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Understanding the Lived Experiences of Low-Income Pell Grant Undergraduate Students at a Most Competitive College

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UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LOW-INCOME PELL GRANT UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT A MOST COMPETITIVE COLLEGE

A Dissertation

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Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

By

Michael H. Postma

June 2017
UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LOW-INCOME PELL GRANT UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT A MOST COMPETITIVE COLLEGE

By

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Approved June 2017 by

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Neal Holly, Ph.D.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my best friend and wife, Debi. I am so thankful for her love and support. Debi’s thoughtful insight and critique contributed immeasurably to completing this dissertation, which was as much her achievement as mine.
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I am indebted to the East State University student participants for sharing their stories with me. The student participants’ experiences provided a window into how Pell Grant participation impacts elite college students. The students’ experiences also offered insight into how most competitive postsecondary institutions can better support low-income Pell Grant students.

In addition to the student participants, I am very grateful to the East State University financial aid director. The financial aid director invested substantial amounts of time identifying, randomly selecting, and disaggregating low-income Pell Grant recipients by undergraduate class. This dissertation would not have been possible without financial aid director support and assistance in recruiting student participants.
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Abstract

Low-income Pell Grant recipients represent a small percentage of undergraduate students at America’s elite colleges and universities. The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to understand the lived experiences of low-income Pell Grant students who attended a most competitive college. I used Tinto and Pusser’s (2006) institutional action model as my theoretical framework because this theory enabled a focus on the institutional factors low-income Pell Grant students identified as contributing to their persistence to succeed within the most competitive college context.

My study employed a qualitative research approach. The 11 student participants – seniors, juniors, sophomores, and freshman – all expressed ways in which elite college experiences had impacted their collegiate persistence to succeed. From the findings emerged themes of adapting, access to support, feedback, people mattered, and context. This research found low-income Pell Grant students were grateful for financial assistance that paid for their higher education. Yet, the participants noted challenges with certain institutional areas that negatively influenced their sense of belonging and participation in extracurricular activities, and these provide insight into how institutional programs can be improved. Reduced cultural capital meant the low-income students were reluctant to seek academic assistance and to ask the elite collegiate administration for support.

Elite institutional leaders and federal policymakers can benefit from this study. The research findings are important for practitioners seeking to improve socioeconomic diversity at our nation’s most competitive colleges.

Keywords: low-income student, most competitive college, Pell Grant
UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LOW-INCOME PELL GRANT UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT A MOST COMPETITIVE COLLEGE
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

During the 18th and 19th centuries, participation in America’s postsecondary education system was restricted to the top 1% of our nation’s affluent population (Thelin, 2004). Typically, our nation’s elite higher education institutions prepared traditional aged (i.e., 18- to 24-year old) students for high socioeconomic status positions (Bastedo, Altbach, & Gumport, 2016). This trend largely continued to 1940 with collegiate participation constrained to less than 10% of 18- to 24-year old American people (Snyder, 1993). When mass education took hold in the 1960s, in part due to the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (GI Bill) funding for veteran postsecondary education, a more democratic shift in collegiate attendance occurred (Bannier, 2006). The addition of the Higher Education Act in 1965 paved the way for need-based financial aid and changed the face of higher education by enabling more people to afford a college education (Lambert, 2014). As a result, the percentage of 18- to 24-year old Americans enrolled in degree-granting collegiate institutions grew from less than 10% in 1940 to 40% in 2013 (Kena et al., 2016). Despite this expansion in the proportion of students participating in postsecondary education, socioeconomic disparities persist. For example, low-income family children enroll in postsecondary education at one-third the rate of high-income family progeny (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, & Saez, 2014).

American democracy relies upon a certain level of socioeconomic equality since disparities in prosperity can lead to societal conflict (Fowler, 2013). According to the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD, 2015), the United
States (U.S.) possesses the largest gap in the developed world between low- (i.e., 25th income percentile and below) and high-income (i.e., 75th income percentile and above) demographics. Equality is central to our democratic political system and equality can equate to equal access to American higher education for all socioeconomic demographics (Espenshade & Radford, 2009).

Even though the U.S. Supreme Court has consistently decided against racial discrimination during the collegiate admissions process (e.g., Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin, 2016), it has not considered admission inequities based on family income (Cahalan, Perna, Yamashita, Ruiz, & Franklin, 2016). Yet, if we are to avoid the growing income disparities in the U.S. we need to assure that more low-income students obtain a college education as this level of education correlates with higher levels of income that can break the cycle of poverty (Carnevale, 2014). Socioeconomic equality for low-income families depends upon attaining postsecondary education (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016).

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016c), “it is in America’s interest to advance both access to higher education for low-income students, and success once they enroll” (p. 1). Improving socioeconomically disadvantaged students’ college participation has long resided on the federal policy agenda (Sawhill & Goldrick-Rab, 2014). For example, the Pell Grant program was established in 1972 as the principal means for subsidizing college education for students from low-income families (DeWitt, 2010). To accomplish this goal, the Pell Grant program provides need-based grants to low-income undergraduate students to promote postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b).
The Pell Grant program has a long track record of facilitating low-income student access to a college education (Yudof, 2009). As a result, the percentage of low-income high school graduates who enrolled in postsecondary education increased from 46% in 1970 to 60% in 2014 (Cahalan et al., 2016). In 2015-16, 33% of all American undergraduate students (i.e., 7.6 million) received $28.2 billion in Pell Grants (College Board, 2016). To ensure a requisite return on taxpayer investment is achieved, it is vital to understand low-income student postsecondary education experiences (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c).

The research-based understanding of low-income Pell Grant student experiences at our nation’s most selective colleges and universities is limited (Lee, 2016). Understanding Pell Grant student elite college experiences can help in improving their participation and persistence by identifying supportive institutional practices (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c). This study examined the experiences of Pell Grant students who are enrolled at one of our nation’s top colleges. To accomplish this, criteria for sorting postsecondary institutions into categories is needed. The next section outlines the methodology this study employed for ranking America’s higher education institutions.

**Ranking American Postsecondary Institutions**

It seems like every month magazines (e.g., *U.S. News and World Report, Money,* and *Kiplinger’s*) publish their rating of America’s approximately 2,600 four-year degree granting higher education institutions (Kena et al., 2016) based on a different and sometimes overlapping set of values and factors (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a). Current American postsecondary education institution rating systems “emphasize
selectivity over inclusiveness (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a, p. 4). According to the U.S. Department of Education, many of the existing college ranking systems omit a substantial number of America’s postsecondary institutions from their lists. For example, “MONEY magazine’s college rankings consider only about 700 of more than 5,000 total degree-granting institutions” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a, p. 6). To ameliorate this situation, the U.S. Department of Education (2016b) developed a college scorecard that facilitates individual postsecondary institution comparison in areas such as student completion rates, economic diversity, and graduate earnings.

Scholars studying categories of postsecondary institutions often utilize the comprehensive postsecondary institutional research published annually by Barron’s Educational Series (e.g., Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2016c). Leveraging 2014-15 freshman statistics, Barron’s Educational Series (2016) categorizes American colleges and universities using the median scholastic aptitude test (SAT) or median composite American college testing (ACT) entrance exam score; students’ high school (HS) class rank; students’ HS grade point average (GPA); and the percentage of students accepted. Barron’s Educational Series grouped the more than 2,600 American four-year postsecondary institutions into six different categories (see Table 1), which range from the most to the least selective: Most Competitive, Highly Competitive, Very Competitive, Competitive, Less Competitive, and Noncompetitive. The Barron’s Educational Series (2016) sorting system provides all undergraduate students and their families with information about the types of American four-year higher education institution and how to differentiate between those organizations when making a choice (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c).
Table 1

*Barron’s Educational Series (2016) Competitive College Categorization*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SAT/ACT</th>
<th>HS Class Rank</th>
<th>HS GPA</th>
<th>% Accepted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most</td>
<td>~728/29 &amp; Up</td>
<td>Top 10% to 20%</td>
<td>A to B+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly</td>
<td>~637/27 or 28</td>
<td>Top 20% to 35%</td>
<td>B+ to B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very</td>
<td>~600/24 to 26</td>
<td>Top 35% to 50%</td>
<td>Not below B-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>~536/21 to 23</td>
<td>Top 50% to 65%</td>
<td>B- to C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less</td>
<td>Below 500/Below 21</td>
<td>Top 65%</td>
<td>C or lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noncompetitive</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* SAT = Scholastic Aptitude Test; ACT = American College Testing; HS = High School; GPA = Grade Point Average. Adapted from *Profiles of American Colleges* (32nd ed.) (pp. 257-267), by Barron’s Educational Series, 2016, Hauppauge, NY: Barron’s Educational Series. Copyright 2016 by Barron’s Educational Series, Inc.

**Most competitive American college benefits.** Our nation’s elite colleges and universities provide postsecondary educational benefits specifically to the individual student and generally to American society (Carnevale & Rose, 2004). Students who attend most competitive colleges graduate at higher rates than students who attend less competitive colleges (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Carnevale & Rose, 2004). According to Carnevale et al. (2016), the financial return associated with a college degree and the gap in earnings by level of education is substantial. In 2015, the median earnings for Americans with a college degree were approximately 58% higher than those with only a high school diploma (Kroeger, Cooke, & Gould, 2016). Pointedly, the annual median earnings for most competitive college graduates were 12% higher than graduates
from less competitive colleges (Hout, 2012). According to Hout (2012), most competitive college “graduates enter the labor force endowed with the equivalent of a $260,000 education” (p. 389), which is $100,000 higher than a public college per graduate investment. Enhanced endowments enable American most competitive college institutions to provide students with financial need increased funding assistance (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Fischer, 2006; Hoxby, 2009).

Most competitive college graduates are likely to obtain more satisfying careers over graduates who attended less competitive postsecondary institutions (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Hout, 2012). According to the Institute for Higher Education Policy (2005), there is a high correlation between postsecondary education attainment and a qualitatively better lifestyle (e.g., improved health and the potential for movement up the socioeconomic status ladder). When compared to less selective college graduates, the societal benefits of most competitive postsecondary education include increased tax revenues, economic growth, civic participation, and workforce productivity (Hill, Hoffman, & Rex, 2005). Graduating from college is beneficial for students, but those graduating from most competitive colleges also receive additional advantages. Thus, it is critical to understand more about who attends and graduates from America’s most competitive colleges.

**Pell Grant research using rankings.** Researchers often use the Barron’s Educational Series college categorization system to compare undergraduate student populations and experiences by income. Carnevale and Rose (2004) used the Barron’s Educational Series rankings of postsecondary institutions to support their research on students’ socioeconomic status (i.e., family income, parental education, and occupations).
and the elite college admissions process. Similarly, Cahalan et al. (2016) leveraged the Barron’s Educational Series ranking system to discriminate between where American Pell Grant students (that is, students receiving federal financial support in the form of Pell Grants) were enrolled by type of postsecondary institution. These researchers found disparities in the types of higher education institutions that Pell Grant students attend. According to the authors, the preponderance of first-time, full-time Pell Grant undergraduate students were concentrated in less competitive American collegiate institutions. From 2000 to 2013, the percentage of first-time, full-time freshmen receiving Pell Grants at less competitive colleges rose from 42% to 51% (Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016). During this same timeframe, the percentage of first-time, full-time freshmen receiving Federal Grants (primarily Pell Grants) at America’s most competitive postsecondary institutions stagnated at 15% (Cahalan et al., 2016). The socioeconomic implications of this trend for American society are troubling. Compared to Pell Grant students enrolled at elite collegiate institutions, Pell Grant students enrolled at less competitive colleges graduate at lower rates (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011). To better understand the issue of socioeconomic inequality and collegiate selectivity, we must identify the institutional factors that influence Pell Grant students’ experiences at most competitive colleges.

**Pell Grant Students at Most Competitive Colleges**

Pell Grant students provide most competitive colleges with diverse perspectives that emerge from their socioeconomic status (Dowd, Cheslock, & Melguizo, 2008). In return, those same students receive access to a gifted academic community and higher levels of institutional financial resources (Hout, 2012). When Pell Grant students have
positive experiences at most competitive colleges, the application and enrollment of future Pell Grant students’ to the institution is improved (Campbell & Voight, 2015). Further, Pell Grant recipients at most competitive colleges graduate at higher rates than similar Pell Grant students who attend less selective colleges (Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner, & Yagan, 2017; Hoxby, 2009).

Despite this, research suggests that many Pell Grant recipients attending most competitive colleges feel marginalized, isolated, and misplaced at the institution (Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016; Lee, 2016). One factor that may contribute to these feelings of non-belonging is most Pell Grant students must work during school to pay for elite college attendance (Tilghman, 2007). Such work requirements can reinforce socioeconomic status disparity and limit the Pell Grant student’s ability to socially adapt within the elite college campus environment (Espenshade & Radford, 2009). When compared to more affluent students, most competitive college Pell Grant students participate less in extracurricular activities (Stuber, 2009) and graduate at reduced rates (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Nichols, 2015).

Feelings of non-belonging on elite college campuses, reduced participation in extracurricular activities, and lower graduation rates suggests that enabling Pell Grant students’ access to most competitive postsecondary institutions is not enough. In order to increase the numbers of Pell Grant students attending and succeeding in elite colleges and universities, we need to understand which experiences affect Pell Grant student persistence to succeed and how most competitive postsecondary institutions can better support Pell Grant student success (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c). According to Kuh (2005), “student success must be everyone’s business in order to create the
conditions that encourage and support students to engage in educationally productive activities” (p. 295). Through the lens of Tinto and Pusser’s (2006) institutional action model (IAM), this phenomenological case study examined Pell Grant students’ most competitive college experiences and what institutional factors influenced this student population’s persistence to succeed.

**Problem Statement**

Even though many previous studies focused on income and its effect on postsecondary education (e.g., Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Bannier, 2006; Bloom, Hartley, & Rosovsky, 2006; Cahalan et al., 2016; Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Chetty et al., 2014; Delisle & Miller, 2015; Dynarski, 2008; Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013; Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016; Kane, 2001; Kena et al., 2016; Lauff & Christopher, 2014; Long, 2006; Mundel & Coles, 2004; Wei & Horn, 2002; Wei & Horn, 2009), these studies do not shed light on the actual experience of Pell Grant students who attend America’s most competitive higher education institutions. Lee (2016) noticed a gap in the literature regarding the lived experiences of low-income students who attend elite American colleges. She partially addressed this gap by studying the lived experiences of low-income women who attended a most competitive women’s liberal arts college (Lee, 2016). What remains unknown is if the experiences of the women in Lee’s (2016) study are also found in co-educational settings. Therefore, I sought to address the dearth of qualitative studies focusing on low-income students’ experiences at elite colleges by concentrating on Pell Grant students at a most competitive co-educational postsecondary institution.
Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study. The sub-questions align with the support, feedback, and involvement dimensions of Tinto and Pusser’s (2006) IAM (see Figure 1).

1. How do the experiences of Pell Grant students at a most competitive college contribute, or not, to their persistence to succeed?
   A. Support: In what ways do Pell Grant students identify institutional support as contributing, or not to their persistence to succeed?
   B. Feedback: In what ways do Pell Grant students identify institutional feedback as contributing, or not to their persistence to succeed?
   C. Involvement: In what ways do Pell Grant students identify institutional involvement as contributing, or not to their persistence to succeed?

2. What other institutional factors do Pell Grant students identify as contributing, or not to their persistence to succeed?

Theoretical Framework: Persistence

Postsecondary education persistence has been a research focus for many years. Of great interest in this work are the factors that help support student retention and graduation. Persistence is defined as “the enrollment of individuals over time that may or may not be continuous and may or may not result in degree completion” (Tinto & Pusser, 2006, p. 1). While postsecondary participation increased by 31% between 2000 and 2014, 40% of the first-time, full-time undergraduate college students did not complete a bachelor’s degree within six years in 2014 (Kena et al., 2016). A factor contributing to the reduced collegiate completion rates was students from low-income families, as this
group of students evidenced stagnated graduation rates over the last 20 years (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). To better understand the factors affecting college student persistence and completion, Tinto and Pusser (2006) developed the IAM (see Figure 1). This model builds on the fact that students arrive at a higher education institution with their own unique capabilities that influence their probability of success.

Tinto and Pusser’s (2006) IAM supports institutional transition from awareness of higher education student persistence issues to creation of an institutional environment that enables student success. According to Tinto and Pusser (2006), “institutional commitment to student success sets the tone for the expectational climate for success that students encounter in their everyday interactions with the institution, its policies and practices, and its faculty, staff, administrators, and other students” (p. 10). Institutional dedication to the interrelated factors of support, involvement, and feedback influence the student’s collegiate experience and ultimately impact their attainment of a college degree (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). The IAM provides a guide for most competitive colleges seeking to improve Pell Grant student persistence and serves as a conceptual lens for analysis regarding Pell Grant recipient experiences at those colleges.
Figure 1. Tinto and Pusser’s (2006) institutional action model. Adapted from Moving From Theory to Action: Building a Model of Institutional Action for Student Success (p. 9), by V. Tinto and B. Pusser, 2006, Washington, DC: National Postsecondary Education Cooperative. Copyright 2006 by National Postsecondary Education Cooperative.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to understand the lived experiences of low-income Pell Grant students who attended a most competitive college. The theoretical framework for this research is Tinto and Pusser’s (2006) IAM. The IAM supports this study because it leverages research-based postsecondary institutional practices to support identification of actions and policies institutions can implement to improve Pell Grant student persistence at most competitive colleges. Instead of considering unique external postsecondary institutional factors (e.g., student attributes), I focused this exploration on the IAM dimensions of support, involvement, and feedback. Institutional commitment to those interrelated factors directly affects the Pell Grant student’s collegiate experience and they are within the elite higher education institution’s capability to change.
Significance of the Study

International economic competition is driving the American goal to educate more people with postsecondary skills and knowledge (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education & Southern Regional Education Board, 2010). American individual and societal success is linked to postsecondary completion (Carnevale et al., 2016). Pointedly, between 2008 and 2014 America’s postsecondary attainment rate improved from 37.9% of the U.S. population to 45.3% (Lumina Foundation, 2016). But, in the near future, even greater higher education attainment rates are needed for the country to be economically competitive. According to education policy experts, 65% of all American jobs will require an associate’s degree or higher by 2020 (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). Increasing low-income students’ postsecondary completion rates are key to addressing our nation’s projected workforce requirements (Lumina Foundation, 2016).

Low-income students’ postsecondary education opportunities, however, are limited when compared to higher income Americans (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c). For Americans born between 1979-1982, 61% more high- than low-income family students possessed some postsecondary education (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). In 2014, the gap between high- and low-income high school graduates who immediately enrolled in postsecondary education was 29% (McPherson, Ferguson, & Fanton, 2016). The completion gap between students from high- and low-income families was also substantial with students from affluent families graduating with a bachelor’s degree at a 60% higher rate than students from low-income families (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). At America’s most competitive colleges, 90% of high-income family undergraduate students attain a bachelor’s degree, compared to a 76% graduation rate for low-income family
students (Carnevale & Rose, 2004). To improve low-income student graduation rates, we need to understand the factors that influence their persistence.

Student interaction on most competitive college campuses creates enduring social networks that support increased power and socioeconomic status (Hout, 2012). For example, approximately 50% of America’s top corporate and political leaders graduated from our nation’s most competitive colleges (Dye, 2014). America’s most competitive higher education institutions are not equally successful in educating their collective student body (Lee, 2016). Research suggests that Pell Grant students struggle to assimilate into most competitive college campus environments (Espenshade & Radford, 2009). According to Lee (2016), “despite decades of research on college inequality, we still don’t know much about the experiences of low-income…students who attend selective colleges” (p. 2). To comprehend the most competitive higher education institutional context, we must focus on the Pell Grant students who experience it.

Administrators at the most competitive higher education institutions, particularly those that are developing institutional support, feedback, and involvement programs, should understand the experiences of Pell Grant students who are participating in those programs. Qualitative inquiry into institutional practices has the ability to provide insight into Pell Grant student experiences at America’s most competitive postsecondary institutions (Lee, 2016). The findings from this phenomenological case study will enable most competitive college administrators and faculty members to better understand the Pell Grant student academic experience and to appropriately tailor their institutional programs to facilitate Pell Grant student success.
Postsecondary institutions operate within the boundaries of federal education policy. The Pell Grant program is a federal tool used by policymakers to improve low-income student postsecondary education access and persistence (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c). Even though low-income student access to postsecondary education has improved, research shows that when compared to high-income postsecondary education students, fewer Pell Grant recipients complete college (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 2012; Pell Institute, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016c), 68% of non-Pell Grant recipients complete a bachelor’s degree within six years, which compares to a 50% graduation rate for Pell Grant recipients. Historically, the Pell program has been ineffective in improving low-income student graduation (Robinson & Cheston, 2012). This study provides federal policymakers with insight into how the Pell Grant program could be adjusted to improve low-income student persistence at America’s elite postsecondary institutions.

**Definition of Terms**

*Belonging* is defined as collegiate students’ “perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty and peers)” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3).

*Dependent Student* is defined as 18- to 24-year olds whose eligibility for financial aid is “a function of their own and their parents’ financial circumstances” (College Board, 2016, p. 11).
\textit{Family income} facilitates comparison of postsecondary institution students (College Board, 2016). According to Proctor, Semega, and Kollar (2016), the median American family income in 2015 was $56,500 and the distribution of family income was:

- 40th percentile and below: Less than $43,511,
- 40th percentile to 60th percentile: $43,512 to $72,001, and
- 60th percentile and above: $72,002 and up.

For the purposes of this study, low-income was less than $43,511, middle-income is $43,512 to $72,001, and high-income was above $72,002.

\textit{Graduation} is defined as first-time, full-time undergraduate college students who complete a bachelor’s degree within six years (Kena et al., 2016).

\textit{Feedback} encompasses student assessment within and outside the college classroom and it refers to “entry assessment of learning skills and early warning systems that alert institutions to students who need assistance” (Tinto & Pusser, 2006, p. 7). For the purposes of this study, feedback refers to student academic performance based on student interaction with peers and postsecondary institutional members.

\textit{Involvement} refers to student academic and social engagement with other students, faculty members, and postsecondary activities (Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

\textit{Low-income student} for the purposes of this study is defined as dependent undergraduate students with family incomes below $43,511.

\textit{Most Competitive College} is defined as higher education institutions that admit a low percentage of applicants, students with high school rankings in the top 20\% of their class, students with grade point averages of B+ or better, students with median SAT test scores above 655 and ACT scores of 29 and above (Barron’s Educational Series, 2016).
For the purposes of this study, the terms most competitive and elite college are used interchangeably.

*Pell Grants* are federal financial aid “to help low-income students afford college in an effort to provide truly equal access to higher education” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c, p. 2).

*Persistence* is defined as “the enrollment of individuals over time that may or may not be continuous and may or may not result in degree completion” (Tinto & Pusser, 2006, p. 1). For the purposes of this study, persistence describes those students who continue to progress through an undergraduate academic program.

*Success* is defined as “the completion of a college degree” (Tinto & Pusser, 2006, p. 1). For the purposes of this study, the definition of success includes Pell Grant student perception of belonging at the elite institution.

*Support* involves the IAM factors of academic, social, and financial. Academic support includes advising, tutoring, study groups, and supplemental instruction. Social support encompasses counseling, mentoring, and clubs. Financial support refers to institutionally provided aid to enable student enrollment and completion (Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

**Summary**

According to Lee (2016), “financial aid terms such as Pell Grant have become proxies for diversity, exemplified when colleges publish statistics on the number of Pell Grant recipients they have” (p. 19). The federal government annually invests approximately $30 billion in Pell Grant financial aid to improve low-income student access and persistence to succeed at our nation’s higher education institutions (U.S.
Department of Education, 2015b). When compared to Pell Grant students, enrollment and graduation rates at our nation’s most competitive colleges are higher for affluent family students (Carnevale & Rose, 2004). Negligible research exists on the actual experience of low-income Pell Grant students who attend America’s most competitive higher education institutions (Lee, 2016). The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to understand the lived experiences of low-income Pell Grant students who attended a most competitive college through the lens of the Tinto and Pusser (2006) IAM.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Improving low-income student access and persistence at America’s colleges by adjusting the Pell Grant program has been the focus of other research (e.g., Kelchen & Goldrick-Rab, 2015; Scott-Clayton & Baum, 2013). Yet, beyond the documentation of the achievement gap between low- and high-income family students, little is known about what happens to low-income Pell Grant students who are enrolled in America’s most competitive colleges (Lee, 2016). Because there are high socioeconomic benefits associated with attending and graduating from one of the nation’s most competitive colleges (Hout, 2012), it is especially critical to understand more about the low-income student experience at these colleges. The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to understand the lived experiences of low-income Pell Grant students who attend a most competitive college. The theoretical framework for this research is Tinto and Pusser’s (2006) institutional action model (IAM).

This literature review encompasses the areas needed to address my study’s research questions. To begin, I review the organizational context of America’s most competitive colleges and low-income student access to those postsecondary institutions. Next, I attend to the current research regarding the low-income student experience at elite colleges and highlight gaps in the existing research base. A brief historical review of the federal government’s policy role in financing postsecondary education, an overview of the Department of Education, and a summary of the Pell Grant program are provided.
Finally, I present literature on exploration of the students’ experience at our nation’s most competitive colleges through the Tinto and Pusser (2006) IAM conceptual framework.

**America’s Most Competitive Colleges**

Initiation of America’s most competitive colleges dates to Harvard’s establishment in 1636, which was founded to educate America’s colonial leaders (Morison, 1928). Through the late 19th century, postsecondary education was primarily restricted to the most affluent 1% of America’s population (Snyder, 1993). During the next two centuries the number of elite American postsecondary institutions increased substantially (Thelin, 2004). For the 2014-15 academic year, 67 American colleges and universities were categorized as most competitive (Barron’s Educational Series, 2016).

Despite the increased numbers of most competitive colleges, their capacity did not expand sufficiently to address student demand. Between 1992 and 2004, the application rate to America’s most competitive colleges grew by 18% and the capacity at those postsecondary institutions grew less than 1% (Bound, Herschbein, & Long, 2009).

Student postsecondary institution choice is being driven by comparison among institutions regarding the availability of institutional resources and student population characteristics (Hoxby, 2009). The rise of publications that rank postsecondary institutions has increased institutional selectiveness, student competition for admittance to elite colleges, and the perceived value of a most competitive college education (Bound et al., 2009). As a result, most competitive college acceptance rates and low-income student enrollment have declined over time (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a). The nation’s socioeconomic disparity at most competitive colleges is pronounced with low-
income students representing a small percentage of the first-time, full-time undergraduate student population (Chetty et al., 2017; Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016).

Table 2 shows the percentage of elite college student enrollment by family income in 1972, 1982, 1992, 2004, and 2014 (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Cahalan et al., 2016; Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016). According to the research, between 1972 and 2004, low-income student enrollment at most competitive colleges averaged between 4% and 5% of the undergraduate student population. In 2012-13, 17 million students were enrolled in American degree-granting collegiate institutions (Kena et al., 2016) and 340,000 students were enrolled in most competitive colleges (Cahalan et al., 2016). During that same timeframe, low-income students comprised 45% of the American postsecondary education population (Cahalan et al., 2016), but only 3% of the student body at our nation’s elite colleges (Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016).
Table 2

*Most Competitive College Enrollment by Family Income*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low-Income</th>
<th>Middle-Income</th>
<th>High-Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Several factors contribute to the dearth of socioeconomic diversity at our nation’s most competitive colleges. Low-income family collegiate students often lack the academic preparation to garner admittance to elite colleges (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013). Over the past 30 years, the buying power of the Pell Grant has deteriorated and by 2014-15, the average Pell Grant amount covered less than one-third of the cost of attendance at most competitive colleges (College Board, 2016). Research suggests undermatching also contributes to the socioeconomic stratification on elite campuses (J. Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013). Additionally, low-income students may lack the
cultural capital to effectively engage most competitive colleges’ faculty and staff (Calarco, 2014; Lareau, 2015).

**Undermatching.** According to Bastedo and Flaster (2014), “undermatching occurs when a high school graduate attends a college that is less selective than her academic achievement indicates” (p. 93). Light and Strayer (2000) found that students whose academic capabilities are appropriately matched with their college choice have a higher probability of graduating from college when compared to those who undermatch. Low-income, high-ability students who attend less selective colleges graduate at lower rates when compared to low-income, high-ability students enrolled at more selective colleges (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). Therefore, aligning student academic capabilities with the appropriate competitive college category is important to collegiate student success (Hout, 2012; Hoxby & Turner, 2015).

A student-college undermatch study by J. Smith et al. (2013) analyzed longitudinal data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS: 1988) and the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002. Both datasets encompass high school and college transition data. Findings highlight that 49.6% of low-income students undermatch their academic achievement capabilities with their college choice, whereas only 34% of high-income students undermatch their college choice (J. Smith et al., 2013). According to the authors, students who undermatch often live in rural areas and lack parents with a postsecondary education. Other student characteristics related to undermatching include limited access to teachers who attended elite universities (Hoxby & Avery, 2013) and the affordability of postsecondary education (Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016). Persistence for undermatched students is affected by several factors
including peer groups, college campus culture, and students’ perceived ability to engage and complete the postsecondary institution curriculum (J. Smith et al., 2013). It is important to better understand the low-income students who do make it to elite institutions to know why—which may help other students who undermatch.

**Cultural Capital.** The concept of cultural capital is rooted in Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) research. Cultural capital is defined as “skills individuals inherit that can be translated into different forms of value as people move through different institutions” (Lareau, 2015, p. 4). According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), parents from different socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds influence their children in disparate ways. As a result, the offspring develop dissimilar views on how to engage the world. Bourdieu and Passeron named this socialization process habitus. Research suggests habitus creates inequality for low SES children within educational settings (Bourdieu, 1986; Calarco, 2014). For example, income disparity can affect students’ use of cultural capital to request academic support (Calarco, 2014; Lareau, 2015). According to research, low-income students are less proficient at using cultural capital than more affluent students to request academic assistance. Additionally, low-income students are less willing than more affluent students to request exceptions to education institution policy (Lareau, 2015). What remains unknown is if Calarco’s (2014) and Lareau’s (2015) findings apply to low-income Pell Grant students attending elite colleges. This study sought to answer that question.

**Qualitative research on low-income students.** Qualitative work on studying low-income students’ experience at most competitive colleges was conducted by Aries and Seider (2007), Lee (2016), and Steinmetz (2008). As I have argued, Lee (2016)
acknowledged the scant research that exists about low-income students’ experience at most competitive colleges. Her study looked at the experience of 13 low-income family students (i.e., under $40,000) and 13 working-class family students (i.e., $40,000 to $80,000) who attended a most competitive women’s liberal arts college (Lee, 2016). In my replication study, my sample included both male and female Pell Grant participants who were enrolled at a most competitive co-educational liberal arts college. Lee’s (2016) participants felt that their higher education institution exploited Pell Grant recipients as a category for statistical benefit towards publicizing a more diverse student body. An institutional brochure from her site college stated, “with over 20 percent of students receiving federal Pell Grants, Linden is an established national leader in creating access for low-income and first generation students” (Lee, 2016, p. 76). These institutional marketing methods created tension for Pell Grant students by making them feel like they were not part of the normal student body (Lee, 2016).

As with Lee’s (2016) study, Aries and Seider (2007) used a qualitative design to explore the experiences of low-income students enrolled at a most competitive college. Their study compared the effect of social class on identity development, whereas my study focused on the interrelated postsecondary institutional factors of support, involvement, and feedback and their influence on the low-income student’s collegiate experience. Aries and Seider (2007) interviewed 15 low-income (i.e., below $60,000) and 15 high-income (i.e., above $110,000) elite liberal arts college freshman and sophomores and 15 low-income public college freshman and sophomores. Participation in the study was limited to White students, whereas my study included minority students. Aries and Seider’s (2007) findings suggested that wealthy students prioritize social class
at a higher level than low-income students and that “social class is unrelated to self-esteem” (p. 153). Low-income students perceived value in their lack of wealth because of the associated life experiences. When compared to the public college study participants, elite student participants placed more value on the social capital and connections enabled by a most competitive college education (Aries & Seider, 2007). What remains unknown is what institutional factors affect the low-income student’s collegiate experience and if Aries and Seider’s (2007) findings apply to minority students.

Steinmetz (2008) expanded Lee’s (2016) and Aries and Seider’s (2007) research by using a qualitative design to explore low SES elite college student experiences. Her study focused on how elite collegiate students’ identity development is affected by low SES. To accomplish this, Steinmetz interviewed 10 most competitive college students in their last semester of college. Steinmetz’s (2008) study suggests that low SES students suppress their identity at most competitive colleges. In contrast to the Aries and Seider’s (2007) findings, Steinmetz (2008) research argued that low SES elite college students do not fully appreciate or leverage the benefits of graduating from a most competitive college. When compared to their more affluent peers, this lack of understanding translates to low SES elite college graduates with more limited career choices (Steinmetz, 2008). What remains unknown is what institutional factors affect low SES students’ elite higher education experience and if Steinmetz’s findings apply to freshman, sophomores, and juniors.

Quantitative research on low-income students. Several quantitative studies on studying low-income students’ most competitive college experience exist (e.g., Carnevale
Carnevale and Rose (2004) focused on access for low-income students, whereas my study centered on low-income student persistence. Carnevale and Rose (2004) analyzed data from the NELS: 1988 and the High School and Beyond Study of 1980 (HS&B), which were conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The study’s NELS: 1988 sample consisted of 25,000 high school freshman and the study’s HS&B sample consisted of 30,000 college students. Carnevale and Rose’s (2004) analysis revealed a reduction in admissions preference for low-income family students at America’s most competitive colleges over the last three decades. The Carnevale and Rose (2004) study suggested that most competitive college admissions policies screen out substantial numbers of academically qualified low-income students in favor of more affluent students. As a result, low-income students constituted a mere 3% of America’s most competitive college undergraduate student bodies in 1988 (Carnevale & Rose, 2004) and in 2014 (Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016).

Building on the Carnevale and Rose’s (2004) research, Wyner and colleagues (2008) studied high-achieving, low-income family students’ academic performance based on Barron’s Educational Series collegiate institution categorization. They analyzed data from the NELS: 1988 and the Baccalaureate and Beyond Study of 1992/1993 (B&B), which were conducted by the NCES. High-achieving students were defined as those with NELS administered test scores in the top 25% of the nation. Low-income was defined as below the annual median American family income, which varied across the longitudinal study data. Similar to the 2004 study, low-income family students were underrepresented at America’s most competitive colleges (Wyner et al., 2008). According to the 2008
authors, low-income, high-achieving students’ collegiate graduation rates fell from 90% at the most competitive colleges to 56% at the least competitive colleges. Pointedly, low-income students have better outcomes and graduate at higher rates when they attend most competitive colleges versus less competitive colleges. This compares to an 80% graduation rate for high-income, high-achieving students regardless of their competitive college choice (Wyner et al., 2008). Moreover, low-income, high-achieving students enrolled in America’s community colleges at higher rates (i.e., 24%), than in most competitive colleges (i.e., 19%; Wyner et al., 2008). Postsecondary education affordability, student proximity to higher education institutions, curriculum, and the students’ work requirements contributed to bifurcation of where low-income, high-achieving students attended college (Hillman & Weichman, 2016; Wyner et al., 2008).

Espenshade and Radford (2009) conducted an extensive quantitative study on the low-income student experience at eight American most competitive colleges. They analyzed data from over 245,000 students across three different academic year groups (i.e., 1983, 1993, and 1997). Much like Carnevale and Rose (2004) and Wyner et al. (2008), Espenshade and Radford (2009) found that low-income students were underrepresented on elite American postsecondary education campuses. Espenshade and Radford (2009) added to the earlier studies by suggesting that all students learn at higher levels when they socialize across SES boundaries. According to Espenshade and Radford (2009), most competitive college students primarily tend to interact with other students who possess similar SES backgrounds, which creates a missed opportunity for learning. Therefore, elite institution administrators can promote inter-SES group socialization opportunities by varying roommate arrangements and by encouraging
extracurricular activity engagement (Espenshade & Radford, 2009). Understanding more about low-income student experiences at most competitive colleges, specifically those linked to institutional areas of support, feedback, and engagement, may provide additional strategies for institutions to employ.

**Benefits.** The benefits of attending an American most competitive college include improved student graduation rates over less competitive postsecondary institutions (Bound et al., 2009; Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Kena et al., 2016). In 2008, 89% of our nation’s first-time, full-time most competitive college students completed a bachelor’s degree in six-years (Kena et al., 2016), compared to a 60% six-year graduation rate for all American first-time, full-time higher education students who attended a four-year postsecondary institution. The six-year graduation rate at the least selective four-year postsecondary institutions was 36%, and only 28% of community college students completed an associate’s degree within three years (Kena et al., 2016). The types of college students attend matters for completion rates.

**Financial benefits.** Most competitive colleges possess more financial resources (e.g., endowments) than less competitive postsecondary institutions, which enable enhanced student financial aid and instruction investment (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). According to Hoxby (2009), substantial levels of institutional resources allowed most competitive colleges to spend $15,000 more per student per academic year than they charged in tuition (see Table 3). As a result, the average low-income student cost to attend a most competitive college was substantially lower (i.e., $6,754) than less competitive colleges (i.e., $26,335). Additionally, the per student instruction investment was considerably higher at most competitive colleges (i.e., $27,001), when compared too
less competitive colleges (i.e., $5,359). According to Webber and Ehrenberg (2010), increased levels of higher education institutional financial aid and the amount of money they spend on instruction corresponds to improved undergraduate student completion rates. Despite the lower net college cost, many low-income students focus on the sticker cost instead and as a result, often do not consider most competitive colleges as an option (Romano, 2012).

Table 3

2009-10 Annual Postsecondary Per Student Instruction Expenditure & Student Cost

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Instructional Expenditures</th>
<th>Average Low-Income Student Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most Competitive</td>
<td>$27,001</td>
<td>$6,754</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly Competitive</td>
<td>$12,163</td>
<td>$17,437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Competitive</td>
<td>$8,300</td>
<td>$23,813</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>$6,542</td>
<td>$19,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Competitive</td>
<td>$5,359</td>
<td>$26,335</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Socioeconomic benefits. The socioeconomic related benefits accrued to most competitive college graduates include increased earnings, postgraduate studies, and social status (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Hout, 2012). According to Hout (2012), most competitive college graduates annually earn 12% more than less competitive college graduates. When compared to less selective college graduates, elite college completion
results in higher acceptance rates at graduate schools (Carnevale & Rose, 2004). Bastedo and Flaster (2014) noted, “elite colleges serve as gatekeepers to well-paying and politically influential occupations, at least partially because of enhanced odds of admission to prestigious (graduate schools)” (p. 93). Graduate school options matter because those with master’s degrees earn approximately 20% more per year than those with only a bachelors’ degree (Kena et al., 2016). Studying the Pell Grant student experience at America’s most competitive colleges is important to building a progressive and diverse American society because of the collegiate connection to higher earnings and the top social levels of our nation’s population (Dowd et al., 2008; Dye, 2014).

**Federal Government Role in College Finance**

Postsecondary education enrollment, persistence, and completion rates are responsive to public intervention through federal need-based student financial aid (Bloom et al., 2006; Deming & Dynarski, 2009). A cornerstone of the federal financial aid system is the Pell Grant, which provides an intervention tool for improving low-income student persistence and completion rates (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2014; Baum et. al., 2013). According to Burd (2016), “when judging a college’s commitment to serving low-income students, policymakers, researchers, and journalists have mostly relied on a single measure: the percentage of Pell Grant recipients each college enrolls” (p. 5). This section provides a brief historical overview of the federal government’s policy role in financing postsecondary education and an overview of the Department of Education. The next section provides an overview of the Pell Grant program.
**Historical overview.** The United States Constitution vests higher education oversight to the individual states. Even though the states are responsible for education, through much of America’s history shared federal and state economic development interests enabled federal government involvement in postsecondary education (Zumeta, Breneman, Callan, & Finney, 2012). The federal government develops higher education policy and administers funding for postsecondary education research and collegiate student aid (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Starting with the Morrill Act of 1862, the federal government has impacted higher education enrollment and completion through a series of legislative and policy actions (Thelin, 2004).

The 1862 Morrill Act provided the states with federal land for use at existing colleges and for the establishment of new higher education institutions (Zumeta et al., 2012). The 1862 Morrill Act funded institutions to advance agriculture, mining, and engineering, which initiated America’s path to a global economic power (Yudof, 2009). The 1890 Morrill Act helped to democratize higher education by providing funding for the establishment of Black land grant colleges (Bastedo et al., 2016). Following World War II, the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (GI Bill) legislation provided funding for approximately seven million veterans to complete postsecondary education (Bannier, 2006). Between 1944 and 1955, the GI Bill increased U.S. college completion rates significantly by providing over $1 billion per year of college funding from an annual federal budget of $60 billion (Bloom et al., 2006). A 1988 Congressional report estimated that one GI Bill dollar invested in a World War II veteran’s college education returned approximately seven dollars to the U.S. economy (Bannier, 2006).
The National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958, which was spurred by the Soviet Union’s launch of the Sputnik satellite, established federal loans for college students and federal research programs to advance America’s scientific capabilities (Kessinger, 2011). The NDEA was credited with making America competitive in science and math, and lifting higher education research to world-class achievement levels (Yudof, 2009). The 1965 Higher Education Act (HEA) and its reauthorizations empower most of the current U.S. Department of Education administered higher education programs, including the 1972 Pell Grant program (DeWitt, 2010). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016c), “Title IV [student financial aid programs] of the law focused exclusively on the federal priority of equal access for students, especially supporting those students from low-income families” (p. 2). During the last two decades, the majority of U.S. Department of Education administered college student financial aid (e.g., Pell Grants) was provided as direct aid to need-based college students (Archibald & Feldman, 2011). Historical points of federal interventions highlight gains not only to individual students’ educational outcomes, but also to the nation’s economy and society (Lambert, 2014).

**The United States Department of Education.** With its origins dating from 1867 and formally established as a Cabinet-level agency in 1979, the U.S. Department of Education is the federal agency responsible for developing, coordinating, and administering the government’s involvement in higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). The U.S. Department of Education develops and implements public policies, and oversees federal higher education financial aid programs (Natow, 2013). The U.S. Department of Education’s authority to make regulatory policy is derived from
Public-Law 96-88, which established the Department of Education in 1979 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). After Federal legislation is signed into law, the U.S. Department of Education is charged with crafting the details of programs and regulations for implementation of a policy’s goals (Pelesh, 1995). One of the most important ways the U.S. Department of Education serves the American public is by identifying major educational issues and focusing national attention on them (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education provides grant and work study assistance to more than 11 million postsecondary students and issues over $97 billion in new student loans annually (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b). The next section provides further elaboration on the Pell Grant program.

**The Pell Grant Program**

The U.S. Department of Education-administered Pell Grant program provides financial need-based grants to promote access to postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b). According to the U.S. Department of Education, a Pell Grant can be used at over 5,400 colleges, but students must be enrolled in a degree-seeking program to qualify. “The laws governing Federal Student Aid programs require that a person apply for aid with a form provided by the U.S. Department of Education which is called the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016d, p. AVG-5). Therefore, the FAFSA has quickly become the gatekeeper to determining eligibility for a Pell Grant, and for some, a determining factor for college enrollment (Romano, 2012).

**Application for funding.** Financial need is based on a family’s financial information (i.e., income and assets), which is reported on the FAFSA form, and this data
determines the expected family contribution (Archibald & Feldman, 2011). The Pell Grant amount an individual student receives is based on the student’s expected family contribution (EFC), the cost of college to which the student is applying, and the student’s enrollment status (i.e., full or part-time; U.S. Department of Education, 2016d). After filing the FAFSA, both the student and the student’s designated colleges receive a report that includes the student’s EFC and Pell Grant eligibility. For 2016-17, Pell Grant awards ranged from $590 to $5,815 (U.S. Department of Education, 2016d). Based on federal Pell Grant program funding, Pell Grant amounts can change every year (College Board, 2016).

In almost every year, the average Pell Grant amount exceeds the average tuition and fees at two-year institutions and a fluctuating percentage of the four-year institution tuition and fees (Archibald & Feldman, 2011). In 2015-16, 7.6 million students (i.e., 33% of all undergraduates) received $28.2 billion in Pell Grants, which provided a per-student average of $2,371 (College Board, 2016). Even though 84% of postsecondary education students whose household family income is below $60,000 receive Pell Grants (Education Advisory Board [EAB], 2016b), only 27% of Pell Grant recipients received the maximum Pell Grant amount of $5,645 in 2014-15 (College Board, 2016). According to the College Board, only full-time undergraduate students with an EFC of zero qualify for the maximum Pell Grant amount, which are typically the poorest of the poor low-income collegiate students (Cahalan et al., 2016).

Evidence suggests cost and debt aversion are barriers to low-income family student postsecondary education (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2014; Baum et al., 2013; EAB, 2016a). A complex application process for
financial aid compounds the cost barrier because students make college enrollment decisions based on the published price versus what they actually would pay to attend college (Romano, 2012). According to Romano, approximately half of the Pell-eligible students did not apply for federal financial aid. Further, Bird and Castleman (2016) found that “16% of freshman Pell Grant recipients in good academic standing do not re-file a FAFSA for their sophomore year” (p. 395), which adversely affected their graduation rates. Simplifying the financial aid application process (Scott-Clayton & Baum, 2013), providing students with assistance in completing the FAFSA (Castleman & Page, 2016), and reducing the price of higher education through increased Pell Grants (Cahalan et al., 2016) would boost low-income family student higher education enrollment and persistence. These statistics highlight the importance of understanding what makes the small percentage of low-income students who attend most competitive colleges successful.

**Access and completion.** Improving low-income family student postsecondary education access and completion is a Pell Grant program focus (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c). Although low-income student collegiate enrollment increased from 28% in 1970 to 45% in 2014, the 2014 enrollment gap between students from low- and high-income families remained high at 35% (Cahalan et al., 2016). The completion gap is even higher, with a 60% difference between students from low- and high-income families obtaining a bachelor’s degree by age 25 (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011).

Low-income family collegiate student graduation rates could be improved through increased Pell Grant program participation (Cahalan et al., 2016). When compared to all low-income family higher education students, Pell Grant recipients
complete postsecondary education at higher rates. For example, a U.S Department of Education sponsored longitudinal study found that by 2012, 14% of low-income students had completed a bachelor’s degree in six years (Lauff & Christopher, 2014) compared to a 51% graduation rate for Pell Grant recipients during that same timeframe (Nichols, 2015).

Even with funding, Pell Grant recipients do not match graduation rates of students from high-income families. The six-year bachelor’s degree completion rate for Pell Grant recipients is 18% lower than more affluent students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c). The research-based understanding of how Pell Grants affect low-income college access and completion, beyond descriptive statistics, is limited (Kane, 2001; Long, 2006; Mundel & Coles, 2004). Existing research produced inconclusive findings on how Pell Grants affect college completion because it did not produce statistically significant results (Mundel, 2008). According to Mundel (2008), conducting these types of studies can be empirically difficult because determining whether or not a Pell Grant caused someone to enroll or complete postsecondary education is challenging. Studying Pell Grant recipient postsecondary education experiences supports identification of student completion issues (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). This study sought to inform Pell Grant program discussion and debate on the program’s effectiveness at supporting low-income students at our nation’s most competitive colleges and universities.

Higher Education Student Persistence

A research question guiding this study relates Pell Grant students’ experiences at a most competitive postsecondary institution to their persistence. Persistence is defined as “the enrollment of individuals over time that may or may not be continuous and may
or may not result in degree completion” (Tinto & Pusser, 2006, p. 1). Higher education student persistence has been a research focus for many years (e.g., Astin, 1985, Astin & Antonio, 2012; Attinasi, 1989; Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Barber, 2012; Bettinger & Baker, 2014; Cambell & Voight, 2015; Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Deming & Dynarski, 2009; Dynarski, 2008; Endo & Harpel, 1982; Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Fink, 2013; Gallagher, 2014; Kuh, 2008; Lee, 2016; Mallette & Cabrera, 1991; Nilson, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Shea & Bidjerano, 2010; B. L. Smith, 2004; Strayhorn, 2012; Suskie, 2009; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1998; Tinto & Pusser, 2006; Zatynski, 2015). Collegiate student characteristics associated with postsecondary education persistence include family income and background, peer groups, and postsecondary institutional environments (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Tinto, 1975). Tinto (1975) was one of the early and foundational collegiate student persistence theory developers.

Tinto’s (1975) research resulted in development of a dropout model, which provided collegiate student factors and postsecondary institutional characteristics associated with higher education student persistence. The model suggests that students’ sex, social skills, educational commitment, and prior academic experience are factors associated with higher education persistence (Tinto, 1975). According to the author, collegiate institutions possess differing academic and social characteristics (e.g., faculty and financial resources) that also contribute to student persistence. Integration of student entry characteristics with postsecondary institutional academic and social processes affects a students’ decision to leave or graduate from college (Tinto, 1975). Therefore, higher education institutions with constructive academic and social environments will foster increased collegiate student persistence (Tinto, 1975).
Work on persistence theory expanded Tinto’s early 1970s research with persistence theorists amplifying the major factors influencing collegiate student persistence (Tinto, 1998). For example, recurrent and positive collegiate students’ engagement with faculty and other students enhances students’ persistence (Astin, 1985; Barber, 2012). Other statistically significant factors that affect higher education student persistence include integration of student academic and social engagement at higher education institutions (Stage, 1989). According to Barber (2012), improved integration of those factors facilitates collegiate student engagement, learning, and persistence. Research suggests that postsecondary education student “engagement and persistence are positively correlated for all students” (Kuh, 2008, p. 9). How students engage on campus can influence their feeling of belonging, which can contribute to persistence.

Strayhorn (2012) further developed persistence theory by focusing on the effect of belonging among diverse higher education student populations. Belonging is defined as collegiate students’ “perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty and peers)” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3). Belonging is a statistically significant factor in higher education student persistence (Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008; Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017; Strayhorn, 2012). According to Strayhorn (2012), collegiate student belonging in postsecondary institutional social spaces and academic environments contribute to persistence. Promoting Pell Grant student persistence requires most competitive college administrators and faculty members to consider these factors when developing their student retention programs.
Exploring Most Competitive Colleges using the Institutional Action Model

In order to understand the essence of Pell Grant student’s experiences at our nation’s most competitive colleges, I explored their persistence at one of these postsecondary institutions through the IAM conceptual framework that was described in Chapter 1 (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). I chose the IAM because it leveraged research-based postsecondary institutional practices to support identification of actions and policies elite colleges could implement to improve Pell Grant student persistence. Instead of considering unique external postsecondary institutional factors (e.g., student attributes), I focused this exploration on the IAM dimensions of Support, Involvement, and Feedback. Institutional commitment to those interrelated factors directly affects the student’s collegiate experience and persistence and, importantly, they are within the institution’s capability to change. The IAM recognizes the impact of federal policies such as the Pell Grant program on students and strives to inform policymakers about ways the program can be adapted to improve student success (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). According to Tinto and Pusser (2006), institutional leaders and policymakers should work together to positively shape the future postsecondary student context.

Support. Students who feel academically or socially separated tend to dropout of college at higher rates than those that are integrated (Tinto, 1975). The support dimension of the IAM seeks to ameliorate this condition by ensuring the requisite institutional processes recognize when students are struggling and take action to facilitate their collegiate success (Campbell & Voight, 2015). The support Pell Grant students receive at most competitive colleges covers a variety of institutional services (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b). For the purposes of this study, I focused on the
support component of IAM to help inform how Pell Grant recipients perceived the collegiate environment promoted support within the areas of academic, social, and financial (Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

**Academic support.** Academic support is important for Pell Grant students attending a most competitive college because they may not be fully prepared for the rigors of an undergraduate education (Carnevale & Rose, 2004). According to Tinto and Pusser (2006), academic support encompasses the availability of advising, tutoring, study groups, and supplemental instruction. Advising facilitates a student’s ability to make decisions regarding their postsecondary education (Schuh, Jones, Harper, & Associates, 2011). Our nation’s most competitive colleges possess the advising capabilities needed to help all students succeed in postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b).

First-year seminars, study groups, and supplemental instruction are related areas of academic support that research suggests could improve Pell Grant student persistence to succeed at elite colleges (Kuh, 2008; Lee, 2016; Tinto, 1998). According to Lee (2016), elite Pell Grant students may lack awareness of how to engage in these opportunities, particularly during their first-year of college. Therefore, institutional socialization could better connect Pell Grant students to the requisite academic support processes. High impact educational practices such as first-year seminars and study groups improve student-learning outcomes and persistence by facilitating student and collegiate institution integration (Kuh, 2008). Instead of separate remedial classes for underprepared students, supplemental instruction provides them with basic academic skills development within credit-bearing courses (Tinto, 1998). According to Tinto and
Pusser (2006), supplemental instruction is particularly useful because it enables progressive student application of learning to on-going coursework.

Coaches are an intervention that potentially improves the most competitive college academic support to Pell Grant students (Bettinger & Baker, 2014). Bettinger and Baker (2014) found that providing Pell Grant students with a coach improved their graduation rates by a statistically significant 4% over Pell Grant students without coaches. The coaches’ role included student course assistance, development of study capabilities, time management, and guidance on where to find institutional research support (Bettinger & Baker, 2014). Coaches are considered more effective than college counseling programs because of the high student-to-counselor ratios at many postsecondary institutions (Gallagher, 2014). What remains unknown is how Pell Grant recipients perceive the range of academic services at my research site.

**Social support.** Social support programs (e.g., counseling, mentoring, and ethnic student centers) positively contribute to collegiate student persistence (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Effective higher education minority student assimilation with the campus culture often depends on social support activities (Attinasi, 1989). Pell Grant students who attend America’s most competitive colleges are an institutional minority group (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c). As a result, they navigate a collegiate social environment where they often feel marginalized by fellow students and postsecondary institutional members (Lee, 2016). According to Lee (2016), institutional engagement with Pell Grant students is typically done through the financial aid office, which does not provide a means for students to establish social connections with others on campus. Ethnic student centers, however, facilitate minority group collegiate campus integration
by providing them with safe zones to interact with those who possess similar backgrounds (Attinasi, 1989). Therefore, higher education institutions with minority student focused social organizations enhance student integration onto the most competitive college campus by providing them with a safe space for social interaction (Lee, 2016). Because many Pell Grant recipients are also minority students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c), these forms of social support are important.

Tinto (1998) suggested that college freshman should socially integrate into the collegiate campus network during their first-year to support persistence. One in five students attending four-year higher education institutions dropout of college (Deming & Dynarski, 2009) and 50% of all higher education student attrition occurs during the freshman year (Tinto, 1998). First-year experience programs encompass institutional strategies to improve freshman persistence and success (Alexander & Gardner, 2009). A supportive family, faculty engagement, and participation in postsecondary institution activities improve Pell Grant student social integration and collegiate persistence (Tinto, 1998). Effective social support strategies for new students at most competitive college include freshman orientations (Gardner, Barefoot, & Swing, 2001), peer mentors (Zatynski, 2015), and freshman seminars, which support social network development (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Again, the question remains about how Pell Grant recipients perceive these supports.

**Financial support.** Reducing the cost of college increases postsecondary education graduation rates (Dynarski, 2008). According to Hoxby and Avery (2013), the average low-income student cost to attend a most competitive college in 2009-10 was $6,754 and the maximum Pell Grant amount was $5,350 (College Board, 2011). Thus,
even with the lower net cost for students, the Pell Grant does not cover the full cost even when the maximum amount is awarded. As a result, Pell Grant students attending most competitive colleges are more likely to work to pay for their education than more affluent students (Campbell & Voight, 2015). Many most competitive colleges require Pell Grant students to financially contribute to paying for their education through collegiate campus work-study jobs (Tilghman, 2007). Such work arrangements can reinforce SES disparity and negatively affect Pell Grant students’ ability to socially adapt on the most competitive college campus (Espenshade & Radford, 2009).

According to Stuber (2009), time constraints and work requirements limit Pell Grant students’ ability to participate in extracurricular activities. This fact is important because extracurricular activity (e.g., Greek life) participation helps to predict student learning (Astin, 1985) and correlates with student persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). To ameliorate this condition, Lee (2016) advocated for elite institutional strategies such as reducing Pell Grant student work requirements, decreasing the cost of collegiate course materials, and training faculty members on potential institutional financial support opportunities. What remains unknown is how elite institutional support programs contribute to Pell Grant students’ persistence? This study sought to answer this question.

Feedback. The Feedback component of the IAM promotes Pell Grant students’ collegiate success during the institutional screening process for programmatic placement, within the individual classrooms, and throughout their postsecondary education (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Student affairs personnel often link first-year Pell Grant students with the appropriate most competitive college programs (Schuh et al., 2011). Astin and Antonio
(2012) discussed the importance of prior student knowledge and experience to higher education learning on student success. Enabling new students to outline key components of who they are and what they want to learn supports appropriately matching the student with the requisite educational program (Schuh et al., 2011). Student learning is improved when the educational programs and extracurricular activities are purposely integrated and designed (Suskie, 2009). Monitoring Pell Grant student progress during their first-year is key to issue identification, early intervention, and student persistence (Campbell & Voight, 2015).

Most competitive college institutional success depends on developing an assessment program that provides performance feedback on educational programs and students’ academic experience (Baker, Jankowski, Provezis, & Kinzie, 2012). Astin and Antonio (2012) developed a performance-based I-E-O (inputs, environment, outputs) model for assessing Pell Grant student learning at most competitive colleges. According to the authors, the purpose of the I-E-O assessment model is to evaluate initial student characteristics (e.g., knowledge) and then adjust the students’ collegiate experience (e.g., curriculum) in order to improve student outcomes upon graduation. In the I-E-O assessment model, the I or inputs refers to what capabilities the student brings initially to the postsecondary institution, the E or environment includes the postsecondary institution programs or activities that influence the student collegiate experiences, and the O or output is the institutions’ goal for student learning (Astin & Antonio, 2012). Assessment of Pell Grant student collegiate experiences could provide most competitive college administrators and faculty members with feedback on those environmental factors that influenced the Pell Grant students’ ability to achieve institutional outcomes and enable
appropriate programmatic adjustment (Suskie, 2009). What remains unknown is how elite institutional feedback programs contribute to Pell Grant students’ persistence? This study sought to answer this question.

**Involvement.** Pell Grant students’ engagement with faculty members and other students on America’s most competitive college campus enhances students’ success and persistence (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Involvement theory suggests that the more students engage with institutional members and other students, the more likely they are to learn (Endo & Harpel, 1982) and to graduate from college (Astin, 1985; Mallette & Cabrera, 1991). According to Astin (1985), “conversely, an uninvolved student may neglect studies, spend little time on campus, abstain from extracurricular activities, and have little contact with family members or other students” (p. 36) and as a result, dropout of college. Students who do not perceive that they belong within the college community graduate at reduced levels, possess diminished academic achievement, and report less satisfying social experiences (Strayhorn, 2012). Student involvement is more important during their first-year of college because most postsecondary education student attrition occurs during the students’ freshman year (Tinto, 1998).

Postsecondary education student involvement occurs within and outside of the classroom (Attinasi, 1989). Lee (2016) found that mandatory extracurricular activities and student interactions with faculty members for course feedback maximized Pell Grant student involvement outside the classroom at America’s most competitive colleges. Additional methods that promote Pell Grant student involvement and persistence include learning communities (Campbell & Voight, 2015; Kuh, 2008; B. L. Smith, 2004; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Typically, learning communities promote students’ collegiate persistence.
by developing support structures among the students themselves (Tinto, 1998).

According to B. L. Smith (2004), the learning community methodology encompasses facilitating students’ ability to integrate varied views and perspectives. Examples of learning communities include varying student living conditions, community engagement projects, and establishing cohorts of students to remain together throughout an academic program (Fink, 2013; Kuh, 2008).

Lee (2016) found that societal difference discussions improved Pell Grant students’ involvement inside the classroom at America’s most competitive colleges. Active learning, which encompasses collaboration between faculty and students to make classrooms integrated learning environments, is key to promoting Pell Grant students’ classroom involvement (Fink, 2013). Team-based learning, problem-based learning, and blended learning are active learning pedagogies that foster student involvement within the most competitive college classroom. They differ from traditional lecture based classrooms by actively engaging students in the learning process (Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

Team-based learning promotes student involvement by forming small groups of diverse students to progressively address segments of the course curriculum (Fink, 2013). Problem-based learning (PBL) has demonstrated improved student involvement (Nilson, 2010) by providing diverse groups of students with an issue to solve at the start of the learning process (Marra, Jonassen, Palmer, & Luft, 2014). Blended learning improves student achievement and engagement in postsecondary education coursework by leveraging a combination of face-to-face and on-line learning (Dzuiban, Hartman, Cavanaugh, & Moskal, 2011; Shea & Bidjerano, 2010). What remains unknown is how
elite institutional involvement programs contribute to Pell Grant students’ persistence? This study sought to answer that question.

Conceptual Framework

Studying Pell Grant recipient postsecondary education experiences at most competitive colleges through the Tinto and Pusser (2006) IAM lens supports identification of student persistence issues. Focusing on the interrelated factors of support, involvement, and feedback, Pell Grant students’ collegiate experience is situated within those three areas (see Figure 2). Collegiate institutional understanding of those interrelated factors and their influence on Pell Grant students’ postsecondary education supports creation of a collegiate environment that improves the likelihood of student success and attainment of a college degree.

The needs of Pell Grant students are not necessarily the same as those of more affluent students (Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Lee, 2016). Therefore, identifying how to construct the most competitive college institutional environment to provide for Pell Grant students’ support, involvement, and feedback requires a thoughtful methodology. Lee (2016) suggested that when compared to more affluent students, Pell Grant students often feel marginalized or misplaced in the most competitive college context. According to Lee, most competitive college environments can present as unequal socioeconomic-segmented spaces where income profoundly influences the Pell Grant students’ collegiate experience. The search for campus connection at most competitive colleges often leads Pell Grant students to seek out relationships with faculty members and other students (Espenshade & Radford, 2009). According to the authors, limited Pell Grant students’ finances frequently hinder the establishment of such relationships. What remains
unknown is how most competitive college institutional contexts or situations affect Pell Grant students’ collegiate experiences. This study sought to address that question.

Summary

The literature reviewed in this chapter helped outline key issues contributing to low-income students’ persistence and graduation. The area of focus for this study is on America’s most competitive colleges. The literature review included coverage of the

Figure 2. Institutional Context & Pell Grant Students’ Persistence. Adapted from Moving From Theory to Action: Building a Model of Institutional Action for Student Success (p. 9), by V. Tinto and B. Pusser, 2006, Washington, DC: National Postsecondary Education Cooperative. Copyright 2006 by National Postsecondary Education Cooperative.
federal government’s financial aid role to support students attending college, the Pell Grant program, and the interrelated institutional factors of support, involvement, and feedback (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). This broad research base provided a mosaic through which to understand better the low-income experience. The Pell Grant program intends to improve low-income students’ postsecondary education access and persistence (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c). Despite this goal, Pell Grant recipients are in a significant minority of the nation’s most competitive colleges. The connection between most competitive colleges and the Pell Grant program is important to make because America needs to greatly expand the pipeline of talented individuals from all SES backgrounds.

Previous Pell Grant program research largely focused on improving low-income students’ access to a postsecondary education (e.g., Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Kane, 2001; Long, 2006; Mundel & Coles, 2004). What is missing from the current literature is a study of Pell Grant students’ actual lived experience at most competitive coeducational collegiate institutions. Understanding these experiences, in particular related to the factors that institutions can control (e.g., support, feedback, involvement) lends depth and breadth to previous research by highlighting factors that influenced Pell Grant students’ persistence. It is crucial to understand what happens to these students within their collegiate experience so that the appropriate institutional program adjustments occur. Ultimately, this study provides institutional leaders and federal policymakers with insight into how the Pell Grant program could be adjusted to improve low-income students’ persistence at America’s most competitive postsecondary institutions. The next chapter outlines the methods used for this study.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to understand the lived experiences of low-income Pell Grant students who attended a most competitive college. As outlined in previous chapters, the theoretical framework for this research used Tinto and Pusser’s (2006) institutional action model (IAM). This chapter presents the research design of my study and justifies a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological case study design. As most competitive colleges explore socioeconomically diversifying their student populations, it is important to understand the relationship between Pell Grant students and the postsecondary education institutional context. Understanding the experiences of Pell Grant students’ at the nation’s most competitive colleges provides a way to improve other Pell Grant students’ collegiate persistence to succeed in college.

As noted earlier, even though many previous studies focused on income and its effect on postsecondary education, those studies do not shed light on the actual experience of Pell Grant students who attend one of America’s most competitive higher education institutions. Elite college Pell Grant students’ perceptions of non-belonging on campus, reduced participation in extracurricular activities, and lower graduation rates suggest that enabling them to access most competitive postsecondary institutions is not enough (Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016; Lee 2016). Access does not equal success. In order to increase the numbers of Pell Grant students attending and succeeding in elite colleges and universities, we need to understand what
experiences affect Pell Grant student persistence to succeed and how most competitive postsecondary institutions can better support Pell Grant student success (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c). In an effort to address this educational need as well as the gap in the extant literature, as previously mentioned, the following research and sub-research questions guide this study:

1. How do the experiences of Pell Grant students at a most competitive college contribute, or not to their persistence to succeed?
   A. Support: In what ways do Pell Grant students identify institutional support as contributing, or not to their persistence to succeed?
   B. Feedback: In what ways do Pell Grant students identify institutional feedback as contributing, or not to their persistence to succeed?
   C. Involvement: In what ways do Pell Grant students identify institutional involvement as contributing, or not to their persistence to succeed?

2. What other institutional factors do Pell Grant students identify as contributing, or not to their persistence to succeed?

**Research Design**

The predominate methodology used in the studies that my literature review identified on low-income students’ experience at America’s most competitive colleges was quantitative (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Wyner et al., 2008). These studies provided a way to categorize how many Pell Grant recipients were at different types of colleges, what factors contributed to students’ progression while in college, and how a mix of family income levels in most competitive colleges resulted in higher levels of student learning occur. Some literature on low-income students has
utilized a qualitative approach (Aries & Seider, 2007; Lee, 2016; Steinmetz, 2008). These qualitative studies investigated low-income students’ experiences at most competitive colleges and found that the collegiate environment affected student persistence to succeed. In particular, Lee (2016) researched the implications of SES disparity of students at an all-women most competitive college and found that when compared to more affluent students, low-income students felt denigrated (e.g., tokenized) within the elite postsecondary institution setting. What remained unknown in this previous research was if these findings would be similar at co-educational or men’s only institutions.

Instead of Lee’s (2016) focus on low-SES women at an elite women’s college, my research centered on low-income Pell Grant students’ experience at a co-educational most competitive college. The research questions sought to understand the current phenomenon of Pell Grant students’ human experience at an elite postsecondary institution. A quantitative, objective truth about Pell Grant students’ most competitive college experience was not possible because each student’s collegiate experience is unique (Creswell, 2013). What the current research base lacks are the voices of Pell Grant recipients attending a most competitive co-educational college. Therefore, my study employed a qualitative research design. The next section amplifies the rationale for my research design choices.

**Qualitative research design.** A qualitative design approach, such as that employed by Lee (2016), was also suitable for my study because both Lee’s study and mine sought to understand the most competitive college environment from the Pell Grant participants’ perspective. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) defined qualitative research as
“inquiry that is grounded in the assumption that individuals construct social reality in the form of meanings and interpretations, and that these constructions tend to be transitory and situational” (p. 650). In comparison to quantitative research, qualitative research is non-positivistic and seeks to identify participants’ self-perceptions of the research phenomenon (Gall et al., 2007). Use of qualitative methodology enabled me to obtain participant insight into the current most competitive college factors that influenced Pell Grant students’ persistence and success (Creswell, 2013).

Qualitative research involves the researcher serving as the primary means of data gathering, inductive and deductive data analysis, and the use of study participant speech to facilitate research reporting (Creswell, 2013). My study possessed those attributes. I was the primary means of gathering the study’s data. Inductive and deductive data analysis involved collaborating with the participants to develop the study’s results (Creswell, 2013). The participants’ voices described how the most competitive college environment affected the Pell Grant students’ collegiate persistence and success.

**Case study approach.** Case studies are defined as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (Yin, 2014, p. 16). Key elements of case studies include the bounded nature of the case (Creswell, 2013) and the specific nuances for selecting a site (Stake, 1995). I studied the distinctive experience of Pell Grant students at one of our nation’s most competitive colleges. Therefore, the bounded case for my research was an American most competitive college. My case study was bounded by location (East coast of America) and type of collegiate institution (most competitive college). The unit for
case study analysis might be multiple cases (cross-case) or a single case (within-case) study (Yin, 2014). My study employed a single case study design. The unit of in-depth analysis (Merriam, 2002) for this within-case study was the experience of a group of elite college Pell Grant students. The objective of case study research is to obtain a detailed understanding of the case (Creswell, 2013), which was accomplished by focusing specifically on Pell Grant recipients’ experiences at a most competitive college.

The specific nuances for selecting my research site (Stake, 1995) included type of institution, access to students, a low percentage of Pell Grant students, and undergraduate composition. East State University (ESU, a pseudonym) is a public, co-educational, four-year liberal arts institution located on the East coast of America. Barron’s Educational Series (2016) classified ESU as one of America’s most competitive colleges. I chose ESU out of the eligible pool of our nation’s most competitive colleges because I had access to students who attended the institution in the way that other researchers may not. I especially sought out an elite college with a low percent of dependent Pell Grant students (i.e., 12% at ESU) because their collegiate experiences may be different from other most competitive college dependent Pell Grant students. As noted earlier, Lee’s (2016) research involved low-socioeconomic status women at an elite women’s college. To differentiate my research from Lee’s research, I studied dependent Pell Grant students’ experience at a co-educational most competitive college (i.e., ESU).

The undergraduate ESU student population consists of 6,000 undergraduate students with dependent Pell Grant recipients represented in all classifications (i.e., freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior). Regarding the cost of college attendance, ESU dependent Pell Grant students pay an average annual net tuition of $5,000, which
compares to an overall listed tuition rate for ESU students of $18,000. Expanding socioeconomic diversity and financial aid opportunities is an ESU priority. An inventory of ESU institutional support for Pell Grant students is provided at Appendix A. Thus, the selection of ESU for the focus of this research can help inform other elite postsecondary institutions as they seek to expand their socioeconomic diversity.

**Phenomenological approach.** In conjunction with the case study research approach, this study employed a phenomenological research approach. I used phenomenology for this research because this methodology helped to determine the essence of Pell Grant students’ most competitive college experience (Merriam, 2002). A phenomenon is anything, “as it presents itself to, or as it is experienced by, a subject” (Dahlberg, Drew, & Nystrom, 2001, p. 45). The phenomenon I studied was Pell Grant students’ most competitive college experiences. Phenomenological research focuses on how participants’ phenomena related experience influences their view of society (Schwandt, 2007). The phenomenological research approach promotes understanding about the common way a phenomenon manifests itself to multiple people (Creswell, 2013). Researchers have used the phenomenological approach to gather participants’ phenomenon related experiences to describe the essence of those experiences for all participants (Moustakas, 1994). I sought to determine the essence of a most competitive college as experienced by dependent Pell Grant students.

To promote socioeconomic diversity, improve student persistence to success, and support postsecondary institutional program improvement, administrators and faculty at ESU should develop a better understanding of the Pell Grant students’ higher education experience (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013). This phenomenological case study
enabled such understanding by suggesting the common aspects of participant self-perceptions of the most competitive college context (Vagle, 2014). The next section describes the interpretive framework used to situate myself as the researcher within this qualitative study (Creswell, 2013).

**Interpretive Framework**

The interpretive framework established the beliefs that guided this research effort (Creswell, 2013). Epistemology, which is defined as an “individual’s beliefs about the nature of knowledge and the process of knowing” (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997, p. 117), was a central element of my study’s interpretive framework (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Because I sought to understand the research participants’ view of the phenomenon based on their experience (Creswell, 2013), I employed a social constructivism interpretive framework for this research. This framework aligned well with the focus of my study on the self-perceptions of Pell Grant students who attended a most competitive college.

From a constructivist view, “knowledge is not discovered but rather created; it exists only in the time/space framework in which it is generated” (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 40). The social constructivism framework has helped researchers to uncover how people constructed and held knowledge, which is assumed to be social constructed (Berger & Luckman, 1966). One of social constructivism’s precepts that undergirds the paradigm is “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). I was interested in participants’ self-perceptions and wanted to comprehend the complexity of their lived experiences; thus, using the social constructivism framework for my study underscored the role self-perceptions created for students as they experienced college at a most competitive college. Therefore, the
participants’ voices were used to describe how the most competitive college environment affected their collegiate persistence. In consonance with social constructivism, the research data reflected the participants’ voices (Creswell, 2013).

**Participant Recruitment**

One feature of a phenomenological study is the focus on a heterogeneous group of 3-15 people who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Since I wanted to obtain a comprehensive view of dependent Pell Grant student most competitive college experience, I planned for a study size of 10-15 participants. I employed purposeful sampling to obtain the requisite number of study participants, which is defined as the process of selecting participants who possessed detailed information related to the qualitative study focus (Gall et al., 2007).

The purposeful sampling criteria for my study included the population of ESU undergraduate dependent students who received a Pell Grant and met my study’s family income levels. I targeted ESU dependent Pell Grant students with family incomes below $43,512 because they are considered low-income and the most in need of collegiate financial assistance (Cahalan et al., 2016). Recall, while there is no specific income cutoff for Pell Grant need-based financial aid, the preponderance (i.e., 84%) of Pell Grants go to students with family incomes below $60,000 a year (EAB, 2016b).

As a doctoral student at William and Mary, I was required to obtain Education Internal Review Committee (EDIRC) approval from the university before contacting the site institution. Once I received approval from William and Mary, I provided this information to ESU and they accepted my original institutional review board protocol submission for their institutional approval process. I then requested ESU financial aid
office support to recruit participants (see Appendix B). To recruit study participants, ESU financial aid administrators identified dependent low-income Pell Grant recipients and disaggregated the population by undergraduate class. The ESU undergraduate class distribution of dependent low-income Pell Grant recipients was 46 freshman, 77 sophomores, 117 juniors, and 113 seniors. ESU financial aid administrators then randomly selected 10 dependent low-income Pell Grant students from each ESU class.

An email from the ESU financial aid director (see Appendix C) was sent to the 10 randomly selected dependent low-income Pell Grant students from each ESU class (i.e., freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior), inviting them to participate in the study. In this initial email, students were told they would be compensated with $25 for study participation and provided a two-week suspense to respond. After the first ESU financial aid solicitation, one student responded to me and expressed study participation interest.

To better promote student study participation interest, I decided to increase participant compensation from $25 to $100, and to give the students cash for their participation versus a gift card. A second email from the ESU financial aid director (see Appendix D) was sent to a second randomly selected group of 10 dependent low-income Pell Grant students from each ESU class (i.e., freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior), inviting them to participate in the study. After the second financial aid solicitation with the higher participation incentive, 13 students responded to me and expressed interest in study participation.

ESU Pell Grant recipients expressing study participation interest were sent a follow-up email (see Appendix E). The follow-up email asked the students to identify dates and times on which we could schedule the individual interview. The email also
included a Qualtrics survey (see Appendix F) link. The survey was used to collect
demographic data on the participants such as age, major, undergraduate class, highest
level of parental education completed, and race. Eleven of the 14 students responded to
the follow up email by providing dates and times to schedule the individual interview and
completing the Qualtrics survey. Thus, in the end, I was left with 11 student participants
for my study.

Data Generation and Collection

This section describes how the study’s data were generated and collected. Data
generation is a process that yields data created specifically for a study (Creswell, 2013).
According to Creswell (2013), phenomenological case study research data collection
typically involves multiple sources of information. This study employed several sources
of data that are often used in phenomenological case study research. These sources were
written participant descriptions of the study’s phenomenon and interviews (individual and
focus group) with participants who have experienced the phenomenon (Dahlberg et al.,
2001).

Several sources of data enabled triangulation of my research data (Yin, 2014).
Triangulation is defined as the “use of multiple and different sources, methods,
investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251).
According to Moustakas (1994), interweaving textual written descriptions of the
phenomenon with verbal interview and focus group phenomenon data supports
generation of the essence of participant experiences.

Written documents. According to Vagle (2014), “I think writing, in all sorts of
forms, can serve as another useful way to gather phenomenological data” (p. 87). The
written document I requested from the participants explored their most competitive college experience. The Qualtrics survey (Appendix F) that was emailed to study participants who expressed study participation interest asked the students to compose a written response (approximately one page) to two prompts in advance of the interview. The specific prompts to which the participants responded was:

1. Describe your college experience to date. For example, how do you feel connected on campus? Have you engaged with other students and faculty? What are some of the highlights of your college years? What are some of the challenges?

2. What, if anything, would help improve your college experience? What might others do to support this change? What might you do?

All participants completed the written document in advance of the individual interviews. This written participant response was considered an object for analysis. The written response completed before the interview appeared to cause participants to reflect on their elite postsecondary education experience, outline specific areas they value, and enabled participants to be intellectually prepared for the individual interview.

**Interviews.** One of the most popular and useful data-gathering techniques in phenomenological research is the interview (Vagle, 2014). According to Vagle, “I encourage you to think about interviews broadly—they might be one-on-one, in small groups, in large groups” (p. 80). In order to understand the essence of Pell Grant students’ most competitive college experience, I collected interview data by individually engaging each participant and by conducting focus group interviews with participants (Vagle, 2014). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by me. Frequent member checking, which involved taking ideas back to research participants for
validation to ensure accurate understanding of the participants’ experiences and perspectives, was conducted (Creswell, 2013). All interviews were conducted at the ESU library in a group study room. Student participants selected the interview dates and times.

**Individual interviews.** In order to understand the essence of Pell Grant students’ most competitive college experience, I collected data by individually interviewing each participant in a face-to-face, semi-structured, and in-depth interview. Semi-structured interviews involve researchers asking participants a series of structured questions and then asking follow-up questions to garner additional information (Gall et al., 2007). The purpose of in-depth interviewing is to “understand the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make from that experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). Prior to conducting the individual interviews, I reviewed the consent form (Appendix G) with all student participants. I asked and received student permission to audio record the interviews and had all of them sign the consent form. Each student participant was provided a copy of the signed consent form for his or her records.

Phenomenological interviews begin with participants relating their specific research focus-related knowledge and expanding on this account as needed (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, my participants were asked to discuss and reflect on their most competitive college experience. An interview guide to support the individual interviews is at Appendix H. The questions that framed participant interviews are based on this study’s theoretical framework (Tinto & Pusser, 2006) and questions from other phenomenological research dissertations (Hench, 2015; Lee, 2016; Soesbe, 2012). Phenomenological interviewers usually vary the questions based on unique participant
interaction during each interview (Vagle, 2014). According to Vagle, “the goal is to find out as much as you can about the phenomenon from each particular participant” (p. 79), and this might mean asking different probing questions. A crosswalk table that shows how the individual interview questions linked to my study’s research questions and how the literature supported asking that question is at Appendix I. The interview time ranged between 46 and 72 minutes, with an average time of approximately one hour.

Within a few days of the individual interview I transcribed and summarized the interviews. The individual interview summaries were sent to each of the participants. Participants were asked to review and make changes to the interview summary in order to ensure that I had accurately summarized our discussion. One of the participants made minor modification to her interview summary. Five of the 11 participants concurred with the interview summary as written. Five of the participants did not respond to my email request.

**Focus group interviews.** After individual interviews were completed, I conducted two focus groups. The primary purpose of the focus group interviews was to provide an opportunity for participants to discuss and compare their experiences at a most competitive college. According to Seidman (2006), in-depth phenomenological interviewing applied to “participants who all experienced similar structural and social conditions gives enormous power to the stories of a few participants” (p. 55). In the focus groups, I discussed themes that emerged in the individual interviews and learned how the students talk amongst themselves about their shared experiences.

The focus group interviews provided an opportunity to delve more deeply into the most competitive college Pell Grant student experiences that were identified during the
individual interviews (Vagle, 2014). Therefore, the focus group interview questions addressed institutional factors Pell Grant students identified as affecting their collegiate persistence that emerged from the solo interviews (Appendix J). A peer reviewer signed a confidentiality statement (Appendix K) and served as a focus group note taker. To keep the focus group size manageable, two focus groups were conducted. As an inducement to participate in the focus groups, I provided each participant with some refreshments. Next I will discuss how the generated and collected data (i.e., written participant documents and interviews) were analyzed.

**Data Analysis**

Most phenomenological data analysis occurs in a series of similar steps (Creswell, 2013; Vagle, 2014). Based on Colaizzi’s (1978) phenomenological data analysis model, Soesbe (2012) developed the following phenomenological data analysis steps (pp. 70-71) that I used for my study:

1. The researcher thoroughly reads and rereads the [written documents and] transcribed interviews to identify with the data and to acquire a sense of each individual and his or her background and experiences.

2. From the [written documents and] transcripts the researcher identifies significant statements, which pertain directly to the proposed phenomenon.

3. The researcher develops interpretive meanings of each of the significant statements. The researcher rereads the research protocols to ensure the original description is evident in the interpretive meanings.
4. The interpretive meanings are arranged into clusters, which allow themes to emerge. The researcher seeks validation, avoids repetitive themes, and notes any discrepancies during this process.

5. The themes are then integrated into an exhaustive description. The researcher also refers the theme clusters back to the protocols to substantiate them.

6. The researcher produces a concise statement of the exhaustive description and provides a fundamental statement of identification also referred to as the overall essence of the experience.

7. The reduced statement of the exhaustive description is presented to the study’s participants in order to verify the conclusions and the development of the essence statement. If discrepancies are noted, the researcher should go back through the significant statements, interpretive meanings, and themes in order to address the stated concerns.

Colaizzi’s (1978) data analysis approach was consistent with the other parts of my study plan because it allowed me the flexibility to work within the participant data to develop common aspects of participant self-perceptions of their most competitive college experience for use in developing the study’s results. In conjunction with Collaizzi’s (1978) data analysis approach, I used my theoretical framework (Tinto & Pusser’s [2006] IAM), for analysis of the data collected in this research study. As noted earlier, the focus of my analysis was on the institutional factors (i.e., support, involvement, and feedback) Pell Grant students identified as contributing to their persistence to succeed (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Therefore, each of those factors was assigned a letter code in my coding.
schema (Appendix L). Next, I will describe how I maximized and demonstrated the quality and rigor of my study’s results.

**Quality and Rigor**

Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria for trustworthiness and authenticity provide valid standards for use in qualitative study design (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, the trustworthiness and authenticity criteria present a basis for evaluating the quality and rigor of qualitative research (Schwandt, 2007). Following is an outline of each of these categories for this study.

**Trustworthiness.** Four criteria: credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability are associated with trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 2002). According to the authors, trustworthiness is defined as the process of establishing “the ‘truth’ of the findings of a particular inquiry for the subjects (respondents) with which and the context in which the inquiry is carried out” (p. 10). The trustworthiness criteria help researchers address the rigor and quality of study results (Lincoln & Guba, 2002). A definition for each of the trustworthiness criteria and the techniques I used to increase the probability that these criteria were met in my study is presented in the following sections.

**Credibility.** Credibility is the truth-value of the study’s findings, which relates to how well the study’s results match the participants’ perceptions and experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 2002). My technique for developing credibility involved summarizing participant-provided data from interviews and written documents and providing those summaries to participants for review. This process of testing study data by soliciting participant feedback is called member checks and they were used to confirm participants’ ideas (Creswell, 2013). Member checks helped to ensure the accuracy of my depiction of
participant data (Lincoln & Guba, 2002). Additionally, documenting my study-related experiences in a journal helped to establish study credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 2002). The reflexive journal captured and documented my researcher thoughts throughout the study.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability is the extent to which study findings are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 2002). To address confirmability, I obtained study data from participant interviews (individual and focus group) and participant-provided written documents, thereby triangulating the data. The use of triangulation connected different aspects of my study’s data and ensured the study met the confirmability criterion (Creswell, 2013). I also kept a reflexive journal, which documented information about the researcher and the study’s methodological decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Transferability.** Transferability involves the extent to which the study’s findings have applicability in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 2002). My study’s results incorporated rich thick data description, which is a technique to increase the chances that transferability is achieved. Rich, thick data description involves developing narrative about the context of study data to enable other researcher use in different settings (Lincoln & Guba, 2002). My study includes detailed data descriptions to contextualize the study’s findings and to address this criterion.

**Dependability.** Dependability is being consistent with the application of all data methods and it includes documenting study data, methods, and decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 2002). Dependability occurs when the researcher ensures that the study methods are “logical, traceable, and documented” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 299). The techniques I
used to achieve dependability were triangulation, member checking, keeping a reflexive journal, and peer review (Lincoln & Guba, 2002). Peer review consisted of peer feedback on my coding techniques and helped to ensure the validity of my coding process (Creswell, 2013). Two peer reviewers signed the confidentiality statement (Appendix K) and coded an interview transcription using the code sheet at Appendix J. After the peer reviewers coded the transcripts, I debriefed them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Those meetings resulted in a common consensus and alignment of my coding schema (Creswell, 2013). The peer review process enabled me to refine my thinking about the codes. For example, one peer reviewer differentiated external factors that influenced the participants’ college experience with external to the college factors. The point was important because it caused me to clarify the code definition and made me think more about those external to college factors that influenced participants’ experience during the coding process.

**Authenticity.** Authenticity is comprised of five criteria: fairness, ontological, educative, catalytic, and tactical and it addresses the quality issues associated with treatment of and benefits to study participants (Guba, 2004). Using participant consent procedures (Appendix G) and transparent study procedures in the study’s report are the techniques I used to ensure authenticity (Guba, 2004). In the sections that follow, I identify the authenticity criteria definitions and the techniques I used to achieve them.

**Fairness.** Fairness refers to giving equal voice to each and all participants in the report of the study’s findings (Lincoln & Guba, 2002). I ensured study fairness by enabling each participant to review my interpretation, representation, and reporting of the study’s data (i.e., member checks). Fairness is the only authenticity criterion within the
researcher’s power to ensure. Given their nature, the ontological, educative, catalytic, and tactical authenticity criteria cannot be guaranteed, because whether or not they are achieved depends upon how each study participant responds to participation in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 2002).

**Ontological.** Ontological authenticity involves providing participants the opportunity to grow through study involvement (Guba, 2004). It is defined “as the extent to which individual respondent’s (and the inquirer’s) early constructions are improved, matured, expanded, and elaborated, so that all parties possess more information and become more sophisticated in its use” (p. 4). To foster ontological authenticity, I used member checks (Guba, 2004).

**Educative.** Educative authenticity is the extent to which participants learn from other participants’ responses to the study’s questions (Guba, 2004). It is defined as “the extent to which individual respondents (and the inquirer) possess enhanced understanding of, appreciation for, and tolerance of the constructions of others” (p. 4). I fostered educative authenticity by sharing study results with all participants.

**Catalytic and Tactical.** Catalytic authenticity involves future study participant actions that address the research focus based on study participation (Guba, 2004). It is defined as “the extent to which action (clarifying the focus at issue, moving to eliminate or ameliorate the problem, and/or sharpening values) is stimulated” (p. 4). Tactical authenticity involves empowering participant action as a result of study participation (Guba, 2004). It is defined as “the degree to which participants are empowered to take action(s) that the inquiry implies or proposes” (p. 5). I promoted catalytic and tactical
authenticity by using member checks and by making the study’s results available to all participants (Guba, 2004).

**Researcher Perspective**

In order to understand the essence of the study participants’ lived experiences, phenomenological researchers should bracket their phenomenon related thoughts, attitudes, and experiences (Vagle, 2014). Disclosure of researcher perspectives that may influence the research effort is important because self-awareness facilitates accurate depiction of participants’ experiences during the study (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, such disclosure is useful for research consumer consideration when reviewing the study’s results (Merriam, 1988). Because my research study focused on Pell Grant students’ experiences at a most competitive college, it was important for me to identify my relationship with that study-related phenomenon (Vagle, 2014).

My own self-reflection revealed several phenomenon-related experiences I had that could influence this study. I was a low-income undergraduate student and the first person in my family to complete college. My path to graduation from a less competitive college included two years at a community college. I possess a Master’s Degree from a most competitive college and am seeking a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree from an elite college. During my undergraduate and graduate years I worked a variety of jobs (full- and part-time) to subsist and pay for the postsecondary education.

Since having those experiences and others in life, I do believe Pell Grant students’ characteristics (e.g., family background and limited financial resources) affect their most competitive college experience. I also believe that the most competitive college context influences Pell Grant student self-perceptions. It is through this background lens that I
approached this study. I appreciate that others may share a different view. Self-reflection and member checking with research participants helped to ensure that the research participants’ perspectives were accurately depicted in the study’s results (Vagle, 2014).

**Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

Assumptions address known limitations that may affect the study and they are ideally based on pre-existing information. Delimitations are factors within the researcher’s control that may affect the study’s outcome. Limitations are factors beyond the researcher’s control that may affect the study’s outcome. Possible errors or difficulties in interpreting the study’s results are also considered limitations. In the sections that follow, I identify the assumptions, delimitations, and limitations of my study.

**Assumptions.** One of the most important assumptions I brought to this study was that improving socioeconomic stratification is a priority for most competitive colleges. Another assumption for this research is that elite college and university attendance influences Pell Grant students’ collegiate experiences. I also assumed that the research participants would be forthcoming and could articulate the elements contributing to their persistence to succeed. My focus on Pell Grant program participants exposes an additional assumption, which is institutional leaders and federal policymakers desire insight into how the program could be adjusted to improve low-income student persistence at America’s elite colleges.

**Delimitations.** My research is delimited to undergraduate Pell Grant students at a single co-educational liberal arts most competitive college. Generalizing the results of
this study to other types of student populations and postsecondary institutions might not be appropriate. The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of elite college low-income Pell Grant students. It was not my intention to collect data in order to evaluate or assess the Pell Grant program. However, the findings could provide institutional leaders and federal policymakers with useful information on Pell Grant student experiences that influence their collegiate persistence to succeed.

**Limitations.** Limitations for the study include demographics, regional influences, a specific research timeframe, and the number of interviews. Because the study’s participant sample was small and limited to Pell Grant students attending a single college, I did not have a fully representative group of students based on race, gender, and ethnicity. Therefore, this study’s results may not be generalizable to other most competitive postsecondary institutional contexts. This study was also limited by the current Pell Grant program rules, which differ from the past and may change in the future. Therefore, my study represents a snapshot in time. The use of one-time individual interviews with participants was also a limitation.

**Human Participants and Ethical Considerations**

I conformed to all ethical considerations needed to assure participants’ privacy and to protect them from harm (Gall et al., 2007). I ensured confidentiality by using pseudonyms for all study participants and locations. ESU is a fictitious name that was used to protect the identity of the institution being researched. I followed the College of William & Mary EDIRC and the ESU prescribed methods for conducting research. Participants signed the EDIRC approved participant consent form (Appendix G) prior to each individual interview session. The participant consent forms outlined study data
security procedures. All research data were secured, protected, and destroyed upon doctoral dissertation completion (Creswell, 2013).

**Participant Descriptions**

My study included representation from across the ESU undergraduate student body. The 11 participants were approximately 40% male and 60% female, which mirrored the ESU undergraduate student demographics. One (i.e., 9%) of the student participants was out-of-state whereas 37% of ESU’s undergraduate students were out-of-state. Two participants were freshman, four were sophomores, three were juniors, and two were seniors. My group of Pell Grant participants was more diverse than the overall ESU student demographic. Table 4 provides a diversity comparison between this study’s participants and the ESU undergraduate student population.
### Table 4

*Participant Diversity Comparison to ESU’s Undergraduate Student Population*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American/Black</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaskan</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Racial</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following is a synopsis of the 11 ESU dependent Pell Grant students with family incomes below $43,512 who participated in my study. The participant descriptions were derived from data collected through a participant completed Qualtrics survey (Appendix F) and participant interviews. Of note, even though these student participants are low-income, they are not all first generation college students. Table 5 provides an overview of student participant demographic information.
Table 5

*Participant Demographic Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Father’s Education</th>
<th>Mother’s Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cody</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Less than HS</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Multi-Racial</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Less than HS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fritz</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>Associates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ileone</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Associates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following individual participant descriptions provides context for understanding this study’s emergent themes. As is evident in the student descriptions, each student’s higher education experience was different. In their written descriptions and interviews, the participants shared detailed accounts of their collegiate journey that helped to identify factors associated with their persistence to succeed. All of these data were used to explore emergent themes, which will be discussed in the next chapter.
**Ann.** Ann was a Black female from a suburban area within the same state as ESU. She was a senior, majoring in art history, and searching for post-graduation employment. Ann described her college experience as a sine wave with many very low points. She noted that academics often felt like a chore and as a result, finding motivation was difficult. Ann knew her roommate from high school. She participated in a variety of different social groups to include a singing group and a music fraternity. Ann was not employed.

**Beth.** Beth was an Asian female whose family immigrated to the United States from Pakistan in 2010. The high school she attended was within 50 miles of ESU. Beth is the oldest sibling and the first member of her family to attend college in America. She did not feel like she was academically prepared for college level courses. Beth was a junior who initially majored in computer science but changed her major during sophomore year to history. She knew her roommate from high school, which provided her with a nice support system. She wished that she had tried more to get engaged in campus activities. Beth worked approximately eight hours a week as an audio-visual technician on campus.

**Cody.** Cody, a Black male, was from a small town within 50 miles of ESU. A high school teacher who attended ESU facilitated Cody’s application to the university. He was a sophomore chemistry major whose academic transition to college was challenging. Cody had not enjoyed his time at ESU and did not feel connected to the campus. He found little utility in taking common core courses because they did not interest him and he believed that they provided little vocational benefit. Cody was
employed on campus as an intramural sports referee and averaged working five hours a week.

**David.** David was a White male from a large town in Illinois. At first, he did not feel a sense of belonging at the college. Fraternal relationships have helped the student to acclimate to the local area and the college campus. He was a junior, majored in public policy, and enjoyed the ESU academic rigor. David believed that the ESU administration was not accessible to students and overregulated college life (e.g., housing policies). He worked during the summer and winter academic breaks at a law firm in Illinois.

**Erica.** Erica grew up about 90 minutes from the University. Her mother was Chinese and her father was Black. Erica was an undocumented student when she applied for college. She now has a green card. The academic transition from high school to college was challenging (i.e., work ethic and anxiety). Reading an Alexander Hamilton biography inspired her to work harder. Without financial aid, Erica would have probably gone to community college and worked to pay for college. She was seeking employment during our interview.

**Fritz.** Fritz was a White male whose hometown was a one-hour commute to the University. He attended a weeklong summer orientation program before starting college, which helped him to form relationships and assimilate on campus. Fritz was academically among the top 15% of admitted students and as a result, he was awarded a merit scholarship. He was a sophomore and biology major. Fritz was the captain of a sports club and President of a large student organization. He was employed during college breaks as a substitute teacher.
George. Immigrant parents in the small community that surrounds ESU raised George, an Asian male. His sister was an ESU alumnus. George took a math class at ESU during high school. This action facilitated his transition to college by exposing him to the higher education academic pace. He was a freshman and majored in chemistry. George noted that ESU students with similar backgrounds (e.g., international) tended to socialize with each other. George was employed during the summers, which paid for textbooks and provided him with spending money.

Holly. Holly was a Black, female, in-state student from a rural area two hours from the University. She was a junior finance major who did not like finance. Holly did not change her major because she wanted to graduate on time. Having the confidence to speak up when struggling in class challenged the participant. She derived a sense of belonging through social engagement within a community service sorority. Holly was employed as a residential life program director and had interned during academic breaks at a power company. She was exploring other academic interests through the internship.

Ilene. Ilene was a White female from the small town that surrounded the University. Her sister graduated from ESU. A senior, Ilene was double majoring in government and business marketing. She took classes at the University the summer before her freshman year to get acclimated to the campus. Ilene was a student athlete during her first two years of college. Lack of playing time caused her to leave the athletic team. She was President of a student marketing association, a sorority member, and student body senator. Ilene was employed for eight hours a week as a nanny.

Jane. Jane was a White, female, in-state student from a small town that was three hours from ESU. She was a freshman English major who enjoyed literary analysis. Jane
described herself as an introvert. Balancing time between academic, social, and physical activities challenged her. Jane was an active participant in a campus Christian fellowship organization and intramural sports. She was in the process of training to be a campus writing center consultant.

Karen. Karen, a Black female, was from an urban area of the state. She attended a weeklong orientation program before starting college, which helped her to form relationships and assimilate on campus. Karen took an academic year off between her freshman and sophomore years to support her family. Designated as a scholar by ESU, the university paid for her tuition and fees. Karen was a sophomore and majored in Kinesiology. She was preparing to be a medical doctor. Karen did not feel connected to the college and attributes that perception to living off campus. She was not employed.

Summary

This chapter outlined the qualitative methodology used for this research study. This phenomenological case study was located within the social constructivism interpretive framework. The phenomenon being studied was the Pell Grant recipient experience within a single American most competitive college case. Data generation and collection consisted of participant written documents and semi-structured, in-depth interviews (individual and focus groups) with participants. Colaizzi’s (1978) phenomenological data analysis model was used to determine themes and to develop the essence of Pell Grant students’ most competitive college experiences. The assumptions, delimitations, and limitations of my study were discussed. The methodology for protecting study participants and ethically conducting the research was outlined. A
description of the study’s participants was provided to provide context for the study’s emergent themes that are reviewed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to understand the lived experiences of low-income Pell Grant students attending a most competitive college. The phenomenon being studied was the low-income Pell Grant recipient experience within a single American co-educational most competitive college case. The research questions were broad and focused on Tinto and Pusser’s (2006) institutional action model. To address the study’s research questions, I collected data through written participant descriptions of the study’s phenomenon and interviews (individual and focus group) with participants who have experienced the phenomenon (Dahlberg et al., 2001). All of the study’s participants were low-income dependent Pell Grant elite college undergraduate students. The participants included two freshman, four sophomores, three juniors, and two seniors.

Common patterns appeared from within and across the collected participant data. The Pell Grant recipients had many comparable elite college experiences, as well as distinctively unique interactions with the phenomenon. Collectively, their experiences provided an understanding of the essence of low-income Pell Grant students’ experiences at one of our nation’s most competitive colleges. Common themes, which are groups of data patterns connected conceptually to each other and the study’s focus, emerged from the patterns.

There were five overarching themes that emerged from my data. The first one was adapting to college environment as an early factor to participant persistence. The
second theme was how the participants’ accessed the most competitive college institutional support structures. The third theme involved the participants’ assessment of the feedback they received inside and outside of the classroom. The fourth theme focused on how people mattered to participants’ success. The fifth theme reviewed students’ experiences within the framework of factors that influenced the elite college context. Each theme is presented separately with participants’ quotations from interviews and information gathered from reading the participants’ Qualtrics survey responses supporting the specific themes.

Adapting to the College Environment

The 11 student participants—seniors, juniors, sophomores, and freshman—all articulated how elite college experiences had impacted their collegiate persistence. Fundamental to their overall experience was the lack of socioeconomic diversity on campus. Participants noted that most of the elite college students were affluent, which they felt made them a minority student group. The Pell Grant students recognized that to succeed in college, they needed to adapt and adjust to the affluent elite collegiate environment. Participants’ perspective on campus socioeconomic diversity enabled them to develop methods to navigate the college environment. But first, they had to understand the environment.

Every participant noted that ESU’s environment influenced his or her elite college experiences. For each student, some combination of academic and social factors shaped how they viewed the college. The student participants all excelled academically in high school. Yet, many participants noted that high school did not academically challenge them. When discussing the rigorous elite academic program, students noted that their
freshman year of college was affected by their high school background and ESU orientation experiences. Social adaptation to the collegiate environment varied by participant. ESU transition programs were credited with ameliorating this adjustment period.

**Transition to college.** Moving from high school to college was challenging for a number of reasons. Several student participants cited inferior high school academics as a factor that exacerbated their academic transition to college. Beth (Junior) described her academic transition as “going from being a straight A over 4.0 grade point average in high school to not having good grades that first year because the adjustment from high school was so drastic and tough.” She noted that her public high school did not prepare her to engage successfully in elite college academics. Most of the student participants had similar experiences and suffered a reduction in academic performance during their freshman year of college.

Dislocation from family and high school friends initially challenged several student participants. Erica (Sophomore) stated that she was “really shy freshman year.” Therefore, she did not get involved in campus extracurricular activities. Much like other freshman, participants expressed a perception of being overwhelmed during their initial ESU experiences. Beth (Junior) noted that she was “not really involved with anything freshman year” because she was sorting through various academic options, which consumed most of her first year of college. In retrospect, Erica (Sophomore) wished that she had attended an ESU summer transition assistance program. She believed transition program participation would have allowed her to “come in knowing people, knowing the college and the buildings, where I lived, that would have been very helpful.”
Transition assistance programs. ESU provided all incoming freshman students with the opportunity to participate in a high school to college transitional summer experience. The purpose of this weeklong summertime program was to introduce new students to ESU’s academic and social life before their freshman year. Program participants were provided with opportunities to familiarize themselves with the campus, campus facilities, faculty members, and other prospective students. Except student travel, ESU paid all of the transitional summer program costs for all students. Two of this study’s participants attended an ESU pre-freshman fall orientation program.

Participants found out about ESU’s summer transition program knowledge by exploring the ESU website. Fritz (Sophomore) explained how his mother discovered the program, “she was just kind of browsing through the materials that ESU had on the website and stumbled across it and said hey, look at this.” As a result, Fritz applied and was accepted into the transition program. Fritz found value in program participation because it enabled him to “form relationships and get to know people before I get on campus. Get a feel for what living here was like stuff like that along with some useful workshops that they had throughout the week.” Similarly, Karen (Sophomore) described the ESU transitional program as “a lot of things that help you get immersed into college.”

Academic orientation classes consumed much of the students’ mornings and afternoons were spent exploring the campus. Student participants formed relationships with faculty members and other students, which alleviated the new college environment anxiety many students experience during their freshman fall.

ESU classes during high school. To facilitate their academic transition to college, two participants took ESU classes during high school. George (Freshman) had
completed high school mathematic offerings before his senior year of high school. He
took an ESU mathematics class during his senior year of high school to further his studies
in that area. George’s ESU academic experience as a high school senior was positive.
He believed the early ESU experience had prepared him for the flow of most competitive
college classes. Similarly, Ilene (Senior) was a student athlete and took classes at ESU
during her senior year of high school. Ilene’s prospective ESU athletic coach facilitated
the process. The ESU classes taken during high school helped to prepare Ilene for a busy
freshman fall athletic schedule. She believed that taking summer classes before her
freshman year facilitated her freshman year transition “because getting acclimated during
freshman fall can be difficult for everyone.” Similar to George’s experience, Ilene’s
early ESU coursework was positive.

_They knew me when._ Two of the student participants knew their roommate from
high school. Beth (Junior) was one of those students and she remarked:

My roommate, we went to high school together. We have known each other since
my sophomore year of high school and we have been rooming together. That was
a nice support system. We both kind of understood each other, much better than
strangers put together. That has been helpful.

Roommate familiarity made Beth more comfortable with her living arrangement. George
(Freshman) also knew his roommate before attending ESU. George commented, “I knew
my roommate before I came to ESU. He went to the same high school so we decided to
room together.” Knowing their roommates helped Beth (Junior) and George (Freshman)
acclimate to the new elite college environment.
**Siblings paved the way.** George (Freshman) and Ilene (Senior) had siblings who had graduated from ESU. Both George and Ilene were from the local community that surrounded ESU, and both of these students took courses at ESU ahead of their freshman year. While their siblings studied at ESU, George and Ilene visited them on the ESU campus. ESU alumni siblings provided George and Ilene with elite college context, which helped them acclimate to the most competitive college environment.

**Pre-college diversity.** One of the low-income family participants Fritz (Sophomore) mentioned that he had attended a high school with a socioeconomic diverse student population. Having that experience helped Fritz navigate an ESU student body dominated by wealthy people. Fritz (Sophomore) commented, “There were people in high school who had more money than me too, it is what it is, and that’s how the world works.” Disparity in family incomes was familiar to Fritz. That familiarity enabled him to better engage the ESU campus environment.

**Time management.** Time management challenged every student participant’s transition to college. Finding an appropriate academic and social activity balance was difficult during their freshman year. Freedom from parental oversight caused several student participants to overly focus on the social aspects of college life. David (Junior) remarked, “When I was in high school there wasn’t ever the possibility for me to be like ah I think I will skip class today.” Once in college, students no longer had parental constraints and had to make their own experiences. For example, David discussed his first year of college, “if I am kind of feeling under the weather here [ESU] I’ll be like no I will sleep in” and miss class. Similar participant attitudes negatively affected four of the student participants’ academic work. Ann (Senior) reflected:
Generally speaking, my freshman year was kind of rough. I prioritized a lot of social interactions before my academic choices. That ended up in not so good grades. Basically I had to go through the Dean of Students office and work out the steps to fix those grades. I am in a better place about it now but some of those choices still follow me.

Ann’s early academic experiences were negative and social experiences were positive. Therefore, challenging collegiate academics took a backseat to the social life she was enjoying.

Cody (Sophomore) also expressed dissatisfaction with his first-year college time management. Cody explained, “I would stay up till two in the morning for absolutely no reason. Just watching Hulu, Netflix, stuff like that.” Cody noted the result was a substantial reduction in his grade point average (GPA) between high school and freshman year of college. Cody went from a superior high school academic performance to an unsatisfying first year of college. He commented, “in high school I was like a star student, 4.0 GPA, state champion wrestler, whole nine yards. And then I get to ESU and like I think it was the first semester my GPA was like 2.5.” Cody credited ESU with providing assistance and noted, “They gave us time management techniques to help us do better.” The ESU workshops improved Cody’s time management capabilities. However, Cody still struggled to achieve a satisfactory balance between academic requirements and social activities during his sophomore year of college.

Much like David, Ann, and Cody, Beth (Junior) indicated time management was an issue during her freshman year. She commented, “I was used to the high school level workload. It was like, oh, its only 11AM and I am done with my classes. I can just
watch Netflix because I am done with my classes.” David (Junior) identified the quantity of college level academic material as a related freshman year issue. He noted that he would study the night before an exam in high school and do well. Whereas in college, much more in-depth studying for exams was needed, which required more preparation time. It took him the preponderance of his freshman year to adequately manage his time for college level exam preparation.

**Work ethic.** Despite what she considered to be a rigorous high school academic experience, Erica (Sophomore) did not feel like she had developed the requisite college level work ethic. She found inspiration through reading an Alexander Hamilton biography. Erica shared a unique literary work experience, “I was reading Hamilton’s biography and he came from no money and he had to really push himself to take initiative and to have like this ambition to succeed and he ends up like Secretary of the Treasury.” Erica found solace in Hamilton’s story. Reading about a famous historical figure who overcame limited financial resources motivated Erica to work harder at most competitive college level academics.

**Out suffering each other.** All of the student participants associated academic stress with the ESU environment. Beneath the placid most competitive college campus surface, a cauldron of tension and anxiety existed. Words and phrases like “stress,” “suffering,” and “no sleep” was pervasive throughout the participant interviews. David (Junior) described the ESU academic environment as stressful. “It is very like rigorous. I think it is a tough institution. It does stress out a lot of people.” Erica (Sophomore) explained how evidence of academic induced stress surfaced on the ESU campus:
When you are walking around campus you don’t feel the stress because people are sitting outside on blankets and stuff but once you start talking to people, then you realize that these people are like really stressed out, they have so some many things on their mind. They have three mid-terms and they are like bio majors even though they are not good at biology and a lot of people are pre-med and it really stresses them out because they don’t even want to be a doctor, they are just doing it because their parents want them to.

The participants described the typical ESU student as studious, over involved, over committed, and stressed. The participants’ experiences aligned with their description of the typical ESU student. Too much involvement contributed to student participants’ perception of stress.

This study’s participants often related student stress to ESU’s competitive academic environment. Beth (Junior) described it this way, “on this campus, in general it’s like everybody is trying to out suffer each other. Like, no, I am taking 18 credits and I studied until 3AM and I have an 8AM class.” Cody added culture to Beth’s campus ESU environment description. Cody (Sophomore) asserted, “they call it a stress culture and it is really huge here at ESU.” He went on to amplify his comment:

It’s like students basically compete to see who has more stress. Here at ESU, it’s a badge of valor to be more stressed then the next guy. I was up till 4AM. I was up till 5AM. I didn’t even blink.

Academic stress caused Cody to regret his decision to attend ESU. He stated, “If I had to choose again I probably would have chosen a different school. I think at a different school it would be a little less stressful at other colleges then at ESU.” Cody had
considered transferring to another college from ESU and decided against it because he wanted to persist to graduation.

Unlike other study participants, David (Junior) and Fritz (Sophomore) did not find the academic transition from high school to college challenging. David noted that the high school to college academic transition was not difficult, “It wasn’t a thing that I struggled with, it was just something that was kind of new to me. I just had to learn how to deal with it.” David went on to relate, “So I enjoy the stress that it puts on me because it forces me to take action on things.” Like other participants, David found the amount of material covered in college exams required more study time than high school. David believed that detailed study plan development adequately addressed the increased amount of collegiate exam preparation time. Similarly, Fritz stated that high school did not academically challenge him. He enjoyed the most competitive college academic coursework. When comparing high school to college, Fritz noted, “It’s very different to actually feel engaged.” David and Fritz were motivated by the rigorous elite college academics.

**Academic major.** Many of the participants attributed stress with their academic major. For example, Beth (Junior) “I was not really involved in anything freshman year because I was focused on getting this issue with my major figured out and that was stressing me out.” When discussing her major, Holly (Junior) noted, “I am majoring in finance, I am taking all of these finance classes, but I do not like it. I am stressing myself out more because I don’t really like finance.” Holly was concerned that changing her major would have put her academically behind peer students. Therefore, Holly had decided against changing her finance major because “I don’t want to graduate late.”
Holly and many other participants developed techniques to deal with the stressful ESU environment.

**Stress reduction.** Every student participant had developed methods to reduce academic stress. George (Freshman) decreased stress by eating “healthier food, fixing my sleep schedule, making sure I get to the gym more, stuff like that.” Others reduced academic stress through planning. Holly (Junior) was one of those participants, “One of the ways I cope is I am a planner by nature.” Jane (Freshman) developed detailed academic requirements and tracked progress. According to Jane, “by breaking everything that I am doing down into steps it feels like I am doing more and gives me more motivation to do work.” Different academic planning techniques made all of the student participants feel like they were in control of their academic efforts. Monitoring progress facilitated a perception of step-by-step progress towards academic goal attainment.

A participant suggestion for reducing academic stress was to implement a freshman year grade forgiveness policy. Beth (Junior) commented on the proposed policy:

I wish they [ESU] had a policy like a lot of other schools with grade forgiveness. Freshman year they [other colleges] don’t count your grades for the first semester because they allow that for an adjustment period. They let you drop one bad grade off of your transcript. I feel like that would take the stress off of a lot of students and make the adjustment to college easier because even when you are a freshman, depending on how good your high school was, when you come
into college not everybody is coming in on an equal scale in terms of how they were taught and how to study.

Beth’s suggestion was offered during a focus group session and the other four focus group participants agreed with her idea.

Various other student participant strategies to overcome the academic stress were detailed. Ilene asserted many ESU students responded to academic pressures by using illicit drugs. Ilene related other students’ thought process:

I have all of this work to do, let me just take an Adderall really quick and I can crank this out in eight hours and not even have to go eat and not have to stop and do anything, just crank it out. You see that because of the academic pressures.

Ilene believed illegal drug use was pervasive at ESU. Despite this, none of my participants indicated they used drugs in this way. Karen (Sophomore) identified self-awareness as a coping skill. She commented, listening to others for advice was important but “what I take on is something that I know is possible.” Managing the academic workload by knowing her capabilities enabled Karen to reduce academic stress. All of the student participants were able to reduce academic stress though social interaction with other students. Holly (Junior) commented, “Having people that you can hang out with is also very important because sometimes you just need to disconnect entirely from academics.” Socializing was a student participant method for taking a much needed break from elite college academics.

**Invisible privilege.** A key feature in participants’ elite college environment discussion was the lack of socioeconomic diversity. The vast majority (i.e., 73%) of ESU’s undergraduate students’ families were affluent with median family incomes of
$176,400 (Chetty et al., 2017). As noted earlier, all of the student participants were from low-income families (i.e., less than $43,511). The stark difference in family incomes provided the affluent students with invisible privilege.

All student participants stated that ESU lacked socioeconomic diversity. Institutional complacency with the status quo was identified as a source of this problem. According to Erica (Sophomore), “the institution may say that socioeconomic diversity is a priority but it is not visible to the students.” Thus, Beth (Junior), described the way she viewed ESU’s undergraduate student population, “I feel like it is so homogenous here at ESU. The student body does not even think about it. They just assume that everybody is as rich as they are.” As a result, affluent students did not appear to be aware of the issues present for non-affluent students, which led them to be inconsiderate. According to this study’s participants, ESU academic or social outings were often planned without cost consideration. Ann (Senior) found that reduced financial means had constrained her social activity. “My friends want to go out to dinner one day and my bank account is looking pretty low so I have to pass.” Many student participants related similar experiences.

ESU faculty members were often more sensitive to the socioeconomic disparity issue than the student body. Ann (Senior) discussed this idea and the influence on her collegiate major, “The professors know how expensive the art supplies can be. They try and help you find the best deals. The professors will sometimes supply you with things until you can get your own supplies. That has been pretty helpful.” She said that it doesn’t seem like a big deal but Ann was very grateful for the faculty member consideration and assistance.
Challenges to persistence. Pell Grant student participants related several barriers to most competitive college success. Many of this study’s Pell Grant students found their financial aid package confusing during freshman year. As well, identifying and participating in internships challenged several student participants. The method for selecting one’s academic major detracted from participants’ elite college experience. Major selection during participants’ freshman year was often accomplished without useful advice about what each major entails. The process for course registration was universally disliked. Additionally, participants believed that the ESU career center offerings were limited to business majors, which made participants with other majors feel disadvantaged because the career center did not have anything to offer them.

Several of the Pell Grant students asserted that the administration was inaccessible and failed to provide students with timely and accurate information about campus incidents. Culture appeared to constrain the low socioeconomic student participants’ response to perceived administrative issues. Low-income students lack the cultural capital to effectively engage bureaucratic collegiate organizations (Lareau, 2015). Cultural capital is defined as “skills individuals inherit that can be translated into different forms of value as people move through different institutions” (Lareau, 2015, p. 4). The lack of cultural capital meant the participants felt powerless to confront their perceived ESU administration issues.

The environment affects an individual’s identity development throughout their lifetime (Erikson, 1980). Because the low-income student participants were constantly interacting with an elite college environment dominated by affluent students, the participants modified their behavior to assimilate. For example, the participants
eschewed family income discussions with more affluent students. To fit within the affluent elite collegiate context, the student participants often suppressed their low-income status. Therefore, the participants’ low socioeconomic status may not have been a part of the student’s identity, especially in terms of what they shared with others.

**Lack of financial literacy.** All of the student participants received financial aid. Limited understanding of their financial aid package detracted from several student participants’ freshman year experience. Two weeks before the start of his freshman fall year Cody (Sophomore) bumped into a high school friend who was attending ESU. This was his recounting of their conversation:

One of my friends from high school, he goes to ESU and I told him that I was filling out for loans and stuff and he was like have you checked your financial aid? And I was like how do you do that? Who do I email to find out? He was like no no, just sign in to this and this. That was when I knew [I had financial aid]. I had not even gone here [ESU] so I did not know about any of that. He was like just use your email and sign in and check and see how much you actually need to apply for before you take out $300,000 loans. I went and checked and everything was paid for by financial aid.

Cody’s fortunate engagement with a friend was his only clue that financial assistance to pay for college was available. He attributed ESU financial aid as a blessing that precluded “crushing student debt.”

Cody’s financial aid experience contrasted with other participants’ experience who were aware of ESU’s financial aid offering. For several of this study’s participants, however, awareness did not equal understanding. Ann’s (Senior) freshman financial aid
experience was still fresh in mind. She noted that while seeking freshman year assistance with her financial aid package “I kept getting redirected so to improve the process they should be more straightforward at first. Here is your award package, this is what you need to do, or maybe part of freshman orientation.” Erica (Sophomore) had a similar freshman year experience with ESU’s financial aid offering. She related that her financial aid package “wasn’t explained to me and it was kind of confusing.” Erica believed that ESU institutional review of how to use her financial aid package would have improved her freshman year experience.

**Internships.** Identifying internship opportunities, limited family network connections, and paying for internships were persistence barriers to the academic experiences of Pell Grant students. Three participants struggled to engage the ESU internship process. George (Freshman) commented, “As far as internships go, I am stressed about that. I don’t really know where to start.” Erica (Sophomore) found initiating the internship process difficult, “What I’ve found really hard is the competition for the best internship. I wasn't raised in a household that stressed summer jobs or internships. For example, I just recently made a resume, and it's pretty sparse.” George expressed similar feeling when he wrote in his Qualtrics survey, “For me especially, I feel so rushed to make sure I achieve an internship but I feel that I am not able to really make a satisfying resume.” George went on to suggest “so maybe offering a rudimentary type of event that explains the things a student should really take advantage of while they are at college to prepare themselves after graduation” would have improved the process.

Pell Grant participants also cited limited family network connections as internship challenges. George discussed it this way, “I know a lot of students have their own
connections, family stuff like that and if you don’t have that you just don’t know.” Erica (Sophomore) compared herself to other ESU students, “They will say things like, oh, my aunt works at a law firm so I just got an internship there. It’s like oh, cool. It’s very weird, it doesn’t happen where I come from.” Beth (Junior) concurred with Erica, “A lot of times if you aren’t as affluent you don’t have connections that can get you these internships.” George, Erica, and Beth believed low-income student internship advice would have improved their elite college experience.

Financial resources constrained five participants’ ability to obtain unpaid internships. Beth (Junior) indicated during a focus group that she passed on internship opportunities “because I cannot afford to get an unpaid internship.” Beth went on to remark, “Students who do not have the financial resources end up getting left out. They don’t have the experience that is going to help them get a job or go to graduate school.” The other four focus group participants concurred with Beth’s comments. To improve Pell Grant student internship experiences at elite colleges, the focus group asserted that ESU internship funding for low-income students was needed.

**Academic major selection.** Six of the student participants were satisfied with their academic major. Those students knew their major prior to beginning undergraduate academics and were content with their decision. The other five participants had a different experience. They believed the process of selecting a major had challenged their persistence to graduate. Major selection during participants’ freshman year was often accomplished without thoughtful advice about what each major entails. Dissatisfied student participants believed freshman orientation did not provide much information about ESU’s major offerings. Issues with ESU hosted major events surfaced during
According to Erica (Sophomore) and Jane (Freshman), the ESU major orientation proceedings were “not well publicized or the times conflicted with my classes.” Beth (Junior) related her ESU major event experience during the day of admitted students:

They did not really tell you about the majors they just give you a piece of paper that tells you the structure of the major. There were so many other people there with different majors all meeting in the same building. It was super crowded together so you were not getting any real information because there were so many other people. They just gave you a paper that listed the course requirements. When I looked them up it did not make any sense to me. I was like, I don’t know how this helps me but okay.

The haphazard nature of major selection had negatively affected four of the student participants. Beth (Junior), Erica (Sophomore), and Ilene (Senior) had changed their initial majors. Holly (Junior) felt trapped in a major that she did not enjoy. Holly wrote in her Qualtrics survey, “learning more about my major prior to entering the Business School” would have improved her college experience. Focus group participants suggested a series of early freshman year department open houses would have improved their most competitive college experience. Personalizing what each major offered and identifying major related post graduate vocations were other participant ideas that would have improved the academic major selection methodology.

**Registration.** The registration process was nerve-racking for two of the student participants. Competition for classes and registration site technological problems compounded the issue. Four of the 11 student participants were first generation college
students. Karen (Sophomore) was a first generation college student and she described the college’s registration process as a challenge that she had faced. She said:

I really dislike the way that ESU does registration. I guess it is the most convenient way for the college as a whole, but I really hate it. Lots of students dislike the registration process. It is just very difficult. It’s just like the hunger games, we wake up at 7AM, and everybody is waiting and it’s like who can type the fastest. It is so ridiculous. I guess it is just a capacity problem.

Karen’s strong use of distasteful registration process terminology was not found elsewhere in this study’s data. Karen’s lack of cultural capital caused her to accept the existing registration process without taking action to improve it.

Other participants related anxiety to the registration process. Jane (Freshman) was not a first generation college student, but she believed that registering during a busy first week at ESU was unnecessary. Jane reflected on her registration experience, “The registration process was rather hectic and also stressful. I know from my own and other students’ experience. It was not very helpful to have that stress in the beginning of the semester.” Jane argued for registering before arrival on campus, which would have improved the process. For Jane, registration site technological issues compounded her anxiety. She remarked:

Another reason that it was kind of stressful is it’s very quick and you are thinking hey, what if I don’t get this class? It depends on the technology and everything. But for me, I was logged in but then the site kicked me out so I was behind.
Therefore, she was unable to register for one of the classes she wanted because it was full. Unlike Karen, Jane persevered and ended up with the courses that she wanted by successfully petitioning the department to open up another section of the class.

**Career center.** The ESU career center offered students a variety of programs and services to facilitate goal attainment. Fritz (Sophomore) related a positive career center experience. He had requested and received the internship information from career center staff, whereas most of the other Pell Grant student participants found issues with the career center services. Ilene (Senior) remarked, “I think you have to know going in the career center what you want because they are not always the most organized.” Other student participants believed their major precluded use of the career center offerings. Ann (Senior) commented:

> Every time I go home my mom asks me if I have gone to the career center. My usual answer is no. I did go to a career fair. I feel like me personally as an art major I don’t feel qualified for a lot of things.

A belief that her art major was not a career center focus area precluded Ann from using the career center.

Other student participants expressed similar career center sentiments by noting non-business majors did not benefit from career center offerings. Holly (Junior) commented during our interview:

> A critique that I often hear about the career center is that it is good for business students but not for everyone else. The career center is geared toward business students, rather than the rest of the campus. A lot of other majors feel neglected because when they go to the career center, the different internships or resources
do not support them. The other majors feel disadvantaged because the career center does not have anything for them. Multiple people have told me this. Even when the career fair comes, there is so many business companies, Fortune 500 companies. They are not centered towards other than business majors. That is definitely [something that] the college is lacking outright.

For Holly, the career center needed to broaden their scope to encompass a broader community of students with non-business majors. Ilene (Senior) concurred, “I think for non-business majors it can be difficult to get the support that the students need when it comes to internships, when it comes to whatever.” Beth (Junior) was a history major and related that she wrestled with what to do after graduation. She commented on her experience with the career center, “They told us that we have a career center. As a freshman, I went to the career center and thought that this is not helpful at all. I am still lost.” Beth’s one time, first-year, bad experience had caused her to close the door on future career center engagement.

As noted earlier, information about career options during freshman year would have improved study participants’ higher education experience. Erica (Sophomore) commented:

It would help to have knowledge of alternative career paths. I think that a lot of people come into college and think that they need to enter a high-income field and this places a lot of stress on their college experience.

Beth (Junior) initially pursued a computer science career because she believed it would enable increased earnings. She found her academic capability did not support a computer
science major; instead Beth is now a history major. Early freshman year vocational discussions might have caused Beth to consider other, more compatible career options.

**Administration.** All of the students in my study mentioned ESU administration as negatively influencing their higher education journey. When asked if she felt a sense of belonging at ESU, Beth (Junior) discussed it this way:

Not anymore. Especially with everything going on. It’s like a weird experience. Quite a few of my friends believe that the school has a very shallow and fake sense of liberalism. The administration does the bare minimum to keep that guise up. Oh, we are very welcoming but you know, we do everything we can to address issues we have but at the end of the day, they don’t actually do much substantial work to address those issues.

Beth noted a lack of ESU administration communication with students as an underlying issue. Cody (Sophomore) agreed, “I would say the administration and student body relationship is nonexistent. I also feel like the administration does not give students enough information about what they do to really warrant students going to them.” The student participants believed that they were not always aware of useful administrative resources. As a result, most participants had not interacted with the administration.

Compared to other participants, David (Junior) identified heavy-handed administrative efforts to control students as a challenge. In response to a Qualtrics survey prompt about what would improve his college experience, David wrote the following, “It would help to have an administration that does not try to control every aspect of students' lives, from the clubs they're allowed to participate in to the strict housing policies to the inaccessibility of the administration to students.” David went on to relate during our
interview, “I think the college has been very poor in supporting the students, just from my past experience. They kind of make rush judgments and typically wrong judgments about people.” David commented that a friend had recently been expelled from ESU. He believed the administration had misjudged his friend during the administrative review process. The lack of cultural capital appeared to limit the low socioeconomic student participants’ response to perceived administrative issues. Participants chose passive acceptance over engaging ESU’s administration on the perceived issues.

**Support Structures**

ESU institutional support was often mentioned as the student participants discussed their higher education experience. As discussed, the support factor of the institutional action model (IAM) encompasses financial, academic, and social support (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Those areas have both contributed and detracted from student participants’ progression through an academic program. Mainly, participants shared examples of institutional support that enhanced their ability to progress to graduation. For example, the students were very grateful for financial assistance. Conversely, limited awareness of ESU’s institutional support capabilities detracted from several student participants’ experience. Although ESU provided students with superior academic support, participants’ were critical of the advising process. A cornucopia of most competitive college social opportunities were available for participant consideration.

**Money matters.** Financial support refers to institutionally provided aid to enable student enrollment and completion (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). When compared to other higher education institutions, elite colleges possess superior financial resources, which enables enhanced financial aid for students (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). Critically, ESU
addressed 100% of financial need for in-state students. Ten of the study’s 11 student participants were in-state students and benefitted from this support. Typically, the ESU financial aid package paid the student participants’ tuition and fees, room and board, books and supplies, and travel to and from the college. Several participants also received a stipend of approximately $1,000 for personal expenses.

All of this study’s participants were grateful for the financial support from the college. Beth (Junior) discussed financial support in this way, “with the Pell Grant and ESU’s own financial aid package I have not had to worry about money. My financial aid covers the entire cost of college.” Holly (Junior) expressed similar sentiments:

I think that having the financial aid package that I was so blessed to get has made it comfortable. It has allowed me to focus on a lot of other things. That makes me unique in a way because I know that money can be such a burden and the financial aid package has allowed me to take on opportunities because I am not worried about if I can continue this semester or if I will have the money to pay for books.

ESU’s financial support impacted participants’ collegiate experience in a variety of other ways. The first of which was college choice.

*College choice.* The high-achieving Pell Grant student participants had applied to and been accepted at other postsecondary institutions. For most of the study’s participants, ESU’s substantial financial aid package was a deciding factor in their higher education decision. Nine student participants identified ESU’s financial assistance as a primary reason for their decision to attend this particular university. Fritz explained how financial aid had affected his college choice:
I was relying a lot on financial aid just to come to be able to go to college at all, let alone ESU. My household does not bring in a lot of money and we don’t have a lot saved up. It was very fortuitous that financial aid was there. I honestly do not know if I could have gone to anything other than a community college if I had not received at least a substantial portion of financial aid.

Cody (Sophomore) did not relate financial aid to his ESU attendance decision. He grew up wanting to attend the university. A high school teacher and ESU alumnus facilitated Cody’s ESU application process. The other student participant exception was David (Junior), who is this study’s only out-of-state student participant.

**Out-of-state.** ESU out-of-state tuition and fees are approximately twice the amount of in-state tuition and fees. At the university, out-of-state students may receive up to 25% of the attendance cost in grant aid, whereas ESU met 100% of financial need for in-state students. David (Junior) chose ESU because it offered a respected public policy program of studies. According to David, “paying for college is a mix of a lot of different things that I never really foresaw or never really knew was necessary.” Parents, grandparents, loans, and financial aid were contributors to paying for David’s collegiate attendance at ESU. David did not indicate how much debt he took on to attend college.

Some of the in-state student participants were sympathetic to the increased amount of money out-of-state students paid to attend ESU. Ann (Senior) explained her experience with out-of-state students this way:

I have quite a few friends who are out-of-state and whose parents’ incomes are just above needing financial aid but just below being able to pay for everything themselves. So I can really only offer them my sympathy because I was really
very lucky and I do greatly appreciate everything ESU has done for me.

Erica (Sophomore) took a less sympathetic view. She remarked, “Out-of-state students complain that they have to pay so much to come here [ESU]. But I am like, you are still here paying it.” Most of the student participants who commented believed ESU’s differing state residence (i.e., in-state or out-of-state) financial support policy was inconsequential to their higher education experience.

**Merit scholar programs.** ESU offered several types of merit scholarships to include Noted and ESU scholars (pseudonyms). The university screened all incoming freshman based on academics for potential inclusion into the Noted Scholar program. Less than 10% of ESU undergraduates received Noted Scholar designation. Selected freshman are at the top of their high school class and score in the top 5% on nationally administered standardized tests. Noted Scholar program benefits include residential selection preference, research stipends, course registration priority, and privileged access to lectures and speakers. Fritz (Sophomore) was designated by ESU as a Noted scholar. Fritz was proud of his scholarship. He leveraged Noted Scholar benefits to explore research interests, conduct a research study, and attend special guest lectures.

When compared to the Noted Scholars who are designated based on admission academics, ESU Scholars are selected based on diversity and/or surmounting hardship. Two low-income Pell Grant student participants, Holly (Junior) and Karen (Sophomore), were ESU scholars. The ESU scholarship paid for students’ in-state tuition and fees and was renewable as long as good academic standing was maintained. Holly attributed ESU scholar designation for academic performance enhancement. She was thankful for the financial assistance and stated, “I have not had to worry about paying for college because
it’s been paid for.” Similarly, Karen expressed excitement and gratitude for the ESU scholar benefits. When discussing paying for college she noted “I was actually very worried because my family has never been a wealthy family.” According to Holly and Karen, the ESU scholarship removed collegiate payment anxiety and enabled them to focus on graduation.

*Study abroad.* ESU offered a variety of study abroad options and programs. Undergraduate students were encouraged by the university to take advantage of the study abroad opportunities. The goal was for students to garner a global perspective and develop cross-cultural experiences. Need based financial aid was available to support students who wanted to study abroad. Once financial aid was approved, tuition, fees, anticipated expenses (including airfare) were deposited by ESU into the student’s checking or savings account. Students were responsible for paying the host university or program provider. Over 50% of ESU’s undergraduate student population studied abroad during their higher education experience, which compared to less than 10% of this study’s participants.

The student participants mentioned a plethora of most competitive college study abroad experiences. Ann (Senior) was unaware that financial aid was available to support study abroad. Therefore, she had decided not to apply because she believed it was too expensive. Jane (Freshman) had recently applied for a study abroad program and was awaiting feedback on her application. Erica (Sophomore) was accepted for study abroad. ESU had agreed to provide the financial aid to support her study abroad experience. Erica was in a financial quandary during our individual interview:
When you apply for a summer study abroad program you have to pay the full fee before you can get the financial aid and then get it back. I don’t know where I am going to find $5,000 to pay the college and then I have two months before I get the money back.

Several weeks later Erica told me “I ended up withdrawing from that [study abroad] program because my mom could not come up with the money” to pay the study abroad program cost before financial aid reimbursement. Even though paying the study abroad in advance of financial aid receipt was an issue for Erica, Holly (Junior) had a different experience.

Holly (Junior) was the only student participant who had completed a study abroad program. She leveraged ESU financial aid to pay for the study abroad opportunity. Fronting the study abroad program payment before financial aid receipt was not an issue for her. Holly commented on paying for study abroad in this way:

I was proactive and saved up the money for that. I knew that I would get reimbursed. In a strange way I ended up profiting from the study abroad because the school gave me [money], one family member helped to pay for it, the college gave me extra money for the study abroad trip and let me keep it so I used it while I was in country. I have not struggled with the financial aspects of going on a study abroad or doing those types of trips because I planned in advance. It is never spur of the moment. I know finance is a hard thing for my family so I was always working in the summer. I am saving my money all the time.

Holly’s advance financial planning and use of several different funding mechanisms enabled her study abroad experience.
Facilitating learning. Academic support includes advising, tutoring, study groups, and supplemental instruction (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). According to this study’s participants, ESU provided a wide variety of academic support to the undergraduate student body. Student advising began during freshman year. Tutoring was available through the library, academic departments, and athletic teams. Formal and informal study groups benefited most of this study’s participants. My research data showed a range of student engagement with ESU’s academic support capabilities.

As discussed in Chapter 2, income disparity can affect students’ ability to use cultural capital to engage academic support (Calarco, 2014; Lareau, 2015). According to the authors, low-income students were less proficient at using cultural capital than more affluent students in schools to request academic assistance. Correspondingly, the low-income Pell Grant student participants were often reluctant to maximize the most competitive college academic support services. The participants struggled to ask for the needed academic assistance, particularly during their first year of college. They noted a need to find their own way, as discussed in the next section.

Finding your way. Elite colleges possess the advising capabilities needed to help all students succeed in postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b). Despite this, most of this study’s participants were unsatisfied with their first-year advising experience. Ilene (Senior) offered her freshman year experience:

I will say too that the advisors here at ESU, during freshman year you are forced to have an advisor, the advisors are kind of useless. Because they don’t know you and they don’t know your goals. You don’t know you and you don’t know your goals because you are only a freshman. I personally think the freshman advisors
are dumb. The professors are forced to be those faculty advisors but they really
don’t know you, they are like oh, you want to take this, maybe you should take
this. This isn’t advice; this is just you throwing classes. Ultimately, you end up
finding your way. I did not really listen to my academic advisor.

Ilene took her own counsel instead of following the ESU assigned academic advisor’s
advice. When asked how the freshman year advising process could be improved, Ilene
commented, “I don’t know if there is a way to improve the advising [process].” Other
student participants had similar experiences with their freshman year advisors.

Initially majoring in Latin, Erica (Sophomore) engaged in a freshman year
process of trial and error with different courses. Through that process she identified
classical studies and political theory as her academic major focus areas. Reflecting on
her experience caused Erica to offer several ideas for improving the advising process.

Erica and several other study participants believed that including detailed major
discussions during freshman orientation would have improved the advising method.
Additionally, Erica offered the following:

I think what would be helpful would be to have your pre-major advisor be
somebody more in the field of what you want to study. My pre-major advisor was
in the Hispanic studies department and I don’t know if they got confused because
of like Latin and Latin American or what but she didn’t know anything about the
classics department. I have a friend who wants to be an English major but her
pre-major advisor is in the physics department and he tells her that English is
useless, that is really not helpful at all.
Based on Erica’s testimony, aligning advisors with field of study would have improved her experience. David (Junior), a public policy major, agreed with Erica’s assessment. His advisor was in charge of the public policy department and the masters in public policy program. David felt that having an advisor in his field of study enabled useful guidance as he navigated the various ESU course offerings.

**Tutoring.** The participant students discussed a variety of tutoring experiences that contributed, and at times detracted from their higher education persistence. ESU offered low-cost ($12 an hour) one-on-one tutoring upon student request at the tutor zone. Two-day advance notice was needed to schedule a tutoring session. Additionally, most of the ESU departments offered tutoring support. The ESU library hosted writing center provided undergraduate students with free writing assistance upon request. University trained students staffed the ESU writing center. The writing center workforce provided assistance with organizing academic writing efforts. Most of the Pell Grant students had not used ESU’s tutoring services to support their academic work.

**Tutor zone.** Karen (Sophomore) and Fritz (Sophomore) had positive experiences at the tutor zone. Fritz engaged the tutor zone in this manner:

I signed up for a time slot for a specific class and someone who had taken the class and was obviously comfortable with the material was there and kind of walked me through it and helped me review the things that I needed to [review]. I felt significantly better going out of it then I did going in.

Karen also shared an affirmative tutor zone experience, “The tutor zone in the library is very helpful.” The other nine student participants had not used the tutor zone services.
Ann (Senior) stated that she was unaware of the tutor zone during her freshman year. Despite academically struggling during her four-year academic experience, Ann was reluctant to seek tutor zone assistance. When asked what advice she would give to new ESU freshman Ann (Senior) stated:

- Ask for help, please ask for help. Failing is not bad. It’s not the end of the world.
- Failure to one person might be an F and failure to another person might be a B+.
- It’s really not that bad. You will probably work through it. Especially if you ask for help. Ask for help.

As Ann reflected on her collegiate journey, she wanted new students to seek academic assistance to improve their higher education experience.

Jane (Freshman), George (Freshman), and Holly (Junior) were aware of the tutor zone services but did not use them. It was difficult to discern why some of the student participants were reluctant to leverage tutor zone support. None of the student participants noted the cost of using the tutor zone as an issue. For example, George (Freshman) stated that the tutor zone was free to him. Despite this, he did not engage the tutor zone services. Jane (Freshman) felt that her coursework would not benefit from tutor zone support. Her reason for not using the tutoring zone was “most of my classes are writing and reading based and those are individual activities.” For various reasons, most of this study’s participants had not leveraged ESU’s tutor zone capabilities.

Research suggests providing low-income students with institutional mentors (e.g., faculty members) might get students more comfortable with asking for academic help (Lareau, 2015). Additionally, enabling freshman Pell Grant students to hear the stories of upper
class Pell Grant students such as Ann might be another way to get students more comfortable with requesting academic assistance (Lee, 2016).

Department tutoring. Compared to the tutor zone, most of this study’s participants were aware of department tutoring and had used that service. Still, student participant department tutoring experiences were positive and negative. Ilene (Senior) was double majoring in government and business marketing and she expressed positive experiences with department tutoring. As a student athlete during her first two years of college, Ilene (Senior) extensively used the athletic department provided tutoring. She asserted, “The best thing about ESU athletics is I got free tutoring in all of the classes. I had a tutor all of the time because I was taking very challenging classes, but again it was free.” During her junior and senior years, Ilene made productive use of business school department tutors.

Holly (Junior) was finance major. When I asked Holly what was not available from ESU that would have helped she commented, “a finance tutor.” Holly was making her own way through a challenging finance major without the much needed finance department tutoring assistance. Karen (Sophomore) and Beth (Junior) were dissatisfied with some of their department tutoring experiences. When discussing department assigned student tutors, Karen majored in kinesiology and she remarked, “some of the student tutors don’t understand how to teach people with different learning styles or they may not take it as serious as they should.” Beth (Junior) initially majored in computer science but changed her major during sophomore year to history. Beth had a similar department assigned student tutor experience:
The computer department had consultants. Higher level computer science majors, who you could go to from 5PM to 10PM. They would help you with your projects. But they would just help you pick stuff out, as opposed to helping teach you.

This practice contrasted with Beth’s French department student tutor experience, “The French department offered its own tutoring sessions, which were advanced French student majors. They would organize tutoring sessions for the lower level classes before exams. Those are pretty helpful.” Beth had not allowed her negative computer department tutor experience preclude her from seeking and benefiting from French department tutoring.

*Writing center.* None of the student participants were satisfied with the writing center’s academic assistance. Lack of awareness, limited prior planning, and a bad experience were attributed to participants’ dissatisfaction with the writing center services. David (Junior) identified the writing center capacity as an issue. David remarked:

> There is like this writing resource center, which I have only been able to use once since they are always so packed with appointments. Especially around mid-term season or final season. I wish that was kind of expanded and more widely used because that [the writing center] really helps with essays.

David believed his sole writing center experience had improved his writing skills. However, he was unable to follow up that positive experience because of limited writing center staff during peak periods of collegiate studies. Prior planning may have precluded David’s issue with writing center capacity.
Ann (Senior) and Holly (Junior) identified academic writing as a challenge they wrestled with during postsecondary education. For various reasons (e.g., unawareness), Ann and Holly did not engage writing center staff for assistance. Ann (Senior) explained her writing challenge and the result:

If a professor says write eight to 10 pages, I will struggle to get to that eight and there are people who write 12 pages and have to cut their paper down and that blows my mind. It’s like, donate some of those words to me. Writing has always been the cause of every bad grade that I have had.

When asked if she had used the writing center Ann stated, “I was unaware of the writing center until the end of my freshman year.” Ann went on to explain, “there is the writing resource center, which everyone tells me to use but part of me is afraid of judgment. You are in your senior year and you are supposed to write this way.” Lack of knowledge and fear of judgment precluded Ann’s use of the writing center during her undergraduate experience. Ann’s fear of judgment may be exasperated by her low socioeconomic status because by this time in college student development, students should less fearful of peer judgment (Erickson, 1980).

Similar to Ann, Holly (Junior) found academic writing challenging. “I hate writing papers.” She noted, “I am overthinking every word when it comes to writing.” As a result, “when mid-terms come, more so finals because professors like to give papers on finals, that is an awful time for me. I get anxiety.” Holly sought writing center assistance early in her time at ESU. She was dissatisfied with the result:

I used the writing center one time and I have not gone back because I had a bad experience. I had about half of my paper written, I asked the person to look over
my paper and she said here is how to restructure my paper and I did that. I should have listened to my intuition because when I turned the paper, the professor was like why did you write the paper this way? You should have done it this way, which is how I originally wrote the paper.

Holly’s initial bad writing experience center caused her to avoid seeking desperately needed academic writing assistance in the future.

**Study groups.** Most of the research participants asserted study group experience contributed to their academic performance. Fritz (Sophomore) found productive use of study groups. He explained his study group experience:

> I have been a part of study groups for different classes and disciplines of study and I think that has definitely helped for someone who goes it alone a lot of the time. It was definitely helpful to get other points of view and maybe things explained to me where I did not have as good a grasp on it as I thought. Yeah, I have definitely relied on my peers in situations and they have come through for me.

Fritz went on to relate that a study group had helped him to complete an academically challenging organic chemistry class, “we studied together all the time, reviewed with each other, quizzed each other and kind of helped each other through.” Study group participation had supported Fritz’s academic journey by providing alternative views and exam preparation assistance.

Holly (Junior) and George (Freshman) also benefited from informal study group participation. Holly (Junior) made limited use of informal study groups and commented, “I don’t do that often. I am too embarrassed to force someone to listen to me get over my
anxiety. The one time I did use a peer it went well.” George (Freshman) had also profited from informal study group engagement. In contrast to Holly, asking for informal study group assistance did not inhibit George. George commented, “I will ask my friends if they want help or if they want to give me help, we might talk about a test or something like that.” As described by George, routine use of informal study groups had positively contributed to his ESU academic performance.

**Student welfare.** Social support encompasses counseling, mentoring, and clubs (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). At ESU, counseling service consisted of student requested mental health assistance. Mentoring matched new students with upper-class students. Mentors provided mentees with academic and social assistance. Clubs offered students opportunities to explore their interests in a supportive environment. A key aspect of student social support was student initiative to identify and selectively engage the many potential options.

**Counseling.** The ESU counseling center offered a variety of mental health services to students who requested assistance. Referrals to local community mental health resources were available when needed. Student fees paid the counseling center operating costs. Three of the participants had used the ESU counseling center and were satisfied with their experience. Despite this, counseling center capacity issues surfaced during my interview with Ilene (Senior):

During my time here I have noticed that the student mental health center, the counseling center does not have enough time slots allotted for the students. I see that as senator here, I see that as complaints. I do see where you can call and they will say let’s schedule for two weeks from now. Two weeks out, I have a crisis
now that I need to talk about. That is a hard problem to tackle because it’s a lot of money that is already going to the student counseling center and I don’t know how, other than bringing on a full time staff member and salary, which is a lot of money, I don’t know how you solve it. They [the counseling center] do not have the capacity.

In addition to the capacity issue identification, Ilene also commented on student referral to off-campus counseling offices. She offered:

I am lucky because I will go see a counselor once a semester. I don’t really need them very often. I think for people that do need a weekly counselor that is a problem. You [students] can get referred outside to someone but the student has to pay for that on their own dime, so there is that problem.

The counseling center capacity issue had not affected this study’s participants. David (Junior) shared his experience, “the counseling center has always been a good place for people to go. I have been there once or twice, just for people to talk to. It’s very open and accessible.” When discussing institutional academic support, Ann (Senior) stated, “there is the counseling center, which I have utilized. It helps to sort of work things out. Once you have vocalized them, it kind of makes them more real and you can figure out ways of dealing with them.” Most of the participant students’ counseling center experiences were discussed in a positive manner.

**Mentoring.** ESU facilitated undergraduate student connections to mentors through several different programs. The Peer-Mentoring program enabled first-year students to network with upper-class students and fellow freshman with comparable backgrounds. The ESU Women’s mentoring program facilitated undergraduate women
student connection with graduate students, faculty, and staff mentors. Additionally, the Alumni mentoring program coupled alumni with students to support student professional development. Much like the counseling center discussion, student participants were upbeat about their ESU mentoring experiences.

Participants often identified mentoring opportunities through the student center. Karen (Sophomore) commented, “The student center advertises everything. It was just stop by if you are interested so I stopped by and got involved.” Two participants, Karen (Sophomore) and George (Freshman), had participated in the formal pre-medical student Peer-Mentoring program. According to Karen, “I had a pre-med mentor, who was going through the pre-med process but was a little bit further along in the process than me. She gave me insight into what classes to take with other classes. That really helped.” Similarly, George commented about his pre-medical student mentors, “they give you good advice on what to do and you can ask them about anything.”

Four of the student participants identified informal mentors as contributors to their collegiate experience. Faculty members, Greek Life, and the local community were sources of informal mentors. Erica (Sophomore) asserted, “I am not like in any formal mentorship programs. My government professor that I was just talking about has been a really great resource. She has been really encouraging.” When discussing mentors, Beth (Junior) stated, “it has all been very informal with some professors and friends.” Holly (Junior) found mentorship through her sorority:

There are a few professors who are a part of the sorority so having that connection has allowed me to build a relationship with them. That has taken on its’ own
mentorship. I have had lunch with those professors and benefited from the discussions.

Ilene (Senior) identified a local community mentor, “I have a mentor through the community chapel, who has been my mentor since freshman year. She was my home away from home, my rock.” Through formal programs and informal associations, student participants identified mentoring as contributing to their higher education experience.

**Clubs.** Possessing hundreds of clubs, ESU offered students a menu of options. When discussing clubs, David (Junior) found issue with the numbers, “I also feel like there are way too many clubs, there will be like five clubs with the same topic, so it is kind of silly that they have so many, they could be combined.” Conversely, Erica (Sophomore) wanted to add the number of ESU clubs, “I want to start a club but I don’t know if it would be successful. Something that I would be known for.” Erica associated founding a club with establishing an enduring higher education legacy.

**Mixed Bag for Measuring Academic Progress**

Most competitive college institutional success depends on developing a feedback program that provides performance feedback on educational policies and students’ academic experience (Baker et al., 2012). This section outlines the participants’ assessment of the feedback they received both inside and outside of the classroom (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Participant feedback adhered to ESU policy standards. The student participants received academic performance feedback within classroom from professors and other students. Outside of the classroom, ESU professors provided participants feedback on their progress to completion through automated systems. The most
competitive college feedback processes contributed and detracted from this study’s participants’ persistence to succeed. One area that fell short of participants’ expectations was the institution’s exam policy.

**Exam policy.** The ESU mid-term and final exam policy required students to engage the Dean of Undergraduate Studies regarding course exam time conflicts. Other student requests to reschedule mid-term and final exams for reasons such as medical issues must be addressed with the Dean of Students Office. Professors were not allowed to reschedule mid-term or final exams without official permission from one of those two ESU institutional offices. Many student participants expressed frustration with the ESU mid-term and final-exam policy. They also noted inconsistent departmental grading standards as a barrier to their success.

Research conducted by Lareau (2015) found that low-income students were less willing than more affluent students to request exceptions to institutional policy. Even though all of the low-income Pell Grant student participants described a rigid institutional exam policy that detracted from their higher education experience, only one of them had requested an exception to ESU’s exam policy. Holly (Junior) was the student participant whose exception to policy request was denied:

Our final exam policy is really restricting and it’s not flexible. What I mean by that is one time I had final exams that were back-to-back, including a paper. I had requested that I get a change in final exam time and the school response was you do not exactly meet our policy so you have to take your exam at the normal time. Holly also expressed how the exam policy made her feel, “I was like, for a school that says they are really big on mental health and they care about the well-being of the
students that was a clear sign of where the policy differs from what is being said.” Holly believed that the proximate exam timing precluded her from adequately preparing for each exam. Cody (Sophomore) agreed with Holly and indicated he too found a compressed exam timeframe limiting, “You have exams, two on one day and two on the next day and then the lab final Friday. It doesn’t make sense.” David (Junior) added:

I feel like you are not getting the best students’ ability. They are like I have to study for four exams that week. You can only do a little bit about one. I can only study for a little bit about for this one. You might not do as well as if you had a week to prepare.

Student participants thought department exam coordination would have precluded much of the exam scheduling conflicts.

All of this study’s participants felt that the institutional exam policy limited faculty members’ ability to adjust exam timing to account for individual student exam scheduling issues. Jane (Freshman) commented:

I think the professors would be willing to give a bit of extra time or move it around but because of the exam policy, the professors are supposed to give their final exams consistently, the professors feel like they cannot.

Student participants believed the prescriptive ESU mid-term and final exam policy precluded faculty members’ from helping students de-conflict exam schedule conflicts during the stressful exam timeframe.

Grading standard. Most of this study’s participants believed that a standardized ESU grading scale would have improved their collegiate experience. According to student participants, ESU course grading substantially varied with different standards
established for different classes. Holly (Junior) described her thought process, “I would appreciate a standardized grading scale because each department can construct how the 93 is an A or a 90 is an A or 97 is an A. It varies by the department and that is very frustrating.” Student participants believed that having a common ESU assessment metric for all course grades would have precluded academic feedback confusion.

**Professor feedback.** Faculty members were the primary source of academic feedback provided to student participants. Ilene (Senior) indicated, “Most of my feedback has been mostly formal and mostly derived from professors.” Several of this study’s low-income Pell Grant student participants believed that their affluent peers were academically advantaged through higher quality pre-college schooling. Therefore, participants’ valued detailed feedback from faculty members, which helped them improve their academic efforts. David (Junior) appreciated specific professor feedback because “it kind of changes things and you get to know what they want to see in your [academic] work.” Ilene added that she also valued comprehensive professor feedback, “I think the ones [professors] that I respect the most tell me how to improve whatever I am doing.” The student participants expressed a range of professor feedback experiences.

   Many students expressed constructive professor feedback experiences. Ann (Senior) commented:

   I have been in a few classes where there are three grades, mid-term, final, and the paper. Those you have to ask the professor if you really want to know how you are doing. I have had classes where the professors tell you, hey, you are not doing so well in this, do you need assistance?
Proactively engaging professors and faculty member academic intervention had contributed to Ann’s academic experience. Fritz (Sophomore) also believed faculty member feedback had enhanced his course assignment submissions. Fritz remarked, “I think more often than not, with professors I have had, they have tried to be constructive. Rather than doing nothing, or taking points off arbitrarily, they are really trying to help you improve yourself and your skills.” Fritz credited professor feedback with improving his academic skills. Beth (Junior) expressed similar professor based feedback experiences. Beth commented, “The professors have always given good constructive criticism, where you can improve, where you did a good job, pointing out those kinds of things.” Pointed feedback was well received by the participants.

At times, most of the student participants found that professors’ academic feedback fell short of their expectations. Karen (Sophomore) asserted, “some teachers write comments and other teachers you never even see your test again, it’s a grade on Blackboard. It’s like okay, I would love to know what questions I got wrong but I don’t know.” When confronted with similar experiences, Jane (Freshman) followed up with her faculty members. Jane commented, “I have gone to professors a couple of times to talk to them more about what they thought about my academic work other than the grade. In my experience, there has not been much feedback, it’s just been a grade.” Upon engaging her professors, Jane was able to obtain the requisite feedback. When discussing professor feedback Cody remarked, “it’s kind of a mixed bag. Some professors are great at this and some professors you never know.” In Cody’s opinion, students who did not obtain professor feedback beyond a grade missed the opportunity to improve themselves.
Limited faculty member feedback on final exams was often discussed during student participant interviews.

**Final exams.** Most of the student participants noted a lack of feedback on final exams as an institutional factor that detracted from their persistence to succeed. Cody (Sophomore) commented, “we don’t really get feedback on the finals. I kind of see why they do that but it kind of sucks as a student because that is the biggest exam that you take and that is the one that you never get any feedback on.” The course final exam culminating experience was less than satisfactorily because student participants did not receive detailed academic performance feedback. Despite the student participant desire for final exam feedback, not one of the participants stated that they had followed up with their professor and asked to see their final exam.

**Class size.** This study’s data suggested an inverse relationship between the size of a class and the amount of professor provided feedback. Large classes often resulted in limited feedback and the level of faculty member feedback increased in smaller classes. George (Freshman), Cody (Sophomore), and Beth (Junior), expressed how the typical ESU large class size influenced feedback. According to George (Freshman), “when the professors grade your exam it’s just a grade rather than personal feedback. Especially if the class is big, they have to do all the tests so they don’t really give personal feedback.” Beth had a similar experience with a large computer science class. Beth related:

I know in the computer science department, I was taking a class and it was kind of an unsupportive environment. It was basically taught as a big lecture class and you had projects and you were on your own working on the projects.
Beth believed that the large class size precluded in-depth professor feedback. In other large ESU classes, teacher assistants (TA) provided student participants with feedback. Cody noted TA use of answer keys to grade assignments limited feedback. According to Cody, “they never post an answer key so it’s just minus two wrong answer. You just go through never knowing the right answer.” Cody believed “it would be better if the professor worked more closely with our TAs to ensure that we get better feedback.” Feedback in large lecture classes was not targeted for the participants and did not provide support for their learning.

Ann (Senior) benefited from the increased feedback she associated with limited student populations in art major classes. Ann remarked, “There are only 12 or so senior art majors and there are a lot of the professors who are giving you feedback on a huge body of your work.” Ann went on to comment about how consistent professor engagement facilitated detailed feedback, “you know all of these faculty for four years and they know your work and what you need.” Ann believed that small art class feedback from professors had improved the quality of her academic work and contributed substantially to her collegiate experience. Ilene (Senior) also benefited from small class feedback at the business school. Ilene remarked, “I get more feedback in, your analysis is right but you did not see from this perspective, or like did you think about this way to see it.” Reduced student populations enabled professors to challenge Ilene’s thinking by providing her with detailed feedback on her assignment submissions.

*Automated systems.* Some of ESU’s faculty members used the Banner and Blackboard automated systems to provide student participants with feedback on their progress to completion. Participants appreciated the professors who used automated
systems and they were satisfied with the feedback they received over those automated systems. Erica (Sophomore) stated:

I think a lot of it is down to specific professors and how they choose to grade and provide their feedback whether banner or specific piece of work. I think that Banner and Blackboard are very efficient. I am on there all the time, whether it is for notes or checking grades or anything like that, and syllabus. I would say that the [automated] feedback process has been very sufficient for me.

Fritz (Sophomore) also expressed his satisfaction with the automated system feedback process and used similar phrases to describe his experience. According to Fritz, “I think that Banner and Blackboard are very efficient. I am on there all the time, whether it is for notes or checking grades or anything like that, and syllabus.” Erica and Fritz related positive receipt of feedback through ESU’s automated system.

Other student participants noted inconsistent faculty member use of automated systems to provide students with academic feedback detracted from their experience.

Karen (Sophomore) commented about the professors who did not use automated systems to provide students with feedback:

I have had some classes that don’t use Blackboard at all and that is very problematic. [It’s problematic] because there is no record of your grade, the professors just email you your test grades and there is no way to see how they match up with your weighted test grades, the way that blackboard breaks it out. All you get is an individual grade, there is no way to put them together to get your mean grade, what you need to get on the final to get this grade.
Karen believed that an ESU policy that mandated professor use of ESU’s automated systems would have improved the feedback process and her collegiate experience.

**Other student feedback.** Two of the student participants benefited from other student feedback. When asked if other students provided him with academic feedback Fritz (Sophomore) responded affirmatively:

> It was definitely helpful to get other points of view and maybe things explained to me where I did not have as good a grasp on it as I thought. Yeah, I have definitely relied on my peers in situations and they have come through for me.

Much like Fritz, George (Freshman) also identified other student feedback as useful. George explained, “I will ask my friends if they want help of if they want to give me help, we might talk about a test or something like that. Informal friend feedback is useful, studying together too.”

Conversely, Cody (Sophomore) and Erica (Sophomore) had avoided other student feedback on their academic work. Cody explained, “Unless it’s like the professors facilitating it, I will not go and ask another student to review my papers.” Cody did not view other student feedback as useful. Erica cited fear of criticism as the reason she did not seek feedback from other students. Erica commented, “I think I underestimate myself. I don’t like people to read my work.” She went on to note “if nobody can read it then nobody can say anything bad.” Erica had participated in professor directed peer reviews of her academic work. She said, “Usually when people read my writing they don’t really have anything useful to say to me, like any useful criticisms so I just don’t like doing it.” Therefore, Erica avoided other student feedback on her academic efforts.
**People Make the Difference**

Involvement refers to student academic and social engagement with other students, faculty members, and postsecondary activities (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). According to Tinto and Pusser (2006), “the more students are academically and socially involved, the more likely they are to persist and graduate” (p. 7). For all of the Pell Grant student participants, institutional involvement had affected their persistence. Their diverse experiences facilitated personal growth and individual development. When asked to identify their best ESU experience, other student interaction was often featured in participants’ answers.

**Other students.** All of the study’s low-income Pell Grant participants reported having friendships with more affluent students. This situation arose for several reasons. First, low-income Pell Grant students represented a small percentage (i.e., 6%) of the ESU undergraduate student population. Thus, low-income Pell Grant students were likely to engage with the more affluent students. Second, low-income Pell Grant students were diffused across ESU. The university did not provide Pell Grant students with a unifying organization. Additionally, it was difficult for ESU’s students to determine the socioeconomic status of other students. Fritz (Sophomore) commented, “one of my teachers in high school went to ESU, the way he put it is it’s not really a big division issue when everybody is going to class in sweat pants and flip flops anyway.” Therefore, socioeconomic determination based on casual student interaction was not possible.

The Pell Grant students I interviewed were largely content with their social relationships. Jane (Freshman) described herself as an introvert and was initially anxious
about making friends. Affirmative social interactions with other students helped Jane to overcome her anxiety. Jane offered:

It is pretty easy to find a community here. I think that is one of the reasons that the students are successful at ESU is because I have noticed we support each other. That has gotten a lot of people through whatever they are dealing with whether it is academics or otherwise.

Much like other study participants, Jane credited residence life with enabling her to establish early campus friendships.

**Campus residence.** The student participants often developed initial social relationships through roommates and hall-mates. Erica (Sophomore) indicated:

When I came in to ESU, I didn’t really know anybody and I didn’t really make any friends in my classes. I still don’t make friends in my classes. I ended up hanging around some other girls in my dorm.

Unlike Erica, two of the student participants knew their roommate from high school. As discussed earlier, knowing their roommates helped Beth (Junior) and George (Freshman) acclimate to the new elite college environment.

Even though Jane (Freshman) did not know her roommate before college, the use of social media facilitated relationship building. During our interview Jane reflected on her experience, “I did not know my roommate before college. We met each other through Facebook, talked a little bit and decided that we were pretty compatible.” Jane enjoyed her freshman dormitory experience and elaborated, “My freshman dorm has been a pretty good experience. It has been a good support system.” Jane found social support through her freshman year dormitory experience. Similar to Jane, Fritz’s (Sophomore)
early residence experience was fulfilling. When writing about his elite college experience Fritz noted, “the best friendships I have experienced thus far in my life were forged in my freshman dorm on move-in day.” Even though most of the conversations with students revealed constructive residence experiences, a few issues surfaced.

Two student participants had negative freshman year residence experiences. Erica (Sophomore) was one of those participants. She sought assistance from the ESU institution. Erica provided the following in an email:

I'm not sure if I mentioned my experience with residence life during our discussion. They reassigned our rooms pretty quickly when my roommate and I were having problems with our suitemates. The lady from res life contacted me with a new room within an hour of my email. I know it can be a long process for some students, especially those who are looking for single rooms or new roommates, but personally, I had a positive experience.

The quick intervention of ESU residence life staff turned Erica’s negative residence experience into a positive one. Cody (Sophomore) shared a similar freshman year roommate experience. He discussed it this way:

This semester I have a good roommate. My freshman year, I had a nut case. One time I was up with my friends, every dorm has a lounge and we were kind of like hanging out and my roommate comes out in his underwear, nothing but his underwear, and he is like hey man, you need to come to bed, I can’t sleep without you in the room. I was like, I don’t even know you, we just met like a week ago. He was definitely crazy. But we are still friends. We still hang out. We just don’t room together anymore.
Cody was able to overcome a unique freshman roommate experience and maintain a cordial relationship with his roommate.

**Comparison to others.** As noted earlier, several of this study’s student participants believed that their undergraduate peers possessed superior high school academic preparation. Thus, a perception of insufficiency existed. Despite doing well academically, Karen (Sophomore) perceived her academic efforts were inferior to other students. When comparing herself to other ESU students Karen remarked, “it is something that I frequently run into, oh gosh, she has her life together and I don’t.”

Similarly, Beth (Junior) commented:

> My hall mates that went to private school they had all these AP classes and they were better prepared for taking on the workload. In my high school, we had some AP classes but, just because my school wasn’t the greatest, it was a public school, I wasn’t as prepared to come into college, ready to take on college level classes.

When comparing themselves to other ESU students, Karen and Beth believed disparate high school experiences placed them at an academic disadvantage.

**Faculty members.** Student involvement with faculty members promotes student learning and success (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). All of this study’s low-income Pell Grant students identified professors as having supported their progression through an academic program. Student participant engagement with professors occurred within a variety of ESU areas. Outside of the classroom interaction featured prominently in student participant discussion.

**Outside of the classroom.** This study’s student participants primarily discussed outside of the classroom engagement with professors. During our interview, Beth
(Junior) recounted good and bad ESU professor experiences. A negative experience involved a computer science class in which she sought academic assistance from the professor. She commented, “I went to the professor for help and he was like ‘Why don’t you know this? You should know this.’ There wasn’t any help at all.” Beth said that she ended up withdrawing from her class and changing her computer science major to history. She had a much better experience with other department professors. Beth remarked, “Some of my professors from freshman year, even if I am not taking their classes, I can go to them and talk during their office hours. Talk about stuff, even stuff besides school.” Beth commented on her history department faculty member relationships:

I love the history department professors. I am a history person so it is more of like my thing. But also, every [history] professor I have had has been great, super helpful, supportive, helping me figure things out, assignments and even beyond assignments.

For Beth, most of ESU’s professors had supported her progression through college. Their willingness to help her navigate collegiate life promoted her persistence to succeed.

David (Junior) had similar positive faculty member experiences. He identified professors as a group that he turned to for support. David remarked:

Professors are, well some of them, the ones that I have been close to, they have always been like if you want to come and to talk about anything, come talk and I will go to them and be like I just don’t understand and like what is going on and they will talk it through it with me. I feel like that helps a lot more than a
professor judging me for not understanding this concept. I feel like that has really helped a lot. Having those types of professors.

While Beth and David noted supportive faculty members contributed to their collegiate experience, other participants struggled to engage professors when needing academic assistance.

**Seeking assistance.** A lack of cultural capital often results in a tendency for low socioeconomic status students to avoid asking for help with their academic efforts (Lareau, 2015). Similarly, five of the low-income Pell Grant student participants were reluctant to ask faculty members for academic assistance during their first year of college. Over time, three of the participants were able to overcome their inhibitions and garner the requisite academic support. Karen (Sophomore) shared her related experience:

The biggest adjustment I had is when first got here as a freshman, I was not confident enough to step out and understand that I needed to go talk to a professor, I need to go meet with the head of this department. Now I have really gotten to understand that you have to go after what you need. The professors will never turn you away. Now I have gotten used to being able to speak out and tell what my problem is and get help or get direction, the direction I need to go in, who I need to speak with to fix this problem.

Karen went on to explain, “I guess I was shy” as a freshman. She overcame her reluctance to ask for help and took the requisite actions.

Holly (Junior), George (Freshman), and Cody (Sophomore) had a similar freshman year experiences. Holly stated, “finding the confidence to speak up when I am struggling in class” had challenged her. When asked if he engaged professors for
assistance, George commented, “Personally no. I feel like it is out of my way.” George was more comfortable studying and learning on his own. Cody also remarked that he was afraid to seek faculty member assistance during his first year of college. Cody discussed his experience during a focus group:

For me personally, as a freshman, I was the type of student who would never ask my professors for help. I always thought it was my fault. Now, I am asking for an extension every other week. I have learned that they [faculty members] are very understanding.

Cody further elaborated his point, “you can go to the professors and ask them for assistance with the homework. They will help you. They will not give you the answer but they will steer you in the right direction.” Key for Karen, Holly, and Cody were garnering the collegiate experience needed to overcome their first year reluctance to engage with professors. Conversely, Ann (Senior) had not overcome her reluctance to seek faculty assistance. Ann remarked, “Even with the academics, I am still learning to ask my professors for help, to take that step to put myself out there.” Ann related that her reluctance stemmed from “social anxiety” and her introverted nature.

Seeking a relationship. Jane (Freshman) identified getting to know professors who were not her course instructors was challenging. At the time of our interview she was searching for a major advisor. Jane was unable to identify a mechanism to meet potential faculty member advisors outside of the classroom. She was at a quandary about how to proceed:

I don’t know how to meet professors to be my advisor other then having taken their class, which can be very frustrating because some of the professors that I
have taken classes with I don’t really want them to be my advisor. They may be nice but they may not have specialties that I am not interested in. It would also help to meet the professors and get to know them, hear some stuff about the majors.

Jane reported the inability to engage professors outside of the classroom negatively affected her higher education experience.

**Enabling relationships.** For all of the student participants, a major source of their persistence to success was campus activity involvement. The 11 student participants were involved with Greek Life, clubs, campus jobs, student body, academic research, and sports teams. Different student participant extracurricular activity experiences promoted, and at times, also detracted from their progression towards graduation.

Participants discovered ESU’s postsecondary activity events through various mechanisms. Cody (Sophomore) asserted students often found out about relevant campus events through a weekly ESU staff email. In addition to the weekly email, ESU hosted a series of events to expose students to social opportunities. Holly (Junior) remarked, “the way I got acclimated to campus was by attending the activities fair. It happens at the beginning of every semester. I went around and shopped organizations.” Despite the existing ESU activity marketing methodologies, several student participants cited extracurricular event awareness as an issue. John (Freshman) explained that campus events are not always advertised. Jessie (Freshman) concurred and expressed frustration about discovering ESU activities after the fact. Erica (Sophomore) commented, “they send out these events in these super dense emails.” She went on to
relate, “I hear about these events in the business school and then you miss the relevant events.” Many of the student participants argued more targeted and focused postsecondary activity event information was needed.

**Participation cost.** The amount of money required to take part in ESU’s social activities was often prohibitive for my study’s participants. As a result, students reported prioritizing postsecondary activity participation in extracurricular events that were low cost or free. Jane (Freshman) explained how activity cost affected her decision making process:

It maybe influences what I choose to, like what activities I choose to engage in. I prioritize everything that is free and I maybe have to say no to things that aren’t free, which can be a little bit frustrating but so far it has not severely affected what I have done. I have learned to live with not having certain things, which is of course a fact of life in finances or otherwise.

Ann (Senior) had similar experiences and commented, “There have been times where socially I would have wanted more funds to do something.” Ann further elaborated her point, “no matter how much you budget, it always doesn’t quite seem like enough for what you need. I find that for me, money has gotten in the way of me doing things.” Limited financial resources had precluded participant students’ from participating in ESU extracurricular activities.

**Greek life.** Fraternity and sorority participation featured prominently in several student participant discussions. Ilene (Senior) joined a sorority to fill an anticipated social void when she quit athletics after her sophomore year. She commented, “I chose my sorority because the people were similar to me.” Holly (Junior) was a member of a
service sorority. She was proud of the sorority’s work and stated, “every month we work with a group of young girls and talk about different topics like self-esteem, money management, eating properly, dietary things. I just really feel fulfilled doing it.” Social support was also featured in David’s Greek life discussion, “It’s a very tight knit Greek community, not only my fraternity but Greek people as a whole. It is easier for me to connect with them. Everyone kind of supports each other in that sense.” Social support and community service were common aspects of participant Greek life experience, but not for all.

**Employment.** Most student participants were employed or seeking employment. Erica (Sophomore) and Jane (Freshman) were seeking employment to augment their finances. Cody (Sophomore) worked several hours a week as an intramural referee. Beth (Junior) credited campus employment as an audio-visual technician with getting her engaged with campus activities. Beth commented, “The job forces you to be involved. If it’s at a club that you are not necessarily a part of we set up all of the different amp events and concerts they do all of that.” Much like Beth, Holly’s (Junior) campus employment had immersed her in campus life. She earned money as a residential life program director. None of the student participants reported employment as detracting from their higher education experience. Instead, employment provided participants with structure, which helped with time management.

**Too much involvement.** Remember, the typical ESU student was described as “overcommitted” and “overinvolved.” Much like other ESU students, several of this study’s participants identified too much campus engagement as an area that challenged them. Over time, the confluence of intramural activities, clubs, organizations, and
academic work became too much. This tipping point often resulted in student participant decisions to reduce social activity participation. David (Junior) found himself in this situation after his freshman year. He enjoyed swim club participation during his first year:

But then after awhile I did not have enough time for it, things added up so I kind of decided to just let that go. Swimming kind of became like a second thing to me and I just decided that I would rather leave that club then do it half-assed.

David decided to focus on sustaining quality postsecondary activity engagement over sampling a large quantity of activities. Ann (Senior) expressed similar sentiments. She found too much involvement debilitating, “It got to a point where all of my work felt like a chore. I am just kind of getting out of that. Finding motivation has been really hard. Just going across campus to do anything.” Ann’s reflections speak to the need for students to recognize commitment and its influence on their quality of life. Moderation was key to finding the requisite extracurricular activity engagement balance.

**Context**

The 11 student participants—senior, juniors, sophomores, and freshman—all expressed ways in which interaction with the ESU institution had impacted their collegiate persistence. The previous sections in this chapter outlined how the experiences of Pell Grant students at a most competitive college contributed, or not, to their persistence to succeed by focusing on the factors of support, involvement, and feedback. This section describes student participant perspectives on institutional factors outside of those areas. Student participants discussed the influence of external events (e.g., presidential election) on their collegiate experience. The Pell Grant student participants
remarked on their perception of belonging. Additionally, the benefits of Pell Grant student attendance at most competitive colleges were featured in participant stories.

**External factors.** Several instances of external to ESU events emerged from this study’s data. At times, those external incidents intruded on student participant higher education experiences. Students reported a womb like collegiate engagement. External events exposed them to discomforting life sensations. For example, Holly (Junior) discussed challenges that confronted her as “recognizing that ESU is a microcosm of the rest of the world. Often times we get caught up in this idea that ESU is in this bubble, and it is perfect and stuff like that.” Realizing that ESU was not perfect challenged Holly. One of the ways it manifested at ESU was a controversial presidential election.

**Presidential election.** America had recently completed electing a President. Fall out from the election rippled across the ESU campus. Seven of the 11 student participants were students of color. All of the student participants who spoke of the issues emerging from the presidential election were students of color. Karen (Sophomore/Black) explained how the election influence her collegiate experience:

> This year with the election and everything going on. You definitely saw a lot of peoples’ true colors. I heard remarks that I don’t like to hear. I had people tell me that I was taking a more qualified White person’s place, space here. You are only here because of affirmative action.

Beth (Junior/Asian) also related negative experiences following the presidential election. Beth commented, “Given the week following the national presidential election, there were quite a few incidents of racism and xenophobia directed towards all minorities. There was a swastika drawn in the hall bathroom.” As a result, Beth no longer felt
welcome or secure on the ESU campus. The ESU institutional response to post election events was discussed in different ways.

Participants related positive and negative higher education institution responses to these election related campus incidents. Holly (Junior/Black) discussed the institutional response in a positive manner:

We had a brave space, which is when the election time a lot of the emotions being felt because Trump won and we had the counselors come out and had an open dialogue about how people were feeling and that could be opinions from either side.

Holly believed that the institution proactively responded to post election incidents. Beth (Junior/Asian) had a different experience. She believed that the administration failed to keep the undergraduate students informed. Beth commented a swastika was drawn in her hall bathroom. She connected the post-election campus incidents and administration communication with students:

This was stuff that we did not find out through the administration. It was through Facebook and social media that students posted on pages that described what had happened. Seeing the initial lack of response and the eventual administration response of stepping around it and never really addressing what had been going on. They never really made it clear. It was explained in vague terms, like “let’s get a grip.” What is that supposed to mean? Even when discussing it in some of my classes my professors were not aware of these incidents that had happened. When we were talking about it there were multiple professors who said can you people tell us what is going on because the emails we get don’t tell us what has
been happening. That response from the administration was very disheartening to a lot of students. In many ways it kind of certified the notion that we know that this administration isn’t really willing to change.

Beth believed the administration had navigated post-election related campus issues without fully addressing them. Much like keeping the top on a pressure cooker, the perceived lack of administration’s ability to effectively deal with the influence of societal events on campus left the door open for similar future happenings.

Family. The student participants’ noted that relatives had affected their collegiate experience. From financial aid application to reviewing academic work, families had supported the student participants’ path to graduation. As discussed earlier, two student participants had siblings who graduated from ESU. Siblings provided the participants with collegiate context and support. Several of this study’s participants relied on their parents for emotional support during difficult times at ESU. Ann (Senior) discussed contacting her mother for assistance when confronted by freshman year academic issues. Ann credited her mother’s support with facilitating her collegiate persistence. Similarly, Ilene (Senior) considered transferring from ESU during her sophomore year. She discussed the idea with her father. Ilene remarked, “My dad did the best thing that he could, which was you are going for sophomore fall and if you don’t like it you can transfer in the spring.” As a result, Ilene returned for her sophomore fall semester and overcame her perceived barriers to persistence.

Academic support. Several students used family members to support their academic work. Holly (Junior) credited her father with providing academic writing assistance. Similarly, Ilene (Senior) used a family member to support her academic
writing. She commented, “My grandfather. He reads over my papers and everything I turn in for government. That was incredibly helpful. He is awesome. He is a writer and he was in the Navy so he has an interesting perspective on things.” Ilene relied on her grandfather’s writing expertise to support her collegiate journey. Jane (Freshman) benefited from her mother’s review of a Fulbright summer study abroad application. Jane’s mother provided reassurance that the application was appropriately completed. Jane was awaiting the Fulbright application results during our interview.

Issues. When compared to non-recipients, Pell Grant recipients are more likely to have family obligations (Baum et al., 2013). Family circumstances had affected Holly and Karen’s higher education experience. During our interview, Holly (Junior) was struggling with family problems. Holly commented, “how do you navigate what is happening in your personal [family] life with your academic experience.” She went on to relate, “There are a lot of family things that I am dealing with right now and I try to avoid them so that I can do well here at ESU.” Holly found family issues were detracting from her ability to focus on her academic work at college.

A sibling’s medical situation caused Karen (Sophomore) to take an academic year break between her freshman and sophomore year. Karen commented:

I took a year off from college for a family problems. My mom donated her kidney to my brother. He went into kidney failure. The college made it very easy for me to withdraw for a year and come back to college.

Unlike Holly, Karen sought ESU institutional support during a difficult family situation.
Karen said:

The college made it easy for me to go home for my family. I went to the Dean of Students and explained my situation. The Dean of Students representative was like okay, let’s get you filed for a leave of absence. It was a very easy process. I was very worried about readmitting and they made sure to email me reminders. Like, make sure you readmit by this day so that you will still be a student. It was very seamless. It was great.

Karen was grateful for the institutional support during a challenging family medical situation. She stated that her mom and brother survived the surgery, were back to work, and doing well.

**Belonging.** In addition to the participants’ external factors, they talked about their sense of belonging on the ESU campus. As discussed in Chapter 2, belonging is defined as collegiate students’ “perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty and peers)” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3). A variety of factors had influenced study participants’ sense of belonging to include peer relationships, socioeconomics, and the ESU administration.

**Peer relationships.** Many of the student participants correlated belonging at ESU with other student connections. For example, Karen (Sophomore) found the ESU student body easy to socially engage. Her views were based on comparing ESU to Duke University. Karen remarked, “I also got [accepted] into Duke. That was one reason that I did not go to Duke, because when I visited Duke’s campus, it just did not feel like it
was very welcoming. Everybody was only concerned with themselves.” Karen contrasted her Duke University experience with life at ESU, “You can talk to almost everyone at ESU, even a stranger, and they will talk back.” The responsive student body made Karen’s assimilation at ESU much richer. Conversations with other students helped Karen develop a connection with the most competitive college community.

Much like Karen, Jane (Freshman) derived a sense of belonging by social engagement with other students. She had quickly adapted to the new college environment. Jane described the elements that contributed to her sense of belonging in this manner:

Primarily the people because I have developed a lot of connections with people at ESU. I am an introvert so I was coming into college kind of anxious about that. But, I was able to get involved with some groups early on and connect through those people and just develop the friendships. Have people to eat with, do whatever with.

Jane found her sense of belonging on the elite college campus through peer social relationships.

Erica (Sophomore) also connected belonging to her campus friendships. When asked if she felt a sense of belonging at ESU, Erica stated, “I do. Especially within my friend group I feel like I found a place here.” Erica did not participate in many social activities during her freshman year. During her sophomore year, Erica branched out and participated in a variety of extracurricular activities to include a Christian fellowship group and a sorority. For Erica, social relationships have mostly developed outside of the classroom. Erica’s circle of friends at ESU possessed similar interests and aspirations.
Erica’s sense of belonging at ESU had grown stronger through relationship building activities.

**Socioeconomics.** Erica (Sophomore) found that socioeconomic differences at ESU had detracted from her sense of belonging. Much like other student participants, Erica struggled at times to relate with more affluent students’ experiences. All of this study’s participants expressed similar most competitive college disparate socioeconomic experiences. As discussed earlier, student socioeconomic determination based on casual interaction was very unlikely. Beyond close friends, most student participants did not discuss money or financial aid with other students. Despite this, hints about students’ socioeconomic status surfaced. During a focus group discussion Fritz (Sophomore) remarked, “I don’t think I have every really been in a scenario where it was thrown in my face, but every now and again there is little reminders that it is easier for some people.”

Family income disparity on the ESU campus emerged in a variety of forums to include students’ ability to pay for social activity participation, family residence, academic break discussions, and campus residence.

**Social activities.** As highlighted earlier, student participants were not always able to take full advantage of elite campus social opportunities. When compared to the predominately affluent student population, limited finances constrained student participant participation. David (Junior) discussed his experience in this way:

You never really know if someone is wealthy or poor unless you really get to know them, from like experiences of asking them do you want to go out to eat and they consistently say no or like the one friend who is always like “let’s do this and you know it’s only like $150,” and you are like wow, no thank you.
Low-income Pell Grant recipients often prioritized social activity participation by cost. Student participants believed that affluent students were able to request family financial assistance, which was not always an option for them. Therefore, student participants aligned social activity engagement with their reduced finances.

*Family residence.* Where undergraduate students’ families lived was an indicator of student wealth. The participants did not discuss inviting other students to visit their homes. However, they had been invited to visit other students’ families. Ann (Senior) related an occurrence that outlined the difference between her and a friend’s home life during a focus group:

I am always sort of reminded about what happens in other peoples’ lives. They say, hey, I am going home this weekend. Do you want to come back with me? I got a dog you can pet. I am just like okay. I go to their house [and think] three of my houses could fit in here. What Fritz was saying, they don’t make it a show. It’s not kind of like, look at my house. It’s more like a genuine. Oh, this is where I live. I guess for me it’s sort of like, it doesn’t get in the way, the disparities and those sorts of things, but you are reminded of it quite a bit I think. Every now and again it comes up.

Cody (Sophomore) related a similar experience. Cody remarked:

I remember one time everyone was trying to get to know each other and stuff. It got to where everyone was Google searching each other’s houses and stuff. These people live in mansions. One guy lived on a farm. It was crazy.
When faced with family income differences, participants employed subtle defensive methods. For example, Cody politely left the conversation when his friend group asked where he lived.

**Academic breaks.** Socioeconomic differences emerged during participant discussions with other students about plans for non-academic social activities. David (Junior) remarked:

> It’s not really a topic of conversation, unless you are saying what are your plans for the summer, what are your plans for spring break, and they will say oh, I am going on a cruise, or I am to like going to China.

David believed finances precluded such travel options for him. Erica (Sophomore) related a similar experience, “like a girl, she wasn’t in my dorm, she was in the next dorm, she went to Bermuda for fall break, that was like for three days, my mom could never get me to Bermuda for three days.” When compared to other ESU students, limited financial resources precluded this study’s participants from similar travel arrangements during academic breaks. Socioeconomic disparity was heightened by affluent student social experience discussions.

**Meal options.** Food insecurities were not an issue for this study’s participants because financial aid provided most student participants with access to an ESU meal plan. Yet, food choices were a topic of much participant discussion. All of the participants believed that campus eating was monotonous. According to Cody (Sophomore), “you end up eating the same thing every day.” Participants believed that affluent students had more options to eat off campus or to purchase supplementary food for their rooms. When asked if money had challenged her collegiate attendance Karen
(Sophomore) remarked, “Sometimes it’s like well, I don’t have the extra money to go eat off campus. I have to eat whatever the cafeteria has because I don’t have money to spend on that type of stuff.” All student participants believed that varied and healthier meal choices would have improved their higher education experience.

**Campus residence.** Where the student’s lived mattered for their perceived belonging on an elite college campus. Most of the participants who lived on campus expressed a sense of belonging because they were satisfied with their campus living arrangements. Participants described the residence life office personnel as friendly and helpful. For them, on campus housing enhanced their connection to life at ESU. Other participants had a different experience. The ESU online residence system and off-campus living detracted from student participants’ sense of belonging.

Five of the student participants were dissatisfied with the online ESU residence system. Erica (Sophomore) remarked during a focus group, “residence life needs to do an overhaul of housing system or process. I feel like whenever I go in there to talk they are nice to me but it’s like trying to do housing online is always a disaster.” The other four focus group participants echoed Erica’s remarks. Beth (Junior) discussed residence life this way, “online does need an overhaul because it is confusing and messy.” The study’s participants believed that the ESU housing online user interface needed to be streamlined. Two students who lived in on campus housing complained about proximity to local area drinking establishments. They found living close to bars detracted from their higher education experience.
Karen (Sophomore) and David (Junior) lived off campus. As a result, they felt disconnected from ESU. Remember, Karen took an academic year off to help resolve a family issue. When asked why she lived off-campus Karen commented:

When I came back from my one year away I had arranged with a couple of friends to live with them through the room selection process but apparently, which they did not tell me when I left campus was that I could not participate in room selection, because I was not a student during the year I withdrew. So I had to go back and get a random selection for a roommate. When they placed me with a roommate we did not really click and I was like this will not work for a whole year. It worked out better for me to move off campus.

Karen’s decision to live off campus negatively impacted her sense of belonging at ESU. Karen discussed it this way:

I struggle with getting involved. If you live off-campus it is very difficult to get involved in stuff. If you live on campus, you hear more about what is going on. I am not on campus a lot, so it’s different this year.

David also felt that living off-campus detracted from his sense of belonging. He decided to live off campus because of the ESU’s “strict housing policies.” David wrote in his Qualtrics survey:

I feel somewhat disconnected to campus, not sure if its due to me being so far away or just my various opinions and beliefs which may differ from other students. It's hard for me to feel a real sense of school spirit too.

Off-campus living detracted from Karen and David’s perception of belonging.
Elite college benefits. The low-income Pell Grant student participants discussed the benefits of elite college attendance from two vantage points. The first discussion involved benefits participants received from attending a most competitive college. In the second discussion area, student participants expressed their perspective on how elite institutions benefited from having Pell Grant students represented in their undergraduate student population.

Benefits received. Ten of the 11 Pell Grant student participants expressed advantages that they derived from attending a most competitive college. The academic rigor, personal growth, and networking opportunities were featured in their stories. For Fritz (Sophomore), advantages included the most competitive college reputation and community. Fritz described ESU’s benefits this way:

You have the influence and the weight of such a prestigious name behind you in whatever you choose to do. You have an environment of faculty and peers who are entirely accepting and willing to work for you, to help you improve yourself and improve the community around you. I have never felt like an outsider in any situation or anything like that. I was never shunned or belittled I felt entirely accepted in whatever I have chosen to do. I think that that was a big one. You can kind of live your life how you so choose and people who accept you for that will surround you.

Fritz went on to relate ESU had improved his social engagement skills and willingness to seek out social opportunities. Other student participants also discussed ESU as a place that accepted and supported them. Ann (Senior) commented:
There is a huge support system at ESU. You can get that from anyone. The professors are kind enough to go through things if you need them. Your friends know what you are going through. They are all the same age as you. They are all doing similar classwork, helping each other study. I would say the biggest thing if I could sum it up would be the support system that you get here.

This statement was powerful coming from a senior, and it reflected the genuine belief in a supportive most competitive college environment. Similarly, Jane (Freshman) described ESU as a community of people who care and are passionate. For Jane, challenging academics and stimulating social interactions shaped her opinions about the advantages of an ESU education. Jane explained:

One of the reasons I first came here [ESU] was academic rigor. I also came here because I had heard that it was a good community and a place where you can be passionate about what you are passionate about. You will find somebody who cares about that or you will find other people who did not initially but will join you in that. Also the relationships, student professor, between students. Those are I think a priority and that makes the college experience much less stressful in the sense that yeah, you have a lot of work to do and you are learning a lot and that is exciting but also tiring. There are people to go to whether they are your professors or your friends.

Jane believed that the supportive ESU community and commiserating with other students who faced similar academic experiences were elite college benefits.

When describing the benefits of an elite college education, student participants often spoke about the superior nature of their higher education experience. Karen
(Sophomore) valued the liberal arts education. She commented, “Here at ESU you get a good range of quality classes.” Karen went on to favorably compare ESU’s course offerings to other colleges. David (Junior) expressed similar sentiments. David described the elite college benefits in this manner:

It opens up your mind to various opinions and beliefs and just different pieces of knowledge that otherwise you would not have really been exposed to unless you go to a college like this. It also just forces you to kind of grow up, become a mature person.

David appreciated the most competitive college’s alumnus. He remarked:

You have to really think that so many people have gone before you and so many greater people have gone before you here. But, you are still here and it is cool to say that you went to the same school.

There is an anticipation of a positive after-college connection due to the networks created via the most competitive college.

Ilene (Senior) felt overcoming the many most competitive college challenges had made her a stronger person. She remarked:

I think some people go to colleges that support their ideals and constructs that they already have. ESU flips your ideals and challenges them. ESU challenges you in every way possible. If you get through ESU you can do anything.

Ilene believed the elite college experience enabled her to find herself. Beth (Junior) had a similar most competitive college experience. She said:

As fake as it sounds, you kind of get to know yourself. Get to know what you care about and what your priorities are. What you want to do with your life in this
very short four-year period where you are more or less deciding what your future is.

ESU had helped Ilene and Beth to develop the self-confidence they needed to prepare for life after college.

When compared to other student participants, Cody (Sophomore) could not identify an elite college benefit. As noted earlier, Cody regretted his higher education institution decision. He went on to relate, “I think at a different school it would be a little less stressful at other colleges than at ESU.” During this study, Cody was struggling with the elite college academics. He described the academic environment as very stressful. Learning to budget time had a significant impact on Cody’s college experience. Cody (Sophomore) related that his social involvement at ESU was much reduced from his freshman year to allow more time to focus on academics.

**Benefits provided.** All of the student participants believed that it was important for low-income Pell Grant students to be represented at elite colleges. Enabling low socioeconomic high school graduates to climb America’s socioeconomic ladder were a factor student participants highlighted during focus group discussion. Beth (Junior) outlined her opinion:

> If you want social mobility in your society you have to make things such as education the one major tool to getting out of the situation that you are in. You have to make it accessible to people or else you are going to keep having the people who are already rich stay rich or get richer and the people who are poor or from a lesser socioeconomic background they are just going to stay in their class.
Erica (Sophomore) further elaborated on Beth’s point by saying:

If you are of a lower socioeconomic status it’s not just that you are working as hard as but like you are probably working harder than more affluent students. They have seen how SAT scores correlate with wealth, stuff like that. I think there are so many barriers. We [America] should be providing as many ways as possible for people to overcome whatever barriers they may face. That is how we can help the population as a whole.

Five of the student participants felt that Pell Grant student participation at elite colleges provided low socioeconomic high school graduates with positive role models. They went on to discuss the importance of Pell Grant students at most competitive colleges by arguing hard academic work by low socioeconomic students should be rewarded with access to America’s best higher education institutions. Jane (Freshman) provided her thoughts on the topic:

Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have worked just as hard and have succeeded in just as many ways as a lot of their wealthier peers. Sometimes it is just difficult for them and for me to think about going to different [elite] schools because of the sticker price. The thought of how am I going to pay for this? Can I take on the load of this college and work? I think it is important for students to be able to attend elite colleges because they have worked really hard to get to that place, or are brilliant and deserve to be in a place where they will be challenged.

All participants agreed that the Pell Grant financial support enabled academically qualified low-income family students to attend most competitive colleges. All of the
student participants also believed that low-income Pell Grant students brought a different and much needed perspective to elite institutions. Jessie (Freshman) summarized it this way for her focus group:

If we are saying that a lot of times people don’t think about socioeconomic differences or they are a little bit inconsiderate or just not unaware then the way to build awareness is to build interactions between people with differences, that’s how things change. You interact with people who are different then you and you learn and you understand other people.

Higher education students from all socioeconomic status classes learn at higher levels when they socialize across socioeconomic status boundaries (Espenshade & Radford, 2009). Therefore, low-income Pell Grant students enhanced undergraduate student learning at most competitive colleges.

Summary

The 11 student participants—seniors, juniors, sophomores, and freshman—all expressed ways in which elite college experiences had impacted their collegiate persistence to succeed. Low-income Pell Grant students described the most competitive college campus climate as academically stressful. Amelioration techniques to overcome the stress were detailed. The participants’ conditions for most competitive college success aligned with Tinto and Pusser’s (2006) institutional action model. Institutional dedication to the interrelated factors of support, involvement, and feedback influenced the students’ collegiate experience and ultimately their ability to attain a college degree. Pell Grant student participants noted several barriers to persistence. Many of the students found their financial aid package confusing during their freshman year. Several of the
student participants asserted that the administration was inaccessible and did not provide students with timely information about campus incidents. Finances limited the students’ ability to participate in study abroad and dining options. Additionally, student participants chose majors that were not aligned with their intellectual capabilities or stayed in a major that was no longer attractive to them to be able to graduate on time. Navigating a most competitive college environment dominated by affluent students presented participants with challenges. For example, student participants were not always able to take full advantage of most competitive campus social offerings. External to college factors such as a recent presidential election and family matters affected student participant’s collegiate journey. These results advance the need for expansion of the Tinto and Pusser (2006) IAM, which will be discussed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to understand the lived experiences of low-income Pell Grant students who attended a most competitive college. The phenomenon being studied was the low-income Pell Grant recipient experience within a single American most competitive college case. This study was conducted at East State University (ESU, a pseudonym), a public, co-educational, four-year liberal arts institution located on the East coast of America. Barron’s Educational Series (2016) classified ESU as one of America’s most competitive colleges. Even though the previous chapter presented the research results, this chapter discusses those results and links them to the relevant research literature. The potential for using this study to guide future research efforts is also discussed in this chapter.

I found that Tinto and Pusser’s (2006) institutional action model (IAM) was a useful framework for exploring the low-income Pell Grant students’ elite college experiences. Understanding these experiences, in particular as they related to the factors of support, feedback, and involvement, fills a gap in the literature and lends depth and breadth to previous research by highlighting institutional factors that influenced low-income Pell Grant students’ ability to attain a college degree. Additionally, I captured participants’ institutional experiences as they linked to Tinto and Pusser’s (2006) IAM conceptual framework, in particular in terms of how these experiences affected students’ persistence. The collective participants’ experience highlighted how interaction within
the elite collegiate institution promoted, and at times detracted from their higher education persistence.

The research questions that fashioned my research results relative to low-income Pell Grant students who matriculated at a most competitive college were focused on Tinto and Pusser’s (2006) IAM:

1. How do the experiences of Pell Grant students at a most competitive college contribute, or not to their persistence to succeed?
   
   A. Support: In what ways do Pell Grant students identify institutional support as contributing, or not to their persistence to succeed?
   
   B. Feedback: In what ways do Pell Grant students identify institutional feedback as contributing, or not to their persistence to succeed?
   
   C. Involvement: In what ways do Pell Grant students identify institutional involvement as contributing, or not to their persistence to succeed?

2. What other institutional factors do Pell Grant students identify as contributing, or not to their persistence to succeed?

This study’s results supplement the limited qualitative research on low-income Pell Grant students’ experience at most competitive colleges (Aries & Seider, 2007; Lee, 2016; Steinmetz, 2008). In the first section of this chapter, I discuss the participants’ elite college institution experience focusing on Tinto and Pusser’s (2006) IAM. Second, I discuss persistence factors Pell Grant students identified that were not fully addressed within Tinto and Pusser’s (2006) IAM, which was the focus of my second research question. Next, I discuss the implications for practice in the most competitive college arena. Recommendations are offered for students, faculty members, and for
administrators at elite, most competitive college institutions. Finally, I make recommendations for areas of future research based on the limitations of this study, and findings that emerged from this study. To start, I address this study’s research questions beginning with Pell Grant students’ elite college persistence discussion.

**Discussion on Pell Grant Students’ Elite College Persistence**

Approximately 90% of ESU’s first-time, full-time elite college students completed a bachelor’s degree in six-years, compared to a 60% six-year graduation rate for all American first-time, full-time higher education students who attended a four-year postsecondary institution (Kena et al., 2016). Each year, around 2% of ESU’s students dropped out of college or transferred to another higher education institution. The percentage of ESU’s dependent low-income Pell Grant students who dropped out or transferred for the undergraduate student cohorts in this study included: 4% in 2013-14; 6% in 2014-15, 4% in 2015-16, and 6% in 2016-17. About 25% of ESU’s dependent low-income Pell Grant students that dropped out or transferred to a different postsecondary education institution between 2013-17 were first generation collegiate students. This rate of persistence for dependent low-income Pell Grant students at ESU relative to their more affluent peers is lower, and this finding highlights the importance of understanding what makes the small percentage of low-income students who attend elite colleges successful.

Low-income Pell Grant students who studied at most competitive colleges are challenged and supported in a multitude of ways (Aries & Seider, 2007; Lee, 2016; Steinmetz, 2008). Much like other American elite colleges, I found that the majority (i.e., 73%) of ESU’s student population possessed affluent family backgrounds with median
family incomes of $176,400 (Carnevale & Van Der Werf, 2017; Chetty et al., 2017). Also like other most competitive colleges, low-income Pell Grant students represented a small percentage (i.e., 6%) of the ESU undergraduate student body (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Cahalan et al., 2016; Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016). As discussed earlier, all of my study’s participants were from low-income families (i.e., family income less than $43,511). How the low-income family participants navigated a mostly affluent student collegiate environment featured prominently in their stories. While each student participant interacted with the higher education institution in his or her own unique way, common themes emerged. Adapting to the elite college environment was one of those themes.

Some of the factors that affected participants’ elite college experience transpired before their postsecondary education started. Prior academic experiences affect Pell Grant students’ higher education persistence (Tinto, 1975). Academic preparation for attending a most competitive college was a common participant topic of discussion during our interviews. Just like the literature on Pell Grant recipients who attended elite colleges, my study concluded that nine participants’ high school education did not adequately prepare them for elite college academics (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Espenshade & Radford, 2009). For example, Beth (Junior) commented, “My [high] school wasn’t the greatest. It was a public school. I wasn’t as prepared to come into college, ready to take on college level classes.” She believed that the deficit in her high school preparation placed her at an academic disadvantage compared to her affluent collegiate peers. Pell Grant recipients start college with educational experiences associated with lower college completion rates and they are not as academically prepared
for college as non-Pell Grant recipients (Wirt et al., 2003). Thus, when considering Pell Grant students’ first year most competitive college experience, it is important to realize that academic remediation and additional support may be needed.

The environment of elite higher education institutions affects student persistence because it provides the backdrop for student, faculty member, and administration interactions (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Sanford’s (1966) student development theory asserted institutional programs influence the campus environment by enabling attainment of the optimal level of challenge and support. Most of the student participants were challenged by the ESU’s rigorous academics and described the academic environment as nerve-racking. Too much higher education stress increases the potential for illegal substance abuse and the risk of suicide (Eells, 2017). According to the participants, ESU’s most competitive college culture involved abundant amounts of stress with students competing to be the most stressed out. The participants’ perception in this study was if students were not suffering, they were not academically engaged.

A substantial amount of research on college student resilience as it relates to stress exists (Eells, 2017). According to Eells, resilience is defined as “displaying enhanced competence under stress” (p. 78). Although, student participants related a trial and error process of identifying ways to reduce stress, all participants found the needed support and developed stress reduction techniques (Sanford, 1966). The type of coping skills participants developed included healthier food choices, exercise and sleep schedules, volunteering in the local community, and detailed planning. Detailed planning enabled participants to control their collegiate schedule. All of the student participants were also able to reduce academic stress though social interaction with other students.
Elite institutions should consider addressing the stressful academic environment by supporting low-income student coping skill development. Increased counseling services helps to accomplish this goal (Eells, 2017).

Specifically, an early strategy the participants noted in navigating challenges in the elite college included finding the requisite balance between academic and social activities. All participants identified time management as a freshman year issue. Freedom from familial oversight often resulted in students’ choosing social engagement over studying. Much like other elite college students, high school did not challenge most of the low-income Pell Grant student participants (Espenshade & Radford, 2009). Initial engagement with rigorous elite college academics overwhelmed some of the students. The resulting high school to freshman year of college drop in grade point averages was a shock for the student participants. A participant suggestion for reducing academic stress was to implement a first semester, freshman year grade forgiveness policy. According to participants, such a policy would enable acclimation to elite college academics without grade concerns.

The concept of invisible privilege surfaced during my research (McIntosh, 1988). According to McIntosh, privilege is invisible to the group of individuals who possess it. In my study, ESU did not fully acknowledge the ways that the affluent students were privileged over low-income students. For example, I found reduced family incomes placed low-income Pell Grant students at disadvantage when compared to their affluent student peers. This idea surfaced in several areas such as limited participant cognizance of their financial aid packages, which serves as a critical linchpin for low-income students to even attend an elite college. Lack of financial literacy meant student
participants often struggled to understand their financial aid packages. Participants believed that institutional review of how to use financial aid would have improved their freshmen year experience.

Another way that participants’ viewed income disparity as negatively affecting their higher education experience was by seeing wealthy student peers obtain premier internships through family connections because such circumstances were unavailable to them. The invisible privilege afforded to affluent students in obtaining plum internships was unquestioned on campus. Internships are defined as providing collegiate students with work experience in a professional setting, and internships provide a high impact educational experience that contributes to underserved students’ success (Kuh, 2008). In addition to limited family connections, financial resources constrained the student participants’ ability to obtain unpaid internships. To improve low-income Pell Grant student internship experiences at elite colleges, the participants believed that internship funding targeted at low-income students was needed.

Disparate student affluence on the elite college campus often resulted in misleading assumptions. Much like Aries and Seider’s (2007) research, my study found that the wealthy student majority frequently assumed that all students possessed similar substantial financial resources. This meant affluent students were not aware of the issues present for non-affluent students, which at times led to a lack of consideration. For instance, ESU academic or social outings were planned without cost consideration. Reduced financial means constrained participants’ ability to participate in ESU events. For example, participants believed that affluent students had more options to eat off campus or to purchase supplementary food for their rooms. Reduced extracurricular
activity participation negatively affects all college students’ progression to graduation (Astin, 1985). To ameliorate these conditions, Lee (2016) advocated training faculty and staff members on how to better support low-income Pell Grant students in areas such as classroom discussions and financial resource availability.

**Support structures.** The support Pell Grant students receive at most competitive colleges covers a variety of institutional services (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b). Within my study, support encompassed how the low-income Pell Grant recipients perceived the assistance they received within the areas of academic, social, and financial (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). As they progressed through college, the student participants had a range of institutional support experiences that affected their movement to graduation. Student participants experienced gratitude for financial aid, scholar program participation, study abroad opportunities, advising, tutoring, study groups, counseling, mentoring, and clubs during their most competitive college academic program journey.

**Money matters.** Financial support refers to the financial aid student participants received to support enrollment and graduation (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). According to Hoxby and Avery (2013), the average low-income student cost to attend a most competitive college in 2009-10 was $6,754 and the maximum Pell Grant amount was $5,350 (College Board, 2011). Thus, even with the lower net cost for low-income students, the maximum Pell Grant did not fully address the low-income students’ elite college cost. In response to this shortfall, ESU augmented the low-income participants’ Pell Grant by addressing 100% of financial need for in-state students and up to 25% of out-of-state students’ financial requirements. Typically, the ESU financial aid package paid the student participants’ tuition and fees, room and board, books and supplies, and
travel to and from the college. The out-of-state student participant in my study was the exception. A mix of financial aid, loans, and family paid for that student’s college education. All of this study’s participants were grateful for most competitive college financial support. Free of worrying about paying for college based on receipt of financial aid enabled participants to focus on graduation. For 9 of the 11 participants, ESU’s substantial financial aid package was a deciding factor in their college selection decision.

*World view.* Study abroad enables students to garner a global perspective and develop cross-cultural experiences (Kuh, 2008). Kuh (2008) identified global learning as a high impact educational experience that contributed to underserved students’ persistence. Over 50% of ESU’s undergraduate student population studied abroad during their higher education experience, which compared to less than 10% of my study’s participants. Reduced participant study abroad participation was attributed to a lack of financial aid awareness and the inability to pay for the study abroad program in advance of financial aid reimbursement.

*Employment.* Pell Grant students attending most competitive colleges are more likely to work to pay for their education than more affluent students (Campbell & Voight, 2015). In my study, the combination of federal government and ESU financial aid support meant participants did not need to work to pay for their education. Despite this, the majority of my study’s participants were employed or seeking employment to pay for incidental items such as living expenses. Work arrangements can reinforce socioeconomic status disparity and negatively affect Pell Grant students’ ability to socially adapt on the most competitive college campus (Espenshade & Radford, 2009). Unlike Espenshade and Radford’s (2009) research, however, my study found
employment facilitated low-income Pell Grant student immersion within campus events. For example, Holly (Junior) credited campus employment as a cultural program director with facilitating her campus engagement. None of the student participants reported employment as detracting from their higher education experience.

**Facilitating learning.** Academic support included transition programs, advising, tutoring, and writing support (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Academic support was important to elite college low-income Pell Grant students because they were not fully prepared for the rigors of a most competitive college education (Carnevale & Rose, 2004). My research data showed a range of student engagement with ESU’s academic support capabilities.

**Transition programs.** Two of the students in this study participated in ESU sponsored summer transition programs. Excepting the cost of student travel, ESU paid for all students’ participation in the transition program. During the transition program, student participants formed relationships with faculty members and other students, which alleviated freshman fall higher education environment anxiety. This finding aligned with Kuh’s (2008) research that found first-year seminars improved student persistence by facilitating student and collegiate institution integration. However, participant knowledge of transition programs were identified by happenstance measures such as surfing the ESU website. As a result, several of the student participants were unaware of the summer transition programs until it was too late. Those students expressed regret that they did not attend one of ESU’s summer transition programs. The lack of cultural capital may have precluded participants from knowing or even asking about this type of programming (Lareau, 2015).
Advising. Similar to other elite colleges, ESU possessed the advising capabilities needed to help all students succeed in postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b). Despite this, most of this study’s participants were unsatisfied with their first-year advising experience. The participants noted how they were assigned advisors outside of their field of study, and as a result, the students did not feel they received adequate academic or program advice. Student participants began their freshman year with majors that were not aligned with their intellectual capabilities or interests. Therefore, students changed their major mid-stream or were stuck in a major they did not enjoy. For example, Beth (Junior) remarked my “sophomore year was [spent] kind of like fishing around majors.” Participants believed that including detailed major discussions during freshman orientation would have improved the advising process.

Tutoring. ESU offers students a range of free (i.e., writing center) and low-cost (i.e., tutoring) academic support. Consistent with Lee’s (2016) findings, ESU’s low-income Pell Grant students often lacked awareness of how to engage academic support capabilities, particularly during their first-year of college. Even when they were aware of academic support, participants were reluctant to use them. Fear of judgment and unsatisfactory initial use experiences were some of the reasons cited. This outcome aligns with Calarco (2014) and Lareau’s (2015) research that found low-income students were less proficient at using cultural capital to request academic assistance than more affluent students. Therefore, it is important to increase socialization of academic support capabilities with low-income Pell Grant students at most competitive college institutions.
Increased socialization regarding academic supports might improve those students’ collegiate experience.

**Student welfare.** Social support of college students includes counseling and mentoring (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Effective low-income Pell Grant student assimilation within the elite college campus often depends on social support activities (Attinasi, 1989). My study found that student participant initiative to identify and selectively engage the many potential options of social support was a key contribution to student persistence. The importance of the participants’ ability to act on their own to garner the requisite social support suggests institutional incentives to foster students seeking assistance can have a strong influence on students’ persistence.

**Counseling.** Although student participants valued mental health assistance, support issues surfaced in this area. Participants noted counseling center capacity constraints due to a shortage of available time slots, which indicates a shortage of counseling staff or resources. Student participants commented on the lengthy timeline required to obtain counseling services. Even though referrals to local community mental health resources were available, the local community mental health resources were considered cost prohibitive by my study’s participants. The ability to obtain timely counseling center support was important to student participants’ mental health. Five of the participants told me they sought mental health assistance from ESU’s counseling services. Elite institutions should consider financial subsidies for emergency low-income Pell Grant student mental health support requirements (Munin & Enos, 2016).

**Mentors.** According to Zatynski (2015), a productive institutional social support strategy for Pell Grant students at most competitive colleges are peer mentors, which
aligned with my research findings. Peer-mentorship supported the low-income Pell Grant recipients’ persistence through both formal programs and informal associations. Two participants were connected to mentors through formal peer-mentoring programs.

Student participants valued the mentor’s advice and guidance. Much like their formal mentor program experiences, all participants cited informal mentors as supporting their progression to graduation. Baxter Magolda (2002) named these relationships *good company*, which involves the actions of others to promote and support an individual’s transition to independence. In this study, participants found *good company* in faculty members, Greek Life organizations, and local community members. Through formal programs and informal connections, student participants identified mentoring as contributing to their higher education experience.

**Mixed bag for measuring academic progress.** Feedback in the IAM referred to assessment of student academic performance within and outside of the higher education classroom (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). My study found that the ESU feedback process both contributed to and detracted from participants’ persistence to succeed. An area that fell short of student expectations was the ESU exam policy.

**Exam policy.** All of ESU’s undergraduate student population adhered to the same exam policy. Student participants identified ESU’s exam policy as restrictive and inflexible. Participants reported classes ran through Friday with mid-term and final exams beginning on the following Monday. Limited exam preparation time and multiple exams scheduled on the same day were student-identified issues. Research conducted by Lareau (2015) found that low-income students were less willing than more affluent students to request exceptions to institutional policy. Even though all of the low-income
Pell Grant student participants described a rigid institutional exam policy that detracted from their higher education experience, only one of them had requested an exception to ESU’s exam policy (which was denied). All of this study’s participants believed the prescriptive ESU mid-term and final exam policy precluded faculty members from helping students de-conflict exam schedule issues during the stressful exam timeframe.

**Faculty members.** Professors were the main source of academic feedback for the students in this study. Low-income Pell Grant students’ ability to achieve elite institutional outcomes depends on comprehensive academic feedback (Suskie, 2009). In my study, student participants’ valued detailed feedback over just a grade. Extensive faculty member feedback was credited with improving participants’ academic performance. Although most of the feedback comments were positive, areas for improvement emerged. One of those areas was a dearth of feedback on final exams. Karen (Sophomore) noted, “We do not get feedback on final exams, I have never seen a final. I think that would help to see how you did, what you missed.” Additionally, class size affected the quality of student feedback. Large classes were perceived as limiting the amount of faculty member feedback. Correspondingly, the depth of faculty member feedback expanded as the class size was reduced. The students spoke about the benefits of detailed academic feedback and how they were academically challenged when it was not provided.

**Other students.** Research suggests collaborative student engagement during the learning process improved students’ academic achievement and persistence (Fink, 2013). Despite this, only two of my study’s participants found benefit from other student feedback on their academic work. Those participants believed that peer review of student
academic efforts improved the quality of assignment submissions by providing alternative perspectives. The other nine student participants in my study avoided engaging their peers for academic feedback. Fear of judgment and limited utility were the underlying reasons that precluded peer-based academic feedback.

Avoiding engaging other students during the academic feedback process may relate to Pell Grant student perceptions of academic inferiority. When compared to their more affluent peers, a participant perception of insufficiency existed, which aligned with Aires and Seider’s (2007) findings. For example, Karen (Sophomore) commented, “Another challenge for me is I feel inadequate when it comes to comparing myself to other students because everyone here is so great.” Brems, Baldwin, Davis, and Namyniuk (1994) called this the imposter syndrome, which “refers to individuals’ feelings of not being as capable or adequate as others perceive or evaluate them to be” (pp. 183-184). As discussed earlier, low-income Pell Grant students believed disparate academic preparation placed them at an academic disadvantage to their more affluent student peers. The findings in this study indicate that elite institutions should identify and foster collaborative student learning opportunities to promote Pell Grant student academic achievement and success.

**People make the difference.** Institutional involvement encompassed student academic and social engagement with other students, faculty members, and postsecondary activities (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Involvement theory suggests that the more students engage with institutional members and other students, the more likely they are to learn (Endo & Harpel, 1982) and to graduate from college (Astin, 1985; Mallette & Cabrera, 1991). The student participants were deeply involved and committed on ESU’s
campus. Over time, however, the confluence of intramural activities, clubs, organizations, and academic work became too much. Thus, contrary to existing research (Astin, 1985; Mallette & Cabrera, 1991), this study found that at times, too much involvement detracted from participants’ persistence.

**Other students.** The students in this study described extensive elite campus social experiences with student peers. The low-income Pell Grant students I interviewed were largely content with their social relationships. One exception to their contentment was related to socioeconomic disparity on the most competitive college campus. Much like Lee’s (2016) research, all of this study’s low-income Pell Grant participants described having friendships with more affluent students. While these wealthy peer relationships contributed to participants’ persistence to success, these relationships also highlighted the prevalent socioeconomic differences between participants and their social network. The students in this study interacted with individuals with different perspectives, which enabled them to understand diverse others. However, similar to Lee (2016) and Steinmetz’s (2008) findings, the Pell Grant student participants in my study eschewed discussing income inequality with more affluent student peers. When financial background difference arose during peer interaction, student participants detached from the conversation. Therefore, most competitive colleges should consider development of forums that educate the student body about socioeconomic difference (Lee, 2016).

According to Lee, prompting students to discuss their socioeconomic differences would benefit all students by sensitizing them to dissimilar student perspectives.

**Faculty members.** All of this study’s participants identified professors as having supported their progression to graduation. Consistent with Tinto and Pusser’s (2006)
research, student involvement with faculty members promoted student learning and success. ESU’s professors were described as helpful. For example, Fritz (Sophomore) remarked, “Professors help me on my way to becoming and doing the best that I can be.” Despite this, seeking professor academic assistance during freshman year challenged many participants. Garnering the collegiate experience needed to overcome their first year reluctance to engage with professors became easier as the students progressed through their undergraduate education. Further research into accelerating this process of students seeking faculty member assistance is warranted.

Postsecondary activities. Campus activity involvement was a major source of participant persistence. The student participants were involved with Greek Life, clubs, campus jobs, student body, academic research, and sports teams. These activities enabled student participants to explore different perspectives. The amount of money required to take part in ESU’s social activities, however, was often prohibitive for my study’s participants. As a result, students reported prioritizing postsecondary activity participation in extracurricular events that were low cost or free. Even though postsecondary activity involvement was found to be important to student participants’ success, institutional initiatives to promote free or low-cost postsecondary activities would have benefited this study’s students.

Extension of the Institutional Action Model Framework

The interrelated IAM factors of support, involvement, and feedback (Tinto & Pusser, 2006) did not fully explain my research results. Therefore, I explored other researcher perspectives to more fully comprehend the low-income Pell Grant student participant experiences at a most competitive college. In this section, areas of
investigation that might be used to supplement the IAM, as well as areas that could be further explored in the elite college environment, are reviewed. From my data analysis, the theme of context surfaced. Pell Grant student perceptions of the campus climate that impacted their higher education persistence included factors external to the college, sense of belonging, and the benefits of Pell Grant student representation within most competitive college undergraduate student populations.

**External factors.** Missing from the Tinto & Pusser (2006) IAM was the impact of societal events on campus climate. For example, a recent 2016 presidential election had profoundly affected the ESU participants’ higher education experience. Also absent from the IAM was the influence of family members on the students’ collegiate success. All participants identified parental involvement as key to their postsecondary education persistence. When the influences of external societal proceedings and family members on student participants’ higher education experience are considered, a more detailed view of participants’ most competitive college experience emerged.

**Presidential election.** The ripple effects of the 2016 presidential election were felt at ESU. After the election, Karen (Sophomore) felt like her world was turned upside down. Karen said, “Before the election I had never really had an experience like that here at ESU. Everybody was pretty much welcoming but once the election occurred it was chaotic on campus for a couple of weeks.” Beth (Junior) also expressed negative experiences following the presidential election. Beth remarked, “Some students got harassed while walking back to class.” As a result, Beth and Karen no longer felt welcome or secure on the ESU campus. For some of the participants, the institutional response was appropriate. Counselors facilitated student dialogue about how to engage
the changed campus climate. Other participants had a different experience. Disparate student understanding of campus events was discomforting. For example, information about a swastika drawn on campus was found in participants’ Facebook postings before it was discussed by the ESU administration. Social media filled a perceived void in ESU administrative information dissemination.

The influence of external events on campus life caused me to consider that another college student persistence theorist could supplement the Tinto and Pusser (2006) IAM. Specifically, Perna and Thomas’s (2006) framework for promoting higher education student success details how multiple layers of context (e.g., societal and family) impact and influence student persistence. According to these authors, elite college policies should consider the effect of external to college events on student success. Therefore, the potential impact of societal conditions on the campus climate should be considered during the higher education policy development process (Perna & Thomas, 2006). Consideration of the Perna and Thomas (2006) conceptual framework moved me from an internal institutional focus on support, involvement, and feedback to a more comprehensive and cross-disciplinary view of the most competitive college student experience.

Perna and Thomas’s (2006) theory helped to explain the participants’ thinking regarding the intrusion of external events on campus life. Students reported a womb like collegiate engagement that was fractured by the campus events following the 2016 presidential election. As a result, my participants turned to and expected the ESU administration to filter societal events that negatively affected campus life. Beth (Junior) commented about institutional actions following campus incidents that followed the
presidential election, “Response from the administration was very disheartening to a lot of students.” For Beth, ESU’s inability to proactively deter societal events from affecting her college experience or to help in providing a context of understanding was discouraging. Further research in this area could help to identify effective institutional policies for improving low-income Pell Grant student elite college success (Perna & Thomas, 2006).

**Family members.** One more example of external events affecting participants’ persistence came through the influence of family members on students’ progress to graduation (Perna & Thomas, 2006). According to these authors, parents can influence their children’s postsecondary experience to promote collegiate success. For example, Cody (Sophomore) struggled through an academically challenging first year of college. He noted that studying for assignments and examinations limited the amount of sleep he was getting. During his first year of college, Cody was reluctant to request institutional academic assistance and often turned to his parents for solace. Cody recounted a related discussion, “Your mom calls you and asks if you are getting enough sleep. Oh yeah, yeah, yeah mom, I blinked three times this week, I am getting plenty of sleep.” Cody was masking a request for assistance with humor.

Perna and Thomas’ (2006) theory facilitates understanding of how family context affected the low-income Pell Grant student participants’ elite college persistence. Ann (Senior) and Ilene (Senior) related collegiate experiences in which they reached out to family to support them when collegiate graduation was at risk. For Ann, a parent helped her through failing a course in her first semester, freshmen year. Ann credited her mother’s support with facilitating her collegiate persistence. Similarly, Ilene (Senior)
considered transferring from ESU during her sophomore year. She discussed the idea with her father who encouraged her to continue at ESU for one more semester. As a result, Ilene returned to ESU and overcame her perceived barriers to persistence. Family context promotes understanding that parental engagement “compounds advantage and disadvantage as they relate to student success in college” (Perna & Thomas, 2006, p. 14). Therefore, higher education institutions should consider establishing and sustaining relationships with students’ parents to enhance student persistence (Shuh et al., 2011).

**Belonging.** Another conceptual area less explained by the Tinto and Pusser (2006) IAM was the perception of belonging felt by low-income Pell Grant students on the elite college campus. Research suggests that college student belonging positively correlates with increased students’ persistence (Museus et al., 2017). Strayhorn (2012) connected collegiate students who do not belong to reduced persistence, diminished academic achievement, and less satisfying social experiences. Elite postsecondary institutions’ policies and programs can be altered to improve students’ perception of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Therefore, Strayhorn’s (2012) research provided additional context for my participants’ most competitive college experience.

Through the lens of Strayhorn’s (2012) research on belonging, my study’s data supplements the existing low-income Pell Grant student elite college experience research. Factors that influenced participants’ sense of belonging included peers, socioeconomics, and the living environment. Much like Lee’s (2016) research, relationships were a key factor in low-income Pell Grant student perception of belonging at ESU. Peer student relationships positively contributed to participants’ sense of belonging. Also comparable to Lee’s (2016) study, socioeconomic disparity detracted from the participants’
perception of belonging. In contrast to the existing qualitative work on studying low-income students’ experience at most competitive colleges (Aries & Seider, 2007; Lee, 2016; Steinmetz, 2008), student residence negatively affected some of my participants’ perception of belonging.

**Social environment.** Student participants found belonging through campus affiliations and friendships with their fellow students, which aligned with Strayhorn’s (2012) research. For example, Erica (Sophomore) commented that she felt a sense of belonging, “especially within my friend group.” My study found low-income Pell Grant students established friendships across socioeconomic boundaries. Lee’s (2016) study of an all-female elite college had similar findings. This finding contrasted, however, with Chetty et al.’s (2017) and Espenshade and Radford’s (2009) research, which found that low-income students at most competitive colleges primarily socialized with other students who possessed similar socioeconomic status backgrounds. Due to the extremely small numbers of low-income students at ESU (6%), it was difficult for these students to necessarily find one another among the vast majority of more affluent students.

Limited socioeconomic diversity at ESU detracted from the participants’ perception of belonging. Navigating a largely affluent student population challenged my study’s participants. For example, Beth (Junior) remarked, “ESU is so non-socioeconomically diversified that people don’t even think that it’s a problem. Everybody here, their parents make $200,000 a year and that is just how it is.” Reduced family finances made the low-income Pell Grant students feel atypical on a most competitive college campus where the large majority of students were wealthy.
Participants’ perceived sense of inequality was consistent with existing low-income student elite college research (Aries & Seider, 2007; Lee, 2016; Steinmetz, 2008).

Lacking a credible method for identifying other low-income Pell Grant students, participants felt alone and unique. As discussed earlier, when engaging socially with their more affluent student peers, participants often suppressed their low socioeconomic status, which aligned with Steinmetz’s (2008) findings. Rather than reveal their low-income status, participants ended conversations with affluent student peers when the discussion involved revealing anything about family income. Only upon becoming close friends, would the low-income Pell Grant students reveal their family’s reduced family finances to other students.

**Residence.** Where all students’ family members resided and postsecondary education residential life affected student participants’ perceived sense of belonging. Comparing home location and the size of their house with affluent student peers negatively impacted low-income Pell Grant student participants’ perceived sense of belonging at ESU. Disparate family residence comparison to wealthy students caused participants to suppress their low-income status during conversations with more affluent students. Participants often detached themselves from their past lives to better adapt to their current postsecondary education environment. Lee (2016) and Steinmetz (2008) also related findings where low-income students constrained conversations with affluent students to avoid family background discussions. Low-income student submersion of socioeconomic information was so ingrained that they may not have been aware they were doing it. The invisible sense of privilege afforded to more affluent students influenced perceptions of the participants in my study.
Not every student participant lived in a residence hall. For those that did live on campus, ESU’s residential life staff promoted participants’ perception of belonging. Those student participants who resided on campus were largely content with their campus engagement. Enhanced community, networking opportunities, and support were factors they associated with to living on campus. Lee’s (2016) study produced similar results with low-income students finding belonging through residence life associations. However, my study’s participants who lived in the local community felt disconnected from ESU. Off-campus student participants discussed limited awareness of ESU’s social activities and ESU event participation. Proximity to campus affected student participant elite college social engagement and perceived sense of belonging (Shuh et al., 2011). Most of the participants who lived on campus expressed a sense of belonging. Off campus living detracted from participants’ perception of belonging.

**Elite college benefits.** Another area that was not completely encompassed within Tinto and Pusser’s (2006) IAM was the benefits of having low-income Pell Grant students study at most competitive colleges. The advantages associated with Pell Grant students at elite colleges were featured in participants’ narratives. Enabling low-income students the opportunity to advance up America’s socioeconomic status hierarchy was one of the ideas student participants expressed. Participants also believed that low-income Pell Grant students benefited elite college undergraduate student body learning.

Most competitive colleges can be a force for social mobility if they provide opportunities for low-income Pell Grant recipients (Chetty et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2016b). Student graduation rates are higher at elite colleges than at less selective higher education institutions (Bound et al., 2009; Carnevale & Rose, 2004;
Kena et al., 2016). Additionally, most competitive colleges enjoy superior financial resources, which provides enhanced student financial aid and instruction investment (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). The socioeconomic related benefits accrued to elite college graduates included increased earnings, postgraduate studies, and social status (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Hout, 2012).

All participants in my study believed it was important for low-income Pell Grant students to be represented at elite colleges. Access to enhanced most competitive college financial aid and the potential for upward social mobility supported the participants’ assertion (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). As discussed earlier, the students in this study benefited from ESU’s generous financial aid resources. The participants believed that elite college attendance provided low-income families with a gateway to affluence. For example, exposures to affluent students enabled participants to learn how to better interact with wealthy people. Much like other ESU students, this study’s participants aggressively worked to gain access to an elite institution and appreciated the rigorous academic challenges. Therefore, participants believed they deserved the opportunity to attend highly selective, resource rich colleges.

Espenshade and Radford’s (2009) research suggests that all students learn at higher levels when they socialize across socioeconomic boundaries. This study’s participants promoted the idea that low-income Pell Grant students improved the academic environment at most competitive colleges. All of the student participants believed that low-income Pell Grant students brought a different and much needed perspective to elite institution classrooms. Participants noted that exposure to students with different socioeconomic backgrounds built awareness and perspective. Similarly,
Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin’s (2002) study found socioeconomic diversity benefited collegiate student learning. According to the authors, collegiate student diversity experiences promoted statistically significant academic learning outcomes.

**Implications for Practice**

Quite a few valuable ideas for current practice surfaced during my study. These implications provide ideas for future research because we know most competitive colleges need to improve their socioeconomic diversity (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Cahalan et al., 2016; Carnevale & Van Der Werf, 2017; Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016). We also know that many Pell Grant recipients attending elite colleges feel marginalized, isolated, and misplaced at the institution (Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Giancola & Kahlenberg 2016; Lee 2016). The implications for practice are furthered with recommendations for low-income Pell Grant students attending an elite college, for the faculty members at most competitive colleges, and for the elite institutions with low-income Pell Grant students represented in their undergraduate student populations.

**Implications for students.** The low-income Pell Grant recipients at ESU reported a challenging first year of college. Tinto’s (1998) research suggests a college student’s first year of college is important to persistence because the preponderance of students who do not graduate dropout of college during their freshman year. Several important ideas for ameliorating the Pell Grant students’ freshman year experience emerged from my study’s data to include summer transition program attendance and engaging family members. Attendance at an ESU one-week high school to college summer transition assistance program facilitated two of the participants’ acclimation to elite college academic and social life. Relationships built by the low-income Pell Grant
student participants during the summer transition program alleviated their new higher education environment anxiety during freshman fall. Therefore, Pell Grant students should seek out and participate in elite college transition programs to ameliorate their postsecondary education adjustment. Another participant idea for succeeding during their first year of college was reliance on family members for support. Reaching out to family members when freshman year issues surfaced contributed to participants’ persistence. Based on student participants’ experience, Pell Grant students should seek guidance and assistance from parents to succeed on the most competitive college campus.

Much like other college students, selecting a major was one of the most important decisions low-income Pell Grant students were faced with at an elite college. Despite this, identifying a suitable major challenged several of the student participants during their freshman year of college. For some of the participants, focusing on post-college earnings over subject matter aptitude was an issue. Other participants based their major decision on limited information about what the major entailed. As a result, several student participants changed their major during freshman year and one participant became trapped within a major that she did not enjoy. A desire to graduate on time precluded her from changing her major. There was a perceived participant need to rush to a major decision. Beth (Junior) noted to improve her college experience “I should have just come in as an undecided major.” Slowing down and taking general education requirement classes during the freshman fall class may be an appropriate mechanism for learning about the various major options before selecting a major.

My study found ESU’s most competitive college academic environment was rife with stress, particularly during a difficult first year of college. At times, participants’
academic stress was debilitating and affected their motivation to succeed. Understanding that stress was normal for all students is important. Also important for my participants was the need to develop stress reduction techniques. Every student participant found ways to obviate academic stress. Healthier eating, physical activity, detailed planning, self-awareness, and taking time for social activities were some of the student reported stress reduction methods that worked. While each individual participant was unique, ameliorating academic stress was vital to his or her persistence to success. Therefore, I would encourage low-income Pell Grant students to attend stress reduction workshops.

The aspect of time management also emerged as an important experiential element during the participants’ freshman year. Balancing social engagements with rigorous elite college academics challenged every participant. Limited awareness of academic support such as tutoring and writing center capabilities compounded the time management issue. Participants invested large amounts of time trying to academically succeed without requesting institutional assistance. Student participants reported a shocking grade point average drop between high school and their freshman year of college. When asked what advice she would give freshman low-income Pell Grant students, Ann (Senior) strongly recommended seeking academic assistance. Cognizance of the academic assistance available at most competitive colleges and willingness to engage them are important to low-income Pell Grant student freshman year success. Pell Grant students should seek out academic assistance information online, work with peer mentors, and engage faculty members for academic support.

**Implications for faculty.** Faculty members were identified as key people for ensuring low-income Pell Grant student success at most competitive colleges. Low-
income Pell Grant students are a small minority group within the elite college undergraduate student population. One way this groups’ minority status manifested itself was participants’ reluctance to surface academic issues with faculty members. For example, finding the confidence to speak up when struggling in class challenged the participants. Faculty members can ameliorate this condition during curriculum development, teaching methodology, and classroom activities (Fink, 2013). Professors need to take the requisite actions to create a classroom climate in which Pell Grant students feel welcome and included. One way to accomplish this encompasses development of a set of classroom rules to establish inclusive expectations (Hockings, 2011). Such rules would articulate the value of every student’s contribution, treating class participants with dignity and respect, and outlining the appropriate ways to challenge others’ ideas. Adhering to the classroom rules enables trust (hooks, 1994) and helps to ensure each student’s voice is represented in the classroom.

Interaction with faculty members outside of the classroom featured prominently in this study’s participant stories. Five participants stated that they were hesitant to seek faculty assistance during their freshman year. Faculty members can help students overcome this reluctance by proactively encouraging office visits. During those faculty and student interactions, the student participants often valued discussions that extended beyond the classroom. Professors who took the time to informally meet with participants were identified as a strong source of support and contributors to students’ success.

The elite college faculty members can support the low-income Pell Grant students in a variety of ways during the assessment process. For example, all participants valued detailed assignment feedback from faculty members. Most of the student participants
noted a lack of feedback on final exams as a factor that detracted from their persistence to succeed. Therefore, providing Pell Grant students with feedback on mid-term and final exams would have improved their progression to graduation. Additionally, participants found faculty member use of teacher assistants (TA) to grade students’ coursework limited academic performance feedback. TAs often used answer keys to grade participants’ assignments with feedback consisting of correct and incorrect student responses. Posting the answer key with correct answers after assignment feedback was completed would have improved the participants’ experience by showing them the correct answer to questions they missed.

**Implications for the institution.** The institution played a pivotal role in all student participants’ progression to graduation. For example, ESU’s substantial financial aid package was a deciding factor in most participants’ higher education decision. However, limited understanding of their financial aid package detracted from the students’ freshman year experience. One participant was unaware that he had received an ESU financial aid offer until two weeks before his freshman year. Elite institutions should consider having an advisor meet with each low-income Pell Grant student for financial aid package review. Guidance on how to make the best use of financial aid would have improved participants’ higher education experience. Additionally, conducting financial literacy workshops would enable low-income students to share financial aid experiences in a group setting.

Participants expressed issues with gaining access to institutional financial resources. For example, ESU offered and strongly advocated its study abroad program. Some of the study abroad programs required an upfront outlay of funding to initiate the
process. Obtaining the money to pay for the study abroad program in advance of financial aid reimbursement frustrated one participant. As a result, the study abroad program that she had been accepted to went by the wayside. Institutional alignment of study abroad programs with financial aid funding or a bridge loan would have improved the participant’s collegiate experience by enabling study abroad participation. Another institutional financial area where participants expressed irritation was the institutional funding of internships. Low-income Pell Grant students complained that students who do not have the financial resources end up getting left out of the important internship experience. Therefore, elite institutions should consider connecting internship funding with student financial need to ensure all students receive the requisite vocational experience.

Expanding most competitive college socioeconomic diversity was an idea surfaced by this study’s participants. Navigating an affluent elite undergraduate student body challenged the student participants. As discussed earlier, Pell Grant students represented a small percentage of elite college enrollments. Less than half of the 150,000 Pell Grant students with the academic credentials to attend most competitive colleges are enrolled at elite institutions (Carnevale & Van Der Werf, 2017). Elite institutions could remediate the underserved low-income students by providing admissions preference to those students (Espenshade & Radford, 2009) and by reaching out to academically qualified low-income high school students (Giancola & Kahlenberg 2016). According to Giancola and Kahlenberg (2016), “by sending an inexpensive mailing costing $6, researchers were able to increase the percentage of high-achieving, low-income students to a match institution by 31 percent” (p. 15). In those solicitations, elite institutions
might highlight the income and networking opportunities afforded to low-income students who attend most competitive colleges. Another method to improve socioeconomic diversity at most competitive colleges would be for public elite institutions to increase the amount of institutional financial aid provided to out-of-state students. As discussed earlier, ESU addressed 100% of financial need for in-state students, which compared to 25% of out-of-state students’ financial need. The out-of-state participant in this study David (Junior) relied on parents, grandparents, loans, and financial aid to pay for his collegiate attendance at ESU.

Family members were important to participants’ progression to graduation. Therefore, elite institutions should consider enlisting Pell Grant student families for student support. Developing institutional ties to student families provides another tool in the toolbox for identifying at risk students. According to Campbell and Voight (2015), postsecondary institutions need to develop processes that recognize when students are struggling and take action to facilitate their collegiate success. During this study, the first source of support participants reached out to during academic challenges was their family. Thus, administrative action to connect families to institutional support personnel would link students who are reluctant to seek assistance with the needed higher education support capabilities.

The low-income Pell Grant student participants described their relationship with the most competitive college administration relationship as nonexistent. Additionally, the participants believed that they were not always aware of useful administrative resources. David (Junior) described it this way, “I also feel like the administration does not give students enough information about what they do to really warrant students going to them.
So that is why there is not really a relationship.” As a result, most participants believed that they had not interacted with the administration. Clearly, the elite college institution administration substantially contributes to Pell Grant student success (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). However, that contribution is not effectively communicated to the Pell Grant students. Participants asserted ESU administration sent out information in lengthy and hard to fathom emails. Elite institutions need to understand how to effectively engage Pell Grant students (e.g., social media) and adapt their practice accordingly.

Low-income Pell Grant student participants did not have a credible method for identifying other Pell Grant students. This meant student participants felt alone and unique on the most competitive college campus. A low-income Pell Grant student focused club would alleviate this condition (Lee, 2016). Elite campus clubs provide students with the opportunity to develop a community and engage with other students who possess similar interests and backgrounds. According to Lee (2016), a student club dedicated to the advocacy and support for Pell Grant students offers the potential for concerted group effort to engage the administration on collective issues and challenges. Club membership would connect freshman low-income Pell Grant students with more senior students for experience and information sharing. Additionally, such a club would provide the elite institution administration with a forum to socialize institutional capabilities targeted to Pell Grant students.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

As stated in Chapter 2, the research-based understanding of low-income Pell Grant student experiences at our nation’s most selective colleges and universities is limited (Lee, 2016). Aries and Seider (2007) and Steinmetz (2008) used a qualitative
design to explore low socioeconomic status elite college student experiences. Their research focused on how students’ identity development was affected by their low socioeconomic status. Participation in the Aries and Seider’s (2007) study was limited to White freshman and sophomore students. Steinmetz (2008) study consisted of low socioeconomic status students in their last semester of college. Lee’s (2016) examination of low socioeconomic status students at an elite all women’s liberal arts college was an important step in understanding the students’ experience across race and undergraduate class. In my replication study, the experience of both male and female Pell Grant participants who were enrolled at a most competitive co-educational liberal arts college was researched.

Even though 15% of ESU’s in-state students were Pell Grant recipients, only 6% of out-of-state students received Pell Grants. I found that elite institution financial aid was not distributed equally across the Pell Grant student population. There where stark differences in how the in-state and out-of-state student participants were treated regarding institutional financial aid. ESU addressed 100% of financial need for in-state students, which compared to 25% of financial need for out-of-state students. While most of the student participants who commented believed ESU’s differing state residence (i.e., in-state or out-of-state) financial support policy was inconsequential to their higher education experience, those commenting were in-state Pell Grant students. Therefore, I recommend research focused on out-of-state Pell Grant students studying at a public most competitive college.

My study focused on low-income family Pell Grant recipients matriculating at an elite postsecondary institution. Research studies targeted at middle-income Pell Grant
recipients who attend most competitive colleges are needed. For this research, low-income was less than $43,511, middle-income was $43,512 to $72,001, and high-income was above $72,002. Approximately half of the ESU’s Pell Grant students were people who possessed middle-income backgrounds. What were the Pell Grant students from middle-income families elite college experience? How do they compare to the low-income Pell Grant students’ most competitive college experience? Studies on middle-income Pell Grant recipients who attend elite colleges could answer these important questions.

My research was delimited to undergraduate Pell Grant students at a single co-educational liberal arts most competitive college on the east coast of America. Therefore, generalizing the results of this study to other types of student populations and postsecondary institutions might not be appropriate. Replication studies to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of elite college Pell Grant students at different types of institutions (e.g., private) are required. Additionally, the lived experiences of most competitive college Pell Grant students studying at non-East coast institutions are needed to fully comprehend the students’ experience.

A follow-up longitudinal study with my student participants after 10 years would help to show how Pell Grants influenced participants’ elite college persistence. A follow-on study would demonstrate how the passage of time changed the participants’ perspective of their elite college experience. What was the impact of financial aid on participants’ vocation and family life? Did low-income Pell Grant recipients experience upward social mobility within American society? The ways in which participants respond could surface lessons learned and best practices that would benefit future
generations of low-income Pell Grant students studying at most competitive colleges. Further, such studies might provide institutional leaders and federal policymakers with insight into how the Pell Grant program could be modified to better support low-income student persistence at America’s elite colleges.

Conclusions

This phenomenological case study described the ways in which low-income Pell Grant recipients persisted to success at an elite college. The 11 student participants’ experiences related to the factors that institutions control (support, feedback, involvement) lends depth and breadth to previous research by highlighting factors that influenced Pell Grant students’ persistence. Student participant perspectives on important institutional factors outside of support, feedback, and involvement were captured as well. It was important to understand what happens to low-income Pell Grant students within their collegiate experience so that the appropriate institutional program adjustments occur.

The participants’ lived experiences at a most competitive college were largely compatible with attaining a college degree. Pell Grant student participants were grateful for financial assistance that paid for their higher education. Unencumbered by worrying about how to pay for college, participants were able to focus on successfully progressing through an academic program. There were some collegiate institutional areas that do not seem to be working as effectively as intended, and these provide insight into how the institutional programs can be improved.

My study found reduced family incomes placed low-income Pell Grant students at disadvantage when compared to their affluent student peers. Feelings of non-belonging
on the elite college campus and reduced participation in extracurricular activities were barriers to participants’ persistence. Student participants were challenged by elite college academics and described the academic environment as write with stress. Much like the existing research (Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Giancola & Kahlenberg 2016; Lee 2016), some of the participants in my study felt marginalized, isolated, and misplaced at the elite institution.

Not all of this study’s participants were first-generation college students. Yet, even with parental background in college, cultural capital was still missing. It might be that the parent’s did not attend a most competitive college and therefore lacked the experience to draw upon, or that they were in college was so long ago that their experiences were different regarding how to access support on campus. Reduced cultural capital meant low-income Pell Grant student participants were reluctant to seek academic assistance and to ask the elite college administration for support.

Elite institutional leaders and federal policymakers can benefit from this study. The research provided a comprehensive case study that captured many of the key elements that affected student participants’ higher education experience. Such information enables practitioners to better understand how the participants interacted with the elite college institution. Overall, this study contributes to the existing research on low-income Pell Grant students’ elite higher education experience by providing the students’ experience at a public co-educational most competitive college.
Appendix A

Inventory of ESU Institutional Support for Pell Grant Students

The following is a list of ESU programming to support Pell Grant Students.

1. The ESU research diversity studies program provides an opportunity for Pell Grant students to develop their research skills. Students attend weekly workshops and are guided by faculty mentors.

2. The first-year experience program supports Pell Grant student transition to the ESU community through outreach services and new student orientation.

3. The preparing for life as a university student program is designed to support new students’ transition from high school to college by providing an opportunity for those students to interact with faculty and current students.

4. The peer-mentoring program enables first-year students to network with upper-class students and fellow freshman with comparable backgrounds.

5. The ESU financial aid office develops a Pell Grant student financial aid package based on student eligibility.

Note: Even though the programs listed do not specifically focus on Pell Grant students, they are designed to support under-served and underrepresented ESU students.
Appendix B

Email to the ESU Financial Aid Director

Hello, my name is Mike Postma. I am a Ph.D. doctoral candidate at William & Mary in the Educational, Policy, Planning, and Leadership department. My dissertation study focuses on the impact that federal financial aid receipt has on undergraduate students’ college experience. Dr. Pamela Eddy is my dissertation chair.

As previously discussed, I am soliciting your office’s support for my study between January and March 2017. Specifically, I am asking that you help me recruit 10-15 study participants by:

1. Identifying dependent, low- and middle-income Pell Grant recipients and disaggregating them by undergraduate class (i.e., freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior). For the purposes of this study, students with family income below $43,511 are considered low-income and students with family income between $43,512 to $72,001 are considered middle-income;
2. Randomly selecting 10 low-income Pell Grant recipients from each undergraduate class; and
3. Sending the email (see attached Appendix C) to the 40 randomly selected low-income Pell Grant recipients on January 15, 2017.

The study participant recruitment process will reoccur every two weeks until I receive the requisite 10-15 study participants. If the eligible pool of low-income Pell Grant recipients is exhausted before 10-15 study participants are recruited, I will contact you again to garner another batch of potential participants using the above methodology.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Michael H. Postma
The College of William and Mary
School of Education | 301 Monticello Avenue | Williamsburg, VA 23185
Hello, my name is XX and I am sending this email on behalf of Mike Postma. Mike is a Ph.D. doctoral candidate at William & Mary in the Educational, Policy, Planning, and Leadership department. His dissertation study focuses on the impact that federal financial aid receipt has on undergraduate students’ college experience. Dr. Pamela Eddy is Mike’s dissertation chair.

Mike is soliciting your participation in that study between January and March 2017. Your participation would require three steps. First, he is asking that you provide an informal written response (approximately one page) to college experience-related questions and second, to participate in one interview that will last approximately one hour. The interview will be conducted in-person at the library at a date and time of your choice. Finally, there will be a focus group that all participants will be invited together to share their college experiences. The data you provide will remain anonymous.

Compensation for participating in the study includes a $25 college bookstore gift card.

If you are interested in sharing your collegiate experience and are interested in participating in this important research study, please contact Mike by email at mhpostma@email.wm.edu by January 31, 2017. In addition, Mike’s telephone number is 757-357-0736 if you have questions regarding the study.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

XX
Director of Financial Aid
Subject line. $100 Compensation for Participating in a Collegiate Experience Study

Hello, my name is XX and I am sending this email on behalf of Mike Postma. Mike is a Ph.D. doctoral candidate at William & Mary. His dissertation study focuses on the impact that federal financial aid receipt has on undergraduate students’ college experience. Dr. Pamela Eddy is Mike’s dissertation chair.

Mike is soliciting your participation in that study, which would require three steps. First, he is asking that you respond to a short online questionnaire (should take approximately 10 minutes) and second, participate in one individual interview that will last approximately one hour. Finally, participate in a one-hour focus group where all participants will share their college experiences. The individual interview and focus group will be conducted in-person at the SWEM library. The data you provide will remain anonymous.

The first 10 people to respond to Mike and complete the three steps discussed above will receive $100 cash. The total time commitment requires approximately two hours over the course of the study.

If you are interested in participating in this important research study, please contact Mike by email at mhpostma@email.wm.edu by February 12, 2017. In addition, Mike’s telephone number is 757-846-5935 if you have questions regarding the study.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

XX
Director of Financial Aid
Appendix E

Email to Students Expressing Study Participation Interest

Dear Student A,

Thank you for expressing interest in participating in my study on the impact that receiving federal financial aid has on an undergraduate student’s college experience. This project provides a wonderful opportunity for you to share your collegiate experience and for me to learn more about the topic.

Attached is the research participant consent form that will give you background information about the study. The consent form includes your rights as a participant. You will benefit most by reading the consent form before the interview session.

Please identify and email me two dates (any day of the week) and times (10AM to 7PM) between February 14, 2017 and March 17, 2017 on which I could schedule a one-hour interview at the library. The focus group will meet during the last week of March 2017 or during the first week of April 2017.

Additionally, in advance of our interview, please respond to the questions posted at the following link: https://wmsurveys.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_dg67gKrsPLxpc0J. It should take you less than 10 minutes to insert your responses. We will touch on these items during our interview as well.

I appreciate your willingness to participate in this study. I am looking forward to meeting you and hearing your story. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Michael H. Postma
The College of William and Mary
School of Education | 301 Monticello Avenue | Williamsburg, VA 23185
757-357-0736
Appendix F

Qualtrics Survey

1. First and Last Name

2. Age

3. Hometown Location

4. Major

5. Undergraduate Class
   __ Freshman
   __ Sophomore
   __ Junior
   __ Senior

6. Highest level (mother’s education) completed
   __ Less Than High School
   __ High School
   __ 2 year degree
   __ Bachelors Degree
   __ Doctorate/M.D./JD
   __ Unknown

7. Highest level (father’s education) completed
   __ Less Than High School
   __ High School
   __ 2 year degree
   __ Bachelors Degree
   __ Doctorate/M.D./JD
   __ Unknown

8. Race
   __ White
   __ Black or African American
   __ 2 year degree
   __ American Indian or Alaska Native
   __ Asian
   __ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
   __ Other

9. In the space below describe your college experience to date. For example, how do you feel connected on campus? Have you engaged with other students and faculty? What are some of the highlights of your college years? What are some of the challenges?
10. In the space below describe what, if anything, would help improve your college experience? What might others do to support this change? What might you do?
Appendix G

Participant Consent Form:

Understanding the Lived Experiences of Pell Grant Undergraduate Students at a Most Competitive College

WHAT DO I HOPE TO LEARN FROM YOU?

This investigation, tentatively entitled “Understanding the Lived Experiences of Pell Grant Undergraduate Students at a Most Competitive College” is designed to explore the experiences of Pell Grant students at an elite college.

WHY IS YOUR PARTICIPATION IMPORTANT TO ME?

Pell Grant recipients represent a small percentage of undergraduate students at America’s elite colleges and universities. In order to increase the numbers of Pell Grant students attending and succeeding in elite colleges and universities, we need to understand what experiences affect Pell Grant student persistence to succeed and how most competitive postsecondary institutions can better support Pell Grant student success. Your experiences will help to create an understanding of how Pell Grant participation impacts elite college students and their experiences.

WHAT WILL I REQUEST FROM YOU?

As participants in this study, I request that you:

• **Compose a written response to two prompts in advance of the interview.**
  The specific prompts to which the participants will respond:
  “1. Describe your college experience to date. For example, do you have a sense of belonging on campus? Have you engaged with other students and faculty? What are some of the highlights of you college years? What are some of your challenges?
  2. What, if anything, would help improve your college experience? What might others do to support this change? What might you do?”
  Please email me a copy of your response a couple of days before the first interview session.

• **Participate in an audio-recorded individual interview in which you will describe your college experiences.** This interview will last approximately sixty-minutes and will be scheduled at your convenience.

• A summary of your interview will be sent to you electronically once it is complete, using the email address that you provide. I will request your review and approval.

• Be available for a follow-up interview if needed.

• **There is a final focus group that all participants will be invited together.**
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

Please know that:

- The confidentiality of your personally identifying information will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.
- Your name and other identifying information will be known only to the researchers through the information that you provide. Neither your name nor any other personally identifying information will be used in any presentation or published work without prior written consent.
- You may refuse to answer any questions during the interview(s) if you so choose. You may also terminate your participation in the study at any time. (To do so, simply inform the researcher of your intention.) Neither of these actions will incur a penalty of any type.
- The interview audio recordings will be erased after the study has been completed.
- Your participation in this study is completely voluntary.
- A summary of the results of the study will be sent to you once it is complete.
- You will be compensated with $100.

HOW CAN YOU CONTACT ME?

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact Mike Postma (mhpostma@email.wm.edu) at The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia (757-357-0736). If you have any additional questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, Dr. Jennifer Stevens at 757-221-3862 (jastev@wm.edu) or Dr. Pamela Eddy at 757-221-2349 (peddy@wm.edu).

By checking the “I agree to participate” response below, then signing and dating this form, you will indicate your voluntary agreement to participate in this study, and confirm that you are at least 18 years of age.

☐ I agree to participate and to have my interview recorded.
☐ I agree to participate and not have my interview recorded.
☐ I don’t agree to participate.

Please keep a copy of this consent form for your records.

Participant: ____________________________ Date: ______

Researcher: ____________________________ Date: ______
Appendix H

Individual Interview Guide

Thanks for taking time with me today. This interview is in support of a study that is exploring the experiences of Pell Grant students at an elite college. My researcher role in this interview is to better understand your perspectives and experiences so I will avoid offering my opinions. I will periodically confirm my understanding of what you have said.

1. Tell me a bit about your college experiences at ESU.
   a. How did you choose ESU?
   b. Describe your initial experiences at ESU?
   c. Do you feel a sense of belonging at ESU?
   d. Describe the challenges, if any, you faced as a student?
   e. How has this changed over time?

2. Outside the classroom, describe the ways you are/were actively engaged on campus.
   a. What activities did/do you participate in/or what groups were/are you part of?
   b. What role did/do you play in __?
   c. Has your involvement changed over time? Why/why not?
   d. What types of extracurricular activities (e.g., clubs) have you participated in?
   e. How has this changed over time?

3. Elite colleges pride themselves on the rigor and quality of their academic programs.
   a. What is your greatest academic challenge?
   b. What institutional resources are available to support your academic work?
   c. What academic support is not available from the institution that might have helped?
   d. What types of feedback did you receive on your academic performance?

4. How to pay for college is the focus of national dialogue. Tell me how you thought about how you were going to pay for college?
   a. How did you think of financial aid packages when deciding on college?
   b. What institutional financial resources are available to you?
   c. Are you employed? If so, please describe your work.
   d. Has money been a challenge for you in attending college?
   e. How does your financial aid package influence your relationships/experiences on campus?
5. Students access a number of different types of supports when in college. Tell me a bit about who or what offices you relied on.
   a. What types of social support programs (e.g., mentors), if any, have you participated in? (Formal/informal?)
   b. How have you relied on your peers/faculty/staff/offices for support?
   c. How has college supported you?
   d. What was your most positive college experience?

6. College students face a range of challenges while in school. Tell me a bit about what has challenged you and how you dealt with the challenges.
   a. How did this change over time?
   b. In thinking about challenges, how many occurred in a particular sphere? (Academic, financial, social, mental health?)
   c. What was your most negative college experience?

7. As you reflect on your time at ESU, how would you describe how the college has changed you?
   a. Would you describe the college environment?
   b. What would you describe to others as a benefit of attending a college like ESU?
   c. What would you change about your college experience to improve it?

8. Do you have anything else to share about your college experience that we have not already discussed?

A summary of the interview will be sent to you by email for your review and approval.

Note: I have set up two dates to conduct a follow up focus group with study participants. Which date is best for you?
### Appendix I

**Crosswalk Between Individual Interview Questions and Literature**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Literature</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell me a bit about your college experiences at ESU.</td>
<td>1. How do the experiences of Pell Grant students at a most competitive college contribute to their persistence to succeed?</td>
<td>Alexander &amp; Gardner (2009)</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Describe your initial experiences at ESU?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tinto (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Do you feel a sense of belonging at ESU?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tinto &amp; Pusser (2006)</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Describe the challenges, if any, you faced as a student?</td>
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<tr>
<td>e. How has this changed over time?</td>
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<td>Outside the classroom, describe the ways you are/were actively engaged on campus.</td>
<td>2. What other institutional factors do Pell Grant students identify as contributing to their persistence to succeed?</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. What activities did/do you participate in/or what groups were/are you part of?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Attinasi (1989)</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. What role did/do you play in __?</td>
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<td>Kuh (2008)</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. What types of extracurricular activities (e.g., clubs) have you participated in?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pascarella &amp; Terenzini (2005)</td>
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<tr>
<td>e. How has this changed over time?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tinto &amp; Pusser (2006)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interview Questions</td>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>Literature</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elite colleges pride themselves on the rigor and quality of their academic programs.</td>
<td>1. How do the experiences of Pell Grant students at a most competitive college contribute to their persistence to succeed?</td>
<td>Astin (1985)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. What institutional resources are available to support your academic work?</td>
<td>2. What other institutional factors do Pell Grant students identify as contributing to their persistence to succeed?</td>
<td>Lee (2016)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. What academic support is not available from the institution that might have helped?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Schuh et al. (2011)</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. What types of feedback did you receive on your academic performance?</td>
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<td>Tinto &amp; Pusser (2006)</td>
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<tr>
<td>How to pay for college is the focus of national dialogue. Tell me how you thought about how you were going to pay for college?</td>
<td>1. How do the experiences of Pell Grant students at a most competitive college contribute to their persistence to succeed?</td>
<td>Campbell &amp; Voight (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. What institutional financial resources are available to you?</td>
<td>2. What other institutional factors do Pell Grant students identify as contributing to their persistence to succeed?</td>
<td>Stuber (2009)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Are you employed? If so, please describe your work.</td>
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<td>Tilghman (2007)</td>
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<td>d. Has money been a challenge for you in attending college?</td>
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<td>e. How does your financial aid package influence your relationships/experiences on campus?</td>
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<td>Students access a number of different types of supports when in college. Tell me a bit about who or what offices you relied on.</td>
<td>1. How do the experiences of Pell Grant students at a most competitive college contribute to their persistence to succeed? A. Support, B. Feedback, C. Involvement.</td>
<td>Attinasi (1989)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. What types of social support programs (e.g., mentors), if any, have you participated in? (Formal/informal?)</td>
<td>2. What other institutional factors do Pell Grant students identify as contributing to their persistence to succeed?</td>
<td>Gardner et al. (2001)</td>
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<td>b. How have you relied on your peers/faculty/staff/offices for support?</td>
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<td>Lee (2016)</td>
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<td>c. How has college supported you?</td>
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<td>Tinto &amp; Pusser (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Campbell &amp; Voight (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. How did this change over time?</td>
<td>2. What other institutional factors do Pell Grant students identify as contributing to their persistence to succeed?</td>
<td>Dynarski (2008)</td>
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<td>b. In thinking about challenges, how many occurred in a particular sphere? (Academic, financial, social, mental health?)</td>
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<td>Lee (2016)</td>
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<td>c. What was your most negative college experience?</td>
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<td>Stuber (2009)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Tinto &amp; Pusser (2006)</td>
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<tr>
<td>As you reflect on your time at ESU, how would you describe how the college has changed you?</td>
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<td>Lee (2016) Tinto &amp; Pusser (2006)</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. Would you describe the college environment?</td>
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<td>b. What would you describe to others as a benefit of attending a college like ESU?</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>c. What would you change about your college experience to improve it?</td>
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</table>
Appendix J

Focus Group Interview Guide

1. Describe a typical ESU student.

2. College persistence is defined as progressing through an academic program to graduation.
   a. Describe academic and social factors that contribute to your persistence.
   b. Describe academic and social factors that detract from your persistence.
   c. Describe how you balance your academic and social experiences.
   d. Describe the coping skills you bring to your college experience.

3. What are the top two things that would improve your collegiate experience?

4. Describe the influence, if any, of money on your college experience? (e.g., academics, social relationships or activities)

5. What does socioeconomic diversity at ESU mean?
   a. Is socioeconomic diversity at ESU important?
   b. Is it important for Pell Grant students to be here at ESU?

6. Describe the relationship between the college administration and the students.

7. Describe the types of feedback you receive on your academic work.

8. Describe the ESU college environment.

9. Do you have anything else to share about your college experience that we have not already discussed?
Appendix K

Peer Reviewer Confidentiality Agreement

I agree to participate as a peer reviewer in the doctoral dissertation of Michael Postma. I agree to maintain the utmost confidence throughout this peer review process by not sharing or disseminating in written or electronic form the transcription(s) of the student participant(s) in Michael Postma’s study or any information gleaned from the review without prior written consent from Michael Postma. Additionally, I will not use any of the data that I am checking for other purposes.

Signed: __________________________

Dated: __________________________
Appendix L

Researcher and Peer Reviewer Coding Sheet

AS = Academic Support. Student participant discussed advising, tutoring, study groups, and/or supplemental instruction. Supplemental instruction includes summer bridge programs and freshman seminars.

SS = Social Support. Student participant discussed counseling, mentoring, and/or clubs.

FS = Financial Support. Student participant discussed financial aid and employment.

IS = Involvement Students. Student participant discussed academic or social involvement with other students.

IIO = Involvement Institutional Offices. Student participant discussed academic or social involvement with Institutional offices (e.g., Dean of Students, residence life).

IFM = Involvement Faculty Members. Student participant discussed academic or social involvement with faculty members.

FWC = Feedback Within the Classroom. Student participant discussed feedback received within the classroom.

FOC = Feedback Outside the Classroom. Student participant discussed feedback received outside of the classroom.

EC = External Commitments. Student participant discussed external to college factors that influenced their college experience.

ECC = Expectational Campus Climate. Student participant is describing the college academic or social environment.

Note. The codes reflect abbreviations from Tinto and Pusser’s (2006) Institutional Action Model.
References


doi:10.1080/2194587x.2017.1300096


The_Role_of_Pell_Grants_in_Access_Persistence_&_Completion.pdf

National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education & Southern Regional Education Board. (2010). *Beyond the rhetoric: Improving college readiness through coherent state policy.* San Jose, CA: Author.


## Vita

Michael H. Postma

**Birthdate:** November 8, 1959  
**Birthplace:** Providence, Rhode Island  

**Education:**

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Degree</th>
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<td>The College of William and Mary</td>
<td>Doctor of Philosophy</td>
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<td>Williamsburg, Virginia</td>
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<td>2003-2004</td>
<td>The United States Army War College</td>
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<td>Carlisle, Pennsylvania</td>
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<td>1988-1990</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Los Angeles, California</td>
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<td>1979-1982</td>
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