating the average of the following: average GPA of all students during the Spring 2009 semester and the minimum GPA of 3.45 needed to graduate Cum Laude.
6. Higher Education: Either a two-year or four-year academic institution.
7. Retention: The continued enrollment of a student in a higher education institution until degree completion.

8. Students: Individuals who have enrolled at Rowan University during the 2010-2011 academic year, regardless of their age at the start of enrollment.
9. Student Involvement: The amount of physical and psychological energy a student dedicates to social, academic, and extracurricular activities during his experience in the college environment at Rowan University.
10. Upperclassman: An individual enrolled at Rowan University with the desired number of credits needed to be considered for Sophomore, Junior, or Senior status during the 2010-2011 academic year. Sophomore status is 24 to 57.99 credits; Junior status is 58 to 89.99 credits; Senior status is 90 and above credits.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in the study:

1. Why do selected high achieving first-generation students pursue higher education?
2. What are the involvement patterns of selected high achieving first-generation students at Rowan University?
3. How do selected high achieving first-generation students perceive their experience in the college environment?
4. What do selected high achieving first-generation students report as the impact of involvement on academics?
5. Does the undergraduate collegiate experience impact the future aspirations of selected high achieving first-generation students?

Overview of the Study

Chapter II presents a review of literature pertaining to first-generation college students. Included in this section is an overview of first-generation students, an

examination of retention rates, and college experiences. The section also presents an overview of student involvement theory, including research on the theory and its impact on improving first-generation experiences.

Chapter III describes the procedures used in the study. Included is a description of the context of the study, as well as of the participants. Also discussed are an examination of the interview protocol questions, the method of collecting data through multiple interview sessions, and the analysis of the qualitative data through content analysis.

Chapter IV includes the results of the study and answers the aforementioned research questions. Tables and direct quotes are used to illustrate various themes that emerged.

Chapter V summarizes the findings of the study and conclusions that can be drawn from this data. In addition, the section indicates future research that can be conducted to contribute to the knowledge base on the topic of high achieving first-generation students.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

Introduction

This thesis focuses on first-generation collegians, a specific student population in all institutions of higher education, including Rowan University. Researchers have focused on certain issues that this group of students experience in the college environment. Therefore, it is important to understand the literature and previous research on first-generation collegians. The chapter begins with an overview of the first-generation college student, including background information and their reasons for pursuing a college education. The chapter then examines retention rates and research on reasons affecting persistence, such as specific experiences in the college environment. Next, the conceptual framework of Alexander Astin's student involvement theory and research on its impact are examined. Finally, higher education programs that utilize student involvement theory and are capable of assisting first-generation college experiences are discussed.

Overview of the First-Generation College Student

Research indicates that individuals tend to achieve the same educational level as their parents (Gofen, 2009). Students whose parents did not attend or graduate from a college or university are less likely to enroll in a postsecondary institution themselves. Further, they are also less likely to graduate if they attend a higher education institution.

Students who enroll in college or complete their educational degree even though their parents were unable to do so are referred to as first-generation students.

First-generation students make up a unique student population in higher education institutions. More specifically, these students are more likely to be ethnic minorities, to come from a lower socioeconomic background, to have parents whose native language is not English, and to have lower SAT scores when compared to non-first-generation students (Bui, 2002). Further, Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora (1996) found that they are more likely to be female, to be older compared to traditional students, and their degree aspirations tend to be lower.

These background characteristics are not the only reason first-generation students have difficulty enrolling in institutions of higher education. Terenzini et al. (1996) found that first-generation students reported that they did not receive much encouragement from their family concerning the idea of a college education. Furthermore, they were also less likely to be encouraged by teachers to attend a higher education institution. This is detrimental to individuals since the predictors of student aspirations include socioeconomic status, parental involvement, and perceptions of the importance of receiving high scholastic marks (Walpole, 2007). Overall, encouragement by parents and others help students consider entering a higher education institution, as well as increase their perceived level of success in the environment.

Even though first-generation students do not receive much encouragement from the family, their reasons for pursuing higher education are predominantly familial. Bui (2002) concluded that this student population believed that attending a higher education institution allowed them to gain respect, gave them the means to financially support their

family, and that earning a degree provided honor to the family. Gofen (2009) also found that first-generation students pursued a college degree in order to exhibit their appreciation and respect for parents. Their parents were seen as role models since they informally obtained an education by reading newspapers and tried to constantly learn through classes at community centers in their neighborhood. Hence, while family members are not vocal about their encouragement, their actions indicate the importance of receiving a high level of education.

Once first-generation students understand the importance of and perceived ability to enter the realm of higher education, they must make a decision in terms of institutional selection. Based on the National Center for Educational Statistics (1999) first-generation collegians are more likely to begin their higher education pursuits at a two-year institution (as cited in Bui, 2002). Such an institutional selection can be attributed to certain factors. Foremost, this student population often cannot gain admission into highly selective four-year institutions because of their academic preparation in high school. Further, they may not be able to afford the costs of such an institution and a two-year college is more flexible and suitable for meeting their other responsibilities (Bui, 2002). While a two-year institution may be more cost effective and flexible, first-generation students are more likely to receive a bachelor's degree if they begin their educational aspirations at a four-year institution instead. However, this student population is more likely to attend less selective institutions, which may be a detriment to them since institutional selectivity influences the completion of a bachelor's degree (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004).

Examination of Retention Rates

There are many factors that contribute to students' ambivalence toward or decision not to enter an institution of higher education. Even though some gain admittance to a college or university, given certain set backs, it is not definite that they will successfully complete a degree. In fact, first-generation students are 1.3 times more likely to depart from the institution prior to graduating, when compared to other students (Ishitani, 2006). It is during the second year of college that this student population is most likely to leave the institution. More specifically, first-generation collegians are 8.5 times more likely to remove themselves from the college environment during the second year when compared to students whose parents successfully completed a college education. Even if first-generation students continue after their second year of college, they are 51% less likely to complete a degree in the fourth year and 32% less likely to graduate during the fifth year. It is evident that this specific student population has a difficult time persisting in college until graduation.

Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) found that 76.5% of the first-generation students in their sample continued to attend the same institution during the second year of college. First-generation collegians who were married were 52.8% less likely to continue into the second year. Further, males were 9.4% more likely to persist. In addition, those first-generation students for whom English was not the primary language were 14.7% more likely to continue into the second year when compared to those in which English was the primary language. Also important to note is that Hispanic first-generation collegians were 35.4% less likely than White first-generation students to persist in the same institution from the first to second year. In terms of institutional type, students who attended a

private institution were 12.3% less likely to continue in the same environment compared to first-generation students at public institutions.

Other factors also contribute to college persistence, including first-generation students' satisfaction with their social life (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). More specifically, first-generation students who were more satisfied with their social life were 16.7% more likely to continue. Moreover, financial resources also contribute to persistence. In fact, first-generation students were 6.4% more likely to continue with every \$1,000 increase in work-study funds. Further, there was a 2% increase in persistence with each increase of \$10,000 in the family income of first-generation students. Overall, it is evident that first-generation attrition is dependent on a wide range of factors.

College Experience

Adjustment in the college environment is another factor that is critical in determining first-generation persistence. Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) found that students' level of self-efficacy at the beginning of the academic year predicts college adjustment at the conclusion of the year. Therefore, if students believe that they will be able to perform successfully in college, students will be better adjusted in the environment. While this is the case no matter what type of student, first-generation students have lower levels of self-efficacy compared to other students. Therefore, first-generation collegians are more likely to initially assume that they will not perform up to par, thus leading to poor adjustment in the environment.

Adjustment in the college environment is also related to certain first-year experiences. Bui (2002) found that first-generation students felt less prepared and felt as though they knew less about the social environment. These students were also worried

about their financial aid and were more concerned about failing at their higher education institution than students whose parents completed a degree. While first-generation students differed from other students in the aforementioned areas, they were similar to others in terms of feeling comfortable in making decisions as an independent individual. Further, they were similar in being cognizant of academic programs at their institution, being able to make friendships, feeling as though they were accepted in their college or university, and also enjoying being a student.

Pascarella et al. (2004) have also contributed to the knowledge base concerning first-generation experiences. When compared to traditional students, first-generation collegians completed fewer credit hours during their second and third years. This student population also worked more hours per week while attending classes. Further, they were less likely to live on campus. Since first-generation students have more work responsibilities compared to other students, they tend to be less involved in extracurricular activities, athletics, and volunteerism in their second year. During their third year, they have less interaction with peers outside of the classroom. Overall, first-generation students obtain greater outcome benefits from their involvement in extracurricular activities and peer involvement when compared to other students.

However, they are less likely to be involved in these activities.

While extracurricular activities and peer interaction benefit first-generation students, other experiences such as volunteer work, employment, and being involved in athletics have a negative impact (Pascarella et al., 2004). This is attributed to the idea that spending time in these activities does not allow first-generation students to be involved

on-campus. Consequently, this minimizes the amount of time that this student population is exposed to more students, as well as the campus culture.

Not only do first-generation students differ from other collegians in terms of involvement in activities, they also differ in regards to scholastic abilities. Research indicates that first-generation collegians had lower grades after completing three years of higher education compared to other students (Pascarella et al., 2004). Types of coursework, however, have different impacts on first-generation students. This student population benefits from coursework in areas such as arts and humanities, mathematics, social sciences, natural sciences, and engineering. However, negative effects are associated with coursework in technical/professional areas. While first-generation students struggle in certain areas, their involvement in academic activities is associated with positive effects in terms of outcomes at the end of the second year and during the third year in the college environment. More specifically, positive effects in critical thinking are associated with the amount of hours that first-generation students dedicate to studying academic material. Further, the “number of term papers or written reports have stronger positive effects on writing skills, openness to diversity, and learning for self-understanding for first-generation than for other students” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 273).

Academic outcomes for first-generation students can be attributed to how this student population understands faculty expectations (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Faculty members claim that they inform students of the expectations for the course and the amount of time students need to dedicate to the material in order to succeed. However, first-generation students have difficulty interpreting faculty expectations. Further, first-

generation students needed more clarity and detail in course syllabi. In terms of written assignments, these students expressed frustration with mechanical aspects, such as format, grammar, and spelling. First-generation students do not have outside resources available to them and their “lack of cultural capital and background information about higher education may limit their awareness of how to do the college student role” (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p. 441). Since these students do not have parents who attended or completed college, they cannot ask them for help or expertise with college related academic issues.

Similarly, not having the first-hand experience of a college-educated parent also impacts the degree plans of first-generation students (Pascarella et al., 2004). These collegians had lower levels of degree plans during the end of their second and third years. This student population “made significantly smaller increases in the highest degree they planned to obtain than did the high parental education group” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 277). These authors attributed this difference to the idea that first-generation students do not bring a similar cultural capital to the college environment that other students bring. Students whose parents did not attend a higher education institution may not be as aware of advanced degrees and the opportunities that they can provide in their professional aspirations. Therefore, if first-generation students succeed in graduating from a college or university, they may not be prepared for any post-college plans in the field they wish to pursue.

Overall, first-generation students have both positive and negative experiences due to the educational level of their parents. Regardless of personal experience, however, first-generation students are found to be statistically significantly less likely to disclose

their experiences in the college environment compared to traditional students (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009). These collegians are less likely to have a social support system at their institution of higher education that they are able to relate to and confide in. Research conducted by Phinney and Haas (2003) found that a first-generation students' coping ability was dependent on their perceived amount of social support. Students who perceived that they lacked emotional support by others, were unsuccessfully able to cope and thus felt overwhelmed. In addition, they were unsure of how to succeed in the college environment even though they wanted to and felt socially isolated. Most importantly, they could not approach their parents since they were unable to relate to the situation.

Student Involvement Theory

An overview of the first-generation student indicates that this student population experiences difficulty in the college environment and persisting until graduation. As a means to rectify these issues, an examination and implementation of student involvement theory may be beneficial. This is especially the case since, "students learn by becoming involved" (Astin, 1985, p. 133). Alexander Astin's student involvement theory incorporates both the amount of physical, as well as psychological energy a student spends on his/her academic experience (Astin, 1984). More specifically, a student who is highly involved in the college environment devotes energy to studying, spending time on his/her college campus, is an active participant in student organizations, and is frequently found to interact with both faculty and fellow classmates. As can be seen, the behavioral component of involvement is of critical importance. While motivation is also necessary, involvement is more defined by how the individual acts more so than his/her feelings and

thoughts. Therefore, Astin preferred the term involvement as opposed to motivation because involvement is greater than a psychological state; “it connotes the behavior manifestation of that state” (Astin, 1984, p. 301).

Student involvement theory has five basic postulates (Astin, 1984). The first postulate, which was previously mentioned, states that involvement is the physical and psychological energy that a student invests in various objects. These objects can be either highly generalized, as in the overall student experience. Conversely, an object is capable of being highly specific, such as preparing for a mathematics examination.

Another postulate of the theory states that no matter the object that a student invests energy in, his/her involvement is on a continuum (Astin, 1984). As such, two different students may have different degrees of involvement in the same object. Further, one specific student may invest a different amount of physical and psychological energy in different objects at various periods of time.

Further, there are quantitative and qualitative aspects of involvement (Astin, 1984). For example, academic involvement can be measured quantitatively by determining the number of hours a student spends studying course material. In terms of the qualitative aspect of involvement, this can be exhibited through a student’s comprehension of course material.

The final two postulates in the theory are more educational, since they may be effective in the design of student programs. Foremost, the amount that a student learns and develops on a personal level is seen to be directly proportional to the “quality and quantity of student involvement in that program” (Astin, 1984, p. 298). Finally, the

theory states that there is a direct relationship between how effective an educational practice is and the capacity of this practice to increase involvement.

Astin (1984) examined different forms of involvement throughout the college environment and their effects. In regards to place of residence, there is a positive association between a student who lives in a dormitory and other forms of involvement, including interaction with faculty members, participation in student government at their institution, and involvement in fraternities and sororities. Further, residents at an institution tend to be satisfied with their experience, including their friendships with fellow classmates, their relationship with faculty, the reputation of their college or university, and their social life.

In addition, students who are involved in honors programs experience specific benefits (Astin, 1984). More specifically, honors students are more likely to continue in their institution until degree completion and to have aspirations of furthering their education through graduate or professional pursuits. These students also indicate satisfaction with their relationship with professors and their quality of teaching. However, involvement in honors programs may be negatively related to a student's satisfaction with friendships in the institution. While participation in an honors program may lead to increased faculty interaction, it may also result in peer isolation.

Moreover, other forms of involvement are also examined by Astin (1984). Students who are academically involved in their institution, tend to be satisfied with all aspects of their experience, except for their friendships. However, those students who are intensely involved in academics tend to be more isolated from their classmates and "are less likely than average students to show increases in liberalism, hedonism, artistic

interests, and religious apostasy or decreases in business interests” (p. 304). Further, athletic involvement is associated with satisfaction in regards to the academic reputation of the institution, the intellectual environment, the institutional reputation, and friendships with students. Those students who are intensely involved in athletics exhibit similar characteristics of those with intense academic involvement. Finally, in regards to student government involvement, these students are found to be satisfied with their friendships.

As discussed, there are a number of different areas in which students can be involved. The aforementioned areas; residence, honors programs, academics, athletics, and student government, are seen as microsystems. Microsystems are one of the components in Bronfenbrenner’s theory of developmental ecology, which examines the interaction of an individual with his/her environment. Bronfenbrenner defines a microsystem as, “a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). College students interact in different microsystems, yet the impact of one microsystem should not be combined with that of another to indicate the total effect that the college experience has on a student (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Instead, Bronfenbrenner (1979) used the term mesosystem to indicate the interrelation between two or more microsystems. For example, a mesosystem of a college student may consist of the interaction between the collegian’s academic and athletic microsystems, which impacts his/her overall experience in the higher education environment.

Student Involvement Research

While Astin provided the characteristics of student involvement and its impact, other scholars have contributed to the knowledge base. Research has been done on student involvement and specific types of college students. In terms of athletes in the higher education environment, research conducted at Rowan University indicated that Rowan student athletes did not participate in fraternities or sororities, student government, study abroad programs, or college productions (Iacovone, 2007). Their attitudes regarding the importance of specific aspects of involvement indicated that the most important social involvement activity was seen to be participation in religious activities. Further, social contact with faculty was reported to be the most important academic involvement activity, while adequate physical environment on campus was the most important campus atmosphere activity. Finally, it was found that student athlete's grade point average was related to their relationship with Rowan University faculty, as well as their relationship with other students in the institution.

Similarly, Fusiak (2009) also found that Rowan University student athletes succeeded academically with the support and interaction of faculty members. Outside of academics, a majority of the athletes, predominantly females, reported feeling as though they had missed out on certain opportunities. However, student athletes reported that their overall experience at Rowan University was positive.

Scholars have also examined leadership involvement. Dugan (2006) found that compared to uninvolved students, students who were involved in community service had higher levels of consciousness of self, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, and citizenship. Further, students in positional leadership roles scored higher on the

following: collaboration, common purpose, and citizenship. Finally, both students involved in campus organizations, as well as students in formal leadership programs scored higher on common purpose and citizenship compared to their uninvolved peers. Overall, involvement allows students to connect to the community and the needs of its members.

Leadership involvement specifically at Rowan University was indicated through an Ackerman (2005) study. Student leaders indicated that the perceived benefits of involvement included meeting more students and “developing transferable skills” (p. 36). Other important benefits included networking with faculty and administration in the institution, as well as networking in the students’ prospective career field. Perceived learning outcomes of student leaders included running meetings, leadership, public speaking, problem solving, and communication.

Other research at Rowan University was also conducted on student government involvement (Diorio, 2007). The majority of participants in the study indicated that involvement in student government has social benefits, including the development of friendships, interaction with faculty, and increased empathy. Conversely, the educational benefits of student government involvement were perceived to be less valuable to participants. In terms of skill development, students indicated that involvement in student government helped more with listening skills, and moderately improved public speaking and critical thinking skills.

Overall, specific student populations, including athletes and student government leaders have different involvement patterns. Involvement is seen to positively impact students and increase their satisfaction in the collegiate environment. While extreme

involvement may have an adverse impact, the benefits of overall involvement outweigh any negative effects.

Improving First-Generation Experiences

First-generation students have difficulty not only transitioning, but also persisting in the college environment. Student involvement is a measure that can be used to rectify certain issues experienced by this student population. One program that incorporates the idea of involvement is the living learning community. Through living-learning communities, students are able to interact more frequently with faculty and peers, have a sense of community, and are supported both academically and socially (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007). First-generation students in a studied living-learning community stated a perception of ease in both their academic and social transition in the higher education environment. This can be attributed to faculty interaction and the resources available to them in their residence halls. As previously mentioned, first-generation students have difficulty understanding faculty expectations. However, living-learning communities can benefit this student population because they will be able to interact more closely with faculty members in order to academically succeed. Moreover, receiving support in transitioning into the social environment contributes to more satisfaction and involvement in campus programs and activities.

Conversely, student involvement can also be improved through the use of technological advancements (Heiberger & Harper, 2008). Facebook is the predominant social networking site that is utilized to increase the communication between the institution and its students. It allows students to be educated on programs at their institution and helps them choose between different options. The Higher Education

Research Institute (2007) indicates the benefits of spending time on social networking sites. In fact, students who spend more time on these sites are also spending more time in real life interactions, such as being involved in social activities, connecting with friends, and participating in campus organizations. Most importantly, they report having a stronger connection to their institution of higher education and have a more positive perception of their social life. Despite the assumption that social networking sites negatively affect academic achievement, the study conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (2007) indicates that students are not spending more or less time studying academic material because they spend more time than others on these sites. Overall, the use of technology is beneficial in increasing involvement amongst all collegians.

However, the use of certain programs, such as living learning communities and social networking sites, are beneficial to first-generation students in particular. These institutional resources help first-generation students in different facets of the college environment that they have difficulty in, such as academics and involvement in campus activities. Ultimately, an increase in student involvement may also help with student retention.

Summary of the Literature Review

Previous research on the first-generation student indicates certain background characteristics and college experiences. Scholars indicate that this student population does not succeed as well as other collegians, is less likely to persist until graduation, and is less likely to be involved in the college environment. However, according to student involvement theory, dedicating more time and energy to academic, social, and

extracurricular activities leads to positive impacts in academics, involvement, retention, and social transition. Through the use of resources that incorporate the tenets of student involvement theory, first-generation students may be more successful in the college environment. While much research has been done on those first-generation students who do not succeed in college, there remains a gap in the literature regarding high achieving first-generation collegians. By examining the involvement patterns of academically successful first-generation students, much can be learned about how to assist all of these nontraditional students in participating in academics, clubs, and organizations within their higher education institution.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Context of the Study

The study took place at Rowan University, a comprehensive, medium sized, public institution in Glassboro, New Jersey. The University offers baccalaureate and master's degrees in a number of academic disciplines, while also having one doctoral program. Courses are taught mainly by professors, with approximately 15 students to every one faculty member. The student body consists of individuals from the Mid-Atlantic States and 30 foreign countries. Demographically, minority enrollment is approximately 22%. In terms of activities, the University offers over 130 clubs and organizations, including academic, cultural, environmental, religious, and political groups. There are other service, special interest, and theatre/dance organizations, as well as 24 fraternities and sororities. In athletics, there are eight men's and 10 women's NCAA Division III varsity sports, as well as 30 intramural club sport programs. The University also provides housing to students, with approximately 3,600 students living on campus in residence halls or apartment complexes (Student Affairs, 2009).

A total of three separate interview sessions were conducted with each of the eight participants during the Spring 2011 semester. Seven participants took part in individual face-to-face interview sessions in a secure study room located in the Campbell Library on the Rowan University campus. One participant conducted the study over the computer using the Skype program, since the participant was overseas in a study abroad program.

Population and Sample Selection

First-generation individuals who are currently enrolled as a full-time student at Rowan University and are of upperclassman status were the target population of the study. The reputational sample included multiple known contacts with administrative status at the higher education institution from the following departments: Educational Opportunity Fund/ Maximizing Academic Potential Program (EOF/MAP), Bantivoglio Honors Concentration, and the Center for Student Engagement. These administrators recommended eligible students to be involved. Eligible students were contacted about the purpose of the study and asked if they would agree to participate. The snowball sample included a total of eight participants who took part in the multiple session interview process. Specific background information on each of the participants is included in the following chapter.

Instrumentation

The instrumentation for the study consisted of three separate interview sessions (Appendix C). Seven background questions including gender, age, racial/ethnic identity, occupation, education level, major, and residence were asked to each participant prior to the interview sessions being conducted. While there were a set number of questions in each interview session that were asked to each participant, additional questions were also asked to certain students if there was a need to clarify and/or expand on answers. While the interview protocols were not directly taken from one specific study on first-generation students, certain interview questions were derived from a number of previous research studies.

The theme of the first interview session was past high school experiences. Participants were asked questions pertaining to certain aspects of high school, including academic and extracurricular activities. The specific question in this session: “What is your best estimate of your grade point average in high school?” was taken from a study conducted by Pascarella et al. (2004). This specific study utilized a longitudinal approach to examine first-generation college students from 18 four-year colleges during a period of three years. In addition the question, “Approximately how many hours a week did you spend on the following activities: studying; interacting with teachers; studying with fellow classmates; participating in the classroom?” was formed based on the importance of academic involvement as indicated by Astin (1984).

The second interview session examined the theme of experience in the college environment. Questions were asked concerning the participant’s overall experience at Rowan University, including involvement activities. The specific questions concerning a participant’s transition into the college environment were formed from a Terenzini et al. (1994) study. This study examined how students become involved after transitioning into the college environment. More specifically, scholars conducted focus group interviews with 132 new students who entered different types of institutions; community college, liberal arts college, comprehensive university, a large research university.

Academic performance was also examined in the second interview session and the aforementioned question concerning the amount of hours a participant spent on specific activities was also used (Astin, 1984). Session two also focused on student’s involvement patterns. The questions concerning the amount of time a student has been involved in specific activities in college, the amount of hours a participant works on-

or/and off campus, and the level of non-course related interaction a participant has with peers, was developed from a Pascarella et al. (2004) study.

Finally, the theme of session three was future plans and aspirations after participants graduate from Rowan University. Questions were developed from Pascarella et al. (2004). The following question was directly taken from the study: “What is the highest academic degree that you intend to obtain in your lifetime?” (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Approval was received from the Rowan University Institutional Review Board (Appendix A) to conduct the study. Two acquaintances were recruited to participate in a pilot test interview. The participants completed the interview sessions in order to test content validity and to ensure that the questions were comprehensible. The pilot test revealed that the questions were comprehensible, unbiased, and could be answered in a short period of time.

Data Collection

Each of the participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their participation included a set of three separate interviews. They were given an informed consent form (Appendix B) prior to the first interview session being conducted. It was made clear that each of the three interviews were completely voluntary and confidential. Moreover, participants were assured that if they felt uncomfortable at any point during the process, the interview would conclude. The face-to-face interviews were conducted individually during the Spring 2011 semester in locations most comfortable for the participant. However, the location of the interview was private in order to ensure that information was kept confidential. Each of the interviews took no longer than one hour to

be completed and each audio tape recording was later transcribed. In addition, other personal notes were taken while the interviews were in session.

Data Analysis

Each interview during the three sessions was organized and carefully transcribed. Transcriptions were conducted in a secure location in order to ensure that recordings and notes were not made available to other individuals. Two participants were randomly selected to be shown their transcription and verified that the information was accurate. After member checking and reviewing each of the transcripts, the emic data were separated into units (Sisco, 1981). Units of data analysis were determined by locating phrases or clauses in the interviews. Phrases were edited by deleting unessential words and correcting syntax. These units were then examined for similarities and differences, resulting in the formation of logical categories. Categories were then collapsed after all units from each research question were classified. Finally, the researcher determined the frequency of units for each category. Thus, a ranking of categories was established and verbatim quotes were used to illustrate participants' thoughts. Through this content analysis, the research questions could be addressed, thus leading to a better understanding of high achieving first-generation college students.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

Profile of the Sample

The participants in the study were selected through the use of a reputational and snowball sampling method. Three separate interviews were conducted with each of the participants during the month of February 2011. A total of eight students agreed to participate in the study. Six participants were 21 years of age, while two participants were 22 years old, with the mean age of participants being 21.25 years. Five females (62.5%) and three males (37.5%) took part in the study. Two students self-identified as Asian, three self-identified as Hispanic, one as African American, one as Afro-Caribbean, and one participant self-identified as Caucasian and Puerto Rican. In terms of educational level, five students were seniors, two were juniors, and one was of sophomore status. The participants studied a range of educational majors. These included Biology, Sociology, Advertising, History, Psychology, Law and Justice, Fine Arts & Art Education, as well as Writing Arts and Elementary Education majors. Six students lived on campus during the time of the study, while two were commuters. Each participant fulfilled the requirements to be involved in the study: full-time Rowan University student of upperclassman status and having a GPA of 3.4 or above. The average college GPA of the sample was 3.6. The average self-reported high school GPA of the sample was 2.9.

The following is a biography of each of the eight participants who took part in the study:

Theresa is a senior at Rowan University, majoring in Biology, who commuted to campus every year except for the year that she was a Resident Assistant. As an Asian American, neither of her parents received a high school diploma. Growing up in Asia, Theresa's mother completed middle school, while her father partially completed high school. When arriving in America, they did not choose to pursue their education because they are not fluent in English.

Justin is a Sociology major in his senior year at Rowan University, who lives on campus. As a self-identified Puerto Rican male, both of his parents dropped out of high school because of financial reasons and instead worked for their respective families.

As an Advertising major, Nancy is a senior, on-campus resident. Her mother graduated from high school and instead of attending college, she enrolled in a trade school for beauty in Latin America. Her father completed high school and then after arriving in America, he worked to financially support his family. After Nancy enrolled in college, her father went to college as an adult to become a mathematics teacher.

Dan is an Afro-Caribbean male who lives on-campus as a Sophomore History major. However, not being from New Jersey originally, Dan attended a different college prior to entering Rowan University and also switched majors multiple times. Since Dan was adopted, he is not entirely clear about his biological parent's educational background. Dan's biological father is assumed to have graduated from high school, but chose to enter the Air Force instead of attending college. His biological mother is assumed to have graduated from high school, but did not attend college because of personal issues. On the other hand, his adopted mother dropped out of high school because she had children.

George is a senior at Rowan University who is studying Psychology. Both of his parents are from South America and he himself was also born there. His mother completed high school and wanted to pursue a college education, however, her test results to enter college in South America were not high enough to qualify, so she worked instead. George's father on the other hand, stopped attending school around the sixth grade, but then went back for a program in South America that is similar to the GED program in the United States. With no interest in attending college, George's father instead worked.

Natalie is an African American female, who is a Senior Law & Justice major. Her father completed middle school and did not attend high school. Her mother received her GED because she was caring for her children.

Monica is a junior at Rowan University, who transferred from a community college. She currently commutes to campus where she has a dual major in Elementary Education and Writing Arts. Both of her parents were born in Asia and she is not entirely clear about their educational background. Her mother finished middle school and possibly attended some high school. Her father only completed middle school. Both of her parents experienced hardships in Asia and education was not of great importance during that time compared to working as a means to financially support the family. Therefore, they did not pursue higher education when coming to the United States because they are not fluent in English.

Janet is a junior who typically commutes to Rowan University, however, she is currently partaking in the study abroad program. As a Caucasian and Puerto Rican student, she is studying for a dual major in Art Education and Fine Arts. Her father

completed middle school and did not continue because of personal issues and financial responsibilities. Janet's mother on the other hand, finished high school and because of personal issues, she was not encouraged to pursue college. However, she later enrolled in a program in order to become a nursing assistant.

Analysis of the Data

Research Question 1: Why do selected high achieving first-generation students pursue higher education?

“Why did you decide to enroll in higher education/Was there a significant person or moment that encouraged you to pursue higher education?”

Content analysis was used in order to determine the reasons for which participants decided to pursue higher education (Table 4.1). The most commonly stated reason for entering a higher education institution was to have career opportunities. In three instances, these participants stated that a degree was necessary to have better career opportunities when compared to their parents. More specifically, participants took note that their parents struggled in their place of employment and their lack of education did not allow them to have a career that provided more financial stability. When Monica discussed her reasons for pursuing college she stated:

To get a degree. I also wanted a profession that makes good money. Our parents, they work at a restaurant. They work six days a week, twelve hours a day. Long, long hard days, everyday. And that's as much as they can do because of the language barrier. So for me, I have the opportunity to go farther so I want to make them proud and I also want a better life for myself.

Guidance counselors and teachers were also frequently mentioned. These particular individuals in the high school environment motivated and encouraged students to apply to college. They also reassured these students that they would be able to succeed in college. Nancy described the role that her guidance counselor had on the main reason that she applied to attend a four-year institution.

Honestly, I wasn't going to apply to college. I was going to apply to the community college and my advisor in high school, he got me the interview for Rowan. I hadn't even applied. I overslept. I didn't wake up to come, to go to the interview. I completely forgot. He called me and yelled at me and cursed at me and he told me that he would give me fifteen minutes to get dressed up and go to school. If not, he's said I'm not going to help you out with anything ever again. So, I went, then I applied and then I was accepted into Rowan.

Familial relationships also contributed to participants' decision to apply to college. Parents or older relatives were discussed four times in the study and were noted as having encouraged the participants to strive toward a college degree. Siblings were also discussed four times throughout the study and were seen as role models. While siblings were mostly seen as role models, one participant did discuss a non-familial role model as her motivation to enter and succeed in college.

Other, less consistent reasons for entering higher education were also discussed. On two occasions, participants stated that entering college was a means for them to leave the environment that they were currently residing. Further, in two instances, students attributed their path to college was found through specific programs, such as the

Educational Opportunity Fund or NJ STARS. Without being a part of these programs, these students did not believe that college was feasible.

Table 4.1

Results of Content Analysis Indicating Reasons High Achieving First-Generation Students Pursue Higher Education (N=8)

Category	Frequency	Rank
Career opportunities	8	1
Guidance counselor/Teacher	5	2
Parent/Older relative	4	3
Sibling	3	4
Leave environment	2	5
Program	2	5
Role model	1	6
Total Frequency	25	

“Why did you decide to attend Rowan University in particular?”

Content analysis was used to determine the various reasons high achieving first-generation collegians attributed to choosing Rowan University as their higher education institution (Table 4.2). Throughout the interviews, there were five occurrences in which participants stated location or the environment to be a contributing factor in their decision. Participants indicated that the distance of the campus compared to their hometown would afford them the possibility of commuting to the University. Participants were also influenced to attend Rowan University through specific individuals. More specifically, there were four instances in which an influential person or persons were mentioned. For example, Nancy once again stated that she only applied to Rowan University because of her guidance counselor. Further, some participants chose Rowan University because they had siblings or friends who were attending the institution.

Another reason for institutional choice was based upon financial need. Some participants

were provided with a more substantial financial aid package at Rowan University than if they were to attend another institution. Also, as mentioned previously, one participant in particular, had come to Rowan through the NJ STARS program, which provided her with the necessary funds.

Other less consistent reasons included being a transfer student and Rowan University would have allowed for an easier transition. Finally, one participant mentioned that prayer and faith aided in her decision to attend Rowan University.

Table 4.2

Results of Content Analysis Indicating Reasons Selected High Achieving First-Generation Collegians Chose Rowan University (N=8)

Category	Frequency	Rank
Location/Environment	5	1
Influential individual	4	2
Finances	3	3
Transfer	2	4
Prayer	1	5
Easier transition	1	5
Total Frequency	16	

Research Question 2: What are the involvement patterns of selected high achieving first-generation students at Rowan University?

It is important to note that seven out of the eight participants took at least one Advanced Placement or Honors course during their time in high school.

“How often did you spend on the following activities in high school: studying, interacting with professors, studying with fellow classmates, participating in the classroom?”

Content analysis was used to determine the degree to which students partook in the aforementioned activities (Table 4.3). In terms of studying, five participants stated that they never studied or slightly studied in high school. Three participants stated that they studied a lot while in high school. When it came to interacting with teachers, four participants had zero to slight interaction while the other half interacted a lot with their high school teachers. Seven participants never or slightly studied with classmates, while one participant only studied with classmates. Finally, four participants never or slightly participated in class, while the other half participated a lot in their high school classes.

Table 4.3

Results of Content Analysis Indicating Academic Involvement in High School (N=8)

Category	Frequency
Studying	
Never-Slight	5
Above Average	3
Teacher interaction	
Never-Slight	4
Above Average	4
Study with classmates	
Never-Slight	7
Above Average	1
Class participation	
Never-Slight	4
Above Average	4

“How often did you spend on the following activities in college: studying, interacting with professors, studying with fellow classmates, participating in the classroom?”

Content analysis indicated participants’ academic involvement in college (Table 4.4). In terms of studying in college, six participants never studied or slightly studied for

coursework in college. Only two participants stated that they studied frequently. Regarding professor interaction, six participants frequently interacted with their professors while in the college environment. When asked to discuss how often she interacted with professors, Natalie stated:

Always. I learned that in the EOF program. To have a connection with your professors so they know your name. I learned that in EOF, so I always do it. Even before I come to the class, I e-mail them, 'hi my name is Natalie'. So they get to know me before.

Six participants never or slightly studied with their classmates, while two participants always studied for courses on their own. Finally, four participants never or slightly participated when in the college classroom, while the other half of the students participated a good amount.

Table 4.4

Results of Content Analysis Indicating Academic Involvement in College (N=8)

Category	Frequency
Studying	
Never-Slight	6
Above Average	2
Professor interaction	
Never-Slight	2
Above Average	6
Study with classmates	
Never-Slight	6
Above Average	2
Class participation	
Never-Slight	4
Above Average	4

“Were you involved in any activities during high school and why did you decide to pursue these activities?”

Through the use of content analysis extracurricular involvement in high school was found (Table 4.5). Six participants were actively involved in activities during high school. Participants took part in two academic organizations, including Honor Society and Science Careers Club. In regards to athletics, participants were in eight different athletic teams such as crew, lacrosse, track, football cheerleading, basketball, cross country, and field hockey. These participants were also in two campus related activities including Yearbook and Key Club. There were three community service/awareness/activism organizations that participants took part in, such as the Natural Helpers organization, Big Buddy, and Fellowship Christian Academy. Further, leadership organizations were mentioned six times throughout the study. These included Student Council, Future Business Leaders of America, Peer Leadership, and NJ ROTC. Finally, five cultural/artistic organizations were discussed; Junior Classical League, Spanish Club, Latin Club, Art Honor Society, and Marching Band. Conversely, two participants were not involved in any activities during high school.

Table 4.5

Results of Content Analysis Indicating High School Involvement (n=6)

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Academic	Honor Society Science Careers Club	2	5
Athletic	Crew Lacrosse Track Football cheerleading Basketball Cross-country Field hockey	8	1
Campus-Related	Yearbook Key Club	2	5
Community Service/ Awareness/Activism	Natural Helpers Big Buddy Fellowship Christian Academy	3	4
Leadership	Student Council Future Business Leaders of America NJ ROTC	6	2
Cultural/Artistic	Junior Classical League Spanish Club Latin Club Art Honor Society Marching Band	5	3
Total Frequency		26	

Those participants who were involved while in high school, attributed their participation to various factors, which are illustrated in Table 4.6. Siblings and cousins were discussed three times throughout the study. These family members were looked up to as role models since their involvement in high school activities encouraged the participants to follow their footsteps. Theresa stated:

There's four kids in my family and there's four kids in my cousins' family and we're all relatively around the same age. There's eight of us and every year there was a Smith that graduated in my family. So, I'm the youngest in my family. All my siblings or what not were always active in student council and all these other clubs and that's what got me interested in joining other clubs too. If it wasn't for them, I think I probably wouldn't have joined all these clubs.

Peers were also discussed three times in the study since participants initiated certain activities because their friends were involved. While specific individuals may have led some students to join clubs and organizations in high school, there were three occurrences in which participants had a natural motivation and desire to be involved in high school. Less prominent reasons for being involved included participants desire to shorten their time in their home environment by spending more time within the school environment. Further, the aspiration of being in a leadership position encouraged a student to be involved, while in one instance a participant wanted to break out of his siblings un-involvement attitude and create a new path for himself.

Table 4.6

Results of Content Analysis Indicating Reasons for High School Involvement (n=6)

Category	Frequency	Rank
Siblings/Cousins	3	1
Peers	3	1
Natural motivation	3	1
Get out of home environment	2	2
Leadership position	1	3
Create new path	1	3
Total Frequency	13	

Conversely, two participants were not involved in high school and attributed this to their lackadaisical attitude. George discussed his un-involvement as the following: “I didn’t know they were there and I didn’t think it was useful in any way. Until later on when I found out when it kind of was if you wanted to go to college.”

“Were you involved in any activities during college and why did you decide to pursue these activities?”

As a means to distinguish the different clubs and activities that students were involved in, content analysis was used (Table 4.7). All of the eight participants took part in some activity while in college, whether it be an organization, an internship, or community service. However, only six were actively and consistently involved in Rowan University organizations that are sponsored by the Student Government Association. Academic clubs, such as Biology Club and Pre-Health Society were mentioned in four instances. Cultural clubs including Black Cultural League, Asian Cultural Association, Gay-Straight Alliance, United Latino Association, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People were mentioned a total of eight times throughout the study. Greek organizations were mentioned a total of three times. Special interest clubs such as intramurals, religious clubs, and Honor Societies were each mentioned only once. Further, there were nine instances in which participants mentioned holding a leadership position in their club or organization. However, none mentioned holding a leadership position within the Student Government Association. However, participants were also involved in activities that are not chartered by the Student Government Association. More specifically, two participants took part in a study abroad program. Holding a position of employment was mentioned a total of 12 times throughout the study. Some

individuals were employed as resident assistants, held a work-study position, were a member of the Peer Referral and Orientation Staff (PROS), or were employed in locations off-campus. Further, working in the Educational Opportunity Fund Program and the Pre-College Institute at Rowan University was mentioned a total of six times. Finally, one participant indicated having an internship outside of Rowan University.

Table 4.7

Results of Content Analysis Indicating Extracurricular Involvement at Rowan University (n=7)

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Academic	Pre-Health Society Pre-Soma Biology Club Academic Research	4	5
Cultural	Gay-Straight Alliance United Latino Association Asian Cultural League Black Cultural League NAACP	8	3
Greek	Fraternity Sorority IGC	3	6
Special Interest	Intramural Religious clubs Honor Society	3	6
Leadership Position	President Vice President Treasurer Secretary	9	2
Study Abroad		2	7
Employment	Work Study PROS Off-campus Resident Assistant	12	1
EOF/Pre-College Institute		6	4
Internship		1	8
Total Frequency		48	

There were a number of reasons that selected high achieving first-generation students were involved in the collegiate environment (Table 4.8). There were three instances in which a Rowan University staff member was stated to be the influential individual that encouraged a participant to be a part of a club or organization. These staff members included a resident assistant, a Peer Referral and Orientation Staff member, and a counselor in the Educational Opportunity Fund program. Justin discussed his experience as follows: “I was really involved in my freshman year because of my RA. He was really involved and he helped me branch out, so that’s when I started doing things.” As can be seen, Justin viewed his resident assistant as a role model who educated him on organizations offered at Rowan University.

In three instances throughout the study, participants discussed a family member who was beneficial in their involvement. These family members were also seen as role models and allowed participants to be cognizant of different organizations available for them to be a part of. Conversely, there were two instances in which involvement in organizations was pursued as a means of career development. More specifically, being involved in specific academic organizations would provide students with information regarding a specific career path and whether a major was best suited for them. In conjunction, being involved in organizations would help them prepare for their future career. Further, in two instances, friends were discussed as instilling a desire in them to participate in the Rowan campus. Also noted twice throughout the study, participants stated that participation in organizations was in some way self-serving. For example, Dan discussed his experience in deciding to participate in activities:

I get interested really easily in little things. I'm a very curious person. I want to see how things are and I want to be involved. I hate being bored and not active and feeling useless. I like getting involved in anything that's of interest to me and that's worthwhile and that I see in the future would be beneficial to me.

Finally, there was only one instance in which a critical moment that led to a participant's involvement was mentioned. More specifically, George discussed his critical moment as the following: "After figuring out how much I could do with academics, just by getting a B in my Abnormal Psychology class, kind of motivated me so much into believing in myself. I just wanted to do everything. I wanted to challenge myself."

Table 4.8

Results of Content Analysis Indicating Reasons for College Involvement (n=6)

Category	Frequency	Rank
Staff member influence	3	1
Family influence	3	1
Career development	2	2
Friend influence	2	2
Self-serving	2	2
Critical moment	1	3
Total Frequency	13	

Conversely, there were two students who stated that they were not actively involved at Rowan University or did not continue their participation after one semester. One participant discussed that as a commuter, she was more involved in participating in community service throughout her own hometown. Conversely, Nancy, another participant, discussed that she held one leadership position her freshman year, but "we never did anything, so I just kind of thought it's kind of a waste of my time." This led her

to discontinue her Rowan involvement, in which she stated, “I was working and I just kind of didn’t want to get out of my apartment to go to meetings. I was lazy about it. I didn’t want to really do anything.”

“Were you aware of any clubs or organizations that Rowan University offered prior to coming to the institution?”

Five participants reported that they were unaware of any Rowan University sponsored organizations or clubs prior to entering the institution. Only three participants reported some knowledge of specific activities. One participant attributed her awareness to a high school teacher. Monica stated her cognizance of areas of involvement at Rowan University were because of relatives and friends.

My cousin Mary comes here. My oldest brother, my second older brother Tom comes here, as well as my boyfriend. I’m not a science major, but I go to their chemistry meetings and their biology meetings. Mary was an RA and I’m currently applying to be an RA. So, I know a lot of clubs through them. But, I would be a lot more lost if it wasn’t for them here.

“Do you think Rowan University markets all the different organizations available for students to be involved in?”

All participants reported that Rowan University does not advertise the areas of involvement that Rowan students are capable of participating in. Monica discussed her experience and that Rowan University did not advertise the information sessions to become a Resident Assistant. If not for her cousin, who was a Resident Assistant, Monica would have not attended the information sessions and ultimately not been able to have the opportunity to hold this position. Justin also discussed his thoughts on the topic.

I think there could be some things that could be done a little better. Most of the time you hear by word of mouth, but if people are off campus, I feel like it's hard for them to get that kind of information. Maybe it could be done a little better for commuters.

“Do you plan to continue being involved in certain projects through the community that you reside after you graduate?”

Seven participants stated that they plan to be involved in their community in some fashion after they graduate from Rowan University. In three instances, participants would like to be involved in their community to specifically aid in fostering child community engagement. Natalie discussed her take on this topic.

I just think that everything starts with kids because some people don't have examples at home. So, going through certain programs, it helps them more.

Students need encouragement from others because they think their parents are just pushing them. But, if they heard something from someone else, they'll probably take it a different way.

In addition, there were three instances in which participants believe they will be involved in the future because of the importance of helping others in their neighborhood. Conversely, in one instance, a participant stated that involvement would provide her with personal benefits and distinguish her as a model citizen within her community. Finally, in one instance community involvement was seen as a means to properly acknowledge and give back to the community that had guided her when she was in need of assistance as a young child.

While the majority of participants stated that involvement in their future communities is of importance, there was one participant who did not believe he would contribute to his community. Dan's response is as follows:

I would love to say the PC answer, 'yeah of course, I would love to.' But, I don't know...Once I'm actually doing my career and my actual job, will I have time, is the question...I would love to say yes and I would want to, but [to] be honest and real about it, you never know.

"Do you plan to continue your involvement at Rowan University through the alumni association?"

All eight students stated that they were unsure of whether they would continue their involvement at Rowan University through the alumni association. Five of these students attributed their indecisiveness to the fact that they did not know about the alumni association and/or were vague about the details of such a program. Regardless of whether a participant was aware of or willing to be associated with the alumni association or not, each participant in the study would like to continue their participation in some of the specific organizations that they are currently involved in. George discussed his stance on alumni involvement.

I'd probably...come back for EOF because I probably do want to work the program again as a professional and be an actual counselor to the students that are coming in. But, besides that, I don't think I would probably join an alumni organization or anything like that.

Research Question 3: How do selected high achieving first-generation students perceive their experience in the college environment?

“How was your transition into the college setting at Rowan University?”

In order to determine how the participants transitioned into the Rowan University college environment, content analysis was used. Six participants in the study stated that their transition into Rowan University was smooth as a result of their participation in the Educational Opportunity Fund program. More specifically, participants in the program are required to attend courses and live on campus during the summer prior to their freshman year. Each of these students stated their uneasiness in attending college and had some difficulty initially, however, the EOF program alleviated their stress and made them more comfortable in the college environment. Theresa was one EOF student who shared her experience. “Because I participated in the EOF program that Rowan has, it was an easier transition than I guess most freshman because they show you all your resources or what not that Rowan has to offer.”

Two participants did not enter Rowan University through the EOF program. However, each of these students had an easy transition to the University because of their previous experiences. For example, Dan transferred to Rowan University from a different higher education institution, so he was comfortable with certain aspects of the college experience, such as academics. In regards to his transition to Rowan University in particular, he attributed his ease to transferring from his fraternity at his previous institution, to that same Greek organization on the Rowan University campus.

I couldn't relate to anybody from Jersey, but fortunately I pledged a fraternity in [previous institution]. That same fraternity happens to be on this campus and as it happens, fraternities are well known and well respected. So when they found out I

was [in a Greek organization], things came really easily...It was a really easy transition.

Monica echoes this theme of having an easy transition into Rowan University because she transferred from another institution. More specifically, she transferred from a community college and this experience provided her with the necessary skills to succeed at Rowan University. Skills such as time management and dealing with a heavy academic course load were already developed in her community college, thus resulting in a more successful adjustment into the University setting.

“How would you describe your academic performance as of now?”

All of the students met the requirement of having a grade point average of 3.4 or higher during the time of the study. As previously stated, the average grade point average of the participants in college is higher than their average grade point average in high school. Seven participants in the study stated that their academic performance progressed from their freshman year in college and one student mentioned that her performance has been consistent. Some students in fact stated that they believed that they were doing well academically at Rowan University, but could still improve. Theresa described her academic performance as follows. “I’m happy with my academic performance. It progressed throughout the years. My GPA slowly became higher and higher because I was more familiar with myself, how I work, and time management.” Natalie also discussed her academic success.

Freshman year I was content. I did the work, but it wasn’t too much of I have to get an A. After my freshman year, that was my first time making the Dean’s List. That just made me want to make it every semester. So, making the Dean’s List,

that's what really pushed me to want it every semester and I have made it every semester.

“Have you ever spoken to an academic advisor at Rowan University?”

Each participant in the study has had at least one advisor during his/her collegiate experience. In fact, many students have more than one advisor, including an overall academic advisor, an advisor for their specific major, and if they participate in the EOF program, they have yet another advisor. While it has been established that participants have utilized these advisors, content analysis was used to determine whether students deem these particular individuals effective. Advisor effectiveness was seen by four participants, while the remaining four students did not believe advisors to be essential in their academic and future success. Justin found his advisors to be a main resource for him. “I have personal relations with my two advisors...You need that kind of network and those kind of resources when you feel like you're in doubt, you have someone to help you out.” While Justin believed that advisors provided him with networking opportunities and resources, Theresa believed the opposite. “If they [would] know any more resources that would benefit me to...make me a more competitive applicant for dental school, that may help. But, most of the stuff that I've done, I've researched myself.” When participants believed that their advisor(s) was not an effective resource in providing them with necessary information, they instead looked to fellow students within their same major to be a guide for them.

“During your time at Rowan University, have you had a mentor?”

Content analysis revealed that seven participants reported having one or more mentors in the college environment (Table 4.9). In three instances, an individual who is

part of the EOF program was identified as a mentor. George identified an EOF staff member as his mentor and discussed the impact that this individual had on him and his future.

[My mentor] really believes in me a lot. He encouraged me to apply to certain places. He was willing to help me out and even pay out of pocket for my application fees. He's offered to give me a ride here and there. He's just someone who's been very, very supportive.

In two instances, friends were identified as holding a mentorship role. Similarly, there were two instances in which fellow Rowan students were seen as participants' mentors. Theresa described how her mentor was the guiding force in her collegiate experience who aided in her career path.

I made my own mentor freshman year. I saw the vice president of Biology Club when I was a freshman. He was also pre-dental and dentistry was something I was considering. I basically spoke with him, saw what he did throughout undergrad and tried to model the same way.

Less frequently discussed as mentors were Rowan University faculty members and family members. Monica referred to her entire family, especially her siblings, as her mentors throughout her collegiate experience as opposed to a faculty member.

I'm the youngest one so whatever problems I have, [my family] tries to help me. Even though I don't have the same major as them, they encourage me to get through it all because it's possible...I've only been [at Rowan University] for a semester and a month or two. So, I really haven't gotten to know my teachers as

well. I respect a lot of them. They know a lot and they educate us really

well...But, right now I more so look up to my family [and] by older siblings most.

Table 4.9

Results of Content Analysis Indicating Types of Mentors at Rowan University (n=7)

Category	Frequency	Rank
EOF staff member	3	1
Friend	2	2
Rowan student	2	2
Rowan faculty member	1	3
Family member	1	3
Total Frequency	9	

“Do you think that being involved at college is important?”

In order to determine whether involvement in the collegiate environment was perceived as important to participants, content analysis was utilized. All eight participants agreed that it is important to be involved in college. Even those two participants who were not actively involved at Rowan University, believed that participating in clubs and organizations are in fact beneficial to students. Overall, the major reason for which involvement was seen as important was to enhance a student’s college experience. While college experience was the major theme, there were three subcategories within this category. Networking was most frequently mentioned throughout the study. Justin described the beneficial experiences associated with involvement.

You meet all different types of people. People you wouldn’t imagine that you would get close with. The networking is unbelievable and...people need that resource when you get out of college and you can look back that you do have these names and numbers and those kinds of connections.

In addition, there were three instances in which participants believed that involvement allows students to be removed from their comfort zone and experience more within their environment. George mentioned the topic of comfort zone during his interview.

“[Involvement] teaches you just how to step out of your comfort zone and just experience things that you didn’t before. That’s if you didn’t do anything in high school or if you don’t have that personality.” Finally, time management was mentioned in one instance and that involvement within clubs and organizations allows students to learn how to properly manage their responsibilities.

Table 4.10

Results of Content Analysis Indicating Reasons for College Involvement (N=8)

Category	Frequency	Rank
Networking	6	1
Get out of comfort zone	3	2
Time management	1	3
Total Frequency	10	

While each participant agreed that involvement is beneficial for students, one participant believed that involvement could also be seen as unimportant. Dan discussed his opinion on whether he deemed involvement in college to be important. His response to the question is as follows.

Yes and no. Yes because you [have] to learn how to be social and work together to achieve a common goal, which most clubs and organizations have. But, no because it can sidetrack you from your goal to get an education and a degree. I’ve experienced both the yes and the no.

“Do you think that being involved at college is important for first-generation students specifically?”

Seven participants believed that involvement in college is important for first-generation students. Content analysis found various reasons for which participants believed involvement to be important for this particular student population (Table 4.11). In four instances, participants believed that involvement in college is beneficial for first-generation students so that they can be seen as an example for family members or their future children. Nancy best exemplified this theme during her interview.

I definitely think [involvement's] really important because then you can go on and tell your children, once you have kids...My parents couldn't tell me [to] get involved, do this, study abroad. I feel like if you've done a lot of things in college, it's easier to pass on to your children and then they feel compelled to kind of follow your footsteps.

In addition, there were three instances in which individuals believed that involvement for first-generation students would allow them to acquire certain benefits. These benefits included an overall positive college experience and the ability to network. Monica described her own personal experience and involvement in the science lab as a means to discuss how first-generation students can meet students through their participation in organizations in the college environment. "There's a lab called the yellow lab because all of us Asian people are in there...It is to get to know a lot of people. That's why I want to do the RA position, as well."

Table 4.11

Results of Content Analysis Indicating Reasons for the Importance of Involvement for First-Generation Students (n=7)

Category	Frequency	Rank
Set an example	4	1
Benefits of college	3	2
Total Frequency	7	

One participant, however, felt as though involvement was not important for first-generation students. As previously mentioned, Dan believed involvement in general to be both important and unimportant for college students. In regards to first-generation students, Dan perceived involvement to not be important.

I wouldn't say it's important. I would rather them...come to school. I'm not saying don't interact... You can do things, but first get your degree because that's what you're there for. If you get a chance, yeah it's cool, but I wouldn't say it's important. It's not paramount that you must participate or you're not getting anywhere. That's not true at all, by any means. But it would be nice, but you don't have to.

As seen, Dan did not believe that involvement was related to success. Conversely, George perceived involvement to be important as seen through his own personal journey.

[Involvement] helped me in the long run. I believe that's part of the reason why I got accepted to the graduate school that I applied to and...that's the reason why probably I got a lot of jobs. A lot of people looked at me, looked at my resume and just kind of congratulated me and told me that's a lot and they were proud of me. They hired me for that reason because they thought I was a responsible person for that.

Research Question 4: What do selected high achieving first-generation students report as the impact of involvement on academics?

Content analysis revealed whether participants believed that their involvement outside of the classroom affected their academic success. All participants indicated that academics were of primary importance in the collegiate environment. However, there were five participants that indicated that their involvement in clubs and/or organizations had an impact on their academics and they had to rectify their predicament. For example, students mentioned working less hours or removing themselves from their outside employment in order to have more time for campus involvement and academics. Monica discussed her experience with outside activities affecting her coursework.

I gave up working because I'd rather concentrate on my school and my grades. I don't think it's as important to work for a meaningless job that is not my future. I'd rather concentrate more on my schoolwork because I know that's my future and not these minimum wage jobs.

Nancy indicated that involvement on campus is not as important to her when compared to her academics.

My academics are a lot more important. I just feel like having a good grade, for my parents too. So they know that I'm here and I'm actually doing stuff. They can see that I'm doing work and I come home and I work and that I'm a good kid and a good student. They really wouldn't care if I was part of anything, as long as I'm getting good grades.

Three participants indicated that they have been able to balance both academics and involvement so that their academics are not negatively affected and they are still

capable of participating in activities that are of interest to them. Natalie best exemplified this theme. “[Academics and involvement] balance each other out. Academics are most important, but being a part of organizations or clubs, it doesn’t weigh my academics down. I balance both.”

Research Question 5: Does the undergraduate collegiate experience impact the future aspirations of selected high achieving first-generation students?

“What do you plan on doing in the future after you graduate?”

Through the use of content analysis, the future plans of the participants were discovered (Table 4.12). In four instances, participants discussed their desire to begin a job in their chosen field upon graduation. Natalie discussed her future aspirations on entering the education field.

I’m currently going to graduate with my Bachelor’s in Elementary Education and I want to get into the field. I want to try to land a job, get into the teaching world and hopefully, if possible, go for administration. Hopefully maybe the school will even help me pay for the credits I’m taking so I can possibly get a principal position.

Entering graduate school after completing a Rowan University degree was mentioned in three instances. George’s aspirations on attending graduate school are discussed.

Recently, I applied to college because I want to get my Master’s in social work. Not because I want to do one particular thing, but I want to do a whole lot. But, my primary thing that I really want to focus on is clinical work. I want to be a licensed clinical social worker and work with the LGBTQ community.

Other future plans were discussed less frequently throughout the interviews. Attending a professional school was a future aspiration mentioned by one participant. More specifically, Theresa discussed that she had been accepted and will be attending a school for dentistry after she graduates. Conversely, there was one instance in which travelling after graduation was a major goal. In addition, joining the Peace Corps or law enforcement were other pursuits mentioned less frequently.

Table 4.12

Results of Content Analysis Indicating Future Aspirations Directly After Receiving Bachelor's Degree (N=8)

Category	Frequency	Rank
Employment	4	1
Graduate school	3	2
Professional school	1	3
Travel	1	3
Peace Corps	1	3
Law enforcement	1	3
Total Frequency	11	

“What is the highest academic degree that you intend to obtain in your lifetime?”

All participants in the study stated that they would like to continue their education past their Bachelor's degree. Four participants identified a master's as the highest academic degree that they plan to obtain. Receiving a doctoral degree was an aspiration of the remaining four participants in the study. Of those students who stated that they intend to obtain their master's degree, they did not rule out a doctoral degree, but are instead planning to make that decision in the future.

“Do you think your Rowan experience has prepared you for your future goal?”

Content analysis revealed that four participants indicated their Rowan University experience has led them to be more prepared for their future aspirations. Of those who

believed this to be the case, there were two instances in which their Rowan experience was the reason that they chose to pursue their future plan. Theresa shared her personal story and feelings regarding her Rowan University experience.

I'm glad I chose Rowan overall because my sister goes to Rutgers. It's a large school. She tried being a biology major first and she couldn't do it. She got a C in chemistry the first time she took it and then she took it again and got a C again. She realized science isn't her thing and she went the business route. I think if I went to Rutgers, I probably would have been lost in that big mix. Going to Rowan, I like it because it has a small student to teacher ratio. It allows me to actually interact with the professors and get closer [so they] know me better. It was definitely easier when I had to request a recommendation letter for dental school.

In addition, there was one instance in which a participant felt as though his social involvement at Rowan University and not his academic experience was the main reason for feeling prepared for his future goals. Conversely, there was one instance in which a participant's entire college experience prepared him for his aspirations after completing his undergraduate degree. George's thoughts on this topic are as follows.

A lot of the involvement that I had, a lot of the jobs that I've had, even the classes that I've had or even workshops that I've been in, they definitely have given me time management, how to be less stressed...I can definitely see how a lot of those involvements have definitely helped me and will help me in the future...I'm definitely more prepared than probably a person who hasn't been involved in college.

One participant stated that she did not feel as though her Rowan experience effectively prepared her for the future. Nancy believed that the fashion in which her Advertising courses were taught, did not adequately prepare her for a career in the field.

I just kind of wished that the classes were more hands on rather than theory.

When I was applying for internships, I would see some of the requirements that people wanted and I would sit there and wonder how come I don't know this, how come I've never really used excel...It was just a lot of things that I wish I would have been taught or had some classes in.

Two participants were unsure as to whether they felt that their collegiate experience prepared them for their post-graduation plans. Monica attributed her uncertainty to the fact that she had just recently transferred to the University. Janet discussed that she was uncertain as well because she is not close to graduating and feels as though she could only truly have an opinion on the topic once she completes her degree. Finally, one participant was split in his opinion on the matter and stated the following as his justification:

I think it's more my fault because if I would have known what I wanted to do before, I could have probably went to a school that prepared me better for my major. I feel like I'm gong into the Master's in Social Work field through the back road and I could have went to a school that already had that from the beginning, but that's not really Rowan's fault. It's more so my indecisiveness.

“Is there a significant person or moment that has encouraged you to pursue your future goals?”

As a means to determine factors that contributed to participants' future aspirations, content analysis was used (Table 4.13). In four instances, participants stated that their goals after graduation were a result of their own self-motivation and interest. Monica discussed her indecisiveness in terms of field of study and that her final decision was based on her own volition.

I was really battling myself. Going through phases. It was just really stressful. My family always told me to go for the degree that gives you more money... They [said] accountants make so much money, so I gave it a try and I realized it wasn't for me. To me it's not the money that matters, it's what I'm going to be doing for the rest of my life... I'm sticking to me. I'm doing what I like, what I want to do for the rest of my life, what I'll be happy with.

In two instances, participants' interest in their future plans was based upon their past employment experience. George mentioned his experience from randomly securing a work-study job, which ultimately led him toward his professional interest.

I use to work at this office and it's an assessment clinic where there are three psychologists. Through them I figured out what my major was going to be, what I wanted to do, and it became a passion from that. At the time, I literally got fired from my job that day, I started looking for jobs, found that one, got the interview the next day, they hired me, and I just liked it a lot.

Family was seen as a significant impact during three instances throughout the study. Justin discussed how he is motivated to do well at Rowan and succeed in his chosen future profession as a means to help his family.

I just want to do something to take care of my family. I would say that I'm trying to do a lot to make sure that my parents are well off in the future. They've done everything for me here that they could so I could stay in school and get a degree.

In addition, there were two instances in which the courses that a participant enrolled in and his professors were instrumental in planning for the future. Nancy discussed that she became interested in a field of advertising after having a specific class and dealing directly with certain professors.

There was a class that made me want to pursue that side of advertising with the pitching and creative [aspect]. It was my campaigns class. I just loved everything about it and I love just coming up with ideas on the spot and writing them down on a napkin and presenting them the next week. I like that and I like working with a team of people who are all creative...I think that's what made me want to go into that. The professors are really good too, I would have to say. There was a professor who worked at real big agencies and he just tells it to us like it is. He's really upfront; he makes it fun and tells you the reality of how it is out there.

Other less frequent themes were also addressed. The significance of friends was mentioned in two instances. A significant staff member in the EOF program was also mentioned once. Monica found one particular EOF staff member to be a role model. "Just talking to [EOF staff member] and seeing her dedication to the program and everything, just made me want to do that. All the students look up to her and look for her for advice and guidance and she gives it with no problem."

Table 4.13

Results of Content Analysis Indicating Factors Contributing to High Achieving First-Generation Students Pursuit of Future Aspirations (N=8)

Category	Frequency	Rank
Self-Motivation	4	1
Past employment	2	3
Family	3	2
Rowan course/Professor	2	3
Friend	2	3
EOF	1	4
Total Frequency	14	

CHAPTER V

Summary, Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Summary of the Study

This thesis investigated selected high achieving first-generation collegians and their involvement at Rowan University. The study aimed to determine the reasons selected participants chose to enter higher education, as well as their involvement patterns and perceived experiences in the college environment. Further, the study discussed the impact involvement has on academics. Finally, the impact of the collegiate experience on participants' future aspirations was also addressed. Eight participants took part in the study and met the necessary requirements. Each participant was a current full-time Rowan University student during the 2010-2011 academic year, who was of upperclassman status, and had earned a cumulative grade point average of 3.4 or above after the Fall 2010 semester. Also, each participant was deemed first-generation if neither parent nor guardian had completed a degree program upon the start of the student entering college.

Each participant took part in three separate interview sessions during the Spring 2011 semester. The first interview session focused on past experiences in high school, while the second interview mainly addressed present experiences in the college environment, and the third interview discussed future aspirations after graduation. Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed.

In order to analyze the data, qualitative analysis was used to code the transcribed interviews. Content analysis allowed for categories to emerge and be identified. The frequency of categories was illustrated in table format. Participants' direct quotes were also utilized to discuss categories and for real experiences and perspectives of selected high achieving first-generation students to be illustrated.

Discussion of the Findings

Research Question 1: Why do selected high achieving first-generation students pursue higher education?

Participants discussed various reasons associated with entering a higher education institution. Pursuing a college degree in order to attain career opportunities not afforded to their parents was one of the most frequent themes found in the study. Selected first-generation students took note that their family had struggled in hardworking positions in order to make ends meet. These students recognized that a college degree would allow them to attain more successful and lucrative job opportunities. This finding supports research by Bui (2002) in which first-generation students were found to attend a college or university as a means to gain respect and allow them to financially support their families.

The study also found that many participants were encouraged to pursue a college degree through their parents, as well as their guidance counselors and teachers. These participants acknowledged the fact that they would not be currently enrolled at Rowan University if not for these individuals. These two themes of familial and guidance counselor/teacher encouragement do not support previous research on the topic. Terenzini et al. (1996) found that first-generation students reported little encouragement

to pursue college from their families and were less likely to report teachers as a source who advocated higher education. However, this difference in findings may be attributed to the fact that my sample specifically examined high achieving first-generation students.

In regards to institutional selection, research indicates that first-generation students are more likely to begin at a two-year institution (as cited in Bui, 2002). They are also less likely to attend a highly selective institution even though the completion of a bachelor's degree is related to institutional selectivity (Pascarella et al., 2004). In relation to this study, only one participant transferred to Rowan University from a two-year institution. Selection of Rowan University as higher education institution of choice was a result of various factors. Location and/or the environment were most frequently mentioned as contributing in the decision to enter Rowan University. Influential individuals were also discussed as the main reason for choosing the University.

Research Question 2: What are the involvement patterns of selected high achieving first-generation students at Rowan University?

In regards to academic involvement in the University, the selected first-generation students were deemed as high achieving since they had a grade point average of 3.4 or above during the time of the study. This finding is not supported by previous research conducted by Pascarella et al. (2004) in which first-generation collegians were found to have lower grades compared to other students after completing three years of college education. When compared to high school, the most significant finding of the current study was that participants tended to have more professor interaction in the college environment. Having more frequent interaction with professors at Rowan University may be related to research by Collier & Morgan (2008) in which first-generation students are

found to have more difficulty interpreting faculty expectations. Since first-generation students do not have similar cultural capital and background information in regards to the college environment because their parents do not have a college degree, they may use professors as an available resource.

Involvement in clubs and organizations was also addressed in the study and it was found that the majority of participants were actively and consistently involved at Rowan University. When compared to high school involvement, there was an increase in involvement from high school to college. While six participants continued their involvement from high school to college, all participants began their college experience being involved in at least one club or organization. Previous research on first-generation collegians has shown that this particular student population is less likely to be involved in extracurricular activities, athletics, and volunteerism during their second year. However, being involved in activities has been found to lead to greater outcome benefits for first-generation students (Pascarella et al., 2004).

In terms of types of involvement that high achieving first-generation students were involved in, there was not an equal distribution among all organizations. Participants most frequently discussed being a part of cultural organizations. However, there was less involvement in study abroad, athletics, honors programs, and official leadership positions in the Student Government Association. Each of these areas of involvement have been found to contribute to student success (Astin, 1984). Participants may be missing out on areas of advancement and benefits if not involved in these departments. The high frequency of cultural organization involvement may be a strategic

selection by participants as a means to find organizations that allow them to feel connected to the institution and locate students similar to them.

All participants mentioned having some type of employment during college. Research on first-generation students and employment indicates that this student population works more often than other students and is thus less involved in other activities (Pascarella et al., 2004). While participants in the current study indicated that they have been or are currently employed during college, they have also been involved in campus related activities. Also, the current study indicated that some students decided to work fewer hours or cease working in order to make more time for academics and clubs and/or organizations.

Overall student involvement incorporates the following components: considerable devotion to studying, spending time on campus, participating in organizations, and frequently interacting with both professors and fellow classmates (Astin, 1984). The patterns of involvement for selected high achieving first-generation students tend to mirror the aforementioned key components. More specifically, the majority of participants discussed spending time on campus and being actively involved in campus organizations. Further, all participants discussed interacting with fellow classmates and the majority of them discussed spending a considerable amount of time interacting with professors. While the majority of first-generation students indicated never or slightly studying in the college environment, all participants have earned academic achievements. Hence, the majority of high achieving first-generation participants support the main elements of Astin's theory of involvement.

Research Question 3: How do selected high achieving first-generation students perceive their experience in the college environment?

Previous research on collegians indicates that degree of self-efficacy is a predictor of level of adjustment in the college environment. In terms of first-generation students, they have lower levels of self-efficacy compared to other students. Therefore, they are likely to assume that they will not perform as well, thus they poorly adjust to their higher education institution (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). Other research also found that first-generation students felt less prepared and did not have much information regarding the social environment during their first year (Bui, 2002).

The present study found that the majority of students indicated having a smooth transition into Rowan University. The ease of their transition was attributed to participating in the Educational Opportunity Fund program and the Pre-College Institute. The programs allowed them to take courses, live on campus, and receive a number of resources to aid in their preparation to the college environment prior to beginning their freshman year. Thus, they felt more adjusted and were able to perform successfully. Those students, who were not in the EOF program, also had an easier transition to Rowan University because they transferred from different institutions and therefore already grew accustomed to the college environment.

Academically, the majority of students discussed that their academic performance has progressed throughout the years. While every participant had at least one academic advisor at Rowan University, only half of the students deemed these individuals to be effective. While academic advisors were not found to be effective by all participants, seven participants stated that they had a mentor while at Rowan University who aided in

their adjustment, success, and future plans. There were three instances in which an EOF staff member was deemed as a mentor. Therefore, participants' academic progression and success could instead be attributed to the EOF program and other prior experiences, which allowed them to have the motivation and build the necessary time management tools for scholastic achievement. Ultimately, the EOF program may be similar to living-learning communities because the resources offered in both programs provide first-generation students with an easier transition and academic success in the college environment (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007).

The perceived importance of involvement in clubs and organizations at Rowan University was also discussed. All eight participants, even those who were not actively involved, believed that students should participate in extracurricular activities. Participants reported that involvement enhances student's overall college experience. More specifically, participants frequently mentioned the ability to network, allowing students to be removed from their comfort zone, and develop time management skills. It is important to note, however, that one student mentioned that involvement could also be seen as unimportant because it removes students from their academics, which should be the top priority in college.

The study also found participants' perceptions of the importance of involvement for first-generation students in particular. Seven participants believed that being involved in activities is important for first-generation students. The most frequently stated reason that this specific student population should be involved in college is to set an example for their family members. Participants believe that they will be able to make their siblings and others knowledgeable about the college environment, since they were not given this

same information. As previously mentioned, this concept has been found in research conducted by Collier & Morgan (2008) in which first-generation students do not have the resources and awareness about how to be a college student because they were not given information from their familial relationships who are unaware of the college experience. Conversely, there was one participant who did not believe college involvement to be important because it distracts students from their real purpose in the environment, which is to succeed academically and obtain a degree. However, research indicates that involvement leads to more benefits for all students including first-generation collegians (Astin, 1984; Pascarella et al., 2004).

Research Question 4: What do selected high achieving first-generation students report as the impact of involvement on academics?

All participants in the study stated that academics are their primary focus in the college environment. However, five participants indicated that their involvement in clubs and/or organizations impacted their academics. Therefore, some participants decided to rectify this issue through specific means, such as decreasing the amount of hours at their place of employment. However, the remaining three participants did not find that their involvement impacted their academic achievement because they were capable of balancing the responsibilities of both.

Research Question 5: Does the undergraduate collegiate experience impact the future aspirations of selected high achieving first-generation students?

Research on first-generation students indicates that these collegians have lower levels of degree plans during the end of their second and third years in a higher education institution. This finding has been attributed to the concept of cultural capital. First-

generation students may not be cognizant of advanced degrees and the professional advancement they bring because they do not have a similar cultural capital compared to other students (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Findings in the present study indicate that participants have future plans. Directly after completing their bachelor's degree from Rowan University, the majority of students want to either enter the employment field or begin graduate school. However, all participants indicated they want to receive more schooling in the future. More specifically, four participants stated that the highest academic degree they plan to obtain in their lifetime is their master's, while the other half plan on obtaining a doctorate in the future.

Participants stated numerous individuals and/or moments that were contributing factors in their future goals. Self-motivation was most frequently seen, in which participants had self-interest in a particular field and advancing professionally. Another frequently discussed reason for pursuing their future aspirations was their family. While participant's families may not necessarily be knowledgeable about advanced degrees, participants understood the importance of obtaining employment and/or at least a master's degree in order to contribute financially and gain respect. This is similar to research indicating that first-generation students enter college in order to financially support their family and gain respect (Bui, 2002). Further, entering college initially was a means of exhibiting the appreciation and respect first-generation students have for their parents (Gofen, 2009).

Other factors contributing to participants' future aspirations include past employment experiences, specific academic courses and professors, as well as friends

and a specific individual in the EOF program. While these were less frequently seen, they are still integral factors for selected first-generation students in the Rowan University environment.

In regards to perceived future preparedness, the majority of participants believed that their Rowan University experience was indeed successful in instilling a sense of assuredness for the future. Of those who believed Rowan University prepared them for the future, two participants indicated that attending the institution was the reason that they chose their field of study and future plans. Thus, obtaining a bachelor's degree and having future plans after graduation may be attributed to institutional selection. Research has already indicated that first-generation students are more likely to receive a bachelor's degree if they attend a four-year institution during the start of their college experience (Pascarella et al., 2004). Initially starting at a four-year institution may also make students more likely to attend graduate school.

Conclusions

The study has found some integral information regarding high achieving first-generation students at Rowan University. The data suggest that the selected participants pursued a college degree as a means to have better career opportunities and be more financially supportive. Having witnessed their parents in hardworking employment positions that were not lucrative, they realized the importance of having a college education. Participants' most commonly stated sources of encouragement into higher education were found to be family members, as well as guidance counselors and teachers. Thus, individuals in the high school environment are of integral importance. Further, the study supports the concept that first-generation students lack cultural capital and the

knowledge of the college experience. Hence, high school is a pivotal time for this student population to understand the importance of higher education, the knowledge needed to apply to college, and the necessary tools to succeed in the higher education environment.

The results of the study also indicate information regarding high achieving first-generation students' experiences of involvement within Rowan University. Participants in the study were found to succeed academically and be deemed as high achieving because of their grade point average. These students may be seen as an anomaly since research states that first-generation students tend to not do well academically compared to other students. However, the focus of this study was to examine academically successful first-generation students and examine other facets of involvement. This study can conclude that the majority of participants did in fact participate in clubs and organizations while also receiving scholastic achievement. While participants tended to have a better grade point average in college when compared to high school, the number of participants who were involved in high school also continued to do so in college. More importantly, there were some participants who did not have any or little involvement in high school, but were actively involved in the University.

The study found differences among types of involvement from high school to college. More specifically, participants reported more instances of athletic involvement while in high school. While there was one instance of intramural participation in college, there was zero official Rowan University athletic involvement. Further, while holding a leadership position during high school was discussed frequently, participants actually held more leadership positions in the college environment. It is also important to note that in terms of clubs and organizations, cultural involvement in college was most frequently

discussed. However, not many students participated in the study abroad program. Hence, selected first-generation students in the study did not represent all Rowan University clubs and organizations equally.

Those students who were involved in college attributed their participation to various factors. Participants mentioned receiving encouragement from particular Rowan University staff members, as well as family members who were already part of the institution. Those who did not actively participate in activities attributed their un-involvement to either being a commuter or not dedicating enough energy to such pursuits. Overall, it can be seen that being a part of the Rowan University community and establishing relationships with staff members and/or peers can positively affect first-generation students' extracurricular involvement in the collegiate environment.

Most students began their involvement through their interaction with other individuals. In fact, only three participants were aware of any clubs or organizations offered throughout Rowan University prior to entering the institution and this was a direct result of having relations with an individual who was knowledgeable about or attended the University. However, the majority of participants did not know of any clubs or organizations ahead of time. This may be seen as a detriment to students' level of involvement in the college environment. While it may be understandable that students are not aware of all organizations offered before arriving to the institution, all participants stated that the University does not effectively market all organizations to currently enrolled students. Thus, students cannot take advantage of all the extracurricular activities found throughout the University. Students may be more willing to participate if they were made more aware of other clubs that were of interest to them.

Data suggest that the majority of students will continue to be involved in their community in the future. In regards to post-graduation involvement at Rowan University, participants were unsure about the alumni association. While participants were unaware of the alumni association, each intends to continue their involvement in a specific organization that they currently participate in.

The research suggests that high achieving first-generation students have certain perceptions of their experiences in the college environment. Adjustment to Rowan University was found to be fairly easy for the majority of participants. Being a member of the EOF program or having a prior experience at another institution were the major reasons for successful adjustment. While having an academic advisor did not seem to have an impact on all participants, a mentor was of integral importance.

Further, participants believed involvement to be beneficial to the college experience. All students believed that it is important for students to be involved in their higher education institution because it provides them with benefits of networking, getting out of their comfort zone, and time management skills. Participants also believed participation in clubs and organizations to be of great importance to first-generation students because they understand the importance of having a role model and someone to explain what it is like to be a college student. By being involved, first-generation students will have the ability to share their experiences with their younger family members and thus give them the information that they did not receive.

While involvement in activities is of importance, all participants acknowledge that academics are of first concern. With five participants indicating that their level of involvement affected their academics in some regard, it can be found that some first-

generation students may need help with time management. While some participants seem to be able to balance all responsibilities within the college environment, some may need additional assistance in order to determine whether removing oneself from an activity is necessary or they merely need to manage their time better.

In terms of future aspirations, the study revealed that all selected high achieving first-generation students intend to continue their education and receive either a master's or doctoral degree in the future. While the majority of participants believe Rowan University has prepared them for their future goals, improvements could still be made. Finally, significant individuals were also mentioned as sources of encouragement for their future plans. Thus, it can be seen that first-generation students benefit from having supportive family members or other individuals throughout their time in the college environment.

Overall, the basic student involvement patterns of devoting energy to studying academic material, spending time on the campus environment, participating in organizations, and interacting with professors and students are exhibited with the selected student population of high achieving first-generation collegians. While differences remain in terms of specific involvement activities and college experiences between non-first-generation students and those deemed to be high achieving first-generation, these student populations may be similar in terms of basic involvement patterns and the benefits associated with participation in the college environment. Therefore, these populations should not be viewed as extreme polar opposites, but instead as unique entities. Ultimately, the scholastic achievements of selected high achieving first-

generation collegians may make this specific population similar to traditional college students in terms of involvement patterns and future aspirations.

Recommendations for Practice

Based upon the findings presented in this study and previous research on the topic, the following recommendations for practice of high achieving first-generation students are presented:

High schools must pay more attention to first-generation students. Knowing that most first-generation students lack a sense of cultural capital, guidance counselors and other high school administrators should make the necessary efforts to teach students about college. Not only should they discuss with them the benefits of pursuing a college degree, but they should also discuss the application process including financial aid, as well as measures to ensure proper adjustment and success in the college environment. By providing workshops on these matters, students will have all the necessary information concerning a college education. However, parents should also be able to attend said workshops and even have others geared strictly toward them and their concerns. In addition to workshops, students should also be required to meet with their guidance counselor a certain number of times during the school year in order to address any personal issues concerning college matters. Finally, guidance counselors should have information regarding involvement activities at different institutions. They should make this information readily available to students and encourage them to research activities that they may be willing to join when arriving to their chosen campus.

As a means to help high achieving first-generation students be involved in the college environment, necessary measures should be taken. On campus residents should

have frequent workshops in their dormitories regarding all the possible areas to be involved in and how to join these organizations. For commuters, there should be specific workshops concerning involvement geared especially for them. Further, Rowan University administrators should collaborate with professors so that students are given weekly announcements about involvement opportunities during the start of their class periods. This would allow for all students, including commuters, to be notified of activities even if they do not check the Rowan Announcers sent to their e-mail addresses.

Further, since involvement in all types of organizations was not seen, measures should be taken to market all facets of involvement. More specifically, each department within the University should take measures to make their programs known throughout campus. Organization fairs may not be the most effective means for increased participation. Therefore, departments such as athletics, the Student Government Association, and the Bantivoglio Honors Concentration specifically should hold workshops to encourage participation.

The importance of having a mentor was exhibited throughout the study. Therefore, Rowan University should consider establishing a mentor program for all first-generation students enrolled in the institution. While participants in the EOF program are given a mentor, not all first-generation students participate in the program. Having a separate mentor program would allow all students to be given a mentor and to utilize them throughout their college experience. Another suggestion may be to have all first-generation students participate in a program similar to EOF, but does not have the financial requirements seen in the EOF program. Further, students would not need to

apply for this program, but would instead be automatically suggested to participate if they self-identify as a first-generation student.

For those students who may not be able or willing to start a transition program prior to their freshman year, the institution may consider having a course offered during the first semester. The course would count for college credit and would provide first-generation students with all the resources necessary to succeed while in their first year of college.

University administrators should also create social events for first-generation students. These events would include all Rowan University professors and staff members who were also first-generation students. This would allow all parties to discuss their experiences, provide helpful tips while in college, and allow students to obtain resources within the University. Ultimately, students will then know of administrators who were also first-generation students and be comfortable going to these particular individuals for help and guidance.

Rowan University should also improve upon their alumni association. Students should be made more aware of details concerning the alumni association and the benefits associated with being in this program. This may encourage first-generation students to continue their involvement at the University after graduation.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based upon the findings in this study, the following recommendations for future research are presented.

1. Future studies on high achieving first-generation collegians should be conducted with a larger population.

2. A longitudinal study should be used in order to examine the progression of high achieving first-generation students during high school, while in the college environment, and a few years after graduating with a bachelor's degree.
3. A study should be conducted using a mixed method approach, which incorporates, surveys, interviews, and focus groups.
4. Research should be done to examine high achieving first-generation students of a specific racial/ethnic group or of a specific socioeconomic status.
5. A study should be conducted with a group of high achieving first-generation students whose parents began their college education after the start of the student.
6. A future study should compare high achieving first-generation students to first-generation students who do not have academic success, in order to examine differences and similarities.
7. Researchers should compare programs such as the Educational Opportunity Fund to other programs targeted for first-generation students.

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APPENDIX A

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter



December 15, 2010

Georgia Kouzoukas
18 Southview Drive
Somers Point, NJ 08244

Dear Georgia Kouzoukas:

In accordance with the University's IRB policies and 45 CFR 46, the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to inform you that the Rowan University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved your project:

IRB application number: 2011-059

Project Title: Involvement Patterns of High Achieving First-Generation Collegians

In accordance with federal law, this approval is effective for **one calendar year** from the date of this letter. If your research project extends beyond that date or if you need to make significant modifications to your study, you must notify the IRB immediately. Please reference the above-cited IRB application number in any future communications with our office regarding this research.

Please retain copies of consent forms for this research for three years after completion of the research.

If, during your research, you encounter any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects, you must report this immediately to Dr. Harriet Hartman (hartman@rowan.edu or call 856-256-4500, ext. 3787) or contact Dr. Gautam Pillay, Associate Provost for Research (pillay@rowan.edu or call 856-256-5150).

If you have any administrative questions, please contact Karen Heiser (heiser@rowan.edu or 856-256-5150).

Sincerely,

Harriet Hartman, Ph.D.
Chair, Rowan University IRB

c: Burton Sisco, Educational Leadership, Education Hall

Office of Research
Bole Hall Annex
201 Mullica Hill Road
Glassboro, NJ 08028-1701

856-256-5150
856-256-4425 fax

APPENDIX B

Subject Information/Consent Form

Informed Consent:

I agree to participate in a study entitled, "Involvement Patterns of High Achieving First-Generation Collegians." The study will be conducted by Georgia Kouzoukas in partial fulfillment of a Master of Arts Degree in Higher Education Administration at Rowan University.

The purpose of this study is to examine the involvement patterns of high achieving first-generation college students, including their reasons for being involved in the college environment. Further, the study also examines whether the amount of energy high achieving first-generation students spend on academics affects their involvement outside of the classroom. Finally, the study examines whether involvement affects the future aspirations of high achieving first-generation students.

The study will be conducted through three separate face-to-face interview sessions. Each session will contain a series of questions that will take no longer than one hour to be completed. I understand that the interviews will be recorded, however, the recorded tapes will be erased and disposed of after the study has been completed.

I understand that my participation in this study is completely voluntary and that all information provided in the interviews is completely confidential. The only individuals that will have access to recordings and answers are the principal investigator and the course instructor. I agree that the information gathered from this study may be used for publication or educational purposes as long as I am not identified and a pseudonym is used.

I understand that there are no physical or psychological risks involved in participating and that I can request to stop the study at any time or refuse to answer any questions.

I understand that my participation in the study does not imply employment with the State of New Jersey, Rowan University, the principal investigator, or any other project facilitator.

I understand that I must be 18 years of age to participate in this study.

If I have any questions or problems concerning my participation in the study, I may contact Dr. Burton Sisco at 856-256-4500 ext. 3717 or the principal investigator, Georgia Kouzoukas at 609-338-3463.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Principal Investigator

Date

APPENDIX C

Interview Questionnaires

Individual Interview Protocol
Session I

Introduction:

This study entitled “Involvement Patterns of High Achieving First-Generation Collegians,” will be conducted for my Master’s thesis in Higher Education Administration. This first session will consist of a series of questions regarding your background information and your high school experiences. Please answer the questions to the best of your ability. Please let me know if you agree to have the interview tape recorded. If you feel uncomfortable at any time, you can refuse to answer a question(s), ask for the tape recorder to be turned off, or stop the study all together. Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this study.

Interview:

1. Gender:
2. Age:
3. Racial/Ethnic Group:
4. Occupation:
5. Education Level:
6. Major:
7. On Campus Residence or Commuter:
8. What are each of your parents level of education?
9. What were your parents reasons for not attending or graduating from college?
10. What is your best estimate of your grade point average in high school?
11. Did you take any Honors or AP classes?
12. Approximately how many hours a week did you spend on the following activities
 - a. Studying
 - b. Interacting with teachers
 - c. Studying with fellow classmates
 - d. Participating in the classroom
13. Were you involved in any activities during high school?
14. If so, which activities are you involved in?
 - a. When did you begin to get involved?
 - b. Why did you decide to pursue these activities?
 - c. Was there a significant person or moment that encouraged you to pursue activities?
15. If not, why did you not decide to be involved in activities?
16. Why did you decide to enroll in higher education?
17. Was there a significant person or moment that encouraged you to pursue higher education?
18. Were you aware of any clubs or organizations at your college prior to entering?

Closure:

Thank you so much for your time and I look forward to our next interview session.

Individual Interview Protocol Session II

Introduction:

Welcome to Session II of the “Involvement Patterns of High Achieving First-Generation Collegians” study. This session involves a number of questions regarding your college experience. Once again please answer the questions to the best of your ability. Please let me know if you agree to have the interview tape recorded. If you feel uncomfortable at any time, you can request to not answer a question, to ask for the tape recorder to be turned off, or stop the study all together if you feel uncomfortable at any time.

Interview:

1. Why did you decide to attend Rowan University in particular?
2. How was your transition into the college setting?
3. How would you describe your academic performance as of now?
4. Have you ever spoken to an academic advisor at Rowan?
5. Approximately how many hours a week do you spend on the following activities:
 - a. Studying
 - b. Interacting with professors
 - c. Studying with fellow classmates
 - d. Participating in the classroom
6. Are you involved in any activities within Rowan University or the nearby community?
7. If so, which activities are you involved in?
 - a. How often during the school year have you been involved in specific activities?
 - b. When did you begin to get involved?
 - c. Why did you decide to pursue these activities?
 - d. Was there a significant person or moment that encouraged you to pursue activities?
 - e. Is there any club or organization that you wish you would have participated in?
8. If not, why did you not decide to be involved in activities?
9. Approximately how many hours per week do you work on- or/and off-campus?
10. Do you have any non-course related interaction with your peers? Explain.
11. Do you think that being involved at college is important?
12. Do you think that Rowan markets all of the different organizations available for students to be involved in?
13. During your time at Rowan University, have you had a mentor?

Closure:

Thank you so much for your time and I look forward to our final interview session.

Individual Interview Protocol
Session III

Introduction:

Welcome to Session III, the final interview in the “Involvement Patterns of High Achieving First-Generation Collegians” study. This session involves a number of questions regarding your future plans and aspirations. Once again, please answer the questions to the best of your ability. Please let me know if you agree to have the interview tape recorded. If you feel uncomfortable at any time you can request to not answer a question, to ask for the tape recorder to be turned off, or stop the study all together if you feel uncomfortable at any time.

Interview:

1. What do you plan on doing in the future after you graduate?
2. What is the highest academic degree that you intend to obtain in your lifetime?
3. Do you think your Rowan experience has prepared you for your future goal? Explain.
4. Is there a significant person or moment that has encouraged you to pursue a future goal?
5. Do you plan to continue being involved in certain projects through the community that you reside in?
6. Do you plan to continue your involvement at Rowan through the alumni association?

Closure:

Thank you so much for your time throughout this entire process. The information that you provided is greatly appreciated.