The Out-of-Classroom Engagement Experiences of First-Generation College Students that Impact Persistence

Sherolyn Hopkins
Valdosta State University, sshopkins@valdosta.edu

Jamie L. Workman
Valdosta State University, jworkman@valdosta.edu

William Truby
Valdosta State University, wftruby@valdosta.edu

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Sherolyn S. Hopkins (Valdosta State University)

Jamie L. Workman (Valdosta State University)

William Truby (Valdosta State University)

This article is the result of research conducted with first-generation upper-class college students enrolled at a comprehensive university in Georgia. The researcher sought to answer the following research question: How do first-generation college students perceive the impact of out-of-classroom engagement experiences on persistence? The study focused on out-of-classroom engagement experiences that included work, residence, athletics, clubs and organizations, and volunteer work. The researcher utilized a qualitative interpretive approach and collected data via individual interviews and a focus group. Participants were selected based on a purposeful sampling technique. The researcher was able to organize the rich data into themes. Findings of this study indicate that the participants perceive that out-of-classroom experiences impacted their persistence by connecting them with the university and faculty, by becoming or being a part of a community, and because of the relationships that they had established by being engaged in an out-of-classroom experience. The article concludes with implications for student affairs professionals and future research on first-generation college students.

Keywords: first-generation college students, engagement, persistence

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College attendance and completion are critical issues facing first-generation college students today. While higher education levels can elevate career and income status, improve the standard of living, and mitigate the effects of family background for first-generation students, many are less likely than non-first-generation students to attend or complete college (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001). Researchers estimated that 33% of the students beginning college in 2015 had parents who did not attend college and could be categorized as first-generation (McFarland, Hussar, de Brey, & Snyder, 2017). In general, first-generation students are more likely to be Black or Latinx and come from lower-income families. They are also less likely than students whose parents completed college to be academically prepared for college, attend college, and persist in attaining a degree (Bui, 2002; Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996).

Collegiate academic and social experiences, coupled with pre-college characteristics and attributes, are believed to have a considerable impact on student persistence (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). A common presumption in higher education practice is that student engagement outside of the classroom results in greater levels of academic achievement and persistence (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005;

Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Some scholars note that out-of-classroom experiences such as living and working on campus and involvement in extracurricular activities heighten academic performance and persistence for all students, even those with background and other hardship challenges such as first-generation status (Astin, 1999; Chen, 2005; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Tinto, 1993). However, first-generation students who have pre-college characteristics such as family education and income status and academic aspirations and preparation that are different from those of other students may have college experiences, including out-of-classroom engagement experiences, that are also different and may persist at lower rates than students whose parents attended college (Astin, 1993; Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012; Pike & Kuh, 2005).

In the past, first-generation students were considered to be those whose parents had not attended college (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996). More recently, researchers have begun to re-categorize first-generation students as those whose parents may have attended college but are first in their family to complete college and earn a bachelor's degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pike & Kuh, 2005). The disparity in defining first-generation students, even within colleges and universities, and the lack of

knowledge specific to first-generation student engagement experiences, creates a problem in identifying these students and the engagement experiences that might assist them in overcoming background challenges and persisting in earning a degree.

The purpose of this study was to explore first-generation college students' out-of-classroom engagement to gain an understanding of the impact those experiences may have on their persistence. The next section of this paper is a review of relevant literature related to the out-of-classroom engagement and persistence experiences of first-generation students. The methods used to gather information including the research questions that guided the study, a description of the research design, sampling and participant selection, and data collection and analysis techniques are described thereafter. Then, presentation of the results and findings from interviews with five individual participants and seven focus group participants, and finally, a detailed discussion of the findings that are related to the literature and address the research question are presented.

Literature Review

A review of the literature and related research was conducted to understand first-generation college students, their college experience, and persistence. The literature review that follows is organized into three broad categories: a) characteristics of first-generation college students; b) student involvement theory; and, c) college student persistence.

Characteristics of First-Generation College Students

Historically, first-generation students were considered to be those who were first in their family to attend college (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a first-generation student is one where neither parent or only one parent has earned a college degree (NCES, 2014). However, many leaders at institutions are taking a second look at how they define first-generation students, including students whose parents have some college credits but have not earned a bachelor's degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pike & Kuh, 2005).

It was estimated that 47% of the students beginning college in 1995-96 had parents who did not attend college and could have been categorized as first-generation (Choy, 2001). However, as the percentage of the U.S. population that enrolled in college and earned a bachelor's degree increased from 21% in 1990 to 36% in 2015, the percentage of first-generation students has declined to an estimated 33% in 2015 (McFarland et al., 2017). Although the percentage of undergraduate first-generation students has declined, the group remains sizeable.

One-third of students enrolled in U. S. post-secondary institutions in 2011-2012 were believed to be first-generation (Cataldi et al., 2018).

Chen (2005) reported that first-generation college students were more likely to be Black or Latinx and come from families in the lowest income quartile (less than $25,000). Among first-generation students, African Americans have shown the greatest decline in representation compared to the decline in other ethnic groups (62.9% in 1971 to 22.6% in 2005). Latinx have remained the most likely group to be first-generation college students (38.2% in 2005) at four-year colleges. In 2012, the highest percentage of first-generation college students were White (49%), followed by Latinx (27%), Black (14%), Asian (5%), and students of other races (5%). Of students who were not first-generation, the majority were White (70%), followed by Black (11%), Latinx (9%), and Asian (6%) (Redford & Hoyer, 2017).

Choy's 2001 study is widely referenced in studies of first-generation students and serves as a foundation of measure for first-generation college student research. Choy (2001) reported that parents' education level, family income, educational expectations, academic preparation, parental involvement, and peer influence were linked to postsecondary enrollment. Students whose parents did not attend college were at a distinct disadvantage when it came to post-secondary access, persistence, and degree attainment compared to students whose parents had some college and those whose parents had earned a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001).

First-generation students are also more likely than their peers, whose parents have a bachelor's degree, to leave college before earning a degree. For instance, among students who began college at a four-year institution, first-generation students were two times as likely as those whose parents had a bachelor's degree to drop out during their first year or not return for their second year (23% versus 10%) (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). Three years after enrolling, more first-generation students who had begun post-secondary education at a four-year institution, had left without earning a degree (33%), than those whose parents had earned a bachelor's degree (14%).

Student Involvement Theory

Student engagement was identified by Astin (1999) and Tinto (1993) as one of the necessary conditions for college student success and persistence. Tinto claimed that the most important factor in student departure before degree attainment was the student's academic and social experiences within the college. Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement stemmed from a longitudinal

study of college dropouts and sought to distinguish factors in the college environment that significantly impact student persistence (Astin, 1993). He identified these environmental factors as significant predictors of student persistence: residency, on-campus employment, participation in co-curricular activities such as social fraternities and sororities and clubs and organizations, and participation in intercollegiate sports. According to Astin (1999), involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features; involvement can be measured quantitatively by the amount of time spent on a task, and qualitatively by the achievement of the outcome at the completion of the task. For instance, a student's involvement in a student organization can be measured quantitatively by the amount of time spent attending meetings versus qualitatively by serving as an officer and organizing activities for the organization. Astin also notes that it is not just the quantity of involvement that matters, but also the quality of the involvement (Astin, 1999). With this, Astin (1999) suggested that students have a better chance of staying in college if they are more involved in their academic experience and the institution's social life, and institutions can contribute to student persistence by offering activities or programs to enhance student involvement. Tinto (1993) concluded that the more integrated or engaged a student is in the college's academic and social environments, the more likely the student would persist.

College Student Persistence

To better understand the impact that first-generation status and out-of-classroom experiences may have on a college student's persistence requires that student persistence be defined. Experts in the field have long credited Tinto's work with expanding the scope of research on college student persistence by bringing attention to factors that affect retention and attrition, particularly the importance of academic and social integration in reducing dropout rates. Tinto (2012) defined student persistence as "the rate at which students who begin higher education at a given point in time continue in higher education and eventually complete their degree, regardless of where they do so" (p. 127). Student persistence is made more complex because students will temporarily stop out and may continue at another institution. It is difficult to determine whether the student has merely stopped out or has dropped out altogether (Tinto, 2012).

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) and Kuh et al. (2005) wrote volumes about student success and college students' engagement experiences. Pascarella et al. (2004) used a sample from the National Study of Student Learning (NSSL) to estimate and understand the impact of the college

experience on first-generation student persistence. The researchers found that first-generation students experienced college differently than their peers. Through their third year of college, first-generation students completed significantly fewer credit hours, had lower overall GPAs, and worked significantly more hours per week than their peers whose parents had some post-secondary education or who had completed a degree. They were also less likely to live on campus, participate in extracurricular activities, participate in athletics, and volunteer compared to students whose parents had college experience (Pascarella et al., 2004). These tendencies toward part-time enrollment status, work obligations, living off-campus, and lower levels of extracurricular involvement negatively influenced the persistence of first-generation students.

Pike and Kuh (2005) attributed lower persistence and graduation rates of first-generation students to differences in pre-college characteristics and college engagement experiences. As compared to students whose parents had earned some college credits or who had a college degree, first-generation students were less likely to live in campus housing, more likely to work more hours off campus, less likely to develop relationships with faculty and other students, and less likely to become involved in clubs and organizations (Pike & Kuh, 2005). These findings indicated that low levels of engagement were an indirect result of being first-generation but were directly associated with lower persistence rates for first-generation students.

Kuh (2008) identified ten high-impact practices (HIPs) that are vastly assessed evidence-based practices that enhance student learning and persistence for college students from differing backgrounds. Among the HIPs are living-learning communities, global learning experiences such as study abroad, and faculty-led service-learning. Participation in HIPs is especially impactful for students who may be first-generation by improving the quality of a students' college experience (Bonet & Walters, 2016). However, first-generation students are less likely than their peers to be familiar with HIPs or engagement opportunities because of their lack of knowledge with the overall college experience (Kuh, 2008).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in a synthesis of Astin's (1991) input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model of college effects and is guided by existing student engagement and development theories (Astin, 1993, 1999; Tinto, 1993). Astin (1993) described his input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model as a "conceptual guide" for analyzing college student growth or development (p. 7). In Astin's model, inputs are the

pre-determined characteristics at the time a student enters college. Such data could be age, sex, race, socioeconomic status, educational level of parents, or academic preparedness. According to Astin, environment refers to various programs, policies, people, places, or experiences that a student encounters during his or her time in college. These could be academic experiences, social experiences, institutional or cultural experiences, or a combination of the three (Astin, 1991). The outcome in Astin's model involves student characteristics after exposure to the environment or a particular experience. Change, or growth in student development, is determined by comparing the outcome characteristics with the input characteristics.

Figure 1 depicts the concept map for this study. The arrows show connections between input, environment, and outcome. Input (pre-college characteristics) can impact environment (out-of-classroom engagement experiences), and both input and environment can impact the outcome (persistence) (Astin, 1991; Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1993). The impact can be either positive or negative (Astin, 1999).

INPUT   **ENVIRONMENT**   **OUTCOME**

High School
Teachers, Counselors
Academic
Preparedness
College Aspirations

Demographics
Race
Family Education
Socioeconomic

Institutional
2-Year or 4-Year
Financial Aid Awards
Career Opportunities
Time to Degree
Closeness to Home

Engagement Experiences of First-Generation College Students

Work

Residence

Athletics

Clubs & Orgs.

Sorority/ Fraternity

Volunteer Work

Persistence

Figure 1. *Concept map based on Astin's (1991) Input-Environment-Outcome model.*

Methods

The researcher explored the perceptions of first-generation upper-class college students enrolled at a comprehensive university in Georgia. The researcher sought to answer the following research question: How do first-generation college students perceive the impact of out-of-classroom engagement experiences on their persistence? A qualitative interpretive approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2002) was chosen for this study because qualitative research is most often used to understand the how and why of an experience and adds humanistic value to a study. Data collection took place via face-to-face semi-structured individual and focus group interviews. Interviews with participants took place in March of 2019 in a pre-arranged private library study room at the research site institution. The interviews, including introductory and consent statements, were audio recorded, and the transcribed data were later analyzed to identify common themes of information that surfaced from the data.

A combined introductory and consent statement was read to each participant as the interview began. Utilizing an interview guide method, a 30-to-45-minute interview with five individual participants and a 75-minute focus group with seven participants was conducted to gather data about their pre-college background characteristics, their college out-of-classroom engagement experiences, and their perceptions on the impact of their experiences on persistence. The interview guide method provided consistency in data collection and increased the credibility of the study (Patton, 2002). The interview questions were guided by the research literature and reflected common themes related to first-generation students, engagement, and persistence. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to share their perceptions of their campus engagement experiences.

Participants

Potential participants for the individual interviews consisted of students who had completed a freshman seminar course designed specifically for first-generation students, who had earned a minimum of 60 credit hours, and who were currently enrolled and in good standing at the institution. There was a total of 72 possible participants; five self-selected to participate. Potential focus group participants were self-identified as first-generation and had completed a minimum of 60 credit hours but did not complete the freshmen seminar course. The researcher sent an email to a random sample of 1,750 students; seven self-selected to participate in the focus group. In the interviews, the participants were asked to describe their family background and the last two years of their high

school experience. A descriptive profile of each participant was constructed, which provided information about family education, socioeconomic status, college preparedness, and high school experiences, all predominant pre-college background factors identified as impacting persistence of first-generation students (Astin, 1993; Astin & Oseguera, 2012; Pascarella et al., 2004; Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004). Tables 1 and 2 provide demographic information on participants; pseudonyms are used as first names.

Table 1

Individual Interview Participant Profile Table

Participant	Gender	Race	Classification	Family Education
Ana	F	Hispanic	Senior	No College
Kelsey	F	Black	Senior	No College
Jake	M	White	Senior	Father Some College
Travis	M	Black	Senior	Mother 2-year Degree
Emma	F	White	Senior	No College

Table 2

Focus Group Participant Profile Table

Participant	Gender	Race	Classification	Family Education
Shayla	F	Black	Junior	No College
Alena	F	Black	Junior	Mother Some College
Isabella	F	Hispanic	Junior	No College
Will	M	White	Graduate	Mother Some College
Daniel	M	Black	Senior	No College
Kadeem	M	Indian	Junior	No College
Amber	F	White	Junior	Father Some College

Participants also reflected on their engagement experiences as first-generation college students and how those experiences have helped them persist. To achieve the goals of this study, the researcher used a purposeful and inductive approach to identify similarities among responses, which were further developed into themes.

Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously, so that the collection could continue, change, or end, depending on if more data was needed, new themes or questions arose, or if there was a saturation of data (Patton, 2002). Qualitative data were collected from face-to-face individual and focus group interviews. The transcripts of the interviews were coded line-by-line, using open coding techniques that identified any word, short phrase, or segment of data that symbolically represented or captured the essence of the elements of the conceptual framework or a concept from the literature, and that were relevant or important in addressing the research question (Saldaña, 2016). In some cases, the codes overlapped, demonstrating the multiple ways an experience can impact student persistence. The researcher created a conceptually clustered matrix to display the categorized and coded data together for use as a visual aid in presenting common themes and representative data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The matrix lists the themes or categories down the left column, and the coded supporting data consisting of descriptions, statements, or experiences collected in the right column and in the row with the corresponding theme. The researcher organized the data into a matrix to visually connect the participants' responses and perceptions that emerged from the data that addressed the research question.

Trustworthiness

Techniques identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985) that were used to establish the credibility of this study were triangulation, frequent debriefing sessions, and member checks. The researcher chose these measures as they address the possible threats specific to this study.

Data were collected from a purposefully selected group of participants by more than one method—individual and focus group interviews. The multiple methods of data collection enriched the overall findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider member checks "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). Each participant was sent an electronic transcript of his or her individual or focus group interview to review, had the opportunity to make revisions or additions, or change any responses as a method of validating the collected data. Debriefing sessions were held between the researcher and secondary authors after the first individual interview and the after the focus group interview as a check-point so that modifications to the interview guide could be made and data collection could continue, change, or end as needed. A second interview with the first individual interview participant was conducted to gain a deeper

understanding of that participant's experiences and modify the interview guide questions for the remaining participant interviews.

Researcher Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the awareness that the researcher's values, personal history, and prior experience with the phenomenon can influence the research process and findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Working as a student affairs professional for more than 20 years shaped the researcher's belief that student engagement and out-of-classroom experiences can add value to the student experience (Kuh, 2009). In undertaking this study, the researcher wanted to understand the out-of-classroom experiences of first-generation students to inform practice that may impact this group's college experience. This topic was of interest because a significant number of the students at the researched institution are first-generation students. The researcher's background in working with this population as a student affairs professional has increased their cognizance of the obstacles that first-generation students face in getting to college and persisting to degree completion. While bias cannot be totally eliminated, understanding how the researcher's background and experiences may influence the study's findings and acknowledging that bias exists, minimized their impact (Maxwell, 2013).

Findings

Both the individual and focus group interviews provided rich data related to the research question. The question was designed to understand how participants perceived their out-of-classroom engagement experiences, impacting their persistence. Findings will be presented as the interpretation of the researcher's understanding of the participants' experiences from the emergent common themes.

Interview Participants

The researcher asked the individual interview participants if they had ever considered leaving the university and why, and if they thought that their out-of-classroom engagement experiences made a difference in their decision to stay at the university and finish their degree. The previously described process for analyzing the interview transcripts was used to identify key ideas, phrases, and themes that represented the essence of participant responses to the interview questions. The themes were organized to construct conceptual patterns and then compared across the participant responses. The most common themes that emerged were "connection," "community," and "relationships."

Connection

For the majority of the participants, finding a connection with the university through their

out-of-classroom engagement experiences was key in their persistence. Travis considered leaving after his first semester, but he started working on campus and began going to basketball games with friends and joined a fraternity. Travis felt more connected through these experiences and no longer thought about leaving. Travis gave this example: "Towards the end of my first semester, I thought about leaving and transferring back home, but I came back after Christmas, and after I started working on campus and going to basketball games, I felt more of a part of the university. Like this is my home now." Emma thought about transferring before her junior year. However, because of her connections with faculty in the honors program and her involvement in a service project through the biology club, she felt like the university was where she was meant to be. Hence, she stayed and finished her degree. Jake found a strong connection between his involvement in SGA and the institution. Jake noted, "I found the Wesley Foundation, coupled with serving and being connected to my institution through student government, has certainly impacted how I view the university. I feel more connected, and it certainly has influenced me not to transfer." Jake considered transferring after his first year but realized that there was much opportunity for him to be a leader and learn skills that would

complement his academics, so he decided not to transfer.

Community

Participants of this study expressed that being part of a community, or finding a community where they belonged or fit, was important to their persistence. Three of the individual interview participants, Kelsey, Jake, and Emma, said that although they did not like going to class, their out-of-classroom experiences enhanced their college experience and made them feel as though they were a part of something and that brought them back year after year. Travis said that he would have probably transferred after his first semester if he had not found his community in joining a fraternity. Anna said, "I was able to experience a sense of community with people that were like me, and being able to be a part of those types of groups and to be able to bring our music together, that has made my experience here better." Kelsey added, "Obviously, no one loves going to class, but I was a part of something that kind of made my experience and made me look forward to coming back the next year and then the next year because if you just focus on lecture, you're not going to be very happy."

Relationships

Relationships was an additional common theme. Many of the participants shared that they were motivated to continue towards their degree, or they did not quit or transfer because of the relationships they had found or established with groups, friends, or faculty because of their engagement in out-of-classroom experiences. Having relationships with professors, coworkers, and friendships made Emma felt that she was cared about and encouraged her to succeed. "It is about having those relationships, having those friendships, having those coworker relationships, and also just having those professors that you have relationships with, you know someone cares about you, and it makes you want to succeed." Ana said that living off campus was a disconnect for her. While she never considered quitting college, making friends through membership in a music fraternity gave her the human interaction she needed to survive. "You can't just always be in your book or in your class. You need to have that human interaction to be able to survive this journey." Kelsey shared that her out-of-classroom engagement made her a better and more well-rounded student. According to Jake, he found acceptance in the groups he joined, and this acceptance developed into a vested interest in finishing his degree.

Focus Group Participants

One of the questions that the researcher asked the focus group participants was how their out-of-classroom engagement experiences impacted their decision to stay at the university and complete their degree. The over-arching theme that emerged from data analysis was "enhancing the overall experience."

Enhancing the Overall Experience

A common theme from the focus group that developed in response to the research question was "enhancing the overall experience." Many of the focus group participants shared that they were motivated to continue towards their degree because their out-of-classroom experiences had enhanced their overall experience, and they stayed to complete their degree. Alena felt her engagement in out-of-classroom experiences kept her going. "I enjoyed doing things besides academics because I made friends. It was great having something that I could be equal to the others. When you are volunteering, the focus is on the people you are helping and not yourself."

Shayla said, "I decided that I am going to make the best of my experience and get everything I can out of college. There is more to going to college than just going to class. If that was all there was, lots of students would quit." For Isabella, her focus was on getting her degree. "The most

important thing is for me to get my degree. Nothing else, except my family, matters to me. If I am able to do other stuff, great, but my family and my degree comes first." Daniel shared the importance of his out-of-classroom experiences and said, "I found that being involved outside of my classes, both in modeling and tutoring has enhanced my college experience. If I hadn't found myself, in modeling especially, I don't think I would have made it." Kadeem shared:

> I didn't want to be that Indian student who just came to school and got good grades. I wanted to be involved in organizations and be an outgoing person. I wanted to meet more people than the friends I had from high school. I wanted to do volunteering in the community, at the local hospital because that will help me in my career. I wanted to get the most out of my college experience.

The findings revealed that these first-generation participants perceived that out-of-classroom experiences impacted their persistence by connecting them with the university and faculty, by becoming or being a part of a community, and because of the relationships that they established by being engaged in an out-of-classroom experience. Participants of this study also perceived that out-of-classroom engagement experiences enhanced

their overall college experience, which impacted their persistence.

Discussion

Data collected from interviews with 12 first-generation students, five individual interview participants, and seven participants in a focus group interview were used to answer the research question that guided this study. In his I-E-O model of student engagement theory, which served as the conceptual framework for this study, Astin (1991) concluded that a student's pre-college characteristics, or inputs, impact that student's college experiences. According to Astin's theory, inputs coupled with environments or experiences, are predictive factors of the eventual college outcome. In asking the participants of this study to describe their family background and the last two years of their high school experience, a descriptive profile of each participant was constructed. The participant profiles provided information about family education, socioeconomic status, college preparedness, and high school experiences, all predominant pre-college background factors identified as impacting persistence of first-generation students (Astin, 1993; Astin & Oseguera, 2012; Pascarella et al., 2004; Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004). Further, themes that emerged are discussed in connection to relevant literature. Connecting to the I-E-O model (Astin 1991), each theme

can be considered a way for the students' environment to impact their outcome.

Connection

For most of the participants, finding a connection with the university through their out-of-classroom engagement experiences was key in their persistence. Emma had this to say: "These out-of-class experiences where you get to meet and connect with people, with faculty, with projects, that's what really keeps you here." Tinto (1993) presents the concept of connecting with the institution as being "marked by stages of passage, through which individuals must typically pass in order to persist in college" (p. 94). Out-of-class experiences are key stages of passage for students. Connecting to the college can be the difference between continued persistence and early departure.

Community

The transition stage of Tinto's (1993) theory of individual departure suggests that students who come from families, schools, and communities whose cultural norms and behaviors differ from those of the college that they now attend, face difficulties in becoming part of or integrating into that new community which can lead to higher instances of departure. Generally speaking, families of first-generation students do not have familiarity with college nor the knowledge of the college

environments, as do families of students who attended or completed college. Tinto (2012) also believes that it is essential that students see themselves as valued members of a community of faculty, staff, and other students and feel like they belong. Jake commented, "I came here and still had actual intentions to eventually transferring. But I found my place." The result of the community bond serves to bind the individuals together as a group or community, even when there are challenges. The participants said they felt like their engagement in out-of-classroom experiences made them feel more a part of the university community, that the university was their home, and that they belonged or fit there, making them less likely to leave and more likely to stay and complete their degree. Anna was able to experience a sense of community with people that were like her through music. In her interview, Kelsey talked about the impact of her out-of-classroom experiences on her persistence as being part of something that was outside herself.

Relationships

Tinto (1993) discussed the importance of social involvement with peers and faculty as having an important impact on student persistence. Tinto noted that the relationships between faculty and students are often the primary social integration factors that are

valuable to meaningful student experiences. "They stay because of friendships they have developed" (Tinto, 1993, p. 131). As Ana shared, "You can't just always be in your book or in your class, you need to have that human interaction to be able to survive this journey."

Astin (1999) found that regular student interactions with faculty outside of the classroom were more strongly related to student satisfaction than any other type of engagement. Jake, one of the individual interview participants, said, "The friends and the relationships and the acceptance that I found played a big role in me falling in love with the university and for me, the out-of-classroom experiences, the engagement that I've had out-of-the-classroom, has made me feel positively towards the institution, and I have a vested interest in finishing my degree here."

Enhancing the Overall Experience

Astin's (1991) input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model provides a conceptual structure for analyzing student growth and development. The theory behind the I-E-O model is a method that can be used to assess the impact of experiences by determining whether students grow or change under various environmental conditions. The outcome element of Astin's theory involves student characteristics after exposure to the environment or a particular experience. Change or growth is determined by comparing the outcome characteristics with the input characteristics. The participants of this study, mostly the focus group participants, said they felt as though their out-of-classroom experiences enhanced their overall college experience, and that because of their experiences, they had grown or changed as an individual and therefore returned year after year and were motivated to complete their degree. Shayla made the comment, "There is more to going to college than just going to class. If that was all there was, lots of students would quit." Daniel attributed his persistence to finding his passion. "I found that being involved outside of my classes, both in modeling and tutoring has enhanced my college experience. If I hadn't found myself, in modeling especially, I don't think I would have made it."

Limitations

As with any research that relies on interview data, the participants' level of comfort and ease discussing personal experiences and feelings during their participation limited the study. The out-of-classroom engagement experiences explored were limited to the experiences that were available to the participants at one institution. Although the findings of this study contribute to the knowledge of the first-generation student experience, this study was limited to first-generation college students who, at the time of the study,

were registered undergraduate students at one 4-year comprehensive university in Georgia, and the results may not be generalizable to all first-generation college students. While the findings of this study were limited to first-generation students who self-identified at one institution, readers may be able to adapt the findings to first-generation students at other institutions.

Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals

The study's findings indicate that out-of-classroom experiences can positively impact first-generation student persistence. Accordingly, student affairs practitioners should consider ways to engage first-generation students in out-of-classroom experiences that connect them with faculty; make them feel like they are part of the university community; and where they can establish and build relationships with faculty and peers, as these were perceived by the participants to be ways that out-of-classroom experiences impacted their persistence.

It is also recommended that student affairs professionals seek ways to encourage participation in high impact practices (HIPs) (Kuh, 2008). Participation in HIPs can be especially impactful for students who may be first-generation by improving the quality of a students' college experience (Bonet & Walters, 2016). Introducing HIPs to first-

generation students through academic advising or student engagement programming can lessen the gap in participation for first-generation students.

One suggestion to engage first-generation students in HIPs is to create a first-generation living-learning community (Kuh, 2008). First-generation students would live together on-campus and could receive needed support from residence life staff and faculty on topics such as financial aid and scholarships, advising, and career opportunities, and where they could connect with other students who experience similar hurdles. Participation in co-curricular activities is also crucial (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2008). There should be several opportunities for first-generation students to become aware of and join student organizations. It is also important that organizations that may appeal to first-generation students, such as those with cultural, ethnic, and religious affiliations, are available.

The formation of a first-generation student organization could be beneficial to students in building relationships and making friends and could serve as a foundation for out-of-classroom engagement. Student affairs staff should encourage and partner with faculty on service-learning or volunteer projects to connect first-generation students to the institution and their academic major.

Recommendations for Future Research

Multiple future research possibilities evolved from this study. First, Astin's (1999) discussion of his student involvement theory suggests that different forms of involvement may lead to different outcomes. For example, the conceptual framework outcome for this study was student persistence, and as suggested by Pascarella et al. (2004), residency, work, involvement in clubs and organizations, and volunteer work, were considered to determine the impact that those experiences had on the persistence of the first-generation participants. However, this researcher recommends that other experiences, even those mentioned by the participants of this study, such as study abroad, involvement in faith-based organizations, and interactions with peers, be explored to understand what impact those experiences may have on first-generation student college outcomes.

It is also recommended that additional research explore the characteristics and experiences of uninvolved first-generation students who nonetheless manage to persist and complete college. All of the participants of this study were engaged in out-of-classroom engagement experiences to some degree. However, other first-generation students at the researched institution, who had very little or no out-of-classroom engagement, may have been successful in completing their degree. Further exploration of these students' experiences will help determine the relationship of pre-college characteristics, during-college experiences, and college outcomes, as outlined in Astin's I-E-O model.

Conclusion

Each first-generation college student has unique pre-college characteristics and experiences college in his or her own way. Much of the past research describes first-generation college students as more likely to be People of Color, low-income, academically underprepared for college, and less likely to persist to degree completion (Bui, 2002; Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). This portrayal of the typical first-generation college student is not necessarily true for the participants of this study. The first-generation students who participated in this study represented diverse racial backgrounds. While they came from families with lower incomes than their non-first-generation peers, they did not fall into the low-income socioeconomic class, as depicted in the literature. Most, if not all, of the participants felt academically prepared for college. While each of their out-of-classroom experiences was unique, they chose their engagement experiences in similar ways. This study's primary purpose was to explore the out-of-classroom engagement experiences of first-generation

college students to understand the impact those experiences may have on persistence. The focal point became the perceptions of the participants and how they perceived that out-of-classroom experiences impacted their persistence.

This study's findings provided insight into the out-of-classroom engagement experiences of a select group of first-generation college students and the perceptions of that group of participants on how those experiences impacted their persistence. The goal was to examine pre-college characteristics and in-college experiences and the impact of those two combined on persistence. The findings revealed that these first-generation participants perceived that out-of-classroom experiences impacted their persistence by connecting them with the university and faculty, by becoming or being a part of a community, and because of the relationships that they established by being engaged in an out-of-classroom experience. Participants of this study also perceived that out-of-classroom engagement experiences enhanced their overall college experience, which impacted their persistence.

This research will inform practice for student affairs practitioners in engaging first-generation students in out-of-classroom experiences such as those that connect them with faculty, make them feel they are part of the university community, and where they can establish and build relationships with peers, as these were perceived by the participants as having an impact on their persistence. In conclusion, although there is abundant opportunity for further research on first-generation students' college experiences, this study provided a foundational understanding of the out-of-classroom experiences that impact persistence.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES & CONTACT INFORMATION

Sherolyn S. Hopkins, Ed.D. is the Assistant Dean of Students at Valdosta State University. With over 25 years of experience in Student Affairs, Sherolyn earned her Ed.D. from Valdosta State University, Master's and two Bachelor's degrees from the University of West Florida. Her research is theoretically informed and guided by the tenets of student development theory. In particular, she explores the application of Astin's Theory of Involvement, Tinto's Departure Theory, and Kuh's High-Impact Educational Practices as they relate to students from underrepresented populations.

Email: sshopkins@valdosta.edu

Jamie L. Workman, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor of Higher Education Leadership at Valdosta State University. Prior to becoming a faculty member, Jamie served over 14 years as a student affairs educator in residence life. She earned a Ph.D. from Ohio University, a Master's from Indiana State University, and a Bachelor's from Eastern Illinois University. Jamie's research areas include living learning communities, academic and career advising, fraternity and sorority life, and supporting students from underrepresented populations, among others.

Email: jworkman@valdosta.edu

Dr. William Truby is a retired Associate Professor at Valdosta State University in the Department of Leadership, Technology and Workforce Development. He is also a retired professional K-12 educator with 43 years of experience: teacher, coach, assistant principal, associate principal, principal, athletic director, head master, and school system superintendent. He has lead start-up schools and low-achieving schools and districts to higher levels of success and new standards of excellence. He has been a sought-after speaker throughout his career on a variety of topics, especially those dealing with leadership, motivation, and ethics. In addition to his work at VSU, Bill is a consult with Georgia Leadership Associates and a member of the Christian outreach ministry, known as Future Now.

Email: wftruby@valdosta.edu