

RUNNING HEAD: Underprepared college students' perceptions of their educational achievement

Perceptions of Underprepared Community College Students Regarding their Educational Achievement: Preliminary Analysis of a Pilot Study

by

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Abstract

This study serves as the preliminary analyses of a pilot study of community college students who persisted through their remedial classes and their programs of study and had attained the associate degree at a multicultural community college. This study is informed by Tinto's academic integration model, Astin's social involvement model and Freire's critical theory with attention to the ways that race, class, gender, the economy, education, religion, and sexual orientation interact to construct a social system. The researcher's goal was to identify how learning community experiences, notably the mentoring and networking opportunities, might have influenced experiences of the underprepared student.

Postsecondary institutions such as community colleges place a great deal of emphasis on student retention. Such interests include the long-term earning options of students, the economic vitality of communities needing skilled workers, and the institution's curriculum development, faculty planning, mission, and political impact (Bragg, 2001). College administrators perceive student retention rates as indicators of academic quality and student success. In community colleges, this accountability measure is particularly disconcerting where the percentage of college students who leave within the first year is higher than that from any other type of institution (McCabe, 2003). Furthermore, college students whose entry placement scores require that they enroll in remedial classes are most likely to have low persistence and graduation rates (Bers & Smith, 1991; Burley, Butner, & Cejda, 2001).

Nationally, 47% of students who require remediation graduate while only 24% of students who need three or more developmental courses complete their programs of study (Adelman, 1996). Attainment of pre-requisite knowledge and skills (failure to complete developmental classes) remains the stumbling block for student achievement but students who complete all developmental coursework achieve success rates similar to college-ready students (Boylan, 1999). The national statistics are consistent with 2-year institutions in South Florida. For example, during the fall 2002 semester at one community college, 2,339 students out of the 9,160 new incoming freshmen, required all developmental courses. Specifically, at one campus, 613 of 2,326 freshmen were underprepared. Of this number, approximately 5% have graduated. Less than 10% of those students who withdraw return within 4 years (*Achieving the Dream*, 2006).

Researchers have identified several factors that increase retention, such as (a) increased levels of faculty-student interaction, (b) integration of academic and social activities, (c) opportunities for involvement, (d) mentoring and (e) use of campus resources (Astin, 1984, 1985, 1996; Harvey-Smith, 2002; Roueche & Roueche, 1999; Tinto, 1997). Learning communities provide such key factors to help retain students. Yet the research focuses on college-ready students at 4-year institutions. Previous studies have relied on correlational studies to show that learning communities have a positive effect on academic achievement and retention of students and have focused on college-ready students (e.g., Brittenham, Cook, Hall, Moore-Whitesell, Ruhl-Smith et al., 2003; Knight, 2003; Raftery, 2005). A few researchers have studied the experiences of college students who have participated in learning communities (Singleton,

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Garvey, & Phillips, 1998; Tinto, 1997). Tinto (1997) found that students at Seattle Central Community College who participated in a learning community reported a greater sense of community with faculty and peers and a greater appreciation of diversity because they had developed relationships with peers different from themselves. Freshmen who participated in the College of the Holy Cross's First Year Program, located in Worcester, Massachusetts, expressed positive satisfaction and had more favorable experiences (Singleton et al., 1998). Yet, to date, no study has been found that analyzes the impact of learning communities on persistence and achievement of underprepared college students

Because the ideals of learning communities are consistent with the values of community colleges within a democratic society (Harvey-Smith, 2002), studying the perceptions of underprepared college students who have participated in learning communities, may inform the field. If better understood, perhaps more holistic initiatives can be implemented by community college administrators, admissions personnel, and faculty to better support underprepared ethnically diverse community college students. The study is also important in light of the potential increased understanding that the underprepared ethnically diverse college students may acquire as a result in participating in this study. This study explores the perceptions of underprepared college students who have participated in learning communities and who persisted to complete developmental classes as compared to their peers who did not persist to complete their developmental classes and who have dropped out of college.

Research Question

The following question frames the study. How do underprepared community college students who participated in a learning community, completed their developmental classes, and graduated from their programs of study or successfully transferred to the upper division, perceive their experiences at the community college?

Theoretical Framework

Three major theoretical frameworks guide this study: academic integration theory (Tinto, 1975); social involvement theory (Astin, 1985) and critical theory (Freire, 1970, 1992; Horkheimer, 1982; McClaren & Hammer, 1989). Figure 1 depicts how the theoretical frameworks guided the interpretations of perceptions of academic achievement of underprepared

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college students who participated in a learning community. Each framework is summarized below.

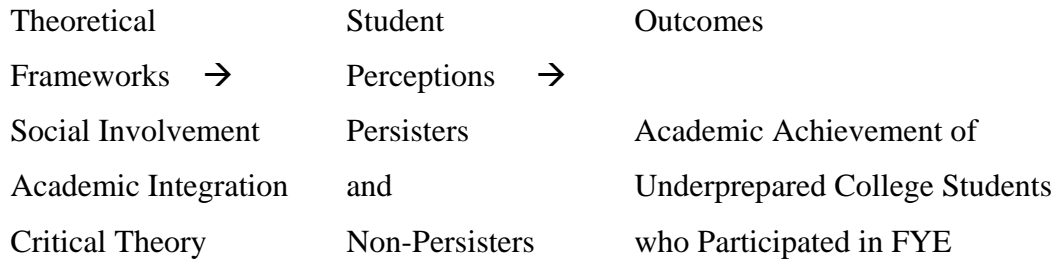


Figure 1. Theoretical frameworks that may guide the perception interpretations of underprepared learning community college students concerning academic achievement.

Tinto (1975) created the integration model that posits students who are more integrated and feel valued are more likely to persist. Astin (1984) addressed persistence and student success, finding that the greater the amount of time a student participates in co-curricular and other in and out of the classroom activities, the more likely he/she will continue in school. The First Year Experience Learning Community was created using the theoretical frameworks developed by Tinto and Astin. Critical theory is used as the lens that frames the examination of underprepared college students who perform well after participating in a learning community through question development and data collection and analysis. Tinto and Astin do not address how the system functions for underprepared students. The third lens is necessary to explain why some students succeed in spite of a flawed education system. This theory guides the researcher in deconstructing the external factors that impact the ability of students from traditionally marginalized groups to navigate unfamiliar systems. Critical theorists such as Freire (1970, 1992) and Horkheimer (1982) reflect on ways in which race, class, and gender interact to influence an individual experience. Freire (1970) proposed the concept of “liberatory intervention” (p. 7) where education results in an individual person’s emancipation or liberation, not only from previously held views of one’s self. Liberation can also occur in the sense of becoming prepared to negotiate larger circles of influence, as when students learn new skills. The liberatory phenomenon or concept is an important aspect of the present study since the researcher hopes to uncover the perceptions of underprepared students regarding how the dominant academic culture may have treated them.

Methods

The research design relied on a case study approach to understand the experiences of underprepared college students (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003, Schwandt, 2007). By focusing on specific instances, or individual cases, the researcher derived an in-depth study of each case so as to obtain the emic perspective of case study participants (Gall, et al., 2003). Subsequently a cross-case analysis was conducted across all participants to identify common and unique themes. Participants were engaged in an interview process in which they described their lived experiences. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003) qualitative methods such as a case study approach can serve as the primary means of “giving voice” to the human experience (p. 201). The goal was to gain a deeper understanding of how the students negotiate and make sense of their college experiences, specifically the experiences that one community college has provided for them.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Since fall of 2003, at the community college where the study takes place, underprepared college students whose scores on standardized tests require them to enroll into all three remedial courses (English, reading, and mathematics) have the opportunity to participate in the First Year Experience Learning Community. Approximately 25 students per year have volunteered (for a total *N* of 98). Of these, approximately 68% persist to complete remedial classes and enroll in credit-bearing classes. Since the inception of the program, seven students (7%) have graduated with an associate degree or transferred to a university. Those who have persisted to complete developmental classes and who are enrolled in credit-bearing courses towards their programs of study for the associate degree (the persisters) and those who have withdrawn from the college (the non-persisters) were invited to participate in the study. To date, 13 students have completed their developmental courses and earned 30 college credits as compared to 51 students who have withdrawn while 7 have graduated (completed their programs of study or transferred). The purposeful case sampling method, intended to identify information-rich cases for in-depth study (Glesne, 1999), was implemented.

The researcher used directory information on all FYE students (address, phone number, and email address). Initially, participants were contacted by telephone to set up mutually convenient interview locations and appointments. For students whose phone numbers had been disconnected, the researcher used a snowballing sampling technique (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003)

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where he asked the interviewed student for contact information of an FYE peer who had not been contacted. Unresponsive students were mailed a letter informing them of the study and requesting that they contact the researcher.

Researcher as Participant Observer

As the main research instrument, the researcher asked questions, interacted with the study participants, and interpreted the results. The researcher identified his assumptions, perspectives, and potential sources of subjectivity. Peshkin (1988) suggests such a process can lessen the impact of researcher bias. In addition, an external audit trail was applied to the researcher's log, verbatim transcripts of the individual and group interviews, the coding procedures, the resulting themes, and the text of the findings to ensure that the participants' experiences were accurately represented.

Connected to issues of researcher subjectivity, observer effect concerned the researcher because of his role as dean of students. Students who were interviewed may have changed their behaviors and responses to try to please the researcher. The researcher encouraged students to realize the importance of their contributing perceptions and the value of their true, honest insights. With the exception of one who could not schedule an interview, they were more than willing to share their stories. In the process of establishing rapport for the individual interviews, the researcher included statements that assured the students that he was willing to hear their negative and positive experiences at the study community college. The reason that the researcher believed that students were frank is that they had all participated in the Freshmen Year Experience where they had been encouraged to provide frank evaluations. Interview questions were designed to encourage participants to attest to both positive and negative experiences and recount both facilitators and barriers. Throughout the interview interactions, the researcher emphasized how important it was to attest to both sides of the record. Ultimately, the researcher's goal was to allow their voices to be heard with respect to the meaning they attached to their experiences.

Data Sources and Data Collection

Multiple sources of evidence were obtained. First, an interview protocol derived from the literature review was developed to capture and explore individual differences among participants' experiences (including academic and social outcomes) so as to understand the meaning of their lived experiences. Individual interviews lasted approximately one and one-half

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to two hours for each participant. The interview method involved a specific type of in-depth semi-structured individual interviews designed to study the experiences of the participants and help the researcher discover meaning of experiences shared by the interviewees (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Second, archived data on withdrawal and failure rates in required classes as well as demographic characteristics were acquired. Demographics included (a) retention, (b) grade point average, (c) age, (d) ethnicity, (e) gender, (f) status as first-generation-in-college, and (g) learning community participation. Anonymity/confidentiality protections were assured as per protocols required by the human subjects review boards at the respective institutions.

Data Analysis

Archived data on participants was analyzed in terms of status variables such as race, ethnicity, gender, and grade point average. To analyze the verbatim transcripts of the individual interviews, the researcher employed the constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The texts of the transcribed individual and group interviews along with the researcher's logs and memos were compared to each subsequent interview, then across all individual interviewees and later to the literature review. The researcher deconstructed and reconstructed their responses to make sense of their experiences within the larger context of the research study. Data analysis did not focus exclusively on similarities, but instead sought to identify relationships that connect statements and events within a context. Core categories were identified until saturation of categories was achieved, that is, no new themes emerged. Data analysis began immediately after finishing the first interview and continued throughout the process. Meaning and coherence among the themes were framed in the following manner.

First, the researcher derived participant profiles which provided word pictures of the lives of the participants. Second, the results were presented in terms of themes that represented their perceptions of their experiences as uncovered in the individual and group interviews. Each theme was substantiated with rich descriptions using the participants' words based on the verbatim interview transcripts. Third, the researcher examined the themes from the perspectives of persisters from various factors that emerged from the review of the literature.

Procedures to Increase Validity and Credibility

The procedures to establish trustworthiness of the data helped the researcher keep in mind the iterative nature of the research procedures between data collection, data analysis, and outcomes. Three of the eight verification procedures recommended by Creswell (1998) were

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incorporated in this study. The researcher selected these procedures so as to verify the trustworthiness of the study at three important points: (a) the data collection process (triangulation of data sources), (b) the researcher's steps to analyze the data (external audit trail through expert reviewers), and (c) the themes that emerge from the analysis (member check).

Triangulation of data sources required that the researcher look at themes as they emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts and then confirmed the theme from other sources (e.g., researcher log and archived data). The audit trail to verify the analysis process was conducted by 2 expert reviewers (members of the dissertation committee) who provided feedback on the researcher's data analysis procedures. The expert reviewers independently (a) reviewed the researcher's records (e.g., interview transcripts, researcher log, archived data), and (b) followed the procedures detailed by the researcher in coding the transcripts so as to trace the themes to the data sources. The researcher met individually with each of the expert reviewers to discuss results of the audit trail and took corrective action towards refining the descriptions of the procedures where indicated. Member checking, a procedure where the participants were asked to examine rough drafts of the researcher's conclusions, was conducted individually through email contact with each participant after the interviews. In the event that the member check revealed disagreement with the researcher, that disagreement was noted as part of the record and lead the researcher to reformulate the theme and/or re-analyze the data.

Results

The pilot study served two purposes: (a) to field test the interview protocol and (b) to identify themes that captured the experiences of underprepared college students who persisted to graduation from ABC Community College. The researcher identified all students who had completed the FYE program and who had completed their developmental courses, and had graduated, earned 60 credits or transferred to the upper division of a 4-year institution. Table 1 shows the demographic information of the 7 students who met the qualifications. Note that all the graduates represented the ethnic and racial diversity of ABC Community College student population. The graduates included 6 female students and 1 male student. Although six students were categorized as Black and one student as Asian, they self-identified by their cultural identities. Two students identified themselves as Haitian-American (Frieda and Sara), 2 as Jamaican-American (Janice and Nekee), 1 African-American (LeLe), and 1 as Indian (Absum). One student graduated in 2006 and transferred to USF; 1 student graduated in December 2007

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and transferred to FAU; 2 transferred to FAU with over 60 hours, only needing to complete math or the math portion of CLAST; 1 transferred to Keiser College and graduated with an AS in Physical Therapy Assistant and 1 graduated in December 2007 and is working full-time as she contemplates her options of 4-year institutions.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the 7 Graduates and the 6 Interviewees (I)

Name	Year in FYE	Year Graduated	Gender	Race/ Self-Identity	Major	Overall G.P.A.
Absum (I)	2004	2006	M	Asian Indian	Engineering	2.76
Frieda (I)	2005	2007	F	Black Haitian	Psychology	2.55
Janice (I)	2003	2007	F	Black Jamaican	PTA	2.65
LeLe (I)	2004	2007	F	Black American	Special Ed	2.89
Nekee (I)	2003	2007	F	Black Jamaican	Business	2.48
Sara (I)	2005	2007	F	Black Haitian	Business	2.52
Shandra	2004	2006	F	Black American	Biology	3.31

As shown in Table 2, the participants persisted in taking courses that were difficult for them to pass. Inspection of the table indicates that the majority of graduates had to re-take remedial math classes, college-level algebra classes, and science classes.

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Table 2. Summary of Number of Withdrawals and Failures

Name	# of Semesters	# of Withdrawal	# of Failure	Courses/ Grade
Absum	7	1	2	Biology (W) Reading (F) Trigonometry (F)
Frieda	6*	2	2	Elem Algebra (W) Inter Algebra (W, F) Statistics (D)
Janice	5**	1	2	Pre Algebra (D) Pre Algebra (F) National Gov't (W)
LeLe	9	5	4	Astronomy (W) Elem Algebra (D) College Algebra (W, F) Statistics (D) Western Civ (W) Biology (F) Environmental Science (F)
Nekee	12	4	3	Short Story (W) Pre Algebra (W, F) College Algebra (D, F) Statistics (W) Liberal Arts Math (W)
Sara	6	3	0	Biology Lab (W) Biology (W) Biology Lab (W) Chemistry (W)

*Transferred to the upper division before earning AA degree

**Transferred after 41 credits to earn PTA degree at Keiser College

Profiles of the Interviewees

Six of the 7 graduates were interviewed: Absum, Frieda, Janice, LeLe, Nekee, and Sara. The researcher constructed an individual profile of each participant based on the analysis of the interviews and the archived data. Representative verbatim quotes from the interviews were included to illustrate key points about how each participant experienced their programs of study at ABC Community College. To protect the anonymity of participants, participants selected

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pseudonyms for their profiles. The profiles are presented in alphabetical order of their pseudonym with a short descriptive quote that captures their overall experiences with ABC Community College.

Absum "Just keep going...keep going"

Absum" is a 23 year old, Indian-American senior at the University of South Florida majoring in Civil and Environmental Engineering. He and his family immigrated to the United States from India when he was a senior in high school. He is the middle child. His older brother, who resides in India, attended college and is an accountant. Absum's younger sister moved to the United States in 2002 as a high school junior and is currently a student at ABC Community College pursuing an Associate in Science degree in nursing. Unlike the other FYE participants, both of his parents attended college. His father is an engineer and his mother has a technical degree. Absum is the first of all FYE students to graduate in May 2006 and the only student to transfer to a 4-year institution outside the immediate area of ABC Community College. Further, he is the only male graduate and the only student who enjoyed mathematics. When asked to describe an item that he carries that best represents him, he said, "My TI89 calculator because I'm really good at math...and I like something I can prove". He joined the 2003 – 2004 FYE cohort and graduated within 7 semesters. He maintained a 2.76 grade point average. While attending ABC Community College, he worked full-time at various places and was not involved on campus. Presently at USF, he works part-time in the computer lab and is involved in the engineering club. Of all the graduates, Absum is the most independent and goal oriented. Although his parents objected to working full-time while a student at ABC, he said, "They didn't want me to work, they wanted me to go to school...finish school and were willing to pay for my degree...but I wanted to work and go to school at the same time. I paid for my own tuition." He is a true utilitarian who considers post-secondary education as a means to achieve his goal. He chose ABC Community College because "it was the closest" and "just to take classes". He advises new freshmen by asserting, "Make sure you know where you're going...just don't pick random classes. That wastes too much time...just know where you're going." Absum intends to graduate in December 2008 and "be successful...earn money and live a happy life."

Frieda "Education is number one"

"Frieda" is a Haitian-American, 21 year old New York native. She moved to Florida in 2001 as a high school freshman. An only child, she lives with her mother and stepfather and

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visits her father who lives in Port St. Lucie at least once per month. Her mother graduated college and is a registered nurse. Her father graduated high school. She is the only student engaged to be married; she met her fiancée in high school. She participated in the 2003 – 2004 FYE cohort and transferred to Florida Atlantic University in January 2008. Frieda attended ABC for 6 semesters. Currently, she needs one more math class to complete her associate in arts degree. She is majoring in psychology. While attending ABC Community College, she was active on campus, serving as president of the Dynamic Soul Dancers. She maintained a 2.55 grade point average before transferring to FAU. Math is difficult for her. While at ABC, she withdrew or failed Elementary Algebra, Intermediate Algebra, and Statistics, for a total of 4 times. Initially shy and little reserved, Frieda maintains that the FYE program helped her “make friends...with all the classes we had each other” and overcome the fear of public speaking. One of her best friends, whom she met in high school, also attended ABC and joined FYE. Neither student knew of the other’s intention. She claims, “I consider her to be closest to me...I think we have a lot in common.” Frieda’s family serves as a source of motivation. Frieda says, “My mom works really hard...she pays for my education and that motivates me to just keep working harder and harder so she can see that her money is well spent and that it was worth it.” Frieda’s goal is to “finish my bachelor’s degree...my fiancée and I are engaged to be married after I graduate.” She provides the following advice to peers, “Take your first semester, the first year of college very seriously...I mean, it’s a new experience and of course, you’re going to be excited about it...but...the grades you get in the beginning affect you. That starts your gpa and that will affect you later o down the line...if your gpa is a little low, it takes a lot to bring it back up.”

Janice “Do something”

“Janice” is a Jamaican-American, 23 year old graduate of Keiser College. She moved to the United States from Jamaica when she was 9 years old. As an only child, she is extremely close to her mother. She said, “It was just me and my mom all the time.” When talking about the importance of staying connected, she states, “I’m not really on the phone all the time with friends, but...I’m always on the phone with mom.” She continues to reside at home. Her female cousin lives with them too and presently attends Keiser College. Her mother did not attend college. She works 2 jobs and as Janice says, “She doesn’t force me in helping her out. My concentration is on school”. Janice completed her associate of science degree in Physical Therapy Assistant and is studying for her state board examination scheduled for March 2008.

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She participated in the first FYE cohort, 2003 – 2004 and completed 41 hours. While attending ABC, she was active on campus, serving as president of the Peer Educators Club and Student Ambassador. She maintained a 2.65 grade point average before transferring. Although initially declared as a nursing student, she changed her major to PTA and transferred to Keiser because of her difficulty with mathematics courses at the community college. She attempted Pre Algebra 2 times. The only other class from which she withdrew was National Government. Ultimately, her goal is to begin working in field and later pursue her DPT degree at the university. She said, “I have the motivation and I have the strong will...ever since high school...I have my goals that I’m striving for...nothing at all is going to get in my way...it’s all about school...until I’m done...there’s only one picture that I’m focusing on.” As a student born outside the United States, she further said, “Being the fact that I’m not a born American, you have something even more to work for...your family don’t come to American to just do nothing...otherwise, why? You come for a better life...to get an education. I’m going to do something with my life and I’m going to do as much as I can.”

LeLe “Open to New Experiences”

“LeLe” is a 22 year old, African-American ABC Community College graduate. Interested in working with children with special needs, her major is special education and she has not yet decided whether she will continue her education locally or transfer to a historically Black college in Daytona Beach. As she said, “I think one of the reasons I want to go there is because it’s a historically Black college and I’ve never had that aspect where it’s just predominately Black...I’ve never had that experience...I want to get a different aspect of my culture.” She joined the 2004-05 FYE cohort and attended for 9 semesters. She completed her associate in arts degree in December 2007. She earned a 2.52 grade point average and withdrew or failed for a total of 8 times, 4 of which were for several math classes to include Elementary Algebra, College Algebra (twice), and Statistics. LeLe was active on campus. She joined Intervarsity Christian Fellowship and worked in Student Life. She boasts of attending several leadership retreats and participating in several trips. Born in Florida, she has 4 siblings – 2 older brothers, 1 older sister, and 1 younger sister. She is the second in her family to graduate from college. Her older brother attended Kent State University. Her mother currently attends ABC Community College. LeLe has a close relationship with her mother, father, and older brother who graduated from Kent State. He has provided both encouragement and financial support. She recounts, “If I needed

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anything for school...if it was clothes or shoes or book bags, he'd get it no matter what. I'd say, 'I'll pay you back' and he would say, 'Don't worry about it'. He's like the role model." She provides the following advice to fellow students, "Be open...there's so much...if you fail at ABC, you fail because you choose to fail, not because you didn't have the opportunity. Don't let anyone let you feel less of anything because you're going to a community college. Things you can experience somewhere else, you can experience at a community college...there's so much that they do here, that it's ridiculous."

Nekee "Be proud of me"

"Nekee" is 23 year old Caribbean-American junior at FAU. Born in Jamaica, she immigrated to the United States with her family when she was 8 years old. She has two siblings: an older sister who did not attend college and a younger brother who is currently enrolled at UNF. She and her family are U.S. citizens. She said, "America...gives you a lot...it provides for you." She participated in the 2003-04 FYE cohort and was active in the Student Ambassadors and Dynamic Soul Dancers. Nekee chose to participate in FYE as a result of her mother's encouragement. She states, "Because we had the same people in the class, you worked together more and you helped each other out...I'm still friends with people." She transferred to FAU in January 2008 and is majoring in Business Administration with a specialization in management. She only needs to pass the math portion of the CLAST to earn her AA degree. She has earned 68 credit hours and has maintained a 2.48 grade point average. She is currently enrolled in College Algebra and intends to receive her AA in May 2008. Although the first in her family to attend college, Nekee has strong family support. She said, "My parents influenced it [my college experiences] a lot. I felt like I had to prove something to them...I had to strive to do better in my life...to get an education so they'd be proud of me...'cause they did not have that opportunity, I should take advantage of it."

Sara "I want to be successful"

"Sara" is a recent ABC graduate and FYE participant. She is a 20 year old, Caribbean-American junior at Florida Atlantic University majoring in Business Administration with a specialization in Management. Born in New Jersey, her parents immigrated to the United States approximately 25 years ago from Haiti. When she was four, they moved to South Florida. She is the eldest of three children; she has two brothers. She is the first in her family to graduate from college. She said, "My parents never got the education they wanted...when they came here, it

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was really hard for them. My father always wanted my brothers and I to get the education, do our homework. Even if we didn't too well, he always encouraged us to try harder and do better.” Sara has a strong family support and peer network and talks of her parents, brothers grandparents and friends. She said, “I really didn't have that many friends growing up...even though I'm a girl...usually boys don't look up to their older sister, but they look up to me and I look up to them also.” One of her closest peers whom she met in high school, also participated in FYE with her. A participant in the 2005-06 FYE cohort and graduated from BCC in December 2007 in 6 semesters. Originally enrolled as pre-Occupational Therapy major, during her tenure, she withdrew from 3 classes: Chemistry, Biology, and Biology lab. As a highly responsible individual who took care of her brothers since the age of 9, her worst experience in education was “dropping Chemistry 'cause I didn't want to drop any classes...it was really hard for me.” She graduated with a 2.52 grade point average. She said, “College is really hard for some people. I would just say have faith, be strong, find either one or two friends that you know, probably have the same values will help you out and not lead you down the wrong path.”

Member Checks to Verify Profiles

To verify the accuracy of the profiles constructed from the interviews and archived data, the researcher contacted each participant via email. Each participant received a copy of the profile and was asked to review the profile to ensure that the participant agreed with the content. Four students accepted the profile as written while two students added details about when they moved to Florida or to confirm that the information was accurate.

Audit Trail by Expert Reviewers

The researcher asked 2 members of his dissertation committee with expertise in qualitative research to conduct an audit trail of the research process. They independently reviewed selected verbatim transcripts of the interviews, traced the researcher's codes to the themes, verified or expanded the emerging themes, and offered ideas for the conclusions and recommendations.

Themes

The researcher reviewed verbatim transcripts of each participant's interview individually, identifying recurring concepts and coding the transcript. Then the researcher reviewed all 6 transcripts to search for common concepts and codes across all interviews. Using the constant-comparative method, the researcher inductively generated four themes organized as follows: (a)

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pre-college characteristics, (b) external college support/community influences, (c) social involvement, and (d) academic integration. Each theme also contains several sub-themes, which provide further detail in interpreting the experience. Figure 3 displays the themes and subthemes. Each theme is described including verbatim quotes from the participants to explain and support the theme. The themes are presented in no particular order.

Pre College Characteristics and Traits

The theme of pre-college characteristics and traits theme includes those attributes students that bring to college – internal factors. It includes 6 sub-themes: (a) sense of responsibility, (b) goal oriented, (c) resourcefulness, (d) persistence, (e) culture, and (f) faith. The student participants shared internal characteristics that may contribute to educational achievement.

Sense of responsibility. The first sub-theme in the pre-college characteristics and traits theme is sense of responsibility. Several of the students talked about “knowing what needs to be done” and “following through”.

Janice said, “I guess, you know, with me...I never grew up with a father...it was just me and my mom all the time...I never grew around men...so, I don't...like when I think about the future, I always think...okay, I need to do what I need to do to support myself...I see it from her [my mom]...it's what I know...be a strong woman.”

From a young age, LeLe felt responsible. She said, “I've always had that in me...even as a child. My mother had my little sister when I was 6 years old, and I thought that was just the greatest thing because I learned to help take care of a baby and everything I've always done has been around children...some of my first jobs were babysitting.” She added, “Someone told me success is what you make it. So, I know what I want from life and I know how to get it...so I think that's what motivates me that I...for me to get what I want I have to...I know what I have to do...” Similar to LeLe, Sara shared, “From the time I was 9, I was taking care of my brothers...so I'm very responsible.”

Goal oriented. The second sub-theme in the pre-college characteristics and traits is goal oriented. All graduates indicated the importance of having goals and a plan.

Most of the participants realized that a college education leads to more opportunities. For example, Absum said, “I plan to be a civil/environmental engineer. My father is an engineer, my

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uncle is an engineer, my cousin's an engineer...there are a lot of engineers in our family...I want to be successful...earn money and live a happy life.”

Concern for her future ability to provide for her family motivated Frieda. She said, “I knew that stopping with just high school wouldn't really...it wouldn't really help me in the long run 'cause I do wanna have a family and be able to provide for my kids...and the higher in education I go, the better I'll be”. She has a reason to complete. She said,” A year from now I see myself at FAU almost done with my bachelors degree...umm...my fiancée and I are engaged to be married after I graduate and after he graduates also...”

Janice said, “I didn't think of any other reason to do anything else but go to college, get a college education, get a degree, and get a job... it's like an automatic from 12th grade...I would like to work in a hospital and get as much experience as possible...and then later on, I really wanna go into working with kids and pediatric physical therapy. But, at Keiser, that's just the assistant program...I do want to go on to preferably in the DPT program at the university. So, I plan to work as a PTA while going to school. I'm motivated by thinking ahead...like, the future and what I want. So, I'm always thinking about what I want and I'm definitely going to get it, so I work towards it.”

LeLe shared why she attended college. She said, “I want to be a teacher...I always wanted to be a teacher since I was 7...I know there was nothing else other than college to become a teacher...so, that's one of the reasons to pursue it further to receive a BA or maybe more.”

Sara spoke of her goals, “My mom owns a cleaning business. I want to take that over, but I also want to open up a franchise.” She added, “I just want to be successful. I want to be able to...seeing what my parents went through...they weren't really able to either afford it.”

Resourcefulness. The third sub-theme in the pre-college characteristics and traits theme is resourcefulness. Several participants transferred to the upper division without earning the AA degree.

Janice transferred to Keiser College and graduated with an AS in PTA to avoid completing college level math at ABC. She said, “I just figured...I was getting tired after awhile...and there was one particular class I couldn't pass and I was getting frustrated (laughter) and I feel like I'm going to be stuck, you know...I needed a change after two years, I just felt

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like I'm going to be continuing, you know, taking classes and classes, like...I just felt like I wasn't going to get anywhere, really..."

Similar to Janice, Frieda transferred to the upper division without completing her associates degree. She still needs to complete the math portion of the CLAST. She remembered, "This last semester I didn't get a "C" in my statistics course and I thought FAU wouldn't accept me because I still needed CLAST. I found out about an appeals program where I met with a committee to allow me in. They did for one semester while I retake the CLAST...I'm glad I went to that committee."

LeLe found financial and academic support from an unexpected connection. "When I first started ABC, one of the students in the FYE program played for the basketball team [who told me], Oh, the coach for the basketball team is looking for a babysitter to babysit her son. It's only going to be for like an hour...and since you're out here anyway, you might as well talk to her....so, I would watch her son for maybe an hour or two while the basketball team practiced...me and him would just walk around...I was able to see more and understand more [about ABC]...like, that's the science building...that's the English building...was able to see much more by working for her. There was just so many things that I was able to experience...I've been to the basketball games...I've been to the leadership retreats...I've gotten 2 computers from ABC."

Persistence. The fourth sub-theme in the pre-college characteristics and traits theme is persistence. Despite several challenges, students stayed in school.

In talking about grades, Absum said, "Getting a bad grade doesn't disappoint me. It just makes me work a littler harder. I know that I can do better and I guess, I'm more disappointed in myself. When I do good, it just makes me feel like I accomplished something...makes me feel like I should keep going." His favorite quote is "probably just I tell myself that everyday is a new day...whatever you did yesterday. it doesn't matter, just keep going...keep going."

Frieda talked about her challenge: "I'm a very resilient person...this past semester at ABC, was my hardest semester...the last one...and I had so many obstacles, but I kept telling myself...I'm determined to further my college career...I did it...and I felt like I'm never supposed to give up on anything. I was taking 2 math courses...I was taking college algebra and statistics at the same time. It was just so many different things going on...my fiancée got into a car accident and that was stressful...and I got into a minor car accident...I don't let other

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obstacles discourage me...it just pushed me to keep working hard...I couldn't see myself not in school."

Similar to Frieda, Sara had some problems. She said, "Dropping the Chemistry class was the hardest thing I ever did, 'cause I didn't want to drop any classes, especially being so close to...it was this year...being so close to graduation. Having to drop that class, it was really hard for me. And changing my major...I had so many things going on in my mind...my grandfather passed away and my grandmother was feeling sick for all that...and also my father got in this car accident and doctors said he might not live..." She added, "I know what I want and I strive for that. Some people are in school because maybe they are forced to be here or they have other things going on or they don't want to be in school anymore and even though I've been through trials and tribulations throughout my college experience, I knew what I wanted and I was striving for that."

Janice explained, "I have the motivation and I have the strong will...ever since high school...ever since school, I have my goals that I'm striving for...so, I just one big picture in mind."

Culture. The fifth sub-theme in the pre-college characteristics and traits theme is culture. The graduates were either born in another country (e.g., India, Haiti, Jamaica) or were first generation in the United States. Their perceptions revealed how their respective cultural heritages influenced their views about the importance of an education and the concept of hard work leading to success. For example, Absum, an immigrant from India, explained, "I think the Indian culture...they're more toward education. Basically, my dad says when you're in school, you do what you're supposed to do...you study hard and you don't mess around and...you live life later on." Similarly, Frieda spoke of her Haitian heritage: "Actually in the Haitian culture they really...they really...like, school is number one. I can't speak for other nationalities or cultures, but I feel like in the Haitian culture, education is a very important factor. If you don't have an education, what do you have? Whether you're a guy or a girl, you're expected to go to school and make something of themselves." Janice described her Jamaican culture: "When I was 9 years old, I moved from Jamaica. Being the fact that I'm not a born American, you have something even more to work for, you know...your family don't come to America to just do nothing...otherwise why? You know...you come for a better life...to get an education and...so knowing that...I'm from Jamaica and my family...my mother...we're here to do something for

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ourselves...I'm going to do something with my life and I'm going to do as much as I can and get everything out of it possible." As an African-American, LeLe shared her experiences: "I think my race has affected me more because before people meet me...before people know your name, before people know anything about you, they see your race. No matter who it is, no matter what it is...before anybody knows LeLe – the person, they know LeLe – the black girl..."

Faith. The sixth sub-theme in the pre-college characteristics and traits theme is faith. Although not consistently mentioned among all participants, 3 spoke of their religious convictions and quoted the Bible. For example, when faced with challenges, Nekee referred to the verse, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Frieda also quoted the same scripture when talking about challenges. She said, "When I feel like quitting, I remember I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." She added, "Yeah, it's [faith] very important. I feel like if you don't have faith in God, like...you won't be able to...I want to say succeed, but you won't be able to...work to the best of your ability." Janice added, "I do believe in God. I...haven't really, as far as going to church every Sunday...lately...especially since I've been a college student, I don't go every Sunday...maybe because my schedule...work..." Similarly, Sara said, "I have a strong faith in Jesus Christ and whenever I feel like giving up I just...I have to pray...even if I don't feel like it...I pray and that gives me motivation and I think I can do anything."

External Support/Community Influences

Participants attributed their success to supportive families who include parents, particularly mothers, siblings, grandparents, cousin, and fiancée.

Parents. The first sub-theme in the external support/community influences theme is parents. Because the students were younger and straight out of high school, their parents had a strong influence. For example, many parents attempted to help their children with schoolwork, despite having little or no post secondary education. Mothers were more frequently mentioned than fathers. Several mothers of the participants directed them to join FYE.

Absum said, "They kept pushing me that I need to graduate and I need to get my degree, so I guess that helped me a lot...coming from India, education is stressed in my family, both my parents went to college." When asked about how they specifically supported him, he said, "First of all, they didn't want me to work, they wanted me to go to school...finish school and they were willing to pay for my degree...but I wanted to work and go to school at the same time, so, I

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started part-time...working 20 hours...but then I thought I can handle it so I worked full-time and went to school full-time..." He noted, "I think my family...they had a great impact on me. They never let me quit...they kept pushing me."

Similarly, Nekee said, "My parents...they don't have like a college background, so...you know...so like, umm, I guess that's the main reason I started going to school and doing what I was doing...'cause, I wanted to get a better education...because they didn't get that. They influenced it a lot...because the way it was...umm...since no one had education, I felt like, you know, I had to prove something to them...I had to strive to do better in my life, you know, to get an education so they'd be proud of me...'cause they did not have that opportunity...so I should take advantage of it...[my] parents helped me with my work, that's encouragement, or like when I do something...umm...when I do my work...they, like, tell me...like give me...I guess encouragement...so making me want to stay in school." In fact, Nekee explained that she joined the FYE program because, "Mom made me do it."

Janice echoed the same sentiment saying, "My mom...she always, like...I guess...motivates me to keep on going. When I'm down and when I don't think I'm going to be able to do this class...or...she's always there for me, being upbeat and telling me everything's going to be okay and...yeah. I mean that's, you know, as far as helping me in anyway, they really couldn't...but as far as motivational support...she would help me as much as she can...like, when I have a problem or something...like talk to me...once I was going to drop out of a class because it was too stressful and I didn't think I was going to make it...it was just making me sick...literally. My mom was there to talk me through it...to help me through it...she was there when I was freaking out about the exam in that class. She was there when I was in the bathroom throwing up because I was so nervous...she always says, you're going to do it...you're going to get through it."

As an only child, Frieda talked about her family: "Well, my mom, she influences me the most because she's...she's like...really, she's the type of person that...she wants me to do very well with school...like, school's number one. And, umm...my father, as well...he always pushes me...my stepdad's there whenever I need to talk to him about anything that has to do with school...yeah, they influenced me a lot." In addition, her mother is a role model who attended college and graduated as a registered nurse. Frieda explained, "She reminds me that, you know, at the end, it's going to be all worth it...'cause I do want to be a psychologist and I know it takes

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a lot of schooling...but I know it's gonna be worth it. My mom is always pushing me hard and says, "study, study, study."

LeLe spoke of her mother who, "attended ABC but she ended up leaving to pursue a career in something else, and she ended up having children so she never came back...but I actually convinced her to come back, so now she's back at ABC." Similar to other participants, LeLe's mother encouraged her to join. She remembered, "My mother came with me to orientation because I was actually kinda going at a slow pace and it was getting closer to the start of school and she looked at me and said, "Have you done your stuff for ABC?" And, I said, "No, I haven't done it yet, but I'm going to do it", and she said, "No, you're going to do it now". The next day she brought me out here and I went down to Admissions and took care of everything and then she came with me to orientation. So, she was here through the whole process and she was one of the ones that pushed me. LeLe's mother would not allow her to quit school. She said, "So, I just wanted to, but my mother never let me...she let me take breaks, but I always had to go back. Like, some summers I took off and like now, I'm taking a break, but I have to go back...there's no if, and, or but...you have to go back."

Sarah talked about her parents: "Well, my father, because my parents never really got the education they wanted to in Haiti, when they came here, it was really hard for them. My father always wanted my brothers and I to get the education, do our homework. Even if we didn't do too well, he always encouraged us to try harder, to do better. But they have been a great influence."

Siblings/extended family. The second sub-theme in the community influences theme is siblings/extended family. Beyond the parents, family is important.

Absum said, "My family I guess I would say. My parents are always pushing me to get my education. Also, my uncle, my dad's brother...they have been pushing me too. So, I guess...that's the biggest motivation."

When asked about quitting school, Nekee stated, "I don't remember a time when I almost quit...I'll say maybe when like I failed a couple of my classes, I may have thought about quitting...and then I thought about my family and I didn't want to do it." She talked about her younger brother who is attending UNF, "Yeah, he's very smart. Like, he's smarter than all of us. He gets good grades and all these scholarships and stuff. He's always motivated me, and he's

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the younger one. He's always motivating me...oh, you need to take this class...you need to pass this class. Even though he's the younger one, he always trying to motivate me to do better."

Although she has 6 siblings, LeLe described her relationship with her older brother as, "He was the pusher that said, "If you don't start now, you'll never start." So, he was kinda the one that pushed me to start school and I was really grateful for that...my brother is one of those people that motivates me the most... when my financial aid didn't give me as much money as I thought it would...and I would call him and he would say that's fine, don't worry about it...I'll pay for your books. If I needed anything for school...if it was clothes or shoes or book bags, he'd get it no matter what."

Sara described her relationship with her grandfather: "My grandfather...he passed away last year...he was someone very close to me...he used to always tell me, if you can't do it...if you try your hardest, than at least you know you tried. Even if you didn't succeed at it, at least trying it sometimes is better than succeeding. That's something I'll always remember."

Peers. The third sub-theme in the community influences theme is peers. Participants indicated positive peer influence to include friends and the FYE cohort. The majority of the participants' friends did not attend ABC Community College, but other postsecondary institutions. The participants expressed common interests with their peers to include college attendance, "right crowd", and providers of support and encouragement.

Absum said, "They are my friends because we share goals...umm...same majors...I needed some help from them and they needed help from me for classes. He also added, "Definitely picking classes...umm...and telling me how the teachers were at ABC."

Nekee added, "Nicole is a supportive friend...because sometimes...like...I don't want to do my work and then she's always like there motivating me, telling me, you know, I need to get this done, so I could, you know, get my degree. So, she motivates me a lot...She also talks about her friends in FYE peers and others who joined student clubs and organizations and states," "Yeah, we're really close. We still talk to each other to this day and hang out and stuff. Good experiences...going out, staying together, building that relationship..."

In talking about her friends, Frieda said, "Overall, I think me and my friends have a lot in common, we all have the same goals, we all want to be successful, we all are in school...we all complement each other."

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Janice talked about peers: "I was always kinda [sic] with the right crowd... (laughter) with [my friend Raquel] being at a university, she kinda encouraged me to like... stay in school and I would talk with her and then vice-versa when I had a problem, I'd call her."

LeLe also spoke about a mutual respect of time and expectation of college. She said, "Most of [my friends] were on the same journey that I was in... like my friends from high school, we worked together all the time and most of them are education majors, so we're all in the same area that we know what's going on. We had that same path which joined us together because we knew... this is what we need to do."

Sara spoke about the importance of peers and said, "We have the same values, we all Christian and we have the same values, morals and their families are close to my family. I've had a lot of friends that throughout the years we have separated, but with those girls I have never separated with them." She added, "Even when we had homework to do and I didn't feel like doing it, my friends would encourage me. They would be like, they'll make sure I would do the homework or help me with a paper I had. And I wanted... we all wanted to graduate all together."

Social Involvement

Social involvement is related to students who are involved on campus in different clubs and organizations and their interaction with other students. Much of the literature indicates that involvement outside the classroom contributes positively to student success. In regarding to his findings from a study of more than 20,000 students, 25,000 faculty members and 200 institutions, Astin (1993) stated:

The review once again underscores the tremendous potential that student involvement has for enhancing most aspects of the undergraduate student's cognitive and affective development. Learning, academic performance, and retention are positively associated with academic involvement, involvement with faculty, and involvement with student peer groups. (p. 394)

Participants of this study expressed many of the same benefits when sharing their own experiences.

Student life. Participants discussed student activities, clubs and organizations which seemed to give their college experience purpose and to develop a peer network. In talking about student clubs, Nekee said, "Yeah, the dance team... student ambassadors... part of everything. I joined

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like every club. Student Life made...umm...me very comfortable... because before when I first started here, I wasn't comfortable at all. Because, when I first went into Student Life, and then, umm, I was thinking about joining Blue Hawks, and I then I was like nervous, and then they were telling me to come...come to the interview and I was like, nooo...'cause I'm scared of interviews and then they were like...just come...it's not going to be scary or whatever...and then I went...then everything was okay from that because it was like a family, you know...Blue Hawks and stuff. So, now I'm like comfortable with everything. Student Life made everything easy."

Frieda said, "At the time when I was on the dance team, I was the president or captain and we had different cubicles and I just felt comfortable going to my advisor, talking to him about different issues that I had about the team or...everyone in Student Life is really nice and made me feel like we were a big family."

Janice echoed the same sentiment saying, "What made me feel comfortable was the friendship that I made...with not only with the students in my class, but with other people, like in Student Life. Like, they were also a big support, like, you know, I just felt like they were a second family...and I felt really good, you know, coming...I felt comfortable."

LeLe provides an example of how she felt connected, "Student Life and the coffee house were important to us. The coffee house is where we would meet in the morning...where most of the FYE students would meet before class...if somebody wasn't there, we would be like, "Somebody's not here today", and we'd call them, "Where are you? Are you coming to school today?" So, that was our meeting place...we'd go in there and we'd watch a movie for that time and then we'd get up and go to class".

Sara said, "In high school I was on a step team and I wanted to be doing something like that in college and we heard about a dance team, but at the end of the semester they kinda cancelled the whole thing. So, my friends and I decided that we wanted to be dancing so we met and picked a captain and everything...we ended up being pretty successful...a lot of people went to the games...basketball games...and we had car washes...at the beginning I was kinda a shy person...I was not putting myself out there like that...but around...being on a dance team...people knowing me and participating in a lot of the events, that made me comfortable with the school."

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Academic Integration

Academic integration refers to the students' inclusion to the campus academic culture and their interface with academia. Underprepared students who may have had limited academic success in the past gain an understanding and develop skills essential for success. This often includes the development of positive faculty relationships, recognition of college expectations, and effective study habits. There are 3 sub-themes (a) faculty, (b) campus resources, and (c) time management.

Faculty. The first sub-theme in the academic integration theme is faculty. Each participant identified at least one faculty member who had a great impact. Further, they discussed beneficial characteristics to include engagers, passionate about their discipline, helpfulness, care. In comparing faculty at the university to the community college, Absum said, "ABC classes are more smaller...ABC teachers do care about students. They know you personally..." Nekee also compares the university faculty to the community college. She adds, "the [university] professors...they are always trying to remind you...oh...this is not ABC...this is, you know, the university...so, more students in the class...and they don't really kinda care about you...kinda...teachers at ABC...they kinda care about you more..."

Frieda talked about her professors saying, "The professors I had at ABC...they were all pretty much good professors...they always willing to help. If I was having trouble in a class, I would talk to them and they always give me suggestions on what I should do." Janice spoke of her professors saying, "They were energetic, motivational, upbeat." She adds, "as far as teachers...definitely, I always asked them for help...they never rejected me." LeLe shared some of her experiences with the faculty: "The professors are good...and even when I got out of FYE and I had to register for classes or I had questions...[Ms. Morrow] was still the professor I went to. She's the professor who wrote college recommendations for me. She's always been that professor that I've always gone back to...if I had a question, I went to her or if I needed something, I always went to her." Sara talked about her professors: "The professors that were in the FYE program helped me a lot...I'm not good at English at all and whenever I did an essay or anything like that...she would help me. My last semester I had to do a 20 page paper and with her help...I got better throughout the years."

Campus Resources. The second sub-theme in the academic integration theme is campus resources. Participants identified several campus resources or departments that contributed

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toward their success to include math lab, tutors and advisors and the FYE program and Student Life Skills class. Participants claimed the program provided consistency, peer support and structure. For example, Absum said, "The SLS class helped me be more organized...umm...just planning things out...taking notes...regular college stuff." Nekee discussed the FYE program and how it helped her. She said, "Because we had the same people in the class, so it's like, you worked together more and you helped each out, 'cause now I'm still friends with people...in FYE...so it helps you because you actually work together..."

Frieda agreed, "Making friends made a difference...with all the classes we had with each other...all of our classes helped us to clique. Also, umm...made me comfortable because we used to do presentations and things like that...public speaking..." LeLe echoed the sentiments: "FYE helped me in becoming more...driven...more outspoken... more...it was...it became more comfortable...I was able to meet new people who I wouldn't have met...otherwise...I was able to make more friends...I was able to do more things in the college." Sara agreed and said, "I went to the math lab and I spoke to some of the tutors in there that would help with a problem. They really helped me."

Time management. The third sub-theme in the academic integration theme is time management. Participants discussed essential time management skills. Students spend more time studying. Most averaged 10 hours per week although Absum said, "While at ABC I studied 12 -15 hours per week. Now at USF, I'm studying 20 -24 hours." LeLe explained, "Time management was something that I learned in college. SLS was a good class in the fact that it taught me time management and it taught me planning out...I study 20 hours a week...I would try to study before everyone started coming because then it would get noisy and hectic..."

Discussion

Overall, the results of this study of ethnically diverse underprepared community college students resonate with research conducted by Byrd and MacDonald (2005) who found that time management, goal setting, and self-advocacy helped non-traditional students succeed. In contrast to Smith and Commander (1999) who found that underprepared students lacked tacit intelligence, failed to understand or use campus resources, the participants in this study were keenly aware of the resources they could utilize. In contrast to Valdez (1993) who found that underprepared students do not have the cultural capital in regards to family or friends who can

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help negotiate college bureaucracies, the participants in this study were able to draw on family support, peer influence and contacts made during the Freshman Year Experience to succeed.

An emerging model to explain persistence of under-prepared college students is presented in Figure 1. The size of the circles indicate those themes that seem to have a stronger impact and to which more students referred (i.e. family). Implications for practice are offered.

An Emerging Model of Persistence of Underprepared College Students who Persist to Graduation

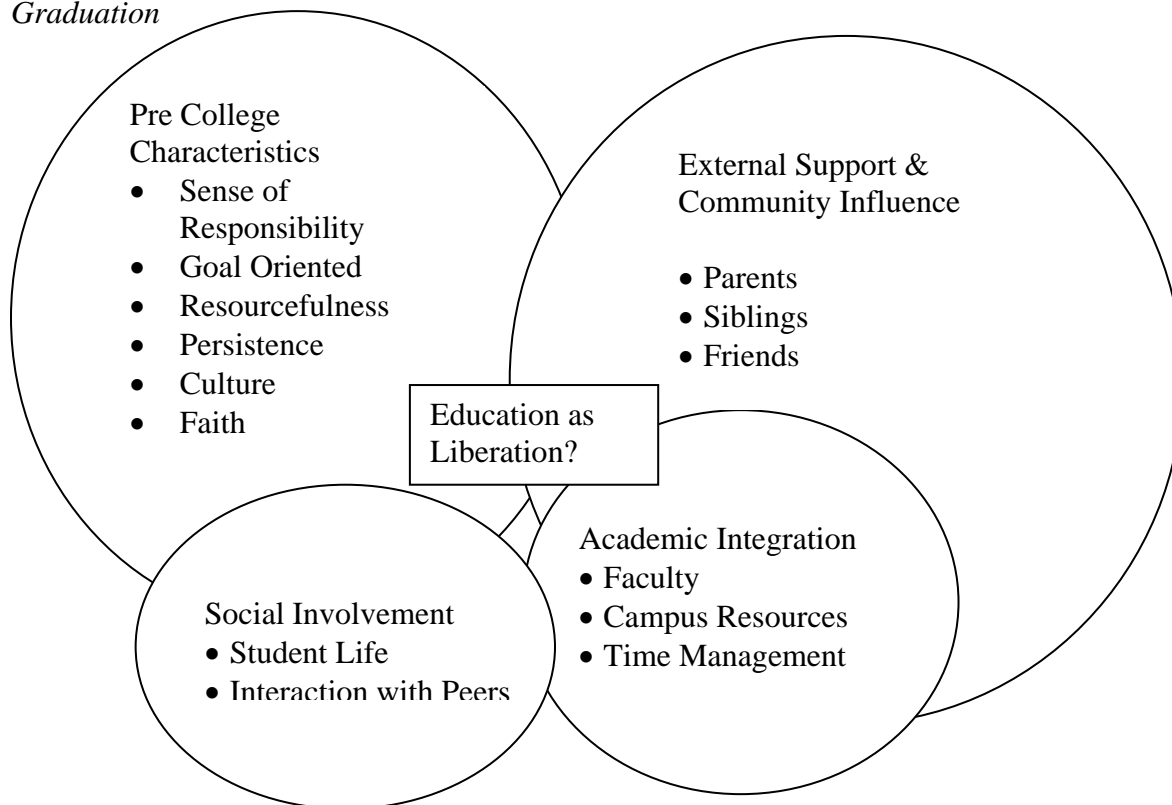


Figure 3. Participant perspectives on their academic achievement.

Family and Peer Support

Family and peers have influence on students. Students who attend a community college are more apt to live at home with parents. In addition, peers influence behavior. Attendance at a community college where incoming students had relatively high level of degree plans had stronger positive effects on end-of-first-year degree plans for individuals who started postsecondary education with plans for less than a bachelor's degree than it did for their peers who planned to obtain a bachelor's degree or higher (Pascarella et al., 2003). This became apparent as the peer support of many of the FYE students were external constituents who did not attend ABC. Of the 6 graduates interviewed, 4 described friends who were attending UF, UNF,

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and FSU. As Sara defined "the right crowd", each participant had another peer or family member who held them accountable and encouraged them to complete their goals.

Internal Characteristics

Characteristics such as positive self-image, self-esteem, and internal locus of control have been found to correlate with successful academic achievement (Harvey-Smith, 2002). In this study, students who had a strong sense of persistence, responsibility and had concrete goals, tend to complete their program of study. (For example, Frieda is delaying marriage to her fiancée until graduation.) In spite of life crises or failed classes, which may decelerate time to degree completion, the participants returned to school to graduate.

Classroom Instruction and Pedagogy

Although the curriculum and basic skills should have been learned in secondary education, the pedagogy and the format in which the discipline is critical. Faculty who incorporate group learning and encouraged students to support each other create a positive experience. (For example, LeLe illustrated where her Sociology professor encouraged students to talk about current events and subsequently relate it to the discipline). Current formal classroom teaching techniques are beginning to focus more on the peer group. Growing literature on cooperative learning (Wild & Ebbers, 2002) where students work together on classroom material in small groups and serve as teachers of each other is much more effective than traditional classroom instructional techniques. It involves students more in the learning process (Astin, 1996).

Faculty Interaction

Related to pedagogy and classroom instruction, the interaction between students and faculty emerged from several studies as having a tremendous impact on retention. Students who are provided opportunities to interact with faculty at greater levels also tend to perform better academically (Harvey-Smith, 2002). Modeling is important and cited as essential for student success. Both the availability of quality role models and the opportunity for high quality faculty interactions have been found to be prime factors in retaining students (Harvey-Smith, 2002). All students at length described both positive and negative faculty experiences. Professors who were engaging, passionate about their discipline, encouraging and open tend to have the greatest influence.

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Education as Liberation

As indicated by Freire (1970), education can serve as a liberatory experience from the present situation. Although all the participants mentioned finances, none perceived or at least represented themselves as members of an oppressed lower socioeconomic class. Yet, they wanted something better. As for race and ethnicity being an influence, except for the African American participant (LeLe), the others did not refer to race. However, all referred to the influence of coming from heritages where education was valued. Critical perspective is not part of the ABC curriculum. Not all classes induce students to challenge the dominant power structure and social stratification or develop a critical consciousness which Kincheloe (2008) defines as “developing new forms of understanding that connect the faculty member to understanding, empathizing and acting to alleviate suffering” (p. 13). Institutions need to be cognizant that education is always political as it supports the needs of the dominant culture while subverting the interests of marginalized cultures.

Rather than reject their ethnic backgrounds, the participants in this study embraced their culture which seemed to help them be successful graduates. For example, Absum emphasized education as a way to be independent and “be successful...earn money and live a happy life.” Frieda said, “I knew that stopping with just high school wouldn’t...help me in the long run ‘cause I do wanna have a family and be able to provide for my kids...and the higher in education I go, the better I’ll be.” Janice emphasized the fact that her family came to America from Jamaica so she could look “for a better life...to get an education.” Nekee wanted to gain an education as “the opportunity” her parents did not have and felt compelled “to take advantage of it.” Sara spoke about her parents emigrating from Haiti and how they “wanted my brothers and I to get an education.” LeLe, as an African American born in the United States, said, “After high school, there was no ‘what do I do now?’ ...there was always college...you had to go somewhere...”

Implications

Based on the findings of the pilot study, the researcher poses implications for practice. While those intended for practice are offered as a result of this specific study, it is anticipated that some may also be appropriate to higher education administrators, faculty, and staff working with underprepared students.

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First, colleges should involve parents and extended family because they are so instrumental in the lives of the underprepared ethnically diverse college students who participated in this study. Rather than alienate the families and expect students to create new social support systems, colleges can engage parents. In fact, several parents attended orientation and encouraged their students to join the FYE program. Perhaps a "Parents Going to College" orientation can be offered to include information on degree requirements, campus resources, and financial aid. It appears they need to be involved. When a son or daughter attends college, it's the family, not just the enrollee. Home culture should not be considered a distraction.

Second, faculty and administrators must develop new programs based on the types of learning experiences known to support student success and persistence to graduation. The failure to connect with others on campus (e.g., peers, student organizations, faculty and or staff) contributes more to voluntary withdrawal than almost any other factor (Brittenham, et al., 2003). The ethnically diverse underprepared participants in this study valued several co-curricular activities (e.g., leadership retreats, field experiences) where the classroom lessons were supported by Student Life. Many other underprepared community college students could benefit from such clubs and organizations that are tied to their major if incorporated more in the classroom. Personnel in post secondary institutions need to expand the definition of "learning" to include affective outcomes such as leadership, self-understanding, and citizenship, as well as cognitive outcomes. It is a serious mistake to limit learning outcomes to only cognitive values (Astin, 1996).

Third, the delivery system, particularly in developmental mathematics, should change. The underprepared ethnically diverse participants in this study criticized those courses, especially developmental courses, that are taught with techniques similar to high school. Furthermore, the concepts are taught in an abstract manner which makes little sense to them. As Frieda said, "after I graduated, I talked to one of my friends...that I went to high school with and I told her that I graduated and everything and she asked me if I took any prep classes and I said, "Yeah, I took a couple of prep classes", and she said she feels that people that take prep classes...it's like they're never going to graduate. ... the prep classes make the students feel like ... it's going to take them forever to get out..." Perhaps classes should be taught in a modular format where students focus on specific competencies where students can achieve success and feel as if they are making timely progress. Janice noted, after transferring to Keiser College and

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experiencing success,, “It’s one class a month. So, you’re just concentrating on that one class which I like.”

Fourth, underprepared college students should be allowed to earn transferable credits while enrolled in remediation (Killacky et al 2002). Many feel developmental courses are a repeat of high school and can be discouraging. Many mentioned the amount of time to complete the developmental courses as a concern. If skills learned in the developmental courses such as reading can be applied in a related college-level course such as computer or sociology, this would contextualize the learning. And students would earn college-level credits simultaneously with completing remedial coursework. In this way, they would discover interdisciplinary application and make progress toward their degree. Courses should not be taught in silos but rather in ways that allow students to see the connected relationships among disciplines.

Fifth, the results of the study indicate that college administrators and staff could improve the transition of students as they enter the mainstream. Some students missed the peer support they had while in FYE and recommended that the program be extended. Perhaps colleges should consider the implementation of a Sophomore Year Experience where not all classes are block scheduled, but perhaps 2 of the required general education.

Sixth, to increase the sense of academic integration, administrators could arrange to group students based on major to increase the identification with academic discipline. One participant reported, “If I had the same major of students with me who were focusing on...in the same direction, I think, it would have helped a lot.” Perhaps more of these peer support relationships would continue beyond the first year if they were in the same program of study.

Conclusions

The results of the pilot study may be significant because the ideals of learning communities are consistent with the values of community colleges. Key factors in retention included high level of faculty-student interaction, integration of academic and social activities, opportunity for involvement, mentoring, leadership experiences, cultural and social support, and use of campus resources and student services (Harvey-Smith, 2002). Learning communities appeared to promote these elements. Analyzing the impact of learning communities on students who are most at-risk for attrition may inform community college administrators, admissions personnel, and faculty about the at-risk students' experience. With increased understanding of the lived experiences of underprepared community college students who persisted until

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graduation, perhaps this more holistic initiative can make a difference with the at-risk, developmental student population and thus experience greater success in their post-secondary education programs. In the final analysis, understanding the experiences of developmental students can help college faculty and administrators structure more effective mentoring relationships when working with the population of the underprepared ethnically diverse community college student.

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Appendix

Individual Interview Protocol for Pilot Study



Tell me about your family. How does your family influence your college experiences? Have you encountered any barriers or obstacles? How have you been encouraged to go and stay in college?

Who are your five closest friends? Where did you meet them? What are they like? Why are they your friends? In what ways do they affect your education at this college?

Tell me some of the reasons for deciding to continue your education and go to college? What factors lead you to choose this community college?

What is/was your major? Why did you choose this major?

Why did you choose to participate in FYE? In what ways did FYE fail you or disappoint you? How did it help you?

What did you expect to encounter in college?

Tell me about a typical professor you've had for class. What classes have been your favorites? What professors have made the most impact on you? How about your least favorites?

What are your goals? What do you plan to accomplish over the next 2 semesters? Where do you see yourself one year from now?

Who helps you succeed in college classes? Who have you asked for help while in college? Tell me about any employees of ABC that you sought help from? What about departments?

Do/did you feel comfortable at this college? Tell me a little about what parts of ABC make you feel that way?

What are/were your favorite places on campus? Are there any parts of campus you find yourself avoiding?

How do/did you come to campus? Where do/did you park, if applicable?

If I asked you to show me something in your wallet, purse or backpack that represents you, what would it be?

What motivates you? Can you share a favorite saying or quote or advice from a person important to you that you think of when you face challenges?

What other aspects of your life seem to compete with school responsibilities?

Have/did you joined/join any student groups on campus? If yes, tell me about them. If no, why not?

Tell me about a time when you almost quit and what kept you going?

Tell me about the best experiences you've had in your education? Tell me about the worst experiences you've had in your education?

Many of the students you started courses with are no longer here. What do you think made the difference for you?

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Codes

Theme	Description
<i>Pre-College Characteristics and Traits</i>	<p><i>Participants share personal characteristics and attributes that affect their success.</i></p> <p><i>Code 1. Sense of Responsibility</i></p> <p><i>Code 2. Goal Oriented:</i></p> <p><i>Code 3. Resourcefulness</i></p> <p><i>Code 4. Persistence</i></p> <p><i>Code 5. Culture/Race/Ethnicity</i></p> <p><i>Code 6. Faith</i></p>
<i>Sense of Community</i>	<p>Participants attributed their success to supportive families who include parents, particularly mothers, siblings, grandparents, cousin, fiancée and peers.</p> <p><i>Code 1. Parents</i></p> <p><i>Code 2. Siblings/Extended Family</i></p> <p><i>Code 3. Peers</i></p>
<i>Social Involvement</i>	<p><i>Participants described their involvement in student clubs and organizations as impacting their success and giving their educational pursuits a sense of purpose</i></p> <p><i>Code 1. Student Life</i></p>
<i>Academic Integration</i>	<p>Each participant identified faculty, campus resources and time management as ways they integrated to the academic community.</p> <p><i>Code 1: Faculty</i></p> <p><i>Code 2. Campus Resources</i></p> <p><i>Code 3. Time management:</i></p>