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An Exploratory Study of the Experiences of Recent Graduates Who Participated in the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF RECENT GRADUATES

WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE RONALD E. MCNAIR POSTBACCALAUREATE

ACHIEVEMENT PROGRAM

A Dissertation
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Leadership and Education
The University of Mississippi

by

ZADUCKA T. C. THOMAS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of recent graduates who participated in the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program at a medium-size southeastern university. This research used a phenomenological approach, as well as qualitative interviews, to provide a detailed and insightful description about the experiences of the participants in this study. They participated in the McNair program as undergraduate students and completed a bachelor's degree during the academic years of 2009-2010 and 2010-2011. One-hour Skype interviews were conducted with ten participants in the McNair program at a southeastern university. Themes from the explication of the data highlighted the importance of the components provided by the McNair program as well as the assistance of other sources as influential in reaching their academic goals. These themes were: Academic Preparations, Academic Inadequateness, Influence of Family, Church, and Community Systems, Family Interactions, Self-Made Support Systems, Recognition of a Lack of Preparation, Introduction to the McNair Program, McNair Program Experiences, and McNair at the Graduate Level. These themes provide valuable information to this and other McNair programs to evaluate the different components of the programs and to better meet the needs of these students. These themes also indicate the importance of the roles and interactions of school and college counselors, as well as the need for resources that focus on the needs of these students at the secondary and postsecondary level. Further implications for parents and students include community outreach programs and additional education to prepare both parents and students for the college experience.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I also want

to dedicate this to my family, friends, colleagues, and anyone else who helped me in this process.

Without you, none of this would have been possible. For that, I say thank you.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FGLIMS   First-generation, low-income, minority students

SU   Southeastern university

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experiences.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The importance of education has been instilled in most all individuals at an early stage. From pre-kindergarten to high school to college, most individuals are taught that education is the key to life and can provide substantial benefits. Higher education, in particular, is recognized as a useful key to financial and professional success. "There are nearly limitless benefits and gains that come with a college degree. A college education allows both social and economic access that is typically not afforded to individuals who are not college graduates" (Owens, Lacey, Rawls, & Holbert-Quince, 2010, p. 291). Moreover, by completing a college degree, individuals are afforded several opportunities that relate to career advancement, elevated financial status, and a higher level of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Card & Lemieux, 2001).

Although there is an abundance of research showing that education at the college level can increase an individual's professional, financial, personal, and economic benefits (Belcheir 2000; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall 2002; Horn & Kojaku 2001; Ishitani, 2003; Ishitani & DesJardins 2002; Knight & Arnold 2000; Perna 2000; Selingo 2003), not all individuals take advantage of the educational opportunity. According to Ishitani (2006), "although substantial benefits associated with postsecondary education exist, certain groups of individuals are less likely to attend and graduate from American institutions of higher education and enjoy these benefits" (p. 862). Additionally, even though some individuals begin the educational journey to a bachelor's degree, some fail to complete the task.

Failure to complete college at the baccalaureate level has been the focus of many research studies (Alexander & Gardner 2009; Braxton 2008; Derby 2007; Fike & Fike 2008; Isaac, Pruitt-Logan, & Upcraft 1995; Roman, Taylor, Hahs-Vaughn 2010; Sanchez-Leguelinel 2008; Veenstra 2009; Watt, Johnston, Huerta, Mendiola, & Alkan 2008). Accordingly, the topic of student retention, or degree completion, is a major focus of research by scholars and practitioners in the higher education community. Many researchers have attempted to highlight what factors influence degree completion as well as what resources and programs should be available that would help to increase degree completion. Based on these high stakes, there is an abundance of literature focusing on student retention, and theories and methods related to a student's ability, (or inability) to complete college (Oseguera & Rhee, 2009).

Study results suggest that most students fail to complete college due to an array of factors and issues. Research shows that because some students are burdened with different responsibilities such as working a part-time or full-time job, choosing a major or career that is satisfactory, dealing with adjustment issues, and also family concerns, completing college may sometimes take a backseat (Hall, Smith, & Chia, 2008). However, despite the strong research focus on student retention and factors that influence student retention, little is known about the experiences of students from socially disadvantaged and academically less prepared backgrounds (Melguizo, 2008).

The timely completion of a higher education degree and the enhancement of academic performance are concerns of all students, as well as parents and college administrators (Hall, Smith, Chia, 2008). The completion of college and the attainment of a college degree can be a challenge to any individual enrolled in a college or university. However, these challenges can be intensified and exacerbated for individuals who are first-generation, low-income, minority

college students (or FGLIMS). Degree completion rates for this population are alarming, with less than 50% actually completing their degrees (National Center for Education Statistics, NCES, 2003). Few studies have focused on this population and the academic, educational, and personal experiences of these students (Grimmett, Bliss, & Davis, 1998; Yelamarthi & Mawasha 2008). Of the research that has been conducted, the literature shows that students in this population experience a unique set of challenges separate from their continuing-generation, average-income, majority counterparts. Additionally, research shows that these experiences need to be examined more closely to better meet the needs of these students and to gain more understanding of the experiences of the students in this population.

Although few studies have focused on this academically underrepresented population and the elements that impact the attainment of bachelor degrees, several colleges and universities have developed and implemented programs that focus on this population and attempt to help them to be successful at the postsecondary level. Some of these programs include: the IMAGE program (Increasing Minority Access to Graduate Education), which has been implemented at all eight of Mississippi's public, four year universities, the Wright STEPP (Science Technology and Engineering Preparatory Program), which was developed at Wright State University to serve under-represented, low-income, and/or first generation college students, the Summer Medical and Dental Education Program which is implemented at over 12 program sites across the country, and the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program which has been implemented on 201 college and university campuses to date. This program is different from the former programs because the McNair participants are all first-generation, low-income college students, or are from traditionally underrepresented minority groups. Therefore, for the purposes

of this study, the researcher focused solely on the McNair program due to its inclusive nature of FGLIMS.

The Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement program focuses on students at the junior and senior level of their undergraduate career. This program helps first-generation, low-income, minority students learn to conduct and perform research studies, to engage and participate in seminars and workshops focused on academic success, and provides a supportive community to increase the likelihood of completing a baccalaureate, and ultimately, a doctoral degree. The goal of this program is to take students at this academic level and in this population (the academically underrepresented population) and help them to become more effective students, gain a degree at the bachelor's level, and go on to pursue other educational goals.

Although the purpose of the McNair program is to assist students in their academic endeavors at the baccalaureate level, and beyond to the doctoral level, little is known about the challenges these students face during this process and what factors may positively or negatively impact their academic success. More importantly, no research has been conducted on the exclusive experiences of McNair students. Although research has been conducted regarding the several different components of the McNair program (e.g., research, mentoring, counseling), no research to date has explored the experiences of the students that have participated in this program. By exploring the experiences of students who have participated in this program, researchers may gain more insight into not only degree completion, but also the experience of FGLIMS as students and McNair participants, information about what aspects of the McNair program are effective or not effective, and how students experience the program. By understanding these experiences, colleges and universities may be able to increase undergraduate college enrollment and degree completion among this population, administrators to initiate

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effective policies and programs to better accommodate FGLIMS, program directors to improve the components of the McNair program to better serve these students, and college and university counselors to better understand and meet the emotional and academic needs of these students during their academic careers.

Statement of the Problem

Persistence to completion of a college degree is important for any student in college, but for those individuals who are considered members of an academically underrepresented population, completing a baccalaureate degree can be a life-transforming experience (Lohfink, & Paulsen 2005). For these students, additional challenges may influence college success and completion. These students may find it a challenge to deal with issues such as information about institutional processes, procedures, and services; decision making strategies; career development; academic coping strategies (Bourdreau & Kromrey, 1994; House & Kuchynka, 1997); increased risk-taking and self-confidence; (Devlin, 1996); socialization and integration (Bourdreau & Kromrey, 1994); and adjustment to campus (Bourdreau & Kromrey, 1994; Schwitzer, McGovern, & Robbins, 1991). Additionally, these students may face challenges that are not academically related, such as financial issues, family concerns, and interpersonal conflicts (Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey, & Jenkins, 2007). As a result, it is important that these students are provided additional resources and specific services that meet both their academic and nonacademic needs. "Educational institutions must do a better job of ensuring access of resources to disadvantaged groups so the benefits of education can be enjoyed by a wider segment of the nation's population" (Gallardo, 2009, p. 64). Because the numbers of academically underrepresented college students are increasing at two and four- year colleges and universities nationwide, interventions, orientations, and academic programs must be designed,

implemented, and evaluated to better meet the needs of these students. In addition, colleges and universities must begin to adapt to this growing population. In order to meet the needs of students in this population, research must first attempt to understand more about their experiences and perspectives.

Without knowledge of the experiences of FGLIMS, it becomes difficult to implement programs that effectively support and enhance their academic, personal, and mental development. With additional research in this area, the resulting knowledge may provide the tools needed for academic achievement programs, academic institutions, and college and university mental health counselors to increase student retention and successful attainment of college degrees.   Also, resources that have previously been deemed unnecessary may become recognized as essential based on the explored experiences of students in this population. Without attention in this area, inaccurate messages may be communicated to future students in this population that education is not an appropriate path to advancement for them, that they do not have the appropriate mental, academic, and educational tools required to complete a baccalaureate degree, and that there are no resources available to assist members of this specific population. This may discourage these individuals from beginning and/or completing a baccalaureate degree.

There is a direct need to assist students in navigating the "*river*, or the pipeline of academic progress from pre-kindergarten to postgraduate study" (Bowen & Bok, 1998).

> The entrenched shortage of degrees awarded to low-income, first-generation college, and underrepresented students (i.e., African American, Latino, Native American, and Pacific Islanders) must be actively addressed with effective intervention strategies at the

undergraduate level to prepare students for the challenges of research and doctoral studies (Gallardo, 2009).

Although there is a need to support students, it is not being addressed (Ishiyama, 2007). In fact, low economic status, lack of a higher educational background, and cultural influence have all been determined as factors that negatively impact a student's chances of completing a college degree at the baccalaureate level. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), "students from families with low-income or with parents who did not receive a bachelor's degree were most likely to drop out of college compared to students from families with high income or with parents who received a bachelor's degree or higher" (2003). Walpole (2008) reported that despite substantial progress which began following the epic 1954 Supreme Court ruling outlawing discrimination in schools, minorities remain decidedly underrepresented on the nation's campuses and continue to lag behind Whites in college enrollment, academic achievement, and degree attainment. Furthermore, "despite the substantial increase in the number of racial-ethnic minorities enrolled in higher education following the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, college completion rates of minorities continue to lag behind those of White students" (Melguizo, 2008). Therefore, the primary goal of educational institutions, academic programs, and future students is to achieve equity among students who identify as FGLIMS and to increase the rates at which these students enroll in and complete college (Yelamarthi & Mawasha, 2008). In order to accomplish this goal, it may be helpful to examine what other academic programs are currently doing to increase retention rates and to help students complete a bachelor's degree. Additionally, it may be helpful to explore the experiences of students who identify as FGLIMS and who have already achieved the goal of obtaining a college degree.

There are several nationwide programs that assist students from the freshman year in college to the senior year and beyond (Educational Opportunity Centers, Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program, Student Support Services, Talent Search, Upward Bound, Upward Bound Math-Science, and Veterans Upward Bound). However, for the purpose of this research study, the researcher will focus only on The Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program. The McNair program has several components that are used to assist students at the undergraduate level.

According to Parker (2003), McNair participants are offered the following services: research opportunities for participants who have completed their sophomore year of college, mentoring, seminars and other scholarly activities designed to prepare students for doctoral studies, summer internships, tutoring, academic counseling, assistance in obtaining student financial aid, and assistance with Graduate Record Examination preparation services (p. 48).

Students who choose to participate in this program do so at the junior and senior level of education and use these resources to enhance their educational experience. It may be helpful to explore the experiences of students that have completed the program and earned a baccalaureate degree and possibly learn more about their experiences as McNair participants during their academic journey. The goal of this research was to identify individuals who are FGLIMS (i.e., who participated in the McNair Program) who successfully earned a bachelor's degree, and to explore with these individuals the actual experience of participating in the McNair program. The results from this research have the opportunity to be extensive in the amount of information that may be gained about the experiences of these students after participating in the McNair program, the experiences of students that identify as a FGLIMS, and any other information that may be

revealed. This research intended to extend beyond information regarding enrollment and degree

completion to other areas concerning FGLIMS that have yet to be addressed by research.

Applying this knowledge and information to other individuals and programs such as high school

students, academic programs, and other educational institutions may also support the creation

and/or enhancement of the "*river*, or the pipeline of academic and cultural progress from pre-

kindergarten to postgraduate study" described as essential by Bowen and Bok (1998).

Purpose Statement and Grand Research Question

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine the experiences of students

who have participated in the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program. Since

the program's inception on college campuses in 1989, researchers have studied different aspects

of the McNair program, including the participation in and completion of research projects at the

undergraduate level, the mentoring component of the achievement program, the attainment of

degrees at the baccalaureate level, the enrollment of participants in graduate school, and the

successful completion of doctoral programs (Grimmett, Bliss, & Davis, 1998; Ishiyama, 2007;

Norfles & Mortenson, 2002; Parker, 2003). Unfortunately, "although some research on the

transitions of low-income, first-generation-college, underrepresented minority students from high

school to college is available, the experiences of these students have not been sufficiently

documented" (Grimmett, Bliss, & Davis, 1998). In addition, no research has been conducted

that focuses on the unique experiences of these participants as FGLIMS students in the McNair

program. Therefore, the grand research question was: Describe your experiences as a participant

in the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program.

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Significance of the Study

Most research that has been conducted on college degree attainment has focused primarily on Caucasian students and has not examined the population of academically underrepresented college students (Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey, & Jenkins, 2007; Callender, 2008; Dowd & Coury, 2006; Oseguera & Rhee, 2009; Ryan, 2004; Titus, 2006).

Moreover, there is a limited amount of research on degree completion within the McNair population (Grimmet, Bliss, & Davis, 1998). This study produced results that added to our knowledge by providing an understanding of McNair participants' experiences as they pursue their baccalaureate degree. This study added significantly to existing research and informed future researchers studying college student retention and FGLIMS' experiences as college students. Additionally, this study highlighted and explored these experiences to extend the knowledge of FGLIMS beyond what has already been researched, such as the area of degree completion. More information was gained about how the McNair program influences the lives of the students beyond earning a college degree. Researchers are able to gain the opportunity to learn more about what is required of and for students in this population to enter and complete baccalaureate programs. The results of this study are relevant to students, parents, researchers, administrators, and policy makers. In addition, the results of this study are useful to strengthen the helpful components of the McNair program, and other similar programs, and restructure less useful components. Additionally, the results of this study led to a deeper understanding of the experiences of students who identify as FGLIMS.

Definition of Terms

Achievement Program- any program implemented at a secondary or postsecondary educational institution with the goals of advancing the knowledge and experiences of the

participants, preparing the participants for academic advancement from one educational level to the next, and providing the participants with resources and services that are intended to support these participants in both academic and nonacademic endeavors.

First generation college student- "any student who identifies with at least one of the following: (1) A student neither of whose natural or adoptive parents received a baccalaureate degree, (2) A student who, prior to the age of 18, regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, and whose supporting parent did not receive a baccalaureate degree, or (3) An individual who, prior to the age of 18, did not regularly reside with or receive support from a natural or an adoptive parent" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, 2006)

FGLIMS- first-generation, low-income, minority student(s), also referred to as academically, underrepresented, college students

Low income- "an individual whose family's taxable income did not exceed 150 percent of the poverty level in the calendar year preceding the year in which the individual participates in the project. Poverty level income is determined by using criteria of poverty established by the Bureau of the Census of the U.S. Department of Commerce" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, 2006)

Student retention- describes when a student enters a college or university with the goal of graduating and after an extended amount of time, persists to earn a college degree. The terms student retention and student persistence will be used interchangeably during this proposal

SU- Southern University

Underrepresented (Minority or Disadvantaged) - any student who identifies as at least one of the following: African American, Latino, Native American, and/ or Pacific Islander (Gallardo, 2009).

Limitations

The major limitations of this study are that the results may not be generalizable to other populations or specific McNair programs. The researcher chose a McNair program that might be similar in structure to other McNair programs, but this does not guarantee the generalizability of the results. Also, the institution that was selected to participate in this study is a predominantly white college/ university. The results from the participants may not be representative of other McNair programs at other academic institutions. Another limitation of this study was that the results might not be generalizable to other FGLIMS. The students that will be participating in this study identified as a FGLIMS, but this does not guarantee that the results of this study are generalizable to other students.

Finally, this research was conducted over the course of one semester and the research participants were 2010-2011 McNair graduates. This research did not allow the investigator to compare pre-McNair program and post-McNair program results. Additionally, the fact that the researcher is considered a member of the academically underrepresented college student population was also taken into consideration. This bias was addressed using qualitative trustworthiness techniques such as member checking and peer debriefing.

Delimitations

The participants for this research came from a wide array of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, which increased the chances for diverse results and research data. The grand qualitative interview question was addressed during a Skype interview with each participant.

These interviews were used to collect and analyze the data. Because of the qualitative nature of this study, the interview question was developed by the researcher and was intended to be open-ended to elicit and gain unlimited information and responses from the participants. The researcher gathered all of the results of the interviews for data collection and analysis.

Conclusion

The McNair program is a valuable resource in helping students successfully complete baccalaureate level degrees, learn to complete research projects, and to further their education at the masters and doctoral levels (Farro, 2010; Ishiyama, 2003; McCoy, Wilkinson, & Jackson, 2008; Olive, 2010). However, little is known about how students experience the program and the influence of the McNair program on the students that participate. Therefore, this study was designed to explore the unique experiences of students who identify as FGLIMS and also have participated in the McNair program.

Organization of the Study

Chapter one included an introduction to this study. The introduction included the following: a purpose statement, a statement of the problem, the significance of the study, the grand research question that will be used in the study, and limitations and delimitations of the study. Chapter two provided a review of the literature, focusing on areas relevant to this topic. These areas were: the McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program, the relationship between academically underrepresented college students, college student retention, theories of degree completion, and the McNair program. Chapter three focused on the qualitative, phenomenological methodology of the study and provided information about the selection of the research participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis. Chapter four consisted of the presentation of the results and an explanation of the findings of the research. Chapter five

consisted of a discussion that connected the results of the study with implications for school

administrators, school and community counselors, and McNair program directors.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student retention and degree attainment have been addressed in numerous research articles and studies. The roles of educational institutions, administrators, parents, and students have all been examined and investigated with the goal in mind of increasing the number of students completing college degrees. However, student retention and degree completion among first-generation, low-income, minority students, or FGLIMS, has received little research attention. Additionally, no literature is available that provides insight into the experiences of FGLIMS that is unrelated to or extends beyond the experience of degree completion. Realistically speaking, students in this population may face more challenges than completing a degree. In order to learn more about these experiences and to better meet the needs of students in this population, more research is necessary.

National academic support programs, such as the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program, promote and support retention and degree completion among students who identify as FGLIMS. Although the McNair program has been providing services to this population since 1989, little is known about the experiences of these students after participating in this program. Although the purpose of the McNair program is to increase degree completion among FGLIMS, no literature exists that focuses on how this process takes place among students in this program. Furthermore, research is limited in regards to the overall experiences of the McNair students.

This literature review will be organized in the following manner: 1) academic enrollment, retention, and degree completion in postsecondary education, 2) student retention theories and models, 3) factors influencing student retention, 4) first-generation, low-income, minority students, 5) Academic Support Programs, 6) Federal TRIO programs, 7) the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program, and 8) conclusion.

Academic Enrollment, Retention, and Degree Completion

Statistics show that there has been a substantial increase in college and university enrollment and student retention. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), from 1987 to 1997 "enrollment in degree-granting institutions increased by 14 percent" and from 1997 to 2007 "enrollment increased at a faster rate of 26 percent from 14.5 million to 18.2 million" (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Additionally, there has been a substantial increase in student retention and degree attainment at colleges and universities.

> Between 1997-98 and 2007-08, the numbers of conferred degrees rose at all
> levels. The number of associate degrees was 34 percent higher in 2007-08 than in
> 1997-98, the number of bachelor's degrees was 32 percent higher, the number of
> master's degrees was 45 percent higher, the number of first-professional degrees
> was 16 percent higher, and the number of doctoral degrees was 38 percent higher
> (U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2009).

Although statistics suggest that enrollment, retention, and degree completion are on the rise, overall there is a noticeable decrease in the number of FGLIMS completing their studies at postsecondary institutions. Consequently, this gap in graduation rates has been examined by researchers from a number of perspectives such as student retention (Ishitani, 2006);

socioeconomic status (Ishitani, 2006; Walpole, 2003); minority status, expectations, and perceptions (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Walpole, 2008; Zea, Reisen, Beil, & Caplan, 1997); and experiences and outcomes (Ishiyama, 2007). Actually, Ishitani (2006) examined retention and degree attainment among students who identified as first-generation college students and found that these students departed from college without a degree at a higher rate than their continued-generation counterparts. As well, the author found that first-generation college students were less likely to complete college in a timely manner. This research is supported by Titus (2006) who examined low socioeconomic status (SES) and college completion among students. The author found that SES was a very influential factor in terms of college completion. Research shows that low socioeconomic status students are less likely to persist and complete a baccalaureate degree than high socioeconomic status students. Moreover, Zea, Reisen, Beil, and Caplan (1997) conducted a study to examine the predictability of retention among minority and nonminority students and found that students who identified as first generation, low income, and/ or members of traditionally underrepresented minority groups had lower retention rates than Caucasian students. Melguizo (2008) also researched enrollment of minority students and found that, although college enrollment has increased since the 1970s, there is still a significant gap in the degree completion of this population and that of Caucasian students. Despite these findings, little is known about student retention among students in this population. Also, little is known about how FGLIMS experience the college enrollment, retention, and degree completion process. Research in this area is essential in order to understand the needs of these students and to increase degree attainment of students in this population.

Student Retention Models and Theoretical Frameworks

Theories of student retention have been developed to enlighten and assist administrators, educators, parents, and students regarding approaches that may be helpful in retaining students and increasing degree completion. These theories have identified the impact of specific factors, such as student interaction and involvement, on the rates of student retention and the abilities and desires of students to complete college. Student retention theories developed by Tinto (1975, 1993) and Astin (1993) acknowledged the roles of student involvement and academic and social interaction, while also incorporating aspects of student communication and interaction, contribution and participation, educational and group interaction, and personal student characteristics. Additionally, Bean (1980) and Bean and Eaton (2000) recognized the importance of developing a working model of student retention. These authors developed retention models that can be utilized at universities in order to increase the number of college graduates. Each of these theories recognizes the importance of the ability of students to become actively involved in the campus environment. This involvement must include developing and maintaining an interactive relationship with professors and classmates, becoming socially involved in organizations and associations and interacting academically with other students and groups on campus. These types of interactions and relationships within the campus atmosphere are believed to increase the chances of a student remaining in college and earning a college degree. Although there are other theories and models of student retention, this literature review will focus only on the aforementioned models due to their consistent use in research and practice to increase student retention rates. This section will include a general overview of each theoretical model or framework as well as the collective limitations of these models and theories when applied to FGLIMS.

Tinto's Interactionalist Theory

Tinto's (1975, 1993) student retention theory is one of the most widely cited theories for explaining the student departure process in the field of higher education (Guiffrida, 2006). He was one of the first to develop a theory that explained in detail the process of student retention. His Interactionalist theory has been referenced in literature by researchers who have examined retention from a number of perspectives including: spiritual integration and student fit (Morris, Beck, & Smith, 2004; Morris, Smith, & Cejda, 2003); the roles of active learning (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000); multicultural progression (Guiffrida, 2006); student attrition and integration (Mannan, 2007); retention among freshmen (Nora, 1987); first-semester college student persistence (Elkins, Braxton, James, 2000); and student retention among community college students (Umoh & Eddy, 1994).

Tinto's theory acknowledged the importance of social and academic integration within the multifaceted aspects of a college or university. According to this theory, departure from college without completion is viewed as a process and is influenced by how well students are able to integrate personal and background characteristics with the nature and demands of the academic environment. Tinto's model proposed that retention is dependent on how the student experiences the academic environment. Students who are able to adapt to the institutional environment and integrate into the academic system tend to persist in college and go on to graduate (Seidman, 2005). Additionally, retention in college requires individuals to adjust, socially and intellectually, to the new, and sometimes quite strange, world of the college (Tinto, 1993). Tinto also recognized the importance of each student's educational skills and limitations. The author states that student retention is a process that involves synthesizing a student's intellectual aptitude and level of commitment to the goal of completing a degree with a

university that is able to successfully meet the needs and goals of that student (Stratton, O'Toole, & Wetzel, 2003).

Tinto's student retention model is one of the most widely used models in higher education due to its comprehensive inclusiveness of individual backgrounds and history, student attributes, and pre-college experiences. The validity of the constructs of this theory has been the popular subject of past literature. Authors have conducted research on this theory's constructs, such as social interaction, student involvement, academic integration, and level of commitment. In fact, Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000) conducted research to evaluate the social interaction and involvement constructs and to also examine the influence of active learning on the process of student departure. Active learning was defined as the level of academic or classroom activities that shape a student's perception of their degree of academic integration, such as discussions, debates, role playing, and question and answer sessions (2000). Research shows that by involving students in active learning activities, students will take more of a responsibility in their education, feel less stressed about course obligations, participate more in social interactions due to the nature of the activities, and become more involved in the academic process, thereby, persisting in college and going on to earn a college degree. Because Tinto's theory recognizes the importance of social integration and involvement of students with other students, groups, and faculty members, these authors examined the role that active learning plays in retaining students. After conducting a longitudinal study with 718 first-time, full-time, first-year students at selective universities, the authors found that active learning, social integration, and student involvement play a central role in student success. By implementing active learning in the academic environment, students become responsible for their own success. Also, these activities help students to interact with others, thereby, becoming more involved on campus. The

researchers stated that it is the responsibility of the student to become active in the educational process and be responsible for activities such as studying, becoming involved with on-campus groups, and developing relationships with professors.

Guiffrida (2006) also evaluated the effectiveness of Tinto's constructs by conducting a study using the theory to examine cultural advancement on college campuses. Guiffrida illustrated the cultural limitations of Tinto's theory and questioned whether this theory would be applicable in multicultural environments. The author noted that although cross-cultural psychological researchers have studied in depth relationships and norms among members of diverse populations, what has been learned has yet to be incorporated into Tinto's theory of student retention. Guiffrida applied principles from the Self-Determination Theory, which was developed to understand how socio-cultural conditions interact with people's inherent psychological needs to shape behaviors, to Tinto's theory in the academic environment (Reeve, 2002). The purpose of this study was to integrate cross-cultural principles, such as the importance of the family relationship and the difficulties of social connections, with Tinto's theory in order to increase the multicultural sensitivity of this model while also gaining a better understanding of the minority population on college campuses. Similar to Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000), the author found that social integration and student involvement presents as a large factor that influences student success. However, when assessing Tinto's theory from a multicultural perspective, the author found that social integration and involvement can have different meanings when applied to minority students. The research showed that there was a need for minority students to remain connected to supportive members of family communities. In fact, the research also showed that it might be helpful to nurture and support these relationships, as their existence may be important to the success of the student. Also, when

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integrating Tinto's theory with multicultural perspectives, the authors stated that it might be more helpful to assist students in connecting with others in a social manner, not integrating, as integration implies that the minority culture must join the dominant culture. By using Tinto's Interactionalist model, Guiffrida was able to provide a thorough examination of student retention from a cross-cultural viewpoint.

Morris, Beck, Smith (2004) also assessed Tinto's theory by examining the role of spiritual integration in terms of student/institution fit at a Christian University. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between student spiritual integration and three core constructs identified in Tinto's model: academic integration, social integration, and goal and institutional commitment (2004). After administering a survey to students enrolled in a Christian college, the authors analyzed the data and found that spiritual integration was found to be positively correlated with academic and social integration and institutional commitment. In other words, the higher the level of spiritual connection with peers and faculty members, the higher the level of academic and social connections and goals of degree completion. Furthermore, students who reported having a greater spiritual fit with the institution also reported a higher level of interaction with peers and faculty. Overall, research has agreed that Tinto's theory is a very effective model of student retention. By including social and academic integration and goal of commitment constructs, administrators, educators, and researchers are enlightened about methods of increasing student retention.

Astin's Theory of Involvement

Alexander W. Astin's (1984, 1985) work has been a primary source of knowledge about student retention (Higbee, Arendale, Lundell, 2005). Researchers have referenced Astin's perspective on student retention in a number of articles (Adelman, 2006; Astin & Denson, 2009;

Baker & Siryk, 1984; Berge & Huang, 2004; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Halpin, 1990; Jeffreys, 1998; Parker, Hogan, Eastabrook, Oke, & Wood, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Stassen, 2003). Similar to Tinto's model of student retention, Astin incorporated the significance of examining student involvement and interaction within the college environment. He developed a theory of college student departure that takes into account how well students are able to become involved in the educational, institutional, and social aspects available in the environment. According to this theory, the level of commitment and effort that is put forth by students will determine how likely they are to persist and complete college. According to Astin, "involved students" are able to spend an effective amount of time studying coursework and participating and actively engaging in activities with faculty and other students. Astin's theory has five basic postulates. First, student involvement can be either general (the college experience) or specific (completing a homework assignment). Second, involvement takes place over a period of time during the college experience and this experience is distinct for each and every student. Third, involvement can be measured both quantitatively (level of student commitment) and qualitatively (time devoted by student), meaning it is important to observe how often something occurred as well as how the student experienced these occurrences. Fourth, student learning and development is directly influenced by the quality and quantity of student involvement. Lastly, the effectiveness of educational policy or practice is directly related to its ability to increase student involvement (p. 136). According to this model, student involvement can take place in the college environment at many different levels. The ability of students to become actively involved in the college experience can often be the determinant of whether or not they will persist in college.

However, some students face challenges when engaging in this process. Students often encounter barriers such as multicultural issues, socioeconomic status issues, problems with matching interests with universities, or social and/or integration issues. According to Astin, in order to increase student retention, educational institutions must play a large role in attempting to meet the needs of all students (Astin, 1997; Burks & Barrett, 2009; Richmond, 1986). Institutions must be sure to create and utilize programs that meet the needs of students from diverse populations in order to increase student retention. Astin states that if students aren't able to become involved in campus activities and other experiences, it is up to the institution to provide alternate avenues in order for students to meet these needs. This student involvement principle of Astin's theory has been addressed by researchers in terms of past and current educational and institutional policy. Pike, Kuh, McCormick, Ethington, & Smart (2011) emphasized the importance of student involvement on college campuses. The authors stated that Astin's ideas on student retention has led to more academic assistance programs being implemented at universities nationwide in order to promote student learning and to increase the number of students that persist in college.

Student involvement was also addressed by Nuñez (2005) in a qualitative study of first-generation female student' transitions to college. Results from the study echo what has been highlighted in past literature regarding the principle of student involvement. The author stated that participants reflected on the experience of incorporating or connecting with the college campus and the related experiences in a variety of ways. Some students felt comfortable or as if they were at home, some felt out of place and abandoned, and others described the experience as neutral as in neither exciting nor scary, only stressful while trying to fit in and be accepted

(2005). Results of this study show support the importance of student involvement and how when this standard is lacking, students may feel the need to disregard college and return home.

Bean's Model of Work Turnover to Student Attrition

In his model developed in 1980, John P. Bean stated that background variables play a large role in influencing the way students experience and interact with the college or university. Bean also identified environmental and student intention variables that predict college completion. In developing this model, Bean used ideas from organizational studies of worker retention and turnover. Bean applied Price and Mueller's (1981) model of employee turnover in work organizations to the problem of student retention and degree completion (Seidman, 2005, p. 62). Bean's model of retention suggests that the principles related to employee turnover in the work place can be applied to retaining college students at universities. He paralleled some of the external variables that were identified by Price and Mueller with student retention. He found that some of the environmental pull variables previously identified as influencing worker turnover were also thought to influence a student's decision to drop out of college, such as limited financial resources, maintenance of a long distance relationship with a significant other, the opportunity to transfer to another location, employment obligations, and family responsibilities (Titus, 2004). In Bean's theoretical model, ten variables are identified as influencing student satisfaction and retention: routinization, participation, instrumental communication, integration, distributive justice (identical to the five variables recognized by Price and Mueller in their worker turnover model), grades, practical value, development, courses, and membership in campus organizations (p. 63). This model takes into account the intensity of commitment and responsibility of students to actively engage in the educational process and to ultimately reach the goal of graduation. Of all of the variables, Bean believed that the most important was

integration. In order to increase retention rates at colleges and universities, there must be an

integration of enrolled students and the characteristics of the college or university (Bean, 1990).

According to this theory, the ability of students to integrate into the college environment and

participate in a wide variety of experiences and activities may be useful predictors of retention

and degree completion.

Bean agreed with Tinto in his belief that departure from college is experienced and

viewed as a process. However, he also argued that students who fail to complete college or

'dropout' may have already achieved their personal goals and should not be viewed as failures.

These personal goals may range from learning a certain set of skills, to gaining a new level of

experience as a college student, to networking with specific individuals, to acquiring a desired

job in that student's career field. Bean also explained that student retention should be further

studied to identify student educational goals. According to this model, dropouts should be

defined by comparing student outcome versus original intent. Only when students leave college

before achieving their personal goals should they be considered dropouts (Seidman, 2005, p. 92).

This view is not widely accepted by institutions due to the fact that success is often measured by

the number of degrees conferred and the number of students retained from one year to the next,

not by how many students drop out before completing all course requirements because personal

goals have been achieved. In addition, identification of personal goals versus student outcomes

has not been examined by researchers, and therefore, more literature is needed in this area.

Bean and Eaton's Psychological Model of College Student Retention

Aside from developing his Model of Work Turnover to Student Attrition, John P. Bean

also coordinated with Eaton (2000) to address student retention issues from a psychological

perspective. Similar to the theoretical models proposed by Tinto, Astin, and Bean, this model

consists of a focus on student involvement and interaction. Bean and Eaton also take into

account the importance of social and academic interactions within the university environment.

However, as opposed to the other models, this theory also takes into consideration the

psychological processes and development of students enrolled in college. The authors stated that

characteristics and personality traits that students developed upon entry into college would

collectively influence how they integrated into the environment. The authors recognized the

importance of addressing the past experiences and personal characteristics that students present

with when entering a university. These experiences often influence how students engage in the

educational process and how they begin to perceive and interact within the college atmosphere

(Seidman, 2005). Interactions within the academic environment then result in psychological

processes that affect students' levels of motivation. The psychological processes include

positive self-efficacy (belief that the student can accomplish the task and complete the goal),

declining stress, increasing efficacy, and internal locus of control (p. 67). Students must learn to

psychologically adjust to the academic environment in order to successfully remain enrolled as a

student and to eventually graduate from college. If students are able to develop and maintain

these positive psychological traits while remaining in the institutional environment, they may be

more likely to persist at the university level and complete a college degree. Students may

experience an adjustment of internal processes as they experience college and non-college

environments. These processes will lead to academic and social integration, institutional fit and

loyalty, intent to persist, and graduation (p. 68).

Limitations of Theories and Models

Although there are a number of theories and models that address student retention and

degree completion, there remain a disproportionate number of FGLIMS that persist at

postsecondary institutions and receive college degrees. Little is known about the particular factors that influence degree completion among this population because traditional theoretical frameworks pertaining to retention have failed to address and include the issues and perspectives of students from this particular population. Moreover, no research currently addresses the experiences of students in the population that have completed college and what attributed to this success.

Current student retention models and theories all have two basic limitations. First, these theories are based on four-year universities with Caucasian, middle-class students, thereby ignoring the experiences of FGLIMS. Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) recognized the inability of current student retention perspectives to be applied to other students. The authors stated that most theories and models apply to students that attend four-year colleges and universities and may not be applicable to students attending community colleges or students that leave college at one point and return later on. Also, these theories were geared toward Caucasian students and therefore, may or may not be relevant to students from traditionally underrepresented groups. Other authors have noted this limitation as well. According to Dowd & Coury (2006), extensions and generalizability of most current models to other types of institutions raised questions about the applicability of the 'integration' concept to commuter, part-time, and otherwise 'nontraditional students' (p. 35). As well, although Guiffrida attempted to expand Tinto's theory to be applicable to other multicultural groups, this research was intended as an introductory explanation about student retention and multicultural student experiences. In other words, this article calls for more research in this area. In order to gain a more extensive understanding of student retention and the experiences of FGLIMS, more research needs to be conducted in this area.

Second, it is unknown whether or not the tenets of each model can be applied to other populations. Because the models fail to take into consideration the experiences and perspectives of traditionally underrepresented students, there is no way of knowing if these models can be effectively applied to FGLIMS. Tinto (1975, 1993), Astin (1993), Bean (1980), and Bean and Eaton (2000) all stress the importance of student adaptability, integration, interaction, and involvement. However, these models fail to address the challenges and obstacles that may be faced by students from this specific population when attending college. Although the information presented by these theories may be generalizable to other groups of students, more research is needed in this particular area.

Student Retention and Degree Completion

The academic transition from high school to postsecondary education can be a challenging journey for most students. Students that engage in this process often encounter a number of difficulties that influence the student's decision to remain in college. An abundance of research has been conducted on this topic and authors have been able to identify several factors that influence student retention in college and university settings. Most student retention research has focused on three outstanding factors as contributors to the rates of retention and degree completion: financial factors (socioeconomic status and income), personal factors (student characteristics and academic abilities), and institutional factors (university responsibilities and policies).

In an attempt to understand how financial status affects rates of college completion, Titus (2006) examined the outcome of students that identified as belonging to high or low socioeconomic status (SES) groups. The study included 5,776 students from 400 four-year institutions. Results showed that students with low SES entered college with a different set of

values, student traits, characteristics, and experiences compared to students from high SES groups. According to the results, SES plays a significant role in college completion and compared to students from high SES groups, students from low SES groups are less likely to persist in college and complete a bachelor degree. These results were supported by Dowd and Coury (2006). These authors examined the effect of federal student loans on the ability and desire of college students to persist and attain a college degree. In this quantitative study that examined 694 community college students, the authors found that there was a negative effect of federal assistance on retention at a community college. Specifically, the authors stated that due to the increasing financial stress related to obtaining a college degree, most students will fail to continue enrollment and will withdraw from the university. Financial factors often distract students that have low socioeconomic status, therefore, most of these students become too worried about paying for school and therefore discontinue enrollment.

Although some researchers have recognized the role that lack of financial resources will have on college completion, others have focused on the role of personal characteristics and abilities. Past literature has been conducted on cognitive skills and the ability to complete college (Flowers & Pascarella, 2003), past experiences (Walpole, 2008), adaptation (Phinney & Hass, 2003; St. John, Hu, Simmons, Carter, & Weber, 2004), family influences (Bui, 2002, Lee, Sax, Kim, & Hagedorn, 2004). Hall, Smith, and Chia (2008) performed a study to determine the degree of a relationship between the completion of a college degree at the undergraduate level and cognitive and affective factors. The longitudinal study included 78 participants from psychology courses. The participants were administered a number of instruments which were intended to measure metacognitive behaviors, locus of control, self-efficacy, and preparedness for the academic experiences (p. 49). The authors found that a number of factors were

significantly correlated with academic success. These factors included metacognition, locus of control, interpersonal and academic self-efficacy, and perception and expectations of experiences. In order to increase retention and degree completion, it is essential to acknowledge not only the social and academic environment of the university, as stressed by many student retention models, but also the self-perception of the student. According to these results, there is a specific need for more attention on metacognitive and affective factors that influence student perception. These results were supported by Dowd and Coury (2006) in which they stated that "both cognitive and affective components impact a student's ability to develop commitments to college participation and become integrated in the academic community" (p. 36).

Andrea (2002) also examined student retention factors from a cognitive perspective. The researcher examined obstacles that may interfere with the completion of a doctoral degree from the perspectives of representatives of the university. Some of the representatives included faculty and administration. The researcher administered a questionnaire to the participants that focused on academic competencies, personal characteristics, life situations, and chairperson requirements. Similar to the study conducted by Hall, Smith, and Chia (2008), results from this study showed that although there are a number of obstacles that may prevent a student from completing a degree, one of the largest and most difficult challenges are the cognitive abilities of the student. Student perceptions and thoughts about academic ability, self-efficacy, and personal characteristics are often entirely influential on degree completion. Additionally, the author stated that because academic institutions are faced with the challenge of retaining more students, a shift in focus is necessary to reach all students. In order to be more productive and to maintain more students, it may be helpful to create and enforce programs that take into consideration individual perspectives instead of focusing on the benefits afforded to the university (p. 185).

Additionally, since administrators and institutions are responsible for retaining college students, researchers have also examined student retention from an institutional perspective. Lau (2003) recognized the influence of institutional and organizational factors on student retention in undergraduate study. The author conducted a study to examine the effect of institutional factors on the timely completion of a college degree by undergraduate students. The researcher outlined three distinct categories that must be addressed, and necessary roles that must be filled, in order for student enrollment to lead to degree completion. The categories addressed are: university administrators, faculty, and students. The author stated that administrators must make sure that funding, academic support (such as learning centers, freshmen year programs, and honors programs), multiculturalism and diversity, and physical facilities are available to students to encourage and foster academic, personal, and social growth. The responsibilities of faculty must include providing opportunities for access to computer technology, computer lab experience, cooperative learning, and collaborative learning. The faculty must also provide emphasis on teaching and learning and academic advising. Lastly, according to Lau, students must engage in peer teaching and tutoring, tutoring and small-group training programs, and role modeling for current and future students. Students must also be accountable and motivated to learn and to engage in the educational process (p. 128). Lau presented a comprehensive plan for making sure that the needs of all students are met and enhancing the desirability of students to remain enrolled in college. If these roles are fulfilled and these duties completed, there may be an increase in the number of students completing college degrees.

In addition, Ryan (2004) explored institutional factors from a budgetary perspective. The author stated that one of the greatest challenges in higher education is increasing student retention while efficiently managing financial funds. However, there are no current models that

offer insight into the possible relationships and links between institutional expenditures and student retention (p. 79). By using a non-experimental quantitative research design to examine the impact of institutional expenditure levels on degree attainment at 363 baccalaureate institutions, the results suggested that expenditures significantly influenced student retention and the timely completion of a college degree. The author noted that institutions may benefit from appraising expenditure patterns in order to maximize the amount of students being assisted with these resources. By creating an effective pattern of assessing need and allotting institutional funds, more students may be assisted by these efforts, and therefore, may be academically encouraged and financially aided during this process.

Stratton, O'Toole, and Wetzel (2007) observed factors that influence student retention in relation to enrollment status for college undergraduate students. A limited amount of research exists that compares the experiences and outcomes of full-time students versus those of part-time college students. Initially, the purpose of the research was to determine if the factors influencing attrition and student retention were the same for students who were enrolled part-time and those that were enrolled full-time. Using a stratified sample, the data was collected from the 1990/1994 Beginning Post-Secondary Survey (BPS), which was made available from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Results showed that there is a significant difference in factors that are associated with dropout behavior for part-time and full-time students. The factors that were identified as significantly influential on full-time students were anticipated. The researchers found that full-time students are often influenced by an array of factors such as family history, socioeconomic status, and academic grades. However, these factors influenced part-time students to a lesser degree. Degree completion of these students was more likely to be dependent on the level of social and academic integration of the part-time

student and race and ethnicity. Because part-time students respond to and are influenced by factors that may be exclusive to this population, student retention models and researchers must address the needs of this group specifically. However, little is known about the experiences of part-time students and how these students handle the college experience. This research suggests that past literature has only focused on one population and more research is needed on others that may be considered 'nontraditional students'.

As stated, there has been a considerable amount of research conducted on student retention. In fact several theories and models of student retention have been developed and widely referenced in research, practice, and education. However, although there has been a large amount of attention focused on helping students to persist in college and to obtain a college degree, very few studies have focused on students that are members of traditionally underrepresented academic populations, namely, FGLIMS. More research needs to be conducted on the distinctive experiences of these students in order to increase degree completion as well as meet the other unique needs of these students.

First-Generation, Low-Income, Minority Students

As stated, there is a limited amount of literature concerning FGLIMS and the experiences of these students. However, there have been a few studies conducted on this population. Past literature has focused on student retention, socioeconomic status, expectations and perceptions, minority status, and experiences and outcomes. Ishitani (2006) conducted a study on student attrition and degree attainment among students that are considered first-generation college students. The researcher selected 4,427 students from data that was collected by the NELS: 88 and NELS: 1988-2000 Postsecondary Education Transcript Study. There was a significant difference in the number of first-generation versus continued-generation students that completed

college. The author also found that family income seemed to be a contributing factor which influenced student retention and degree completion. Students that came from a household that earned less than $50,000 annually were less likely to persist in college. These students often faced financial challenges that are related to attending and paying for college. This research was supported by findings that resulted from an investigation completed by Walpole (2003). The author performed a mixed method study to examine the impact of socioeconomic status on student retention. As indicated in this study and past research on student retention, socioeconomic continues to play a large role in student retention and outcomes. Students with low SES are less likely to become involved in student organizations and associations spend, are less likely to spend an appropriate amount of time studying and reviewing class requirements, and maintain lower grades than those from high SES groups.

Minority status has also been the focus in past research. Researchers have recognized that being a minority student in a college environment can sometimes present difficulties and barriers that are experienced differently by each individual student. Students bring to the college environment pre-college experiences, habits, values, and beliefs and these characteristics often determine or predict the ability of the student to successfully complete college. Often, administrators and faculty fail to identify and recognize these individual experiences among this population. Arbona & Nora (2007) examined the affect that academic and environmental factors had on Hispanic students enrolled in college. The authors found that not only does this population experience a unique set of circumstances while enrolled in college, such as cultural differences and expectations and perceptions of academic ability, but also, these experiences have yet to be examined in detail in current literature. These results were supported by a study conducted by Zea, Reisen, Beil, and Caplan (1997). In an effort to observe the intention of

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minority versus nonminority students to persist in college and earn a degree, these authors found

both commonalities and differences in the populations' intention to remain in college.

According to this study, both groups placed a great deal of emphasis on social integration and

relationships and self-esteem and intention to graduate. However, the results showed that

although the nonminority groups valued academic achievement, minority groups related

academic success with high levels of commitment to the university at a significantly higher

degree than nonminority students (Zea, et. al., 1997).   However, similar to the study conducted

by Arbona and Nora, little is known about the ability and intention of members of this specific

population to persist in college and earn a degree. These studies highlight the need for more

research in this area as little is known about this population. As a result, research has shown that

the needs of minority students are rarely being met by academic institutions which in turn lead

students to feel ignored, isolated, and less likely to complete a baccalaureate degree (Walpole,

2008). By examining the experiences of the students in this population, university administrators

will be much more capable of developing and implementing programs that could best meet the

unique needs of these students.

Along with entry status, socioeconomic status, and minority status, past research has also

qualitatively addressed the expectations and outcomes of students who are considered

traditionally underrepresented academic groups. Ishiyama (2007) conducted a study on the

expectations and perceptions of mentoring among undergraduate students. The author compared

first-generation, low-income Caucasian students to first-generation, low-income African

American students. Thirty-three participants from the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate

Achievement Program were interviewed for the study. The researcher only included participants

who were: Caucasian students who were from first-generation, low-income backgrounds;

African American students who were from first-generation, low-income backgrounds; and African American students who were from continuing generation backgrounds (p. 542). The researcher found that African American students, of both categories, were more likely than Caucasian students to emphasize the personal need and importance of mentors and to recognize the benefits of the research experience. However, over time African American students began to deemphasize these benefits (p. 547). It is suggested that most minority students are unsure of what to expect from college mentors and faculty and are thus overly reliant on the relationship in the beginning. However, this connection often wears off as students become more aware of expectations and obligations (p. 549). More research is needed in the area of student expectations, effective mentoring relationships and strategies, and pre-college experiences among this population. Therefore, in order to meet these needs, the experiences of FGLIMS must be explored thoroughly be researchers.

Academic Support Programs

One means by which institutions and administrators are addressing the issues of student retention among academically underrepresented college students is through the development and implementation of university academic support programs, also known as intervention or transitional programs. "Policymakers and professionals have developed a number of outreach and preparation programs intended to assist students who otherwise might not access higher education in earning college degrees" (Bergerson, 2009. p. 85). The main objective of these programs is to increase student retention while also increasing the number of students completing college. Critical components of academic support programs include equipping students with effective study habits, advising students about courses, presenting orientation sessions, and providing students with academic counseling and tutoring. However, hardly any

academic support programs are exactly the same because each institution must examine its unique interaction process in order to develop appropriate, need-based programming that supports and prepares students for the demanding process (Colton, Conner, Jr., Shultz, & Easter, 1999).

There are a variety of types of academic support programs and these programs can range from university partnership programs such as the University Partnership Program (UPP) at The University of Akron, to school district partnerships such as ASKME, to private nonprofit programs such as a Better Chance or Posse, to state programs such as MSMS (Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science), to federal programs (such as Upward Bound and the McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program) (Contreras, 2011). Although all of these programs share the goal of increasing the number of high school students who attend college and increasing the number of college students who graduate from college, for the purpose of this investigation, the researcher will focus solely on the federal TRIO programs, the McNair program in particular.

Federal TRIO Programs

In an effort to increase student retention rates among college students, steps have been taken by Congress to create, enforce, and evaluate programs to assist students as they participate in the educational process. One of the largest efforts was made by Congress with the development of the eight TRIO programs. These programs were developed to serve and assist students who were considered first-generation and low-income college students and students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, 2007). The goals of these programs are to provide services to students who are members of disadvantaged or underserved backgrounds. Congress also established these programs to help students "enter college,

graduate, and participate more fully, socially, and economically in life" (Olive, 2009). These programs are all funded under the Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Council for Opportunity in Education [COE], 2007). This legislation was signed into law by Lyndon B. Johnson with the sole purposes of creating teacher quality enhancement grants, creating institutional aid, strengthening institutions, increasing the number of minority students who were participating in the fields of science and engineering, improving and increasing student financial assistance, and implementing and creating graduate and postsecondary programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

The TRIO programs originally consisted of Upward Bound, Educational Talent Search, and Student Services. Since development of these programs, additional services have been added to meet the needs of more college students. TRIO now consists of Educational Opportunity Centers, Training Programs for Special Program Staff and Leadership Personnel, the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program, the Upward Bound Math/Science Program, and Veterans Upward Bound. The legislative requirements for all TRIO programs can be found in the Higher Education Act of 1965, Title IV, Part A, Subpart 2 (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

The success of the TRIO programs has been addressed by researchers in past literature. Grimmett, Bliss, and Davis (1998) examined the expectations of students who participated in a federal TRIO McNair program at a major state university. The authors explored the participants' expectations and satisfaction with the program services that were offered.   They stated that the most effective component of the program seemed to be the financial support that was offered to the students. Also, the research, mentoring, and internship opportunities and activities also proved to be effective. These services allowed the participants to experience the academic

environment in a way that promoted personal growth and accountability, effective learning skills, and self-sufficiency. The students were satisfied with the services received from the program; however, the authors also stated that the results suggested that there was a need to explore why some services and components of the program seem to work less well than others and less than expected.

Mahoney (1998) also examined a TRIO program and found results that were similar to Grimmett, Bliss, and Davis. Mahoney identified particular characteristics that helped to make a TRIO program successful with increasing student retention among students participating in a university-based Special Student Services program, called EXCEL. He stated that the most effective components of the EXCEL program were identified as academic advising, academic and personal counseling, mentoring, and research. These components of the program were all thought to have positively influenced and impacted the participants in the program. The author noted that the largest weakness identified was the lack of funding that was available (i.e. limited number of counselors employed, limited service hours, lack of reserved study rooms). However, overall, the author found that the EXCEL program has kept its focus by giving nontraditional students an opportunity to get a college education (1998).

Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program

The Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program, also known as the McNair program, was established in 1986 to "increase the attainment of Ph.D. degrees by students from underrepresented segments of society" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, 2006). The McNair program is named after Ronald E. McNair, an African American scientist and astronaut, who was killed aboard the space shuttle *Challenger* with his crew in 1986. The 1986 amendments to the Higher Education Act provided for the creation of the

program under his name, with the first programs established in 1989 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). With the inception of the program in 1989, 14 institutions started a McNair program. Today, there are 201currently funded McNair programs nationwide.

In 2010, there were 5,419 students participating nationally in the McNair program (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, 2011). In fiscal year 2008, the average award of a McNair program was $240,000 and the minimum award was $220,000. In fiscal year 2010, a total of $47,373,968 was awarded, at an average cost of $8742 per participant, and in 2011, $47,400,000 will be awarded (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, 2011). Although the data has yet to be released regarding the number of awards that will be available in 2011, 200 awards were available in 2010. According to the 2010 statistics provided by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, each institution is averaging a total of 25 participants who are enrolled in an undergraduate program and is preparing for doctoral study. The majority of grantees are non-minority institutions (82%) while only 8% are Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and 10% are Hispanic Serving Institutions (HIS) (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, 2011).

As a requirement of all McNair programs, participants must be low-income, potential first-generation college students. At least two-third of all students participating in the program must be from groups who are traditionally underrepresented in graduate education (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, 2011). A low-income college student is defined as an individual from a family whose taxable income for the preceding year does not exceed 150 percent of an amount equal to the poverty level determined by the Bureau of the Census (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, 2011). A first-

generation college student is defined as a student who identifies with at least one of the following: (1) A student neither of whose natural or adoptive parents obtained a baccalaureate degree, (2) A student who, prior to the age of 18, regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, and whose supporting parent did not receive a baccalaureate degree, or (3) An individual who, prior to the age of 18, did not regularly reside with or receive support from a natural or an adoptive parent" (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Traditionally underrepresented groups are identified as African American, Latino, Native American, and/ or Pacific Islander (Gallardo, 2009).

The McNair program has been instrumental in preparing undergraduate students for doctoral study. Although all programs are unique to the environment which surrounds it, McNair participants are generally offered the following services: research opportunities, mentoring, seminars, internships, tutoring, academic/personal counseling, financial aid assistance, and Graduate Record Examination (GRE) assistance. Most programs also offer assistance in exploring and securing admissions materials for graduate school. In an effort to determine the effectiveness of the McNair program, Parker (2003) examined the impact and the effectiveness of the components of the program. The author argues that due to the growth of the McNair program (in terms of appropriations of the number of awards), the wide variety of services available (i.e. mentoring, research, internship), scholarly activities (i.e. conference presentations), and trajectories of McNair alumni (higher than average graduation rates), the McNair program has contributed to the sizeable increase in the number of doctoral degrees earned by members of traditionally underrepresented racial groups (2003).

These results were supported in the studies conducted by Ishiyama and Hopkins (2003) and Ishiyama (2007). Ishiyama and Hopkins examined McNair participants and found that first-

generation, low-income students were far more likely to persist and obtain an undergraduate degree than first-generation, low-income students who were not participating in the McNair program. The authors attributed this difference in graduation rates partly to the preparation resources and program services that the McNair participants received. Additionally, Ishiyama (2007) examined the mentoring relationship of McNair faculty and Caucasian and African American participants and found that although each group interacted differently and perceived the mentoring relationship differently, both groups acknowledged and appreciated the relationship that existed between the mentor and the mentee. In fact, the participants in this study identified the mentor relationship as one of the most effective components of the McNair program.

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of recent graduates who participated in the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program. Although limited research has been conducted that examined the participants perception of the different components of the McNair program, no research has examined the overall experiences of the students who have participated in the program. Individuals who participate in the McNair program all identify as FGLIMS, therefore, it seems as if much more insight could be gained into the experiences of these students by looking at the experiences of these students in its entirety. It is expected that participants may provide details that would extend beyond what is to be learned about degree completion, but may also include information about the other unique experiences of students participating in this program as a FGLIMS.

Conclusion

According to past research, college entry status (first-generation versus continued-generation), socioeconomic status (low-income versus high income), and social status (minority

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versus majority) all seem to factor into a student's ability and decision to continue and complete college. However, even though research exists, although very limited, no literature exists that qualitatively examines the entire experience of these students. Additionally, although the research on FGLIMS is slim at best, the main focus of this research has been on degree completion. The purpose of this research was to examine McNair students, who all identify as FGLIMS, in order to learn more about the experiences of these students in its entirety. Although degree completion plays a large role in these experiences, this may be only one piece of the puzzle that is the FGLIMS experience. This research intended to learn more about degree completion among this population, but also other unique experiences that may have gone unobserved. By exploring these experiences, research was enlightened about the services, resources, and programs that may need to be implemented, enhanced, evaluated, and maybe even eliminated to best meet the needs of the students in this population.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The following chapter will describe the research design of this study and will include information about qualitative methodology, phenomenology, role of the researcher, researcher bias, theoretical sensitivity, objectivity, ethical concerns, triangulation methods, data collection, and data analysis procedures.

Qualitative Methodology

A review of the literature concerning college degree completion revealed that researchers have examined this phenomenon from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective. Quantitative researchers have attempted to explain the experiences of students by predicting degree completion rates (e.g., Andrea, 2002, Ryan, 2004; Stratton, O'Toole, Wetzel, 2007; Titus, 2006), while qualitative researchers have examined the student population by exploring their experiences (e.g., Flowers & Pascarella, 2003; Hall, Smith, & Chia, 2008; Phinney & Haas, 2003; Walpole, 2008). However, research conducted to date has failed to thoroughly address and examine the experiences of students who are academically underrepresented. More in-depth and conclusive research is needed on the students in this population who participated in achievement programs that focused on encouraging them to complete a college degree, such as the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program.

Because typical quantitative methodologies tend to systematically investigate phenomena using statistical values to describe participants, this study instead utilized a qualitative

methodology to explore the actual experiences of the students in this population. This approach allowed the researcher to explore the context of the phenomena that were experienced by the

students, in this case the McNair program, and to describe the circumstances and the experiences of the interactions. Due to the absence of research concerning the experiences of FGLIMS that have participated in the McNair program, I conducted a qualitative study to explore these experiences of the students in this population.

To address this gap in existing literature, the central research question that guided this study was: Describe your experiences as a participant in the McNair program. This question was intended to be non-leading and open-ended in order to encourage the participant to be as descriptive as possible. This interview question limited the impact of any assumptions may have been held by the researcher and also encouraged the expression and exploration of the phenomena by the participant. This also allowed the researcher an opportunity to capture the true essence and thoughts of the participants while also capturing rich data to be used in the study. Additionally, the interview question was intended to be general in nature so as not to influence the responses of the participant, but also specific enough to maintain structure of the interview (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 41).

This study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological approach which is the most appropriate method to study the experiences of students who have participated in the McNair program. Qualitative inquiry allowed the researcher and the participants to explore the numerous experiences of the participants and how they perceive the McNair program. As opposed to quantitative methodology, which would only have been helpful in statistically measuring and assessing the components of the McNair program, qualitative methodology revealed more

information about the unique and individual experiences of each student and how each actually experienced the program. Additionally, the use of qualitative methods, such as interviews, were used to learn more about the complex details of the phenomenon in question such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are sometimes difficult to identify and explore through more conventional methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 11). Qualitative methods helped to ensure that the true essence of the phenomenon is captured and explored by the participants using their unique experiences and perspectives.

Naturalistic Inquiry

In following with qualitative methodology, naturalistic inquiry is based on the idea that existing realities are multiple and considered holistic in nature (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Naturalistic inquiry is also based on the foundation that there are infinite truths that are mentally and socially constructed by the participants (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1999). Additionally, naturalistic ontology suggests that realities are whole and cannot be examined in separation from the contexts in which they exists (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This method of inquiry allowed the researcher to explore with the participants the realities and experiences of the McNair program. Accordingly, this research asked recent graduates who participated in the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement program to participate in this study. These students had all experienced the program in its entirety and all shared unique experiences. By taking into consideration the multiple realities and experiences of each participant, the researcher was able to use the phenomenological approach to identify the socially constructed realities of the participants to ensure that each voice and belief of the participant is recognized and respected. Also, because the research was conducted in the natural setting of each McNair graduate, the true experiences of the students were fully explored by both the researcher and the participants.

Another basic tenet of the naturalistic paradigm is the assumption that the researcher and the participant interact with one another during the research study. According to Lincoln and Guba, "the inquirer and the object of inquiry interact to influence one another; the knower and the known are inseparable" (p. 38, 1985). Also, Schatzman and Strauss (1973) stated that "the researcher must get close to the people whom he studies; he understands their actions are best comprehended on the spot- in the natural, ongoing environment where they live and work." Although in this study the researcher was not a participant in the McNair program and only had the opportunity to interact with students via the online interviews and the member checking sessions, the researcher was still considered a member of the academically underrepresented college student population. This experience allowed the researcher to assume the role of participant observer during the research. In this role the researcher interacted with the participants through the interview sessions and also through the member checking sessions in order to learn more about the experiences of these students.

Qualitative measures, such as interviews, observations, and field notes, worked well with a naturalistic approach due to the emphasis that was placed on conducting the research in a naturalistic setting. According to Denzin and Lincoln "qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world…qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (2000). Thus, this study took place in the natural setting of each McNair graduate in order to make sure that the responses of the participants did not change due to their settings. Additionally, "qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in each individual's life" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). Qualitative methods were used with

naturalistic inquiry to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought process, and emotions that were difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional research methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 11). Using a qualitative naturalistic approach to examine the gap in literature regarding the experiences of McNair students highlighted the experiences of these students and also shed more light on the factors that influence degree completion among students in this population. For these reasons, this methodology was best suited for this research.

Phenomenology

In following with qualitative methodology, the phenomenological approach to research was the most appropriate model to use in this study. Phenomenology seeks to describe things as they really are and to understand the meanings and essences of the phenomenon in light of each participant's level of self-reflection. This methodology was most appropriate for this research because it was used to explore the descriptions of experiences, while not focusing on explanations or analysis. By using a phenomenological approach, this research aimed to provide a detailed and insightful description about the phenomenon or experience, while also refraining from any pre-given framework, about the experiences of students participating in the McNair program (Moustakas, 1994).

Qualitative designs used in research are all variations of the phenomenological approach. All of these methodologies have four basic premises: (1) Researchers must focus on the whole experience, instead of just its objects or the parts, (2) Researchers must obtain descriptions of experience through first-person accounts by using conversations and interviews, (3) Researchers must regard the 'experience data' as important in order to comprehend human behavior, and (4) Researchers must design the study and formulate questions and problems in such a manner that

shows interest, involvement, and commitment (Moustakas, 1994). However, what sets

phenomenology apart from other methodologies is the attempt to understand the perceptions,

perspectives, and understandings of people that are involved or influenced by the particular

phenomenon. Additionally, phenomenology allowed the researcher to understand and explore

the experience from each of the participant's point of view. Moreover, unlike quantitative

approaches, the phenomenological approach to research was more appropriate for a study of

human experiences because it allowed for the exploration and examination of meanings and

essences of experiences rather than measurements and assessments (Moustakas, 1994).

Therefore, this approach was most appropriate in order to explore the experiences of students

who have participated in the McNair program.

Role of the Researcher, Researcher Bias, and Triangulation Procedures

In qualitative methodology, the role of the researcher is considered to be one of the most

vital components of the research process. "Just as the artist is the primary instrument in painting,

the researcher is the primary research instrument in qualitative investigation" (McCaslin & Scott,

2003, p. 453). It was important that the researcher state any biases and background history prior

to the beginning of the study in order to inform the participants of the researcher's involvement

with the study. It was also important that there was an ongoing evaluation and level of

consciousness of the relationship between the investigator and the research. The research was a

direct reflection of the investigator, and behind that research "stands the personal biography of

the researcher, who speaks from a particular class, gender, racial, cultural, and ethnic community

perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 18). Therefore, it was necessary for the researcher to

communicate her role to the participants in order to provide a clear and distinct understanding of

the research.

One of the most important roles of the researcher is to develop theoretical sensitivity towards the phenomenon that is being investigated. Theoretical sensitivity has been defined by Corbin as a researcher having the insight and the ability to assign meaning to data that is provided by the participants, while also maintaining the ability to understand what is relevant and what is not relevant (1990). According to Strauss and Corbin, a researcher is demonstrating theoretical sensitivity when he or she is able to adequately comprehend the meanings of the descriptions while also identifying meaningful relationships between the concepts (1998). Adhering to qualitative methodology, it was important for the researcher to be able to read and examine field notes and identify variables and relationships within the data. The ability to engage in the identification of these variables is known as theoretical sensitivity and can come in different forms such as observing behaviors and interactions among the participants or formulating and comprehending diary entries (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Traditional research asks that investigators enter the field with as few assumptions about the research as possible (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006, p. 4). This enabled the researcher to remain sensitive to the data, while also collecting and analyzing without the biasing assumptions that tend to influence the results of research (Glaser, 1978).

Sensitivity allows the researcher to maintain an open mind about the data and the participants. By practicing theoretical sensitivity, the researcher will become more skillful in recognizing the meaning and relevance of information gained from the participants in the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Methods practiced in this study to facilitate theoretical sensitivity of the researcher included the researcher's experience as a professional counselor, identification as a first-generation, low-income, minority college student, or FGLIMS, and exploration of the relevant literature. By gaining professional counseling experience in both group and individual

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settings, the researcher became sensitized to the unique perceptions and personal meanings of a wide range of clients. This practice helped to sensitize the researcher in an interpersonal manner; helping to emphasize the importance of genuineness, empathy, warmth, and patience. The identification as a FGLIMS helped to sensitize the researcher to the perspectives and opinions of others and the way the participants in the study may reflect upon the McNair program and interact with the research experience. As a member of this population, the researcher was familiar with the challenges and obstacles that present themselves while trying to obtain a college degree. The researcher was also familiar with the perceptions about success, failure, and academic capability held as a student when working towards her undergraduate degree. These experiences helped the researcher to understand the perceptions and perspectives that are unique to each student in this population. Reviewing relevant literature sensitized the researcher by stimulating thoughts about properties or dimensions that can be used to examine the data presented (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Furthermore, Glaser recommended that before entering the field, researchers become familiar, at least on some level, with the literature on the phenomenon in order to sensitize themselves at this stage (Trauth, 2010). These processes allowed the researcher to examine what has already been researched within this population and helped to add new and innovative information about the experiences of students in this population. By employing these measures, the researcher enhanced the theoretical sensitivity within this study.

Another important role of the researcher is to maintain objectivity, or impartiality towards the participants' responses and the research findings. It is important to the success and validity of the research that the investigator be willing and able to encourage, accept, and understand the perspectives and experiences of the participants. Objectivity in this case does not refer to the variables that are being influenced during the process of the study. Objectivity is

more about the researcher being able to listen and give voice to the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process involves listening, observing, and representing these experiences as accurately as possible during the research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In order to encourage objectivity, it was the responsibility of the researcher to explain any biases and to clarify how these obstacles impacted the course of the research.

As the primary researcher, I had a number of biases and values regarding the exploration of the experiences of students who had participated in the McNair program. These biases were the result of being a member of the FGLIMS population. First, as a member of this population, I had preconceived ideas about the experiences of the students in this study based on my own experiences. Second, I believed that the experiences of the students in this population had yet to be examined quantitatively or qualitatively in past research. Third, I believed that a common theme existed in the experiences of the participants in the McNair program. In following with the phenomenological approach to research, this study intended to highlight these themes in order to explore the experiences of the students in this population.

The researcher encouraged objectivity during the study by employing a number of methods such as: distancing herself from the data in order to gain a different perspective, considering multiple viewpoints of those who are and those who are not involved in the study, gathering data from numerous sources, remaining skeptical about the results of the study and the responses of the participants, and adhering to the appropriate research procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher also used multiple triangulation methods in order to enhance objectivity and to reduce the chances that any of the results might be influenced by bias. Triangulation, or the process of using two or more methods of investigation during a research study, will be used to increase the credibility of the results of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As the researcher continued to investigate the phenomena in question, steps were taken to highlight regularities and to explore the richness and complexity of the phenomena. Steps to triangulate data included: an acknowledgement by the researcher of biases and experiences as a FGLIMS, a distribution of interviews with the participants, a literature review of past research and concerns, performing member checks with participants in the study, and discussions of the data with my dissertation committee, my colleagues, and my peers who are not involved in the study. Furthermore, by engaging in conversation with peers, such as professors, authors, and supervisors, any influence of the researcher's biases was identified and addressed.

Another characteristic of the researcher's role was that of creating and maintaining ethical standards and guidelines during the research. Adhering to guidelines set forth by the American Counseling Association (ACA) and The University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board (IRB) were necessary for the completion of helpful and principled research. Therefore, the researcher followed the standards set forth by ACA and the IRB when conducting the research. Following these standards, the researcher obtained consent from the participants via electronic format prior to beginning the research. Consent was in the form of a document that explained the purpose of the study and what would be asked of each participant. This form was sent out to all who agreed to participate in this study. The participants were asked to read and electronically sign the document and email it back to the researcher. When obtaining prior consent from the participants, they were made aware of their rights within the research and that they could withdraw from the research at any time without any consequences. They were made aware of risks, benefits, confidentiality, and rights to withdraw in this document, which was electronically transmitted. The researcher also answered any of the participants' questions pertaining to the study. The researcher is trained as a professional counselor, supervisor, and

researcher, with experience in qualitative, phenomenological methodology, which qualifies her to conduct the research. Additionally, the researcher received approval from her dissertation committee to conduct the study.

Site Selection

The research site is a southeastern, 4-year, public, coeducational research institution. According to the Carnegie Classification of the Advancement of Teaching, this southeastern university, or SU, had 17,085 students enrolled at its main campus during the 2010-2011 academic terms (http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/?q=Univer+of+miss). Of these students, 14,159 of these students were classified as undergraduate students and 93% were enrolled at SU full-time. Admission to this SU is considered selective with incoming freshmen ACT test scores averaging 23.3, or roughly in the middle two-fifths of all degree granting institutions.

During the 2010-2011 academic year, 53% of the enrolled undergraduate students were female and 47% were male. Additionally, the breakdown of undergraduate student race/ethnicity is as follows: 0% identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 1% identified as Asian, 16% identified as Black or African American, 2% identified as Hispanic or Latino, 0% identified as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, 76% identified as White, 1% identified as being a member of Two or More Races, 0% reported Race/ Ethnicity Unknown, and 2% identified as Non-Resident Alien (http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/?q=Univer+of+miss).

SU has an active Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program which aims to increase enrollment, retention, and degree completion among students who identify as first generation, low income, and/ or minority students. This program offers several services and benefits such as personal and academic counseling, mentoring, graduate school preparation workshops and seminars, and the opportunity to conduct research.

This research examined one McNair program instead of a collection of programs due to the differences of each program and how each program is directed and maintained. All McNair programs must provide basic concepts such as mentoring, research, and academic counseling components (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, 2011). However, how these components are offered and to what degree of importance, may vary from one McNair program to the next. For instance, a McNair program at one school may focus more attention and funds on mentoring, while another university focuses more on the research component. Because no two programs are administered the same, the researcher chose to examine only one program.

The Population, Sample, and Participants

The purpose of this research study was to explore the experiences of recent graduates who participated in the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program at SU. Therefore the participants for this study were chosen from the recently graduated McNair student population. In order for a student to be considered for the McNair program, the student had to meet the following eligibility criteria: the student must have been a first-generation college student at the junior or senior level of undergraduate study and the student must have met the low-income federal guidelines. Additionally, at least two-thirds of all students that participated in the program must have been from groups who were traditionally underrepresented in graduate education (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, 2011).

Any students interested in participating in this particular study had to meet the following additional criteria: the participant must have been a recipient of a baccalaureate degree from SU within the 2010-2011 academic year and the participant must have completed the McNair program and its required components at the undergraduate level while receiving the

baccalaureate degree. The McNair program at the university serving as the research site averages 19 students, and, at the time of the study, 18 program participants completed a baccalaureate degree in the 2010-2011 academic year.

For the purposes of this research, the researcher chose to focus on recent graduates who had completed the McNair program as opposed to current McNair students who had only completed certain phases or components of the program for a number of reasons. This approach made it more likely that the research would yield more useful information about the experiences of students who identify as first generation, low income, and minority students. There were several components of the McNair program that were experienced by each student at different levels of his or her academic career (Ishiyama, 2007). At one point during the program, the students were involved in expanding their research skills, meeting with mentors, and learning more about presenting at and attending workshops and conferences. Another point, students were more involved in developing research studies, preparing for the GRE, submitting graduate school applications, and attending professional meetings and visiting graduate schools. The researcher would only have been able to explore the experiences of the students as the experiences became available during the student's course of study. By exploring the experiences of the participants at certain and specific levels of the program, the researcher would have been limited only to the perceptions of the components that had already been experienced by the participant. For example, if the participant was a junior and had yet to work on graduate school admission applications, then he or she would not have been able to comment on this particular aspect of the program. This would have limited what could be learned about how students experience the program. However, by examining recent graduates, the researcher was allowed the opportunity to explore the participants' experience as a whole while looking at the

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phenomenon in its entirety. At this stage the participant was able to provide richer data and was able to reflect on the degree, if any, of the impact of the McNair program on different areas of their lives. Only students who had experienced the program in its entirety would have been able to reflect on the program and its components. This was much more helpful to the field of research and to other program directors of other McNair programs. As well, in following with the phenomenological approach to research and according to Husserl (1913), "we can only know what we can experience" and students who have completed the McNair program at the bachelor's level would be able to reflect and provide much more useful and insightful information.

As stated, using recent graduates was more consistent with the phenomenological approach to research. Phenomenology asserts that in order to study and understand a phenomenon, the researcher must choose participants who have actually experienced the phenomenon in question. As well, the basic premise of phenomenological research is to get participants who have experienced the phenomenon in its entirety (Moustakas, 1994). In fact, Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) defined phenomenology as "the study of the world as it appears to individuals when they lay aside the prevailing understandings of those phenomena and revisit their immediate experience of the phenomena" (p. 495). This approach to research is retrospective in nature, and not introspective, which made it more appropriate for a study of this nature.

By examining the perceptions of those who had yet to complete the program, the researcher may have ended up with a collection of experiences or responses that may be likely to change over time. For example, the researcher may have asked the question: "What are your thoughts about the McNair program?" The participant may have responded that the program was

great and was really helpful. However, after a bad experience with a situation during the course of the program, the experiences of that participant may have changed. On the other hand, those who had completed the program and were able to reflect on their experiences had a more secure perception of the program. According to Groenewald (2004), one of the basic tenets of phenomenology is to understand the experience from the participant's point of view once the participant has had the opportunity to reflect on the actual experience. This allowed the participant to provide a more direct and established description of his or her experiences.

Lastly, the researcher chose to use students who had completed college as opposed to those that have not, because of the connection between student retention theories, degree completion, and the McNair program. Most theories of student retention recognize the importance of the ability of students to become actively involved in the campus environment (Astin, 1993; Bean, 1980; Bean and Eaton, 2000; and Tinto, 1975, 1993). This practice is present in each component of the McNair program and can only be reflected on by students who have graduated and completed the program. According to retention theories, in order for a student to complete a college degree, there must be a number of components present such as: student involvement must include developing and maintaining an interactive relationship with professors and classmates (the McNair program accomplishes this by helping students to develop an effective mentoring relationship, develop research studies in conjunction with faculty and other students, and develop close relationships with other McNair students and relying on these relationships for support), becoming socially involved in organizations and associations (the McNair program does accomplishes by encouraging students to join professional associations and present at professional conferences and workshops) and interacting academically with other students and groups on campus (the McNair program accomplishes this by encouraging students

to volunteer to become mentors to other incoming McNair students and to participate in

admission workshops). These types of interactions and relationships within the campus

atmosphere are believed to increase the chances of a student remaining in college and earning a

college degree. Tinto isolated four basic constructs related to student retention such as: student

involvement, social interaction, academic integration, and level of commitment. The McNair

program addresses each of these constructs in its components such as: required and encouraged

interaction with faculty and student mentors, participation in research and professional activities,

and checking in with mentors on a regular basis to encourage success. Additionally, Bean's

(1980) model takes into account the influence of background variables. These variables can be

addressed through the mentoring and personal counseling component of the McNair program.

By combining all of these variables and constructs, retention theorists have suggested that

students will be more likely to complete college. The only students that were able to reflect on

these experiences as a whole and provide information about the role of the McNair program in

degree completion were students who had already completed the program.

Data Collection Procedures

This research study utilized purposeful sampling to recruit individuals to participate in

the study. "Purposeful sampling is a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or events, are

selected deliberately in order to provide important information that could not be received as well

from other sources" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 70). According to Patton (1990), purposeful sampling

allows the researcher to identify participants who meet a certain set of criteria in order to be

considered an appropriate participant for the study, such as identifying as a FGLIMS who has

participated in the McNair program. This sampling procedure was intentionally chosen because

it complimented the purpose of the research which was to explore the experiences of students in

the McNair program. Additionally, according to Kruger (1988), the selection of participants in phenomenological research is based on whether or not the participant has actually experienced the phenomenon in question and can relate his or her experiences to the researcher. This study used a small sample size of 10 to 20 participants, which is typical for qualitative studies, because of the wealth of in-depth data that was collected through the interviews. Because so much information will be gained through this process, only data from small sample sizes will be manageable (Maxwell, 2005). Boyd (2001) recommends using anywhere from two to ten participants in a study of this nature and Creswell (1998) states that extensive interviews with at least ten individuals is sufficient for a phenomenological study.

The researcher obtained approval from the university's IRB (Institutional Review Board) prior to beginning the study. Following these procedures, participants consented to the study and were given a statement of the reason of the study, information regarding any requirements of participation, the opportunity to request a hard copy of the informed consent form, a description of all measures that were taken to ensure and protect the confidentiality of the participants, and information about the use and dissemination of the results of the study. Also, in order to ensure extended confidentiality and safety, participants were assigned codes (P1 for participant 1, etc.), instead of names, and these codes were used in reporting the experiences of the participants.

This study used students who participated in the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program within the 2010-2011 academic year. These students were selected from a McNair program at a public university located in the southeastern region of the country. In order to obtain participants, the researcher contacted the McNair program director at SU and asked him/her to forward an email to all program participants who had finished the McNair program and had graduated with an undergraduate degree within the last academic year.

Students who responded to the email, agreed to partake in the study, and met the research requirements were used in this study. Once the participants agreed to become involved in the study, they were contacted via email with a consent form by the researcher. Consent was in the form of a one-page document that explained the purpose of the study and what would be asked of each participant. This form was sent out to all students who agreed to participate in this study. The students were asked to read and electronically sign the document and email it back to the researcher. The participants were also asked to create a Skype account (these services are free), if he or she did not already have one. Once the researcher and the participants created communication and exchanged Skype information, the researcher set up a day and time to conduct the interviews. The grand research question was posed in a qualitative manner that asked the students to describe their experiences as McNair program participants. As well, the participants were notified that the interviews would be recorded via audio and visual recording methods. This notification was included in the informed consent documents.

For the purposes of this study, the researcher conducted the interviews using a semi-structured interviewing method, as opposed to the observation method of collecting data, to obtain rich and descriptive information. This method was chosen for a number of reasons. First, interviews are the most widely used approach to data collection in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The reason this method is so popular is because the process of interviewing allows the researcher to learn directly from the participants how they understand their world and experiences. The process of qualitative interviewing also allows the researcher to understand the world from the participants' perspective, to unfold the meaning of the participants' experiences, and to uncover the participants' lived world prior to scientific explanations (Kvale, 1996). This process has been defined by Kvale as an *inter view*, or an interchange of views between two

people as they engage in conversation about a mutual topic (1996). By allowing the participants to share their story and explain their experiences from their own point of view, the researcher was provided thicker and richer description and data to contribute to the research and to support the research findings. This method contributed more information to the research study than just by observation alone.

Also, using observations as a method of data collection would have required that the researcher and the participant be close enough in location that the researcher would have physical access to the participants for face-to-face communication. Because the students who complete the McNair program and the baccalaureate degree went on to pursue graduate degrees from colleges or universities anywhere in the world, the students would not have been available for research observation. As well, the focus of this study was not to observe the behaviors of the students but to explore with the students their experiences with the McNair program.

When interviewing the participants, the researcher used the interview guide approach which referred to the topics and questions and their sequence in the interview (Kvale, 1996). The interview guide approach was used to ensure that the same information was collected from each participant by maintaining focus and structure in the interview. Each participant was asked the same question, using the same wording. Using this approach supported the consistency within the study, minimized any research bias, and mad replication of a study of this nature possible. Following the interview guide, the researcher used a standardized, open-ended format when interviewing the participants, as outlined by Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003). This format was semi-structured in nature as it allowed the researcher to ask each participant the exact same questions in the exact same form, yet the questions also encouraged open-ended responses from

the participants. Therefore, the research was consistent with each participant having the opportunity to answer the same questions and not just variations of the research questions.

During the interview process, the researcher felt that it was necessary to ask probing questions following the grand research question. These probing questions were asked in order to manage the conversation or steer the participant back to the research topic, clarify unclear information, or to encourage the participant to provide more detail about what has been stated. Additionally, the research interviews were intended to be as in-depth as possible, with the researcher making sure to get as much information as possible from the participant. Getting the participant to describe the phenomenon in as much detail as possible required the researcher to ask probing questions. The types of probes that were used during the interviews were: continuation probes (used to encourage the participant to talk more about the topic), elaboration probes (intended to get the participant to provide more detail about what was said), attention probes (lets the participant know that the researcher is an active listener and observer during the interview), clarification probes (used to clarify a statement provided by the participant), and steering probes (used to control the direction of the conversation during the interview) (Rubin & Rubin, 2004). All of these different types of probes were used to elicit more information from the participant and are not intended to guide or influence the responses of the participants in any way. The researcher was sure to use different methods of triangulation, such as identifying biases and performing member checks, to ensure that the perspectives of the participants were captured without the influence of the researcher.

The researcher conducted one round of online interviews and one final round of member checking with each participant in the study. Two rounds of data collection with each participant were considered sufficient in order to accurately gain as much information about the

phenomenon as possible (Seidman, 1991). As stated by Polkinghorne (2005), in order to obtain thick descriptions and rich data from each of the participants, "researchers need to engage with participants in more than a one-shot, one-hour session" (p. 142). Each interview lasted an hour to an hour and a half. Because so much data was obtained from these rounds of interviews, the researcher found it unnecessary to conduct any additional rounds of interviewing (Moustakas, 1994). The interview took place via Skype and the participants were asked one open-ended question: Describe your experiences as a participant in the McNair program. Because the researcher used a phenomenological methodology, it was important to gather information from participants and use this information to understand and explore the phenomenon in question from the participants' point of view (Creswell, 1998). The purpose of the interview was to understand the perspectives of the participants and to provide a description of the participants' experiences as it was experienced by the participants themselves (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). While conducting interviews with each of the participants, the researcher worked towards saturation, or the moment during the research in which the topic was exhausted by the participants and no new information emerged or no new perspectives were introduced.

Skype

The interviews were conducted with the participants via Skype, a free, online networking software application. Although online interviewing using techniques such as Skype are not the leading type of data collection, according to qualitative researchers, this method of collection has gained popularity in the last few years due to the increasing use of technology and the Internet. According to Weiss, alternate methods of data collection are gaining popularity and by using these means, useful information can be gained (1994). Additionally, Kazmer and Xie concluded

that as researchers continue to use interviews as a method to collect data, they are often relying more on Internet media to communicate with participants and obtain data (2008).

Although the use of Skype as a qualitative method of data collection is new and its use in research has been narrowly investigated, some researchers have begun to use it as a method of data collection and have reported on the benefits of using this new, yet effective, approach to research. Cater (2011) used Skype to explore the experiences of female service members after a traumatic amputation. The author found that using Skype allowed her to access and investigate research participants over a wider geographical area, bypass the financial cost and time issues related to interviewing participants in a different location, and work around the busy work and family schedules of the women who chose to participate in her study. Aside from the convenience of using this form of data collection, the researcher also stated that by conducting the interviews online, the participants were put at ease and didn't have to deal with the anxiety that can sometimes accompany face-to-face research interviews. Additionally, Wright and Griffiths (2010) reflected on the benefits of using Skype in order to engage in supervision. The authors listed the advantages of this process as being able to communicate in real time with another individual when a face-to-face interaction was unfeasible and being able to focus more on the task and experience at hand rather than on other surrounding objects.

Skype was chosen as an alternative to face-to-face, telephone, and email interviewing for a number of reasons. Because the intended participants for this study were individuals who had completed the McNair program at the undergraduate level and had completed a bachelor's degree, they were dispersed in different locations around the world. They were no longer required to partake in any McNair program requirements and therefore were not accessible for face-to-face interviews. In this case, face-to-face interviews would have been too cost and time

consuming, and therefore would not have been a possible data collection method for a study of this nature. Although face-to-face interviews had a number of advantages, such as being able to interact with the participant in person, being able to develop rapport with the participant, being able to observe nonvisual cues, and being able to ask follow-up questions during the interview process, interviewing participants via Skype also provided these experiences in the same efficient manner. Using Skype, the researcher was able to sit across from the participant via the computer, and conduct the interview as if the researcher and the participant were in the same room.

Telephone and email interviewing were deemed ineffective methods of data collection for this study because of their limitations. Interviews conducted via telephone would restrict the researcher from picking up on visual and nonverbal cues that may be exhibited by the participant. The researcher would not have been able to see any of the participant's reactions and feelings that were not conveyed by speech. These same limitations applied to gathering data by using email. As well, by using the email method, the researcher would not have been able to ask follow-up questions or clarification statements. Because these methods would have limited any additional information that would have been provided by the participant to the researcher, the researcher deemed it necessary to use an online interviewing technique such as Skype.

Researchers are beginning to use Skype as a method of connecting with participants and gathering data because of the advantages associated with using this technique. Some of the advantages of using Skype are cost (it is a free, online social network that uses a voice-over-internet protocol for communication), level of interaction (it allows two or more individuals to communicate with one another via audio and visual technology, while also taking away the anxiety related to meeting with a person face-to-face), and geographical access to participants

(because it allows online communication, two more individuals can communicate from anywhere in the world). Another advantage of Skype is the ability of the participants to communicate with the researcher while the participants remain in their natural setting. According to Lincoln and Guba, the construction of reality cannot and must not be separated from the world in which the reality was created and experienced, and therefore, interacting with the participant in his or her natural setting will yield more useful and insightful data (1985).

Although some of the benefits of Skype have been examined, this method also has its disadvantages. Some of the limitations of this approach include: internet/computer technical issues that may come up during the interview, the webcam may only offer a head shot and not the entire body of the participants, audio/visual issues, and security/ privacy concerns (Kazmer & Xie, 2008). These issues can all be easily handled by increased communication between the researcher and the participant, e.g. making sure the visual cues are acceptable prior to beginning the interview, going over confidentiality and informed consent with the participant, and discussing the chances that the internet connection may be disrupted and what will happen if that takes place.

In addition to the steps that will be taken by the researcher to ensure confidentiality and privacy, Skype also has measures in place to protect the information of its users. One of the methods used by Skype to protect its users is the use of digital certificates.

Digital certificates (DC) are electronic credentials that can be used to establish the identity of a Skype use, wherever that user may be located. Just like a physical identity document, such as a driving license, a DC must have certain properties in order to be used as a form of identification, such as being able to name the account being utilized, be

difficult to counterfeit, and be issued by an authority that can revoke the certificate

(http://www.skype.com/intl/en-us/security/detailed-security/#identity).

This technology is used to ensure the user that they are actually communicating with who they

think they are. The DC is issued to each user through their username and password. This is

done to limit the access of each account to one specific user, thereby, increasing the security and

privacy of the online interactions.

Skype also uses a technology to protect the online conversations and interactions between

users. This tool, known as Secure Sockets Layer (SSL), encrypts "all information before it

leaves the computer and can only be decrypted by the Skype server"

(http://www.skype.com/intl/en-us/security/detailed-security/#identity). Additionally, when

Skype users sign on, information is protected and kept safe by the use of SSL encryptions.

These different methods of technology will be helpful in increasing the security, confidentiality,

and privacy of the McNair graduates that choose to participate in the study. Because the

probability of being able to interview past McNair participants face-to-face is low, and the risks

of interviewing students via telephone and email are too high, the researcher has chosen to

interview participants via Skype for this study.

These interviews were recorded via an audio recorder and a video recorder in order to

ensure accuracy, to minimize researcher bias, and to serve as a form of information in the audit

trail. The participant and the researcher interacted by means of video conferencing as allowed by

Skype. The researcher was able to sit face-to-face in front of the computer screens, although the

participant and researcher were in different locations geographically. Because the interviews

were recorded via audio and visual technology, the researcher was able to transcribe the

interactions. These recordings provided a higher level of accuracy when recording and reporting

the behaviors, opinions, feelings, and other personal information that was provided by the participants. These transcriptions occurred as immediately as possible after each Skype interview.

Methods Used to Enhance Trustworthiness

Journaling

The objective of trustworthiness in qualitative research is to support the claim that this research is "worth paying attention to" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, the researcher conducted additional measures of data collection to ensure that the findings of this research are credible and dependable. One additional data collection method was the researcher's journal that was maintained throughout the entire research process. It allowed the researcher to record personal thoughts and ideas that arose during the research. Journaling was a process that assisted the researcher in safeguarding against investigator bias and error. As described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), reflexive journals are used to reflect the researcher's personal thoughts, reactions, philosophical positions, and decisions. Researchers typically become absorbed in the process and the experiences of the participants, and therefore, need a method of reflecting that is separate from the actual interview process. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that these reflections should occur on a daily basis, or as often as possible, and should address the schedule and logistics of the investigation. The journal should also include the personal diary that allows for researcher catharsis and the methodological processes that are taking place during the study. This process was used to enhance trustworthiness and served as an audit trail, or method of confirming "the rigor of the fieldwork and confirmability of the data collected (Patton, 2002, p. 93).

Member Checking

During this process the participants were allowed the opportunity to verify the data, or interpretations and conclusions that were provided by the researcher. This process increased the credibility of the research findings because the individuals who provided the data verified that the reconstructions of the interviews were accurate and recognizable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This allowed the researcher to correct any inaccuracies that were identified by the participants. Member checking was identified as the most important stage of any type of qualitative methodology because it helps to establish and support the credibility or reliability of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During the process of member checking, the participants determined the accuracy of the information and related this information to the researcher. This process was used throughout the implementation of this study in order to ensure the accuracy and appropriateness of the themes and summaries that emerged from the data provided by the participants. Member checking was done on both a formative and a summative basis during the research process. After each Skype interview, the researcher concluded the conversation with a summary of what was relayed to the researcher to make sure that the true intent and experience of the participant is captured and recorded. This allowed the participant to provide any corrections or clarifications. As well, the researcher also conducted member checking by presenting the provisional report of the research findings to each of the participants after all interviews had been conducted and analyzed. This was done to ensure that the researcher had captured the true essence of the data that was provided by the participants during the course of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Peer Debriefer

Peer debriefing is a critical component to producing credible qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000). During this process the researcher collaborated with a peer with the purpose of "exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 309). One of the main purposes of this process was to promote research credibility by keeping the investigator honest and open to alternate points of view, perspectives, decisions, and biases. It was the responsibility of the debriefer to make sure that the researcher recognized all personal opinions and values that might influence the data and the research process. Another purpose of the peer debriefer was to be a sounding board for ideas, suggestions, and theories that emerged from the data during the research. The debriefer supported, challenged, or questioned any aspect of the research analysis and in this manner was able to provide feedback to the researcher. In this sense, the debriefer served the same purpose as the researcher's reflexive journal except that the debriefer was able to provide feedback. The peer debriefer also provided the researcher with the opportunity to experience catharsis and insight into new ideas and meanings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The primary person who served as the peer debriefer in this research was a member of the researcher's dissertation committee who was well versed in qualitative research and methodology. As well, discussions of the data with the dissertation committee, colleagues, and peers who were not involved in the study were also conducted for this purpose. Furthermore, by engaging in conversation with peers, such as professors, authors, and supervisors, any influence of the researcher's biases were identified and addressed.

Another method employed in this study to increase trustworthiness and to establish credibility was the confirmability audit. Just as quantitative researchers must provide procedures that show validity and reliability, qualitative researchers must also illustrate conditions of trustworthiness, such as dependability (reliability) and confirmability (validity), during the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher addressed both dependability and confirmability by using a naturalistic inquiry technique known as the confirmability audit. According to Halpern, an audit cannot be conducted without a trail of records that stem from the inquiry (1983). These records were used during the research to validate the findings of the researcher. Additionally, five of the six categories of the audit and how they will be addressed by the researcher are as follows: raw data (the exact interview questions used to gather data, the audio and video recordings, and the field notes taken by the researcher), data reduction and analysis products (write-ups of notes, summaries from the data, and peer debriefing notes), data reconstruction and synthesis products (phenomenology and data analysis processes and notes), process notes (researcher's reflexive journal), and materials related to intentions and dispositions (research proposal, researcher's journal, and peer debriefing notes). All of these materials were maintained by the researcher in order to support the findings of the researcher and to eliminate any researcher bias. The sixth type of Halpern's audit trail categories is instrument development information, but because the researcher did not develop any type of instrument for this research, this category was not addressed.

Treatment of the Data

As confidentiality and privacy are always ethical concerns that must be addressed in any type of research, the researcher took a great deal of care in protecting the data that was gathered

during the study. Although the interviews were conducted online via Skype, they were also

stored using audio and video recordings. The transcribed data was kept anonymous to protect

the confidentiality of each participant and to reduce any researcher bias. The interview

recordings, as well as all interview transcriptions, were kept in a locked and secured container

that was accessible only to the principal researcher. Because the interviews were conducted

online and the researcher and the participant never physically met, the researcher asked that the

participants review all consent documents online and electronically sign these forms and email

them back to the researcher. All of these consent forms were stored in this same manner in a

separate locked container.

Explication of the Data

Phenomenologists tend to avoid the term *analysis,* because to analyze a phenomenon

infers that the phenomena must be broken down into parts in order to be examined. Therefore,

researchers using this methodology tend to describe this process as explication, or investigation

of the phenomenon while keeping the context of the whole (Groenewald, 2004). The explication

process had five basic phases, which were: (1) bracketing and phenomenological reduction, (2)

delineating units of meaning, (3) clustering of units of meaning to form themes, (4) summarizing

the interviews, validating them, and modifying them, when necessary, and (5) extracting themes

that are general and unique in nature and making a summary (Groenewald, 2004). Bracketing

and reduction did not refer to reducing the phenomena to cause and effect. Instead, it involved

the researcher reducing the phenomena to pure subjectivity or examining the phenomenon from

its own perspective with its own meaning (Fouche, 1993). No position was taken by the

researcher either for or against the phenomenon. This step also involved 'bracketing out' the

assumptions and suppositions of the researcher and not allowing those issues to enter the unique

world of the participant (Groenewald, 2004). This was done to capture the true essence and meaning of what has been communicated by the participant without the influence and bias of the researcher. The researcher listened to and/or read repeatedly the interview transcripts in order to become familiar with the perspectives of the participants and to emphasize the experiences of the participant (Holloway, 1997).

In the next phase of delineating units of meaning, the researcher was responsible for isolating relevant statements or thoughts that had been communicated by the participant. These statements were identified and explored if they help to illuminate the phenomenon in such a way that the researcher was able to learn more about the phenomenon in question. During this stage, the researcher made judgment calls while at the same time, making sure to bracket her own assumptions in order to avoid bias (Groenewald, 2004). This process involved thoroughly scrutinizing the responses of the participants and eliminating the redundant units in order to explore the meaning that is communicated. According to Hycner, this phase "is a combination of crystallization and condensation of what the participant has said, still using as much as possible the literal words of the participant" (1985). In this stage, the researcher considered the actual literal content and the number of times a meaning was mentioned by each participant. Because two seemingly similar units of meaning may have been different in terms of weight or chronology, the researcher was extremely careful in this stage to identify and eliminate any biases or assumptions (Groenewald, 2004).

After delineating the units of meaning, the researcher took the nonredundant units of meaning and continued the process of bracketing out presuppositions. This was done to ensure that the research stayed as true and close as possible to the actual phenomenon (Groenewald, 2004). The researcher was responsible for examining the list of units of meaning and trying to

elicit some understanding and meaning of the units. This step involved a great deal of skill on part of the researcher and was the reason that the triangulation methods are extremely necessary for the research. According to Colaizzi, "particularly in this step is the phenomenological researcher engaged in something which cannot be precisely delineated, for here she is involved in that ineffable thing known as creative insight" (as cited in Hycner, 1999, pp. 150-151). In this stage, the researcher worked meticulously to form the clusters of themes by grouping units of meaning together (Creswell, 1998). The researcher also identified significant topics, also known as units of significance, which were discussed by the participants. By going back and forth between the interview transcripts and the units of meaning, the researcher was able to identify the clusters of meaning. Additionally, by exploring these clusters, the researcher was able to determine themes that emerged (Groenewald, 2004).

Next, the researcher completed a summary of each interview that incorporated all of the themes identified from the data in order to give the research a complete and holistic framework (Moustakas, 1994). After completing a summary, the researcher validated this information by returning to the participants to determine if the true essence of the phenomenon had been described and explored. This was done to make sure that the perspectives and experiences of the participants were truly captured by the researcher (Groenewald, 2004). Lastly, once all of the previous phases had been completed to the satisfaction of both the researcher and the participants, the researcher explored and identified themes that seemed common to all of the interviews as well as any individual variations (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher was careful to avoid clustering any themes that seemed similar at first but were entirely different. Concluding this process, the researcher prepared a report that summarized the context from which the themes emerged during the study. In this summary, the researcher was able to "transform the

participants' everyday expressions into expressions appropriate to the scientific discourse supporting the research" (Sadala & Adorno, 2001, p. 289). In this process the researcher will combine the themes and the experiences of the participants in order to provide a detailed explanation of the phenomenon in the study. Once these themes are analyzed, the researcher engaged in member checking to enhance the validity of the study. This included presenting participants with the summaries in order to validate the themes or address any inaccuracies. According to Riley (1996), when validating the findings from the research, the roles of the researcher and the participants are reversed, with the participant becoming the expert and the researcher becoming the novice.

Conclusion

The researcher used a qualitative phenomenology methodology to explore the experiences of recent graduates who participated in the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program at SU. This form of methodology was chosen because the literature regarding the experiences of students in the McNair program did not contain explorations on this population. The Naturalistic Inquiry approach allowed the researcher to interact with the students in this population without any form of manipulation and influence. Also, phenomenology was used to explore the experiences of these students and to identify any themes that existed in the perspectives of these students. By following phenomenological procedures, the researcher was able to extricate themes based on these students' experiences. The information that was gained from the data provided by the participants informed future research in regards to students who participated in the McNair program and/or those who identify as first-generation, low-income, minority students.

CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of recent graduates who participated in the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program at a large four-year public institution in the Southeastern United States. This study utilized a phenomenological approach to gain a detailed and insightful description of the experiences of each participant as he or she provided self-reflection. This approach also sought to describe things as they really were and to understand the meanings and essences of the phenomenon, while not focusing on explanations or analysis. The participants in this study were asked one central research question: Describe your experiences as a participant in the McNair program. This chapter includes a summary of the research findings, which will also include participant characteristics, and the major and minor themes that were identified in this study.

Participants

The data that was collected for this study was gathered from students who had participated in the McNair program at the undergraduate level and had completed a baccalaureate degree. There were a total of 10 participants and of the 10 students, six were female, and four were male. At the time of the interview, participants ranged between the ages of 22 and 26 years. Also, at the time of the interviews, all of the participants were enrolled in a graduate program with the intention of seeking either a Master's degree (3) or a Doctor of Philosophy degree (7).

Participant Characteristics

Demographic data, such as race, age, and the participant's standing in the program, was gathered from each participant during the online Skype interview. Participants were assigned an identification code, such as P1 (Participant 1). These codes were developed by the researcher and were used consistently throughout the process of the study. Because mechanisms for the protection of individuals have a central place in the design and conduct of ethical research, it is essential to provide a certain degree of anonymity to participants (Kvale, 1996). Therefore, codes were used during this study. Additionally, because identifying information, including programs of study and geographical locations may limit the anonymity provided to the participants, this information was excluded from descriptions of the participants included in this chapter.

The female participants ranged in age from 22 to 24 years at the time of the interview, with a mean age of 23 years. Five of the female participants identified as African American (83.3%), while one participant identified as Indian American (16.7%). Of the female participants, four were pursuing a Ph.D. degree (66.7%), while two were pursuing a Master's degree (33.3%).

The four male participants ranged in age from 22 to 26 years, with a mean age of 24. All of the males that participated in the study identified as African American. Additionally, three were pursuing a Ph.D. degree (75%), while one was pursuing a Master's degree (25%).

Explication of the Data

The process of explicating the data, or investigating the phenomena while keeping the context of the whole, took place after the participants were interviewed via Skype. The data was collected from one round of Skype interviewing (each interview was approximately 60 minutes

long), one round of member checking with each individual in relation to their interviews (approximately 30 minutes long), and a final round of member checking in which the participants were presented with the final themes and information (approximately 30 minutes long). The interviews and the member checking sessions produced a significant amount of data, which was used to develop analytic themes.

After the research data was collected, the researcher then transcribed each individual interview. The data from each interview was explicated using techniques that are consistent with the phenomenological approach to research. The explication process involved: bracketing and phenomenological reduction (identifying and removing all biases and assumptions and examining the phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants), delineating units of meaning (isolating relevant statements that were compared and organized based on the responses of the participants), clustering of units of meaning to form themes (examining the list of units of meaning, trying to elicit understanding and meaning of the units, and ultimately developing themes based on the units of meaning), summarizing the interviews, validating them, and modifying them, when necessary, and extracting themes that are general and unique in nature and making a summary (Groenewald, 2004).

During the process of explicating the data, the researcher took extra steps to ensure that the data was bias-free and reflected an examination of the phenomenon from the perspective of the participants. The researcher worked along with a peer debriefer to ensure the accuracy of the interpretations and to gain additional perspectives that may have been influenced by the transcriptions. The researcher also maintained a reflective journal during the course of the research and in these journals she recorded thoughts and ideas that pertained to the research.

Additionally, member checks were performed with each participant in the research to verify the results.

Annotated Narratives

The McNair students that chose to participate in this study shared a wide variety of experiences pertaining to the program. During the interviews, many participants reflected on new levels of insight that they experienced as they reminisced about past experiences in the McNair program. Annotated narratives of each participant will be provided in the exact order that the participant was interviewed. Each narrative will include a demographic description of the participant, as well as a summary of the experience and any relevant statements communicated by the participant. Additionally, each participant will be referred to as P1, P2, etc.

P1

"The McNair program really helped me to see other people who looked like me. Because before, I really didn't see anyone who looked like me." Participant 1 is a 22 year-old Indian American female who participated in the McNair program and is now currently pursuing her Ph.D. While in her sophomore year of college, P1 learned about the McNair program and decided to apply because of the opportunities that she would get to "mingle and network with other minority students." This was one of the main reasons that P1 chose to apply to the McNair program and to go on to obtain her Ph.D. "When I first got to college, I didn't see a lot of people that looked like me…especially the professors or other people in high positions. So that's why I wanted to become a McNair student."

P1's positive experiences in the McNair program were highlighted by her interactions with the research and mentor component of the program. These experiences helped her to

prepare for graduate school and her role as a graduate student. "I really didn't have a lot of research experience and I knew that if I wanted to go to graduate school, then I was gonna need that experience. And my relationship with my mentor helped me to accomplish that." By gaining these experiences, the participant felt as though she was better prepared to succeed and earn a Doctor of Philosophy degree.

P2

"If you were on campus, and you saw a fellow McNair student, you guys might catch up for lunch or something like that and that was always helpful." Participant 2 is a 23 year-old African American male who participated in the McNair program. He is currently enrolled in a graduate program and is working towards his Ph.D. P2 found out about the McNair program from a former McNair participant and describes this experience as "one of the best things that has ever happened to me."

Perhaps the most helpful component of the program to P2 was the networking component. "After my friend told me about the McNair program, I applied, and I got in. I have made some of the best friends I will ever have while in the McNair program." Because he already had experience with research and other experiences deemed important by graduate programs, P2 was looking to address the one issue that he had trouble with: meeting new people, socializing, and maintaining professional connections. "I felt like I had already done some of the stuff the program offered, but I knew that I lacked in the social department and was looking for a way to meet like-minded individuals and start networking." His participation in the McNair program helped him to achieve this goal.

P3

"This program really worked with me to increase my clarity because I didn't know what I

wanted to do with my life and now I feel like I have a little more direction and focus." P3 is a 24 year-old, African American female who is currently completing her Master's degree. When P3 was introduced to the McNair, she claimed, "this was just what I wanted and needed to help me to realize what I want to do with my life." P3 shared that she went from wanting to be a doctor, to a policewoman, to an educator. By participating in the McNair program, she was able to focus her interests and chose a path that she felt fit with whom she was as a person. "My mentor in the McNair program helped me to narrow down the things that I really liked and because she was an educator, she was able to tell me more about that area, and what it was like to be professional educator."

Additionally, P3 had the unique experience of being a McNair student as well as a worker in the McNair office. She worked as a graduate assistant in the office of the McNair program and gained experience as a "behind the scenes McNair student." Therefore, she was able to get an inside look at the way things worked and why they worked the way that they did. "Well, what once was a nuance, like going to conferences and stuff like that, is now seen as really important to the success of each of the participants in the program."

P4

"The program really did help me to reach my full potential as a minority student, and for that I feel blessed." P4 is a 24 year-old African American male and is currently pursuing his Ph.D. He became interested in the McNair program after learning about the astronaut that it was named after. "When I saw that it was named after an African American, and only because he died, I knew that I wanted to be a part of it." P4 took full advantage of each component of the program by completing more research than was required and by developing strong relationships

with his peers and his mentor. "I wanted to make sure that I got everything there was to get out of the program. I didn't want to leave anything behind."

P4 described his experience with other participants in the program as well as students that he interacted with that were not in the program. "People that I went to school with but who were not in the McNair program seemed like they were lacking or further behind those that did participate and become McNair students." Students that were not in the program didn't have the experiences that McNair students had, such as research, mentorship, GRE Prep classes, and the opportunity to be compensated financially. "It was like, the things they were complaining about were the things that we already had. We almost didn't have anything to complain about. It was awesome."

P5

"What the McNair program did for me and other people that participated in the program, I think, lets us know that we definitely need more programs like this one." P5 is a 23 year-old African American female who is pursuing her Master's degree. P5 shared openly about what it was like to interact with the components of the McNair program, along with the other benefits of the program. "I just thoroughly enjoyed participating. I know that I got research experience and stuff like that, but I also benefited from the relationships that I developed with Demetria, my mentor, and the other McNair students."

Some of the resources that were available to her through the McNair program were somewhat foreign and new to P5 because that was the first time that she "had been introduced to things like research and networking and prep classes and stuff like that. Even though I knew I needed it, it was all new to me." After gaining these necessary and helpful experiences, the participant was able to feel more confident about graduating college, getting into graduate

school, and becoming a professor in the college environment. "It really gave me a lot of insight into what it was like to become a professor and what it was like to get a job and to have a job like that. It was amazing and the experience was a true eye-opener." As well, the participant stated, "I think that this program was one of the best programs that my school had to offer. The program just did so much for us."

P6

"It was just a really wonderful experience. I gained so much knowledge by participating in the McNair program. I know this would not have been possible if not for this program." P6 is a 23 year-old African American female student who is completing the requirements for her Ph.D. She shared positive reflections about the McNair program and its components and described this process as "life-changing and very influential." The participant reported that the most helpful component of the program was the process of maturing into an African American graduate student, and hopefully someday, a professional faculty member. "I like how the program prepared us with different aspects such as research and networking, and this in turn is helping me to prepare myself for what lies ahead as a minority student."

P6 also gained positive experiences from the other aspects of the McNair program. "Even though I had research experience and stuff like that, it still didn't hurt to put anything extra on your resume and be able to say that I presented at a national research conference." The participant also talked about the helpfulness of the other less acknowledged aspects of the program.

> People think that McNair just means: research, mentor, and financial aid. But to me it meant so much more, like GRE prep courses, mock interview processes, and grad school visits. These experiences were just as helpful as some of the other stuff.

These experiences combined to help P6 feel confident that she could be a successful and well-prepared graduate student.

P7

"I have become a better person and I have learned a lot more because of the things that I have experienced in the McNair Program." P7 is a 23 year-old African American female that is currently pursuing her Ph.D. In her interview, she reflected on her experiences with the different components of the program. "I think that the program has definitely made me a better person, and more importantly, a better graduate minority student." The participant also commented, "I was prepared with information and experiences regarding things that other students may not have been prepared for. Like conducting research and stuff like that. I felt ready." She talked about how she interacted with the different aspects of the program and described her experience as "very helpful. My experience with the research and mentor component was very helpful. That really helped me to become the diligent student that I really am today."

P7 also described her thoughts on the overall effectiveness of the program. "The McNair program was just a really big help to me. It helped me to overcome a lot of doubt and fear." She reported feelings of "confidence and self-assurance not only as a graduate student but also as an African American female." These experiences, coupled with her exceptional academic performance, helped her to believe that she could compete equally with other students in the college environment and other professionals in the work force.

P8

"I felt like they understood me and kind of knew where I was coming from, considering they were minorities as well." P8 is a 22 year-old African American male who is currently working on his Master's degree. Although he described the components of the program as

helpful and necessary, the most important element for him was ultimately the variety of relationships that he developed with the other McNair participants, his mentor, and Demetria, the Assistant Director of the McNair program. "I met so many people and it was like, we had most of the same things in common and I will never forget the people I met and the relationships that I developed. It was awesome."

P8 talked about the development of this process and how that process impacted him. He described it as "me finding out where I truly fit in and having like-minded individuals around me that had a common purpose and that was to graduate and be successful." He also went on to describe why the development of these relationships was so critical at the time.

> When I first got here, I didn't know many people and the people that I did know were always too busy for this and too busy for that. But the people in this program accepted me. They let me know that I had a place and that place was in the McNair program. P9

"The best thing about the McNair program to me was that it showed me what else was out there and it helped me to show those around me my true potential." P9 is a 24 year-old African American female, presently working towards her Ph.D. Like the other participants, she described her experiences with the research, mentoring, and networking components of the program.

> Well, it was really great, I mean like it really was. I got to experience a number of things like, doing research, going to different graduate schools and learning more about the application process, attending workshops and seminars about being a successful graduate student, the financial stipend that we got every month, and also, the relationship I was able to develop with my mentor.

Because of these interactions with the different elements offered by the program, P9 described the overall process as "a great experience and one that ultimately helped me to learn how to adjust and to exceed in graduate school."

P10

"Being in this program really has made me a better person." Participant 10 is a 26 year-old African American male who is currently pursuing his Ph.D. "I learned a lot more than I thought I knew about doing research and stuff like that. It was really helpful to me during the entire process." P10 had conducted different types of research at the high school level in conjunction with different teachers and nearby community colleges. However, during high school, he was only acting in the role of a "research assistant or aide." Research took on a new meaning when for him when he became the primary researcher. "It was like I was in control and things depended on me. It was hard at first but I got used to it. It made me feel like I could really do it and maybe do more research in the future."

P10 also reflected on the other elements of the program and how this experience influenced him socially, academically, as well as personally:

I mean like I really enjoyed doing different things with the McNair program and it was really helpful to participate in those experiences like the prep courses, mentoring, and to receive the financial stipend, but as I moved on to the next experience, which for me was graduate school, the thing I took with me the most was the overall picture. This program goes beyond those elements, and helps people like me to make connections, both professionally and otherwise. It also works towards getting minority students to ultimately obtain a Ph.D. and become professionals in whatever field in society. And for me, that was the most important thing.

Analytic Themes

After each interview was completed, the researcher completed the transcription process. The researcher also studied each transcript in order to become familiar with and understanding of the responses by the participants. This was done to ensure that the researcher had a better understanding of the experiences of each participant. After this process was completed, the researcher used the five basic steps of explicating data in order to isolate relevant statements shared by the participants and to create themes related to their experiences. These themes were then reorganized and restructured during the peer debriefing process, and then shared and validated by the McNair participants. As a result of the data analysis, nine synthesized themes emerged: Academic Preparations, Academic Inadequateness, Influence of Family, Church, and Community Systems, Family Interactions, Self-Made Support Systems, Recognition of a Lack of Preparation, Introduction to the McNair Program, McNair Program Experiences, and McNair at the Graduate Level.

During the analysis of the interview data, it became clear that the participants' reflections seemed to have taken place within discrete academic time periods. They began to reflect on experiences they had encountered before entering the McNair program, while in the program, and after the program. These experiences seemed to have a direct and lasting influence on the participants and therefore, were included in this research. The academic time periods that emerged were: Pre-College, College, the McNair program, and Postbaccalaureate Experiences. Themes were then placed within the appropriate time periods and further analyzed.

For the pre-college time period, participants reflected on high school experiences, family influences, and also influences of others such as mentors, teachers, and school counselors. They discussed how these experiences influenced their lives beyond high school and as college

students. The second time period, college experiences, included the participants' reflections on their lives as college students and the challenges and obstacles that they overcame to become successful college students. The participants also revealed their thoughts on the process of adjusting to college and what it was like for them to balance family, social life, and academic responsibilities. During the next time period, which is participation in the McNair program, the participants described being McNair students and their interaction with the different components of the program. In the last time period, the participants described life after their undergraduate degree and their transition from undergraduate student to graduate student. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, the analytic themes have been placed and will be described within the context of the respective time period to which they relate.

Pre-College Experiences

Pre-college experiences seemed to fall into three major groups-those that participants believed prepared them for success as college students, and those that participants reported as either not experienced at all in high school or that were experienced but not believed to be helpful. These three themes are Academic Preparations, Academic Inadequateness, and Influence of Family, Church, and Community Systems.

Academic Preparations

During the interview process, participants discussed their experiences as high school students and the ways in which they were prepared for the college experience. Participants also discussed their motivations for pursuing a college degree and their post-college careers. Participants reflected on how some of their high school experiences prepared them for college, including helping teachers conduct research while in high school, participating in summer college programs, and interacting with college recruiters to learn more about what schools had

programs that aligned with their interests. Some spoke at length about how these experiences prepared them to interact in a college environment and more easily adjust to college life. P2, and several other participants, shared that he felt like he had "participated in a couple of research programs in high school and this helped me to conduct research while in the McNair program." P3 added, "When I was in high school, I attended the Mississippi School of Math and Science and that's pretty much where I got a lot of experience." Another participant shared that

> I had participated in a few programs as like a research assistant to some of my teachers
> that had started to conduct research and I even participated in a summer program that was
> linked to a college near my high school.

These participants stated that by gaining experience in conducting research, they had a "leg up" on some of the other students that were graduating from high school and going to college. P5 reported, "I felt like I was a little more prepared than some of the other students."

In addition to participating in research while in high school, participants reflected on the value of visiting nearby colleges to help determine where they wanted to attend college. One participant shared:

> We even took classes at community colleges, me and other seniors from my high school,
> and we actually scored like really high and that let us know that we were somewhat
> prepared academically and otherwise. Those visits and classes really helped us out.

Another participant shared that "we did things like visited colleges and we were able to talk to the school recruiters when they came to our high school." These experiences were viewed as valuable by the participants and as very influential in their thoughts on pursuing a college degree. By participating in research and interacting with college recruiters, these participants were able to get a glimpse at the responsibilities and requirements of college students and were able to

prepare at the high school level in order to meet those requirements. P5 also shared that "I participated in the MAMP and Bridge program at college while I was still a high school student" and these experiences helped her to "get used to surviving away from my comfort zone or my usual spot" and "to adjusting to new and different things." P1 shared that "these experiences really prepared me for college."

Other participants shared information about their mentor relationships with teachers while in high school and how some of these relationships influenced their decisions and motivations to attend college. Participants reflected on how these mentor relationships communicated a certain need to obtain a degree beyond a high school diploma. One participant shared

> I had known my mentor since high school and he was actually the one that convinced me to come to college when I graduated from high school. He was really instrumental in helping me to complete school and to go to college.

> Another participant stated "my high school mentor was the one that first introduced me to

college and that is one of the main reasons that I attended." Within these relationships, the participants were able to become motivated about the possibility of going to college. P1 reported, "While talking to my mentor, I was able to see what it would be like to go to college. This is what excited me the most. I was able to see where she was in life and I wanted to do some of those things and I knew that in order to get there, I had to have a college degree first." These relationships seemed to highlight the importance of obtaining a college degree for these participants.

Summary

This first theme, *Academic Preparations*, described participants' high school academic experiences and how they contributed to their success as college students. Major experiences included participating in research at the high school level and maintaining a working relationship with a mentor. In addition to these positive high school experiences, participants also reported ways in which their high school experiences did not adequately prepare them for college success. In the following theme, Academic Inadequateness, participants describe these missing or inadequate experiences that did not contribute to their college success.

Academic Inadequateness

Although most of the participants described a certain degree of preparedness for college while still in high school, others discussed a recognizable degree of inadequate preparation. This academic inadequateness included a breakdown in the academic structure, such as "teachers not doing their jobs and preparing us and well, school counselors not really caring either. It was like it was the student versus the school." There was also a perceived lack of significant connections between students, teachers, and school counselors, in which the students were "left feeling alone and without anything related to a guideline." These participants reflected on high school experiences and described feelings of "not feeling prepared by my high school when I made it to college." This lack of preparation was described by P6 who stated that "it wasn't just one area, of like the teachers not teaching us the right material, but it was the school in general. There were no resources around that could help, and what was available, wasn't really helpful." Another participant shared a similar experience, stating "the school was located in a rather poor county, so we didn't get the material and things that we should otherwise have received and learned." These experiences contributed to the participants feeling as if the lack of resources and

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support they experienced did not prepare them adequately for college and placed them at a disadvantage compared to other students. P6 also shared,

I just felt like we were behind. Like I knew that I was making good grades but some of the other students were not and so I felt like they just were left behind. In college they probably wouldn't make it as far, compared to the other students.

Other participants described more specific factors related to their high school experience. Some described their lack of relationships with teachers and school counselors. P10 stated "I don't really feel like the teachers at my high school made much of an effort to prepare their students for anything beyond high school." Another participant shared "some of my initial college courses were difficult because it was not like my high school teachers had taught anything remotely like that while I was in high school." Along with feeling ill prepared in terms of academic material, other participants discussed the lack of personal relationships with faculty. "It was not like I could go to her and talk about things that were going on in my family or anything like that. She was my teacher, not my counselor, and besides she just wasn't that approachable." Another participant shared "I didn't expect my teachers to understand, or to even try to understand anything from my perspective. But it would have been nice if they would have given a little effort." These experiences communicated to these participants that teacher-student relationships were not important in their high schools, therefore leaving these participants lacking in the support and guidance they might have benefited from.

In addition to the lack of relationships with teachers at school, some participants also described the role of the school counselor as ineffective. P9 described here relationship with her school counselor as "non-existent" and went on to state "she was really geared towards helping the white students get to college, and not the black students." P10 also stated, "we had a school

guidance counselor but she wasn't really helpful." Had the relationship with teachers and school counselors been stronger, some participants feel as if a lot more students would have been successful. "Some students didn't have families pushing them to go to college, so if they would have had teachers and counselors that had actually cared, maybe some of them would have gone to college and been successful." P 9 also shared "although I did have my family behind me, I think that it would have still been helpful to have the support of the school and to have access to resources that may or may not have been available."

Summary

This theme, *Academic Inadequateness,* details the perceived breakdown in communication, education, and support as experienced by the participants during high school. This theme also explored the lack of educational preparation and encouragement by the teachers and school counselors that students experienced while in high school. All the participants reported either academic preparedness or inadequateness during high school. All of them also described additional systems outside of the school setting that encouraged and supported their education and assisted in making their goals of obtaining a college degree both accessible and realistic. These systems included their family, church, and community.

Influence of Family, Church, and Community Systems

During the research interviews, participants discussed their experiences with family members, churches, and members of the community and how these experiences influenced their desire to pursue a college degree. Within each of these systems, they discussed the people that were influential in their decisions to go to college. One of the most notable influences on the participants' decisions to attend college was their family system. Most participants identified their main source of influence as their parents, but some participants also discussed being raised by a family member other than their parents and how this influenced them to attend college and

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earn a college degree. As well, participants discussed relationships with other individuals, such as church groups and members of their local community. Nonetheless, all of the participants discussed the experience of having someone to support them and push them to succeed in college. These participants reflected on the effectiveness of that support and how it encouraged them to be successful.

Participants reflected on the persistence of their parents to attend college and what a college degree would mean for the participant. P2 described the influence of his family: "if it were not for my family, like my parents for pushing me and making me know that not going to college was not an option, I don't think I would have gone to school after high school." P3 reflected on her parents' diligence in regards to her furthering her education, stating "neither of my parents went to college but they finished high school and my mom always said that she wished she had gone to college and done something better but she made sure that I got a college education." Other participants shared their experiences related to how their parents pushed them beyond simply getting a college degree, by encouraging them to take advantage of any and all opportunities that came their way. One participant described her experience as

> My parents didn't believe in wasting opportunities or chances. My mom always told us, a person was a fool not to go to college. She always went on and on about how people had died for us to get an education, so we may as well take advantage of it.

P5 also shared her experience of being raised by her grandmother, instead of her parents, and how her grandmother encouraged her to get a college degree.

> Although my granny raised me and took me in when I was about 5 years old, she still made me go to school, study every night, and do something with my life. Even though she's not here right now, she would be very proud of the things I have accomplished. I

mean like, my mom wasn't there and neither was my father, but I still learned what was

expected of me and that was to get a college degree and make something out of myself.

For many participants, it was this 'sky is the limit' approach of family members that encouraged

participants to "make the family happy by finishing college and earning a degree."

During the course of the interviews, the participants were encouraged to talk more about

the ways in which it was communicated to them the importance of seeking a higher degree.

Some of the stories are really unique, as one participant shared that "a wide variety of techniques

were used, but mostly it was fear of physical punishment if you did not do well. When you

transition to college, this fear doesn't go away, although the chances of physical punishment

decrease." Although this particular participant no longer feared physical repercussions, there

was still the idea that there were consequences for not holding up to a certain standard. Another

participant shared a different, yet similar, experience:

> Whenever I was on the bus ride home from school, I would always have to think, like
>
> hmm, I have got to figure out what I have to do to teach my mom everything that I have
>
> learned in school today. Because the first thing I had to do when I walked through that
>
> door every day from school was tell her what I learned while I was at school. My mom
>
> was very involved in my education and if I wasn't able to tell her what I learned, or if she
>
> asked me a question about some material and I didn't know the answer, then she was
>
> going to that school the next day, asking questions. And in the end, I still had to learn the
>
> material!

P2 also reflected on how the importance of education was instilled in him. The participant stated

that his parents always "stressed the Black History thing, like, people that gave their lives to go

to college and the least we can do is give it our best shot and try to make something out of

someone dying for these opportunities." Regardless of the method of communication, the participants received the 'memo' about the importance of education and took steps to become college graduates and successful professionals.

The importance of some form of family system was evident throughout each interview. Participants shared how family members acted as a form of support to them while they were entering college and as they transitioned from high school student to college student. P2 talked about the support he received from his parents, stating "they were happy but it wasn't really important what I decided to pursue in college, as long as I went, but I knew that whatever I chose they would be behind me and support me along the way." Other participants reflected on the roles their family systems played during the transitional period of entering college. P1 stated, "I remember going to my dad about what college I should choose. He was really helpful in being my sounding board and letting me come and vent about the application and entry process whenever I needed to." Other participants such as P9 stated "I could really go to any one in my family and ask for advice, especially one of my cousins because she is actually like a Rhodes Scholar, so she knew from experience what I was going through." Another participant reported, "without this level of support, I don't see how I, or anyone else for that matter, could be successful in anything. It was just really important to me."

Along with support from family members, participants also recognized the role played by the church and community system their academic endeavors. Both support systems acted as sources of motivation for participants growing up in a tight-knit church and community environment. P10 described his experience in growing up in those environments and trying to earn a college degree. He revealed, "church and community played a large role in where I am today. Sometimes, my mom wasn't able to come pick me up after school. But she didn't worry

because church members or neighbors would do it." P8 reported similar experiences, stating "there was always something about the way I was raised with my parents, church, and community and stuff like that that helped me to see that I wanted to do something great with my life."

Summary

This theme, *Influence of Family, Church, and Community Systems,* describes the experiences and the roles that were played by different support systems in the lives of the participants. This theme also describes how these support systems encouraged education and communicated its importance to the participants.

College Experiences

Family Interactions

This theme highlights the participants' experiences and interactions with family members as the participants transitioned from high school students to students beginning college. Participants acknowledged a distinct shift in the roles that were played by family members, especially parents and siblings. While reflecting on their high school experiences, most participants described the family unit as being the primary, and sometimes only, source of support. Participants reflected on the high level of encouragement they received from the family unit was and how this level of support helped to motivate the participants to enroll in college and pursue a college degree. However, the participants noted that as they began to adjust to college and the college environment, the role of the family unit changed. Participants discussed these changes and their effects, as well as how they had to adjust and learn to balance school and the family unit.

Parents and other siblings were often excited for and supportive of a member of their family that was taking the opportunity to earn a college degree, but according to participants, this

excitement and support often shifted to confusion and lack of understanding. P6 commented about her experience:

I could just see how excited my parents were when I was accepted into college and then when I went off to college and then they would become mad or confused when I didn't come home every weekend, or if I didn't have time to talk on the phone like I used to. It was like, because they had never been college students and didn't know about the process of adjustment, they just didn't understand. It was just hard for them to understand.

Other participants shared the same experience of parents having a lack of understanding of the adapting and adjusting processes. P4 reported that "it's not like I didn't want to come home, but I really needed to get in my books and study more", while P8 shared "I just started accepting that my family didn't know what I was going through and that they just didn't understand my problems." P2 described this lack of understanding as a very terrible time for her as she reported "A professor once told me: if a person goes off, like to a different place like college or whatever, he can never go home (not physically, but emotionally). He will never be the same as before. That's how it felt." P2 went on to describe the experience of "not being able to go home." He reflected on "the times you remember, when you were little or whatever, and like my parents were stuck in those times, because they couldn't adjust to the idea of me being a college student and like, not their little boy anymore."

Because most of the members of the participants' family units lacked the experience of being a college student and were unfamiliar with adjusting to a college environment, participants felt misunderstood and stressed. Considering the fact that this was one of, if not the most, significant support systems that most of the participants had ever known, this process was extremely difficult for most of the participants. One participant discussed not being able to

really get through to his parents, as his parents did not understand the level of hard work that would be required to master the participants' semester course load. The participant stated "they really couldn't help me or understand what I was going through because to them I was the smartest person in college and so their only words of wisdom were like just hang on or hold in there." He also shared "that was one of the hardest parts of college, feeling like the people back at home, didn't get it or didn't understand. It really stressed me out sometimes." Based on these experiences, participants reported that although communication between themselves and the family unit was still strong, topics like schoolwork and things of that nature were hardly mentioned.

Participants also discussed their feelings of isolation from the family unit. When schoolwork became more and more demanding and the participants began to develop social relationships on the college campus, interaction with family members or with individuals from the participants' former experiences began to decrease. Participants reported feelings of being "isolated from the family because of my involvement with new relationships or college experiences" or "I wanted to do my own thing with people that I met, but like I was also missing out on a lot back home with family. They were doing a lot of stuff without me, because I wasn't there." Participants also reflected on how this isolation from the family unit affected their experiences as college students. P10 shared "well at first it wasn't so bad, but then it got hard because on one hand I wanted to go home and on another hand, I wanted to hang out with my new friends, but all the while my grades were suffering." P5 also commented that "not spending as much time as I used to with my parents kind of made them sad sometimes because we couldn't hang out like we used to but I had other things to do. But I was sad at times too, because while trying to adjust here, my grades went down."

Along with the noticeable drop in grades, participants also noticed other changes that took place as they transitioned from high school to college. Some participants perceived a higher level of stress as well as transference of dependence and reliability from the family to other systems on campus, such as friends, professors, and mentors. P1 reflected on how "stressed, anxious, and tired I had become because I was worried about things at home. It was really hard for me not to worry and stress." As well, P8 shared a similar experience, "it caused a lot of problems and stress between my family and I, but that is when I started to hanging out more with friends on campus and I also started using more of my college resources." P6 stated that she "relied more on professors and advisors as well as my McNair mentor for times when I was stressing about home life."

Although participants discussed the consequences of leaving the family unit and how that unit dealt with those actions, they also discussed the balancing act that took place between learning how to deal with family members while also enjoying life as a college student and making better grades. P2 shared "initially it was hard to break away from the family and to have people back home deal with that, but eventually I learned to balance school with my personal life and my parents became very supportive of me." P5 also shared that "it was hard in the beginning for my parents to adjust and adapt, but it was something we got used to and accepted. Now things are great and my parents are prouder of me now than before." Parents became used to the idea of the participants not coming home as much and they also got used to the participants gaining more freedom. Participants reported a process of adjustment for both themselves and their families. They reported feelings that progressed from isolation and alienation from the family unit, to independence and autonomy. As described by one participant "they started

becoming comfortable letting me make my own choices and do my own thing and meet new people. It was like a newfound freedom."

Summary

This theme, *Family Interactions,* explores the process of adjustment and growth that was experienced by both the family unit and the participant. This theme also explores the challenges and issues that came along with this adjustment process and the methods used by the participants to handle these situations and ultimately succeed as college students.

Self-Made Support Systems

Based on responses throughout the interviews, it became apparent that the dependence on the family unit as the primary source of support decreased and was replaced to various degrees by other support systems on the college campus. Participants reflected on the processes they engaged in while learning to connect to other students, faculty, and staff within the college environment. Participants also talked about the significance of making social connections with new individuals, balancing school versus social events, and the roles that the different support systems played in the participants' ultimate academic successes.

Although the participants were comfortable making friends and relating to others, they noticed a difference in the types of social skills needed to connect to others in college, as opposed to high school. One participant commented on the difference between socializing in high school and college:

Well when I was in high school, I mean, like you pretty much had the same people in your class year after year, so like you knew them from kindergarten or whatever. Well, in college everyone is new and I didn't know anyone. Then too, like I only saw people

when we were in class, like once every couple of days, not like in high school. So that

kind of made it tough to really get to know people that you didn't know.

Another participant shared his experience: "it was harder to get to know others than it

was in high school. I mean you grew up with your high school classmates. You made friends

but now you have to do it all over again. That can be really tough." Participants reflected on

how necessary it was for them to "act a little more mature, and probably be a little more

outspoken and popular" commented P1. According to other participants, this was a lot harder to

do than some could imagine. P5 stated that "it almost made me want to go back home to where

my real friends were and maybe try to go to a junior college closer to home" and P10 shared

"people didn't want to talk and they had already probably come to college with like a group of

their high school friends, so that already excluded me in that area." Although some felt as if

connecting and finding a sense of belonging would never happen, most participants agreed, "it

wasn't as bad as it looked, now that I think about it."

Eventually, participants found social systems that shared their interests and gave them

something to do when they wanted to take their minds off of stressful issues, such as schoolwork.

When discussing their sources of socialization, participants revealed the different sources of

support that became available to them. Participants described the different social outlets that

were used to connect to others such as: becoming members of fraternities/sororities, participating

in volunteer work in the community, participating more in campus activities, and opening up

more with students and professors in classes and dorms. P1 stated "making friends was not the

only thing. People were looking for ways to connect and belong. That included teachers and

advisors too." As P8 shared "when I got to college, one of the first things I did was join a

sorority. I remember feeling that I am not the only girl on campus that just goes from class to

my room." Another participant shared her experience: "I tutored and mentored at the elementary and high school level. It really just gave me something to do and it also got me connected with some of the other mentors there. It was nice to meet new people."

These social experiences provided these participants with more than just a method of connecting and getting to know others. "It really helped me to raise my self-esteem, because when I came to college and I realized how alone I really was, I started doubting my ability to perform well in college and I started feeling down on myself." Other participants shared the value of their connections: "I became more involved with campus stuff and people got to see my face and know more about me" and "the things that I was doing were great in terms of socializing with other people on campus, but I also realized that these things were great resume-building experiences and would come in handy in the near future." The participants were starting to see the multiple advantages reaching out and connecting with others and becoming involved with the campus environment.

As the participants began to make friends, socialize with others, and build college relationships, it became obvious to some participants that these relationships were having a negative influence on school work and time management. P10 reported feelings of "anxiety and stress based on how much I knew I was slacking in school. My grades were never low-low, but they got to the point where they could have been better." P2 also shared that:

I spent too much time socializing and although I still maintain some of those

relationships, more free time and freedom was not intended to equate neglecting my

studies. Because that's what it came down to: I was neglecting schoolwork. Maybe not

in the way that most people would consider negligent, but I knew me and my standards

and I was not doing what I should have been doing.

Participants that shared this experience often stated that they had to "tone it down a notch" and "bring the focus back to school work." Some of the methods used to refocus were "talking to my mom more to make sure that my attention was where it needed to be", "keeping in touch with my advisor and meeting with her on a regular basis", and also "just reminding myself what I was in college for and what I wanted to do. Life for me had become kind of hectic, so I just kept reminding myself." After making these adjustments and learning to balance maintaining a social life with being a successful student, participants shared that the process of "being a college student became a lot easier and it was easier to just get into the groove of things."

Summary

This theme, *Self-Made Support Systems,* explores the participants' processes of adjusting to the college environment and ways in which the participants began to connect and network with other individuals. This theme also describes the challenges that came along with this process and the approaches used by the participants to balance academic work and social support systems.

Recognition of a Lack of Preparation

As participants began to settle into the college environment, it became clear to some that their pre-college experiences had not prepared them as well as they would have liked for becoming a college student. During this "moment of insight about preparedness", they noted feelings of inadequacy and fear of failure, and described those feelings in detail during their interviews. Participants compared their high school experiences to the experience they were getting while adjusting to college and noted drastic differences in their levels of preparation compared to the academic preparation of other students. Participants shared that once they were

in college, they experienced two adjustment periods that they were not prepared for: academic adjustment and financial adjustment. In discussing the challenges that came along with these adjustments and how those adjustments took place, participants described how they were able to adapt and use other "tools like the McNair program" to "fill in the blanks."

"When I did get to college, I noticed that the college material was nothing like the material that I was presented with in high school." Another participant shared:

I made good grades and all of this made my parents very proud of me, but when I got to college and realized that I wasn't as smart as I thought I was or as high school made me seem, I realized I had to put in extra work so that I wouldn't lose my scholarships, or have to get any loans, or get kicked out of college.

Most of the participants felt as if the material that was provided in college was abstract material and was something foreign to them. Some participants noted that their high schools might not have been equipped with the tools that were necessary to teach them the new material. P2 stated, "the material in high school wasn't very challenging and therefore when I got to college, it was all new to me." P6 also shared "the material in college was new to me and I wasn't used to it." As they recognized these challenges, this made it harder for these students to adjust to college and feel prepared. "It took me extra time to grasp the material and by that time other students had already understood the material and moved on to something else. It made me feel dumb and like I couldn't get it." Another participant shared a similar experience as she discussed "having to do extra work and put in extra time in order to keep up. I felt like the other students knew something I didn't or that they had done something I didn't do in high school."

When describing the challenges during this process, P10 stated, "the main challenge that I was aware of was the fact that I was getting behind. I was studying at the last minute and

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turning things in at the last minute. I knew that had to stop." Other challenges reported were, "I was always feeling stressed and like there never was enough time in the day", "confidence was hard to come by because it just took me a little more effort to do something that others seemed to do with ease. I always wondered if they got something in high school that I didn't" and "it was hard to keep up. It was just so demanding and tough." These obstacles were often school-related and served as a great stressor for participants. The lack of preparation affected the participants' level of confidence and self-esteem, while also testing their previously held notions that they could succeed. As reported by P4, "it made me wonder if this was the right place for me. I mean, I finished, but still sometimes, it made me wonder."

As the recognition of the lack of preparation continued, participants discussed methods they used to adjust and prepare. "For me, that's when I started to reach out to others like my friends and my advisor. They really encouraged me." Another participant reported feeling "like I was behind but I just used the study groups and spent a lot of time in the professor's office trying to make sure that I was able to keep up." For these participants, the resources that were available on and off campus (mentors, advisors, family members) were essential for their successful completion of a degree at the baccalaureate level. They also utilized campus resources that made it easier for them to adapt such as "time management and campus groups that taught me how to actually study."

During the interviews, participants also discussed the differences in socioeconomic status among them and other college students and how these differences in status highlighted their feelings of not being prepared. "I felt like other students had stuff that I didn't, like money, and they were able to buy and do things that I just wasn't able to do. I didn't have a car or anything." Another participant also "felt like there was a difference in the interaction between like high

income and low income students and that difference to me was based solely on income. I just didn't feel prepared for that experience at all." P3 shared, "it was like they were prepared for college with a car and books and computers, and I wasn't. I didn't have those things and didn't know that I even needed them." However, one participant summed up her experience as "different but helpful. It just made me work harder and to put forth a lot more effort." Although participants noted a lack of preparation in terms of socioeconomic status, this challenge wasn't going to stop them from being successful as college students because as one participant shared "I would like to have had the nicer things in life, but you can't miss what you've never had."

Summary

In this theme, *Recognition of a Lack of Preparation,* details the experiences of the participants as they began to feel academically and financially challenged due to a lack of preparation during previous experiences. This theme also addresses how participants utilized different resources and support systems to deal with and overcome these obstacles.

Introduction to the McNair Program

Participants reported having little to no prior knowledge about the McNair program before they became participants in the program, with most participants reporting that they had never heard of the program and didn't know what it was about. P7 stated "I felt bad that I didn't know about the program and that it was created because of a Black astronaut that died and far as I know, none of the other students had heard about it before joining either." However, this lack of knowledge didn't stop the participants from applying when they did hear about it. "My advisor told me to apply and I did and my grades were high enough that I got in" and P3 shared that "I found out about it from my college advisor, who just so happened to be a former McNair student." Other participants were informed about the program through other means such as "one

of the girls that was in the program told me about it and that was the day before the application was due, and that's when I applied" and "my parents found out about the program from the school website and they made a few phone calls and that's how I found out about it. After that, I applied, and well, the rest is history."

Because some of the participants in this study lacked research experience prior to participating in the McNair program, they quickly realized the importance of applying and getting in. "I wanted to teach, so I had to go to grad school. I heard about the program, and knew I needed to be a McNair student. I needed that research experience to make my grad school application stand out." Another participant shared "although I may not have had some of the experience that others had, based on everything the program was offering, after I was told about it, I knew I had to give it my best shot by applying." Learning about the McNair program was the first step these students would take in furthering their academic futures.

Summary

This theme, *Introduction to the McNair Program,* explores the many different ways the participants became aware of the program and learned about its benefits. This theme also includes descriptions of the participants' motivations for wanting to join the program.

McNair Program

McNair Experiences

Each participant was asked to describe his or her experiences as a McNair student. The participants reflected on their research experience, mentoring, and graduate school visits. These experiences were described as the "brochure components" or experiences that were actually advertised and offered by the McNair program, and therefore, these were the experiences that were expected by the participants. They discussed what it was like to interact with these

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components and how those interactions have impacted them as undergraduate and graduate students. However, participants also reflected on the "invisible benefits" or opportunities that were not official components of the program, but came nonetheless. Invisible benefits included: close relationships that were developed between the participants and Demetria (Assistant Director of the McNair Program) in which Demetria was often portrayed as the "Protector," relationships that developed with the mentors primarily within the McNair program but also extended beyond the program, and the relationships that were developed with other McNair participants. "Invisible benefits" also included advocacy on behalf of other minority students that were not participants in the program. This theme will address the general experiences of the McNair participants, the participants' reactions and perceptions regarding the several different components and elements of the program, the development of social connections, the process of advocating for other minority students, and the relationship that was bonded between members of the McNair staff and the participants.

"I am really happy with the program and I try to encourage others that I know that would benefit from the program to apply" P3 exclaimed enthusiastically. She described her experience in the McNair program as "positive and exciting" and "I just really enjoyed it." Other participants offered their thoughts as well with comments such as "we did so much in the McNair program," "I had never done any of those things before, it was all so knew to me," and "it teaches you more about being successful and that was really helpful." Participants seemed excited about sharing their reflections and memories about certain experiences with the Program. They provided helpful and positive comments about the program and wanted to communicate their thoughts about the necessity of the program. P2 commented, "I loved the McNair program

and just wished they could accept more students or offer more resources and assistance, but it is a great program."

Brochure Components

As the participants transitioned from offering general to specific comments about the program, they began to talk in depth about the different components that were offered. Participants shared about the opportunities that the program had to offer that would benefit them such as gaining research experience, working with a mentor, visiting graduate schools, and being financially compensated.

<div align="center">

Research

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One of the most popular and useful components according to the participants was the research experience. Participants all shared their thoughts on what it was like to participate in research as the primary researcher. Although some had done research previously, few had actually developed and conducted their own research. Participants described this experience as "really exciting because before this program, I had never been exposed to research, but afterwards I felt like I had a great set of research skills and that was really fascinating to me." P8 also described having "a great time learning what it was like to really do research. It was new, but it was cool." "One of the best parts about the research experience is being able to feel like you are in control. You ask your advisor for help when you need it, but mostly it's all about you."

Another benefit of the research component was the option to present the research findings at a national conference. Participants were able to see what it was like to present at a conference, while at the same time being able to network with professionals that were in attendance. P4 described this process as "really interesting because I was really nervous but when it was over

with, I knew that I had done something that a lot of undergraduate students at my level had never really done." Other participants talked about this experience as well. P10 talked about the ability to network with others while at the conference and "it was a mind-blowing experience for me because I was standing in front of a room full of people and I was the one talking. They were listening to me and it was so cool." P8 also responded "I met so many people there. I presented on my research and also met students from other schools. I feel as if this kind of gave me an advantage when applying for graduate school."

Mentoring

Another component of the program that was described by the participants was the mentoring component. Participants shared what it was like to develop a relationship with mentors, how that relationship was maintained, and how they took what they learned from that relationship and applied it to other areas of their lives. Participants also compared these mentor relationships with those that they had with previous mentors.

As students in the McNair program, participants were assigned mentors who were faculty members in different fields on campus. These mentors served as a "sounding board or place where we could bounce ideas and get feedback." Participants described the process of developing a relationship with their mentors as "really helpful. She was just someone I could talk to." P5 shared her experiences:

> She helped me to see a lot of different stuff like how to get used to my family kind of not understanding what I was going through and how to keep my studies focused and me on track. She was good at giving me advice and she was even the one that told me more about the graduate program that I am in now. She listened to my interests and goals and helped me to find my program.

P1 also described her process as "hard at first. It was kind of hard to open up and talk to someone that you didn't know. But he would always tell me that I could talk about whatever I wanted. Eventually it became easier to connect." Participants were able to get information about the McNair program or ask questions, and were also able to discuss career goals and educational resources and opportunities with their mentors.

Most participants met with mentors on campus or communicated via email and telephone. "I would call my mentor whenever I had a question and he never acted like I was getting on his nerves or that my questions were stupid. I could reach him when I needed to for support or whatever." Another participant also shared that she communicated with her mentor mostly via email and that "it wasn't a problem. I felt like I could just ask a question and get a response rather quickly. That was a great setup for me because we weren't in the same location." Participants feel that by "having access to someone that I could talk to, this made it easier to be a college student and to be in the McNair program."

Some participants in the study were mentors in other programs and took some of the strategies they learned from their mentors and applied it to their own mentor/mentee relationships. One participant, who was a mentor in the Leap Frog After-School Program, talked about how she took what she gained in her mentor experience and applied it to her mentees.

> I learned to be more available because when I signed up for the Leap Frog program, I knew that some kids were going to be depending on me and I wanted to be available. That's how my mentor was with me and that's how I wanted to be. That was really helpful to me and I wanted to share that.

P8 also shared how he related to his mentees.

I think the biggest thing that I gained from my mentor was to have an open mind and to reserve judgment. My mentor had like a different perspective and was comfortable thinking outside of the box. That's how I learned to relate to my mentees. I always wanted to have an open mind about things.

By learning from their McNair mentors, the participants felt as though they were able to connect easier to those that they were around. They discussed how it made their mentor relationship with their own mentees "easier and more effective."

P4 described how his McNair mentor compared to mentors that he had in the past. "The mentor that I have now takes the time to listen. I thought that my high school mentor was effective but now that I compare, I didn't get nearly as much help back then that I am now." He continued with his comparison and described his high school mentor as "too busy to really be there and talk" and reported that his McNair mentor "knew what I was going through so when I got stressed and needed to talk, he was there." This reflection seemed to have an impact on this participant, as well as others that had previous mentor relationships. P6 stated "I learned what kind of mentor I wanted to be and how to communicate with others and also what kind of mentor I didn't want to be and how not to communicate. My McNair mentor taught me that."

Networking

One of the major benefits of the McNair program is that it provides an opportunity for students to network with current McNair students, former McNair participants, faculty members, and professionals at conferences and seminars. Participants discussed what it was like to interact with others that had the same experiences and interests. P3 reported feelings of "connectedness and feeling like I fit in. I was among this group of people that had a common purpose and goal and it felt great." P8 also shared that he felt "professionally connected and as if I, one day, would

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be able to say that I met professionals, researchers, and other people from other locations and experiences." As described by P5, "I got the opportunity to network with students from all different places and experiences. I feel like it was my first chance to start developing my professional contacts and this was a great place to start."

Participants recognized the importance of the development of these connections. "The very person you might have met at a conference or something may be interviewing you for a job or a graduate program." P3 also shared, "at these conferences, we were able to meet other professionals and professors and people from graduate schools. So it was important to network around." By recognizing the benefits of these experiences and making these professional connections, participants began broadening their associations with individuals that could assist them with academic endeavors in the future. P10 reported "I am actually working with one of the professors that I met at a conference. We are working together on some research related to minority students. I was glad that we made that link at the conference." Another participant reported "one of the people that interviewed me for grad school was at the conference. We talked and kind of exchanged information and then I was interviewed by her. I was wowed."

Graduate School Visits

"McNair took us to different schools, like she took us to different graduate programs and schools for tours." Participants traveled to at least four to five different graduate schools and met with campus tour guides to learn more about the graduate programs at those schools. "It was really neat to go to these different schools and learn about what it would take for us to be graduate students." Participants described this process as "helpful because I had never been to schools like those and it was great to get that new experience." P1 shared his experience:

I was so excited because I knew then what it would take. We learned about the

requirements for each school for admission into the graduate program. We also got to see

the campuses and met some of the students that were attending those schools. It was

great to just see what people on different campuses were like and to feel as if I could be

one of those students. After we finished those campus and school tours, I think some of

the students actually applied to a few and actually got accepted.

P4 also commented, "it was just nice to see a new experience and to be taking it all in."

Other McNair Services

Along with the research, mentoring, networking, and the graduate school component of

the McNair program, other services were offered as well. Such services included Graduate

Record Examination (GRE) preparation classes, educational workshops and seminars, McNair

Panel discussions, and financial compensation for participating in the program. The GRE prep

courses were "classes that we were able to take to make good scores on the test. They were

really helpful because I think that it helped me to make a good score on the actual test." P5 also

described her experience with the prep courses as "really helpful because as far as the math and

analytical sections, I was really nervous about those parts but the courses taught me how to feel

more confident about what I could expect." One participant reported "we had someone to come

in and brush us up on our skills for the test. That was beneficial to me." The preparation courses

were offered on a continuous basis throughout the semester and taught study skills to the

participants preparing for the test.

The McNair program also offered workshops and seminars during the semester that

focused on professional topics such as resume writing, interviewing skills, and writing personal

statements for their graduate school applications. They also offered workshops on study skills

and time management. These workshops served as a tool for preparation for participants in their graduate school endeavors. "The workshops helped us to practice for graduate schools because we could do mock interviews for grad school. They taught us what questions to expect and how to respond" P10 commented eagerly. Another participant reported:

That was probably the most helpful part of the workshops. The mock grad school interviews were where we learned to anticipate questions that would be asked during the interviews. We learned a lot about professionalism in the seminars. They modeled behavior based on how to act and what to do. It really helped me when I actually had my grad school entrance interview.

Participants also had the opportunity to interact with former McNair students and faculty members when they attended the McNair Panel discussions. These panels had a question/answer format in which both current and former participants were able to bring concerns or questions to the table. "During the discussions, we were able to come and share our stories. Mostly it was a time to get advice and information from people that had already been through the program and were professionals in their careers," shared one participant. P2 commented "this was a great networking tool because this panel was created and consisted of different professionals in different fields on campus and that was helpful to be able to talk to people like that." The participants were able to connect to the members on the McNair panel by being able to have discussions and being able to share relevant experiences. P6 and P8 shared their experiences about the panel. They both described it as "a good change of direction. It was not like we were the student and they were over us. We were equals at that table and all of our questions and remarks were relevant. They made me feel important." They also reported "I got really

insightful answers for my questions from members of the panel and I was able to kind of create a guideline for how I wanted to proceed as a college student."

<p style="text-align:center">*Financial Compensation*</p>

Another benefit of the McNair program was the financial support that was given to each student that participated. Participants received a stipend for participating in the program during the summer in the amount of $2500. For a lot of the participants, this was another leading factor for participating in the program. P2 contributed "I needed the financial assistance that it gave for the summer program" and these comments were shared by others as well. P4 stated "I was able to use that money to pay for some of my schooling while also giving a little to my mom to take care of things back at home." P9 also shared:

> My parents weren't able to send me lots and lots of money, I mean, like they tried to give me money, but they couldn't send me a lot of money, so the monthly stipend from the McNair program was extremely helpful to me and a lot of the other students. Like that was a major benefit of the program.

The financial contributions made by the McNair program helped to encourage and support participants that otherwise may not have had the opportunity to participate in the program. One participant shared that "if it had not been for the money, I probably would not have been able to participate. I would have been spending my summer working a part-time job to support myself."

Invisible Benefits

During the research process, participants began to describe benefits of the program that were unexpected but helpful nonetheless. Participants reported not expecting to make "such lasting relationships with those related to the McNair program" and "these experiences are

probably what I will remember the most because after the other components were finished they were done, but these relationships will last a long time." P10 described the benefits as "something that I really did not know that I would get or have but I am really glad that I did. I don't think that the program would have been successful without them." These benefits included the development of lasting social connections, advocating for other minority students, and the development of relationships with Demetria and other mentors.

<div align="center">*Social Connections*</div>

"They were transitioning and kind of feeling overwhelmed sometimes. So it was always helpful to be able to talk to them about what was going on and how to deal with it." Participants often saw the value of connecting with other participants in the program. They were able to talk to one another about issues related to school, family, and often personal situations. "I was able to talk to them about anything because it was like they understood" shared P3. These connections developed into a social system for some individuals who felt as if others didn't understand them and their experiences. P5 shared "it was nice to be able to talk to someone that was going through the same thing that I was and we all got close, and in fact, I still keep in contact with some of those people." Sharing a similar experience helped participants to feel comfortable enough to communicate with and rely on one another. During the McNair process, participants began to form a support system for each other and this system was heavily relied on by many. P9 shared, "when we were all doing our research and participating in the summer part of the program, we all knew that it was stressful, so we often talked about it to one another. That was very helpful." The development of that support system was seen as a benefit to most participants as a group of people they could go to for understanding and advice.

Eventually, the relationships became more about friendships and less about the McNair program. "I made friends during that time. I don't think of them as McNair students, but as students that I could go to and talk" reported P1. These feelings were similar to those shared by P6: "I still hang out with some of the people that I met. I keep up with what they are doing and I try to make sure that they know that I am here for them if they need me." Although the purpose of the McNair program was to promote networking among the students that participated, participants reported extending that component into something that was more meaningful and longer-lasting.

Advocacy for Minority Students

Another invisible benefit that came from the program was the experience of being able to advocate for other minority students. Participants reported "wishing that the McNair program could accept more students. There are millions of other minority students, especially African Americans that could really benefit from this program." P7 also commented, "opportunities like this really don't exist on a larger scale. We need more resources like this that other students can take advantage of. I think that would go a long way if there were more programs that did what the McNair program does." Because the program only admits 19 students each year, several participants commented on the need to develop more programs or expand the number of students accepted in the McNair program. "The majority of minority students from where I'm from didn't have the first clue about how to get into college and where to go from there and personally I think that is sad. We need more resources." Participants reported feeling "unable to help others that didn't have this opportunity. If it had not been for the McNair program, I may not have gone to college. So imagine the minority students that actually don't have this program."

The need to advocate for others inspired some participants to want to make changes in terms of what programs were available. "I wish that I could help and do more. Maybe when I graduate and get my degree I will look back and start a similar program. I know that it takes a lot of work, but I think I can do it" shared P1. The need to help others and to give back to the community "is something that I have always wanted to do. This program helped me so I want to help someone else." Other participants shared "it would be helpful to have other programs that got students used to going to college and used to seeing what was out there" and "where I'm from, these programs hardly exist, but we need to be able to help students and assist them as professors and professionals."

Relationships with Program Mentors and Demetria

One component of the McNair program was the networking element. Several students commented on the usefulness of this experience and how it evolved into something much more meaningful. During their interactions with the program, students were assigned mentors and they often talked about academic and non-academic issues that concerned them. However, during the process of the program, participants began to feel as if the relationship with the mentor was much more. "She was more than my mentor, she was my friend. Like when she needed to be, she was my advisor and mentor, but eventually, as I graduated and entered a graduate program, she became more like a friend." Other participants shared similar experiences stating "my mentor and I could talk about more than just the program or my grades. We could talk about everything" and "I admired him and he often gave advice about what I should do in certain situations and like, it was just really helpful to have someone like that around. He still emails me to check on me." The bond that was developed with the mentor and the mentee served as an additional support system for the mentees that they could use when necessary. P4

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reported "I felt like I could talk to her when I needed to. Not about regular stuff, but about stuff that mattered to me. She was really helpful and she made herself available."

Participants made sure to distinguish between the mentor's role as part of the program and something that was separate, and personal. "I know that she was my mentor, but now that I am in my graduate program, we actually send articles and stuff like that back and forth and try to be a sounding board for one another." P6 also shared that "she helped me through a lot of stuff. Like how to deal with my family and it was like, she took off her mentor hat, and put on her counselor or friend hat. That was most helpful." These relationships provided a safe place that participants could go to vent or share personal information that may not otherwise have been shared. During the development of these mentor/mentee relationships, participants eventually became comfortable enough to share information with the mentor that was unrelated to the McNair program. This process helped participants to feel more comfortable asking for help and opening up. "It took me a while to really learn how to talk to him, but when I did, I starting feeling as if I was growing and maturing. He really helped me to look at things in a different way."

Summary

In this theme, *McNair Program,* participants discussed the different aspects and components of the program. The participants also went into detail about the program, identifying two different elements: brochure components (opportunities that the participants expected to receive such as research, mentoring, and networking experience) and invisible benefits (advantages that were unexpected but developed based on the relationships and connections that were made between participants, faculty, and other professionals).

Postbaccalaureate Experiences

> ### *McNair at the Graduate Level*

Although the central research question asked participants to describe their experience in the McNair program, some participants also volunteered information about their experiences as graduate students in their current programs. In a sense, participants began to reflect on their experiences in the McNair program at the bachelor's level, and talk about how they have taken what they gained from the program and applied it to their lives at the graduate level. P7 reported "sometimes I feel like the McNair program was one of the main reasons I am successful as a graduate student" while P4 also shared "I probably would not have made it into graduate school without those experiences and it really made it easier for me to be here."

Other participants also shared briefly how they have taken their experiences with the different components of the McNair program and applied them to graduate school. "I recognize now, because of my relationship with my mentor in the McNair program, how important it is to develop working relationships, both socially, and professionally, while in grad school." Another participant commented on the research component of the McNair program in relation to his standing in his current program, stating that as a student in the McNair program, he was able to "do research, so that by the time I applied to grad school, I was familiar with the research process and I think this is what set me apart from the other applicants and is how I got accepted." Although one aspect of the McNair program was completed (participating in the McNair program at the undergraduate level), and the next level was to be anticipated, the participants described during the interview how helpful the program was and how significant the components were to their success as first-generation, low-income, minority college students.

> ### *Summary*

In this theme, *McNair at the Graduate Level,* participants discussed their current academic programs and how their undergraduate McNair experiences have influenced their graduate student experiences. This theme also explores how participants are applying what they learned in the McNair program to the graduate school process.

Summary of Themes

The examination of the interview transcripts using phenomenological methodology revealed common themes that held meaning across participants. In speaking with students who had participated in the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program and who had recently completed at degree at the undergraduate level, the researcher identified nine themes: (1) Academic Preparations; (2) Academic Inadequateness; (3) Influence of Family, Church, and Community Systems; (4) Family Interactions; (5) Self-Made Support Systems; (6) Recognition of a Lack of Preparation; (7) Introduction to the McNair Program; (8) McNair Program Experiences; and (8) McNair at the Graduate Level.

As participants described their experiences as McNair students during the interviews, they typically described experiences that spanned from childhood to high school through graduate school. They shared experiences and perceptions that included the motivational and influential forces that encouraged the completion of a college degree. The participants also shared the challenges and obstacles that were encountered on their academic journey as they tried to achieve their goals of completing college. These challenges ranged from lack of prioritizing, to learning to balance family, to becoming adjusted to the new experiences and environments. The participants described in detail the process of maturing and becoming independent and autonomous college students and adults, while also providing information as to how this process took place.

While learning to adjust to college and their surroundings, participants spoke at length about the resources that were available that made this process easier and much more enjoyable. Some of those resources include: advisors, support systems, and community service work. However, one of the most influential and effective resources was the McNair program. Participants actively described the program and the benefits and advantages that the program afforded them. Most of the participants described a significant amount of career, academic, professional, social, and personal benefits that came from the program. They also provided information as to how they were able to take the program with them wherever they went, including graduate school. In the next chapter, the themes that emerged from the interviews will be discussed in further detail. In addition, implications and recommendations for school administrators, school and community counselors, and McNair program directors will also be addressed.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter will provide a summary of this study, a discussion of the research findings, and the limitations of this study. This chapter will also include recommendations and suggestions for future research. A summary of this study will conclude this chapter.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of recent graduates who participated in the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program at a large four-year public institution in the Southeastern United States. To learn more from the perspectives of the participants, they were asked one central research question: Describe your experiences as a participant in the McNair program. Data was collected during research interviews that took place online via Skype. These interviews lasted approximately one hour.

The Assistant Director of the McNair Program sent out an invitation for participation to all McNair students who met the research qualifications: must be a recipient of a baccalaureate degree from SU within the 2010-2011 academic year and must have completed the McNair program and its required components at the undergraduate level while receiving the baccalaureate degree. Recipients of the e-mail were instructed to contact the researcher directly if they wished to participate or wanted to learn more about the study. After participants responded to the email and consent for participation was received, dates and times were set up

for the Skype interview.

This study utilized a phenomenological approach to gain a detailed and insightful description of the experiences of each participant as he or she provided self-reflection. This approach also sought to describe things as they really were and to understand the meanings and essences of the phenomenon, while not focusing on explanations or analysis. Thick descriptions about the participants' experiences in the McNair program emerged from the data that was collected. These descriptions emerged and took place along an academic timeline in which participants shared experiences that took place during specific times of their lives, such as Pre-College, College, McNair, and Postbaccalaureate Experiences. Nine themes emerged and were identified by the researcher as: Academic Preparedness, Academic Inadequateness, Influence of Family, Church, and Community Systems, Family Interactions, Self-Made Support Systems, Recognition of Lack of Preparation, Introduction to the McNair Program, McNair Program Experiences, and McNair at the Graduate Level. These themes were described in detail in the previous chapter.

Discussion

Participants in the study revealed nine major themes during their interviews and their descriptions of their experiences as McNair students. Participants felt comfortable reflecting about experiences other than the McNair Program and as a result, their experiences all seemed to have taken place along an academic timeline. These themes will now be discussed within the appropriate time periods.

Pre-College Experiences

Themes that were identified during the pre-college time period were: Academic Preparedness, Academic Inadequateness, and the Influence of Family, Church, and Community Systems. Participants reflected on their high school experiences and how these experiences

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helped to prepare or shape them for what to expect as future college students. Research has

addressed the importance of preparation at the high school level for college students. Ochberg

and Comeau (2001) listed high school preparation as one of the most important steps in order to

be successful as a college student. Participants in this study reflected on their high school

preparations and commented on the helpfulness of these experiences. They reported on the

usefulness of academic and personal interactions that took place between them and their teachers

and high school counselors. These participants shared that these "experiences were very helpful

because they helped me to see that I wanted to go to college and I was able to do that."

Participants also were able to communicate with these resources on both an academic and

personal level. These relationships help to create and support an idea that these students could

attend college and ultimately succeed. This message may or may not have been communicated

by other sources such as parents and community members, but was reinforced by academic

figures. Relationships maintained with teachers at the high school level helped these students to

learn more about what to expect when, not if, they attended college in terms of advanced college

material and tests. Students were also able to develop effective study habits and test-taking

skills.

Students also commented on the relationships they had with school counselors at their

high schools. School counselors were effective in advising students on which colleges to attend

based on the interests of the students, scholarships and financial aid sources that were available,

and experience in attending college while still in high school. Some participants shared how

they were able to take pre-college courses at nearby community colleges and universities. The

school counselors helped them to learn more about these opportunities. This study helped to

confirm the usefulness of having a person educate students about what opportunities are

available and how to take advantage of these opportunities. The participants reported feeling as if they were prepared for college based on these experiences.

Participants that reported a high level of involvement with teachers and school counselors also described more experiences that they were able to take advantage of prior to entering college. Some participants had previous experiences with research, mentoring, and academic adjustment prior to becoming participants in the McNair program. Participants reported taking part in research in conjunction with teachers as well as professors at nearby colleges. These experiences helped to prepare these students for college.

Although some students commented on the helpfulness of their relationships with teachers and school counselors, some students were deprived of this option. These students reported that the relationships with teacher and counselors outside of the academic environment were "nonexistent." These participants also commented on how it would have been useful to have these relationships and that "it seemed as if they were just trying to get through the day with us. They were not really concerned with us when we left their classroom or office." These participants further commented, "if that connection had been established, it may have been a lot more helpful if we could have had that. It may have influenced a lot of others to first finish high school, and then attend college." Without these relationships in place, these students felt as though they "didn't have a guide or a clue as to what to expect when we got to college. I didn't know about scholarships and applications and all that stuff." These participants experienced isolation and alienation when they entered college because of unclear expectations and a lack of prior knowledge.

Participants that reported a low level of involvement with teachers and school counselors also reported on the lack of information that was available to both them and their parents. "My

parents were not college graduates, so they didn't know. I just wish that there was a community

workshop or something like that in which parents could be educated about the college process."

These participants also commented on the role that teachers and school counselors could have

played in this process. "They could have been available to talk to parents and tell them about the

opportunities that were out there so students wouldn't have to graduate high school without

knowing how to interact with people in college." Educating parents as well as students at the

high school level was deemed as necessary in order for students and parents to "be on the same

page and know what to expect and how to adjust to the college environment."

These findings are consistent with research conducted on the experiences of FGLIMS

when entering college. Past research has noted that students within this population are more

likely to succeed in college when they have strong relationships with faculty and staff within the

high school (Nora, 1987). Participants that had previous experiences with college material, had

connections to members in the academic environment and those that had a family unit that

supported college endeavors were more likely to graduate high school, attend college, and to

complete college.

As Zalaquett (2006) found, the role of the family support system in the education and

success of FGLIMS is essential and often the leading source of support. The family system was

one of the most substantial and important systems for participants in this study. This system was

seen as supportive and helpful, although understanding about the college process may have been

seen as limited. "Although my mom didn't go to college, she was still excited that I was going.

She insisted that I take advantage of the opportunities that she was able to take advantage of."

The family system was also seen as a sounding board for some participants. They were able to

go to family members for advice in terms of their choice of college, majors, and other academic

decisions. With this support, despite not having relationships with teachers and school

counselors, participants felt motivated and encouraged to learn more about financial aid, college

careers, and college adjustment.

Participants reported relationships with community and church support systems as well as

family units. These relationships were deemed as important and necessary in order for students

to succeed in college. They reported feeling as though they "had the community on their backs

and this made me feel more like I could make it and really make something out of myself. This

was very important to me." These systems encouraged participants to enter college and succeed

as students. This support was communicated by "words of encouragement and other things like

money when I needed it while in college. A lot of people didn't want me to take a job because

they thought that it would interfere with my studies. They helped financially."   By having a

large support system in terms of family, community and church systems, these participants

reported feeling as if "adjustment to college and graduating was a little easier." These

relationships were critical in the success of these participants.

College Experiences

Themes that were identified during this time period were: Family Interactions, Self-Made

Support Systems, Recognition of a Lack of Preparation, and Introduction into the McNair

program. When participants began to become familiar with the college environment, they soon

faced the difficulties of transitioning from dependence on the family system to independence,

understanding the importance of the development of social connections, and the struggles of

adjusting to the college experience. Gandara (2002) noted how often students drop out of

college due to the difficulties of managing 'home-sickness,' making new friends and adjusting to

living life away from home. The participants in this study commented on these experiences and discussed the challenges they faced.

All participants shared the experience of transitioning from a child to an adult in terms of going off to college. One participant commented, "once you go off to college, you can never really go home again, because you will never ever be the same. Things will always be different." Another shared "it was really hard to look into my rearview mirror and see my parents standing there and waving back at me. I knew things were always going to be different, that I was going to be different." This transition often met with some resistance with the participants as well as their family members. As participants began to get used to being college students and making social connections, family members often felt as though they were being replaced and that the participants "didn't need them anymore." However, as the process went on, both participant and family system became used to the idea of the participant becoming more independent as a college student. Parents became more understanding of the times that the participant wanted to engage in an activity with a friend rather than attend a family event. Additionally, participants became more comfortable being independent and making decisions on their own. A participant described this as "a maturity process on both parts. The student has to learn to become more free and self-sufficient and the family has to let them and support them."

As participants began to become comfortable with the process of "breaking away from the family unit in order to complete college," they also described social connections that served as systems of support while in the college environment. Current research supports the need and desire of college students to engage in social relationships in order to adjust to and persist in the college environment (Ishiyama & Hopkins, 2003). Participants discussed how these relationships helped them to become "organized and on top of my game because I saw how my

friends were making good grades, and I knew that I needed to do that too." Another participant described his experiences with his social support systems as "sort of like replacing my family because with them, I had some people who I could talk to and hang out with." Participants in this study identified with the prior research and reported "feeling like I was lost until I found a group of people that I could relate to and hang out with. It made going to school and being away from home easier."

These relationships often served as sources of encouragement and academic support when participants felt "like I didn't have anywhere else to go and no one else to talk to. My friends were always there and they were less likely to judge me than my parents or friends from home." By having a group that offered support in terms of encouraging words and actions, participants were able to vent frustrations as well as "bounce ideas off of people without feeling stupid."

One universal experience shared by the participants was the process of adjustment. All participants experienced the difficulty of getting used to a new place, new academic material, and new people. They had to "re-learn how to fit in and what to do when I felt lonely." Although some participants discussed having pre-college experiences that were intended to help them prepare for college, nothing was able to prepare them for the entire unique experience. As one participant shared,

> I mean, we took classes at community colleges but like at the end of the day, we got to go home. Like we weren't students there. But when I got to college and because that college was located over 100 miles from home, there was no going home at the end of the day. It was easy at first, but over the course of a few weeks into the semester, I really became homesick.

This process of adjustment took place in several ways such as socially, academically, and personally. Although researchers have explored adjustment issues among college students, the unique experiences of students in this population had not been examined. Therefore, these insights shed light into the perspectives of FGLIMS as McNair participants. Participants reported on finding new social connections to relate to and often times, this was not an easy process. These students described this process as "tough because I was always academically inclined so I spent a lot of time studying. I didn't have a social life, so when I got to college, it wasn't different. It was really lonely without friends or whatever." Another participant shared, "when I was in high school, I did have a lot of friends but I went to a college that a lot of my friends didn't go to. I had to make new friends all over again and that was hard." By participating in campus organizations and getting to know students that they shared classes with, participants "started to feel a little more connected. Because at some point you just feel like an island and you want to feel involved." Another reported "feeling like I had to force myself to socialize with others, which has never been particularly easy for me. I just jumped into the social pool and started making friends."

Another way that participants had to learn to adjust was academically. Material that was presented during high school was either considered "less demanding and challenging" than the material that was presented in classrooms at the college level. Participants felt as though other students, particularly Caucasian students, "had an upper hand on me. It was like when we were in class and the professor would ask the class something and it seemed like they knew all of the answers and were better prepared than we were." Another participant shared, "I didn't have to study in school. I would show up to take the test and pass. It wasn't like that in college. College was hard. It may be easy to get into but it's hard to get out."

Some participants reflected on this academic adjustment experience from a different experience. Race, socioeconomic status, and geographic location were all believed to be the reasons material seemed new and difficulty at the college level. "It's because of the schools that we probably came from. Poor schools, in poor counties, with poor black people may not receive as much funding as other schools. Therefore, we can't afford textbooks and other material. Therefore, we're behind." Another participant agreed, "because most black schools in the state are failing, they may not receive funding. Those students at those schools start out already behind."

Participants also had to get used to adjusting to their lives as young adults. With this transition came important responsibilities such as scheduling study sessions "without being told to go study by my mom," making sure to wake up and make it to class on time, learning to budget money wisely, and learning to balance a social life with school work. Participants learned how to be more self-reliant from early experiences with their family members and by trial and error. One participant shared,

> My mom always taught me how to be responsible so even though I stumbled when I got to college. I was able to correct things. I started going to study groups and tutors if I needed help and then I got a work-study job to make a little money. I was really trying to be as responsible as possible because no one was going to do it for me.

Another participant shared similar experiences as she reported,

> I mean college really made me grow up. I had to learn how to manage my money, my time, and my school responsibilities and the only way I was able to do that was messing up. I had to mess up a little in order to really appreciate the opportunities that I had. I would miss class or whatever, and eventually, I just told myself that I had to get it

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together and straighten up. That's when I started to feel more like an adult and like I had

adjusted well.

Some participants even reported feeling "glad that I didn't have any expectations about

college. That let me enter into the environment without any preconceived notions, so what I

experienced was based on reality, not expectations." Also, "I was able to fail by myself and this

in turn helped me to develop self-discipline and guidelines for how I wanted to proceed in

college." As participants began to feel more comfortable with the process of self-regulation and

self-discipline, they noticed an increase in grades and an improved balance between the personal,

academic, and social areas in their lives.

McNair Program

The theme that was identified during the McNair program time period was the

experiences of the participants as they reflected on their involvement in the program. McNair

student interactions with different components of the program have been addressed by research

literature. Researchers have found that the services offered by the program are beneficial and

educational in nature, while also useful in helping students to become career professionals

(Ishiyama & Hopkins, 2003). Overall, participants in this study felt similar to participants in

other studies, as they reported positive experiences with the McNair program. Participants

reflected on their interactions with different services offered by the program, such as the research

component, networking, mentoring, financial assistance, workshop presentations, mock

interviews, GRE preparation courses, graduate school visits, and conference presentations. They

shared how:

Being in the McNair program and doing all of these types of things really helped me to

prepare for graduate school. When I entered my graduate program, I already had

experience with research and stuff like that and I appreciate the McNair program for helping me to be ready.

Participants also shared, "by participating in the research with the McNair program, I was able to be one step ahead of the competition when it came to entering graduate schools. I felt like I had the upper hand in that situation." This experience was recognized as useful at the graduate level in that "it showed professors that I was serious about my studies because I already had the experience."

Conducting research also helped participants to gain professional experience. They were able to conduct research with professors on campus, talk in depth about their research projects at conferences and universities, and gain a sense of the responsibilities and professionalism that came along with and was required by future graduate programs and faculty members. Participants talked at length about "having the feeling like you are among the elite when it came to your research topic. If you know what you are talking about, then that makes you look a lot more professional than if you don't." Another participant also shared, "that research experience really looks good on my resume. It shows that I take my education seriously and that I want to be recognized as a professional student, not just as someone who finished college."

Participants also reflected on the usefulness of the networking component of the program and how they were able to utilize this service to their advantage. This component was examined by Ishiyama (2007) and the researcher found that participants identified with the professional aspect of being able to connect with others. Participants in this study seemed about to recognize both the professional and social benefits of the networking components. They were able to network at different levels, including students participating in the McNair program, those that participated in the program but had gone on to further their education at other universities,

McNair faculty members, and professionals at conferences. Students that participated in the program together created connections that those students were able to rely on for support when needed. They reported feelings of "belonging to a group of people that I could talk to and relate to. Not a lot of people can say they had that experience." "It was nice having students around that you could hang out with if you needed to. I still keep in contact with some of those people even today." These connections helped students to become more familiar with the process of networking and encouraged students to become involved in other areas on campus.

Through the McNair panel, which involves students in the program meeting with former participants, McNair staff, and faculty members, participants were able to network and learn more about life after undergraduate school. No current research exists that describes participants' reflections on their experiences, but participants in this program seemed to find this component extremely useful. They commented, "it was helpful from a professional perspective because it allowed me to get to know people. I would be able call up people for references and stuff, so I thought that this was really helpful." Also, "it was just nice to meet up with people and to be able to ask questions because they had experienced something and they felt like sharing it with me." These experiences helped participants to recognize the importance of connecting with others on a professional level and maintaining these relationships. These recognitions were supported by past research as literature suggests, "in order for students to become familiar with what is considered professional and successful, it is important that they become connected to individuals that are considered so" (Mahoney, 1998).

Participants shared about their experiences with the mentoring component of the program and how their participation in the mentor/ mentee relationship influenced them in their academic endeavors. Past research shows that by having students develop a mentor relationship with a

faculty member on campus, this communicates to the student the importance of college, provides

students with sound advice and information, and provides a resource for students that they can

use for support (Parker, 2003). Participants in this study shared, "I just became really close to

my mentor because she was always there to help me and to talk to me about stuff." Other

participants also shared, "I was able to talk to her about anything and that included stuff that was

related to school and personal issues" and "He was available more than other people. He was

available for me more than my own professors. I could ask advice or he would tell me about

grad school opportunities and how to take advantage." These connections that were developed

during the McNair program are still in place today as participants have moved on to graduate

programs.

Mentoring relationships also educated participants on how to interact as mentors

themselves with their mentees. Some participants shared their experiences as mentors at

community service programs like Leap Frog or the Boys and Girls Club of America. As

volunteers at these organizations, some participants mentored children in their roles as

volunteers. "I was able to learn how to effectively interact with my mentee based on the way my

McNair mentor interacted with me. I thought this was helpful because just like I was helping

somebody, someone else was helping me." Others shared that "I really didn't know what I was

doing as a volunteer, but I started to mentor students based on my experiences with the program"

and "it taught me helpful and unhelpful methods of interactions, in which I applied them to

program I was working in."

The financial responsibility and freedom among students in this population had yet to be

explored by past research. However, when addressing financial issues among other college

students, Titus (2006) found that lack of income was one of the major reasons some students fail

to finish college. Participants in this study discussed the importance and helpfulness of the financial assistance they received as students in the McNair program. This assistance served two roles in the experiences of the participants: students were able to receive financial compensation for their participation in the summer research program and they were able to learn more about budgeting and managing money. Most participants in this research had never been employed and most depended on their parents for financial support. However, when they began to receive financial assistance from the McNair program, they were able to gain first-hand experience with handling their own money. Participants shared "my family was always financially strapped, so when I found out that the program would give me a monthly stipend, I wanted to participate. That gave me my first chance to have and be over my own money." Another shared,

> I learned how to create and budget and how to stick to it. Although I had money from the program, I learned a lot about what it took to keep and save it. It was like the best of both worlds: getting college experience, and getting paid for that experience.

Participants described their experiences with other less recognized components of the McNair program such as the workshops, mock interviews, GRE prep courses, graduate school visits, and conference presentations. These elements were used to teach participants how to write resumes and personal statements, how to prepare for an interview at the graduate and career level, how to prepare for the GRE and also, what to expect at the graduate school level, and how to present at national conferences. Participants were able to "learn anything regarding what it takes to be successful as a graduate student. I took what I learned and went beyond my undergraduate program. I looked at how this would help me as a grad student." As stated by another participant, "these services really were useful at the graduate level."

Components offered by the McNair program are intended to increase degree retention, promote academic success, and to encourage students to further their educations at the graduate, and ultimately, the Ph.D. level. Participants commented on the effectiveness of this program and how it uses those components to promote academic achievement. However, other experiences stood out to participants as well and they were able to reflect on these experiences. Other experiences that were highlighted but were not necessarily included in the components of the McNair program were the practice of advocating for minority students while enrolled in the program, and the development of significant relationships with Demetria, the Assistant Director of the McNair program.

Most participants described the need for more resources and programs that are directed towards FGLIMS. Because the McNair program at this university only admits 19 students per year, participants felt as though "there should be something else for students who don't academically qualify for the program or who didn't get accepted. These students may just fall through the cracks." Another participant shared, "I just wish there was more to be done. I know that the program can only admit so many students, but for every student that gets into the program, five hundred or so don't." This advocacy on behalf of other FGLIMS is based on participants' experiences as members of this population themselves. "I know how hard it is to afford college and better yet, to stay in college. Minority students have a hard enough time getting into college, so when they do, something should be in place to keep them there."

Participants also commented on their experience with the hands-on approach used by the program. By using this approach, the program was able to encourage communication and effective, working relationships. Participants remarked,

Even though the components are in place, one of the most influential factors was the role

played by Demetria, the Assistant Director. Just because you are a McNair student does

not make you automatically successful, but with Demetria behind you, pushing you, and

supporting you, you are more likely to want and desire that success for yourself.

Another participant reported,

There was always an open line of communication between me, my mentor, and Demetria.

She stressed communication so if you had a problem or were facing a dilemma you could

always talk to her and she would help out. That's what I liked most about the program, I

didn't feel abandoned.

Although the participants identified several strengths and benefits associated with

participating in the McNair program, they also identified a weakness of the program. The

seminars that were conducted by the McNair staff were seen as "dated and irrelevant." Most

participants commented on how they would have liked to have had more experience with

seminars that incorporated the fields of study that they were going in and "not just on math and

science." One participant mentioned "they were interesting if they were based on your interests.

But if not, they were not as helpful."

Postbaccalaureate Experiences

During this time period, participants reflected on how they were able to apply what was

learned during the McNair program to their graduate careers. The theme that emerged during

this time was identified as McNair at the Graduate level, during which participants reported a

retrospective shift in perspective about the program. Although participants described how helpful

the program was, most were not able to recognize its true importance until after they began to

apply their experiences to their education endeavors (Bui, 2002). Participants commented on

how "I knew the program was helpful but it didn't really hit me until I made it to grad school. That's when it got really serious and the program really became useful."

Participants discussed how the program actually prepared them for graduate school. Although the individual components of the program were mentioned (e.g., research, mentoring, etc.), participants also shared about experiences that were not expected but were certainly appreciated. These "invisible benefits" included experiences such as "making close social connection to people in the program and those that had participated in the program and creating personal relationships with McNair staff. As stated by Ceja (2004), any effective program that hopes to help students academically must first begin to create effective and lasting connections between both participants and staff members. Participants in this study shared their relationships and how "if I were not able to talk to my mentor on a person-to-person, and not a student-to-teacher basis, then I probably would not have opened up as much." Other participants also shared "I became friends with a lot of people in the program and those connections helped me to make it through school."

Although the program seemed helpful to participants, some commented on the need for more support at the graduate level. Even though participants still maintained a relationship with their assigned mentors, most would have liked more components at the graduate level such as more research and conference presentation opportunities. As shared by one participant, "we had gotten used to having a close relationship with people in the program. But when everyone went to grad school, it was just kind of scattered." Another participant reported similar experiences: "what once was close is not gone. I can email or call my mentor, but we can't see each other or have lunch together. I think I needed more support in that way."

Participants shared about their postbaccalaureate experiences and ultimately about their perceived differences between undergraduate and graduate school. "I was able to see that in graduate school, there was little room for error. I wasn't gonna be able to make a C on a test, and get away with that. I was going to have to get serious." One participant reported "the bar is now being raised. It is time out for wasting time because now the stakes are higher." This transition in thought process, along with the components of the McNair program, helped students to adjust easier to graduate school than when they adjusted during undergraduate school. "I now felt like I had the necessary tools to succeed. Like I know that grad school is going to be harder and have a lot more complicated material, but the program helped me to learn how to prepare for that." Another participant comment, "I was taught study skills and time management, so I know now how to manage my school life with my personal and social life."

Limitations of the Study

The results of this study may not be generalizable to other populations or specific McNair programs. The research was conducted using a McNair program at one university. Although most programs are similar in nature and offer most of the same services such as research experiences, a mentoring relationship, and financial stipends, all programs operate to meet the needs of the students in that area. Therefore, the McNair program that was chosen for this study may be similar in structure to other McNair programs, but this does not guarantee the generalizability of the results. Another limitation of this study was that the results might not be generalizable to other FGLIMS. The students that participated in this study may identify as a FGLIMS, but this does not guarantee that the results of this study will be generalizable to other students in this group.

Another limitation of this study was the institution that was chosen. This academic institution is a predominantly white college/university with a minority student population of at least 20 %. Although this research explores the experiences of McNair students, the perspectives of these students may be different from those at other universities. Students that attend community colleges, trade schools, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), or colleges and universities that have a more balanced and equal ethnic student population makeup may report different experiences. Therefore, the results from the participants may not be representative of other McNair programs at other academic institutions.

Finally, the participants in this research were students who had completed an undergraduate degree and were enrolled in a graduate program. The themes that emerged during this research may only be applicable to students who identify as FGLIMS and McNair participants and who are at this stage in their academic career. These themes may change when addressing the experiences of students who are first entering the program and have not interacted with all of the components of the program as well as when addressing the experiences of students who did not finish college at the undergraduate level, did not go on to complete a graduate program, and who did or did not complete a Ph.D.

Implications

Examining the experiences of students who participated in the McNair program and who identify as FGLIMS has several implications for all McNair programs, the counseling field, for academic administrators, for parents of FGLIMS, as well as for students who identify as FGLIMS. It is important that those that are academically involved with FGLIMS learn as much as possible about the experiences of these students in order to promote educational aspirations (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

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Because the number of FGLIMS attending and completing college is disproportionally

low according to other students, it is important to gain a clearer understanding of the experiences

of these students and what they deem as important in order to complete college (U.S. Department

of Education, NCES, 2009). The students that participated in the current study all shared their

thoughts about the helpfulness and effectiveness of the McNair program while pursuing their

educational goals. Participants reported how each component of the program facilitated a desire

to be successful as a college graduate and to enter a professional career. This research showed

that the participants viewed the components of the program as desirable and useful. However,

researchers may be interested in continuing to monitor and explore the experiences of

participants at this stage in the program as well as at other stages. Some participants may have

different experiences with the several components offered by the program and in order to

continue to meet the needs of the students in this population, program directors may need to

make adjustments in the future.

This study's data revealed several areas worthy of attention within the field of counseling

and education. School and college counselors must address the academic, social, personal, and

emotional needs of students in this population and resources should be created and made

available that meet the needs of these students. These students have a unique set of experiences

and circumstances that should be recognized at both the high school and collegiate level.

Counselors and teachers should become more involved at the high school level in order to

interact with these students and to meet their needs. They must interact with FGLIMS on both

an academic and personal level in order to create and support a college-going identity.

More preparation by school counselors must be implemented in order for students in this

population to know what to expect and how to adjust when interacting within the college

environment. In order for students in this population to succeed in college, they must be made aware of career choices, college and university options, and scholarship/financial aid opportunities.

Additionally, the role of college counselors was also addressed. Mental health counselors and counselors on the college campus may need more experience and knowledge in dealing with students from these populations as these students have unique experiences. As well, more effort should be made by these counselors to reach out to students during their college careers. These relationships may help to foster and communicate the importance of academic success.

Because some participants reported a low level of academic preparedness for their college experiences, opportunities such as advanced placement and experience with research, should be promoted by teachers and other faculty members. Students who were able to take advantage of these experiences prior to college felt well prepared. Those who did not experienced a longer period of adjustment issues when beginning college. These advanced experiences may help to prepare FGLIMS at the high school level for expected experiences that may take place while enrolled in college.

Several participants commented on their pre-college expectations of the college process and how these expectations were not met in terms of being able to relate to faculty in the college environment. Participants noted the personal importance of having faculty members at college that "looked like them" ethnically. It was revealed that when students have some faculty members that are of the same race or culture, it was easier to develop relationships with these sources that fostered educational success (Oliver, 2010). Colleges and universities must make efforts to provide a diverse group of faculty and staff in order to meet the needs of these students.

Because first-generation college students are the first students in their immediate family to attend college, this process can often be difficult for both the student and the family members. Parents often struggle with a release of power and control and the idea of their child transitioning from a child to an adult. As well, students often struggle with this transition. This study revealed some of difficulties that come along with a first-generation student attending college. However, more research is needed on these difficulties and how they affect the student and the family system. In addition, programs at the high school and college levels aimed at educating and supporting the families of FGLIMS may be instrumental in easing the transition from high school to college, as well as the initial decision to pursue a college degree.

As stated by Oliver (2010), when students are given the opportunity at an early stage in life to learn the system, the discourse, and the expectations of school, they tend to have an advantage over those who do not. If these messages are not communicated early in life, then students within this population are sure to experience challenges and obstacles during their college experiences. Therefore, those in the field of education must take steps to create connections, relationships, and experiences that would provide students an opportunity to enter, adjust to, and complete college.

Recommendations for Future Research

The McNair program at this institution is distinctive and operates to meet the unique needs of the students in the surrounding areas. This program offers students experience with research, mentoring, conference attendances, workshops/seminars, financial aid, as well as preparation for the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). Although participants commented on the helpfulness of these components, as well as the other opportunities they took advantage of, there has been no prior research about this particular McNair program at this university. Therefore, further

research is needed to more fully explore the needs and experiences of these students as they interact with the program.

Specific areas of further inquiry include examining the experiences of McNair students that are participating at different levels in the program, such as those that are gaining summer research experience, conference experiences, experiences at the graduate level, and participant perceptions after degree completion at the graduate level. Such follow up will be helpful for the McNair program at this University as well as other programs that are modeled similar to this program and that serve participants that are comparable to the participants served by this particular program. This investigation may extend the experiences that emerged from this study and help the program to better meet the needs of its participants.

This study only included students that participated in the McNair program at the undergraduate level and had gone on to enroll in a graduate program. Future research is suggested to explore the experiences of McNair students that have completed the Ph.D. Because the ultimate goal of the program is to assist students in completing a degree at the doctoral level, more research is needed on the experiences of the students that actually persist to complete a degree. This research may be used to assist other students who identify as FGLIMS or who participate in McNair programs.

In this study, some participants reported a low degree of involvement with teachers and school counselors. Participants reported feeling as though these academic figures failed to initiate interactions and therefore, prepare them for what to expect in college. More research is needed to communicate the importance of faculty/student interactions in order for students to be successful in college, as well as developing programs and processes to accomplish this task.

Some participants also reported a lack of understanding from family members regarding the college experience. These feelings of lack of preparation and understanding for the college process left participants feeling lonely and isolated. More research is needed on how to effectively address the concerns of family members, especially parents.

One of the most important themes that emerged from this research is the value of developing of social connections and how participants began to adjust as college students. Participants shared their difficulties of learning how to adjust and developing their social network. Participants also commented on the usefulness of having resources in place that would help students to become connected socially. Future research about how to assist these students to increase social connections and to increase adjustment and success might improve the degree of becoming familiar with the college environment, adjusting to the college process, and therefore success as college students.

This research study examined students that identified as FGLIMS who participated in the McNair program. Their experiences were analyzed and significant themes emerged. However, these same themes may not be applicable to FGLIMS who had not participated in the McNair program. More research into the experiences of these students may reveal relevant themes and therefore, increase the likelihood of these students persisting in college and ultimately earning a college degree.

Finally, the researcher's literature review showed that several college retention theories have addressed the factors that influence college completion. However, these theories were all developed based on the experiences of students that attended predominantly White colleges and universities. Although participants in this study commented on the importance of adjustment, involvement, and interaction to be successful as college students, future research about how

these theories apply to FGLIMS and McNair participants may lead to more insight about how these students learn to adjust to college and go on to earn a college degree.

Summary

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of recent graduates who participated in the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program. Students who participated in this study also identified as first generation, low-income minority students. A review of the literature revealed that the experiences of FGLIMS had yet to be explored, and of the research that existed on McNair programs, only participants' interactions with certain components of the program had been addressed. This study was intended to examine participants' experiences in a general manner to learn more about the overall perspectives of these students. By learning more about these perspectives, researchers may learn more about factors that influence degree completion among this population, services and resources that need to be in place to better meet the needs of these students, and the level of involvement that is required of faculty and staff at the high school and collegiate level to encourage college degree completion of FGLIMS.

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological study to explore the experiences of McNair students at a large, four-year, public institution in the Southeastern United States.   This research approach was used to explore the descriptions of experiences, while not focusing on explanations or analysis. Participants were interviewed via Skype and data was collected. Nine themes emerged from the data: Academic Preparedness, Academic Inadequateness, Influence of Family, Church, and Community Systems, Family Interactions, Self-Made Support Systems, Recognition of Lack of Preparation, Introduction to the McNair Program, McNair Program Experiences, and McNair at the Graduate Level.

This research showed that experiences that took place prior to college were often influential in the process of college adjustment. Participants that reported having extensive academic pre-college experience (research, mentoring, and college courses) often felt a higher level of adjustment than participants who did not experience these opportunities. However, all participants still faced adjustment issues when entering college and faced the difficulties of transitioning from a high school student to a college student. Because of these adjustment issues, participants were able to benefit from the components offered by the McNair program, in both established program components (research, mentoring, and grad school visits) as well as the unexpected (development of social connections with other participants and long-lasting relationships with the Assistant Director and their mentors). With these experiences participants were able to excel as undergraduate and graduate students.

This research adds to the limited body of literature that exists on FGLIMS as a collective unit and the research on McNair students. However, more research is needed on these groups of students in order to effectively understand and support FGLIMS who attend and complete college and subsequently continue their education in graduate programs.

Conclusion

This chapter included a summary of the research study, a discussion of the research findings, and the identified limitations of this study. This chapter also included references to literature regarding FGLIMS and McNair participants as they related to this study. Recommendations for future research as well as implications for community and school counselors, academic administrators, as well as parents and students concluded this chapter.

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APPENDIX

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Title: An Exploratory Study of the Experiences of Recent Graduates Who Participated in

the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program

Investigator	Sponsor
Zaducka T. C. Thomas, M.Ed.	David Spruill, Ph.D.
Department of Leadership & Counselor Education	Department of Leadership & Counselor Education
120 Guyton Hall	103 Guyton Hall
The University of Mississippi	The University of Mississippi
(662) 915-7069	(662) 915-4995
ztthomas@olemiss.edu	dspruill@olemiss.edu

Description

You are being asked to participate in a study that will explore the experiences of students who participated in the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program. You will be asked to participate in an online interview via Skype. The researcher will pose a broad question that is intended to examine your experiences as a McNair participant. This process should take approximately an hour to an hour and a half. After the online interviews have been conducted, the researcher will go through the process of data analysis and will contact each research participant to ensure that the data is accurate and recognizable by each participant. All data will be confidential and no participants will be identified. We will explain the study to you and you may ask any questions about the study at any time.

Risks and Benefits

We do not think that there are any risks. You will have the opportunity to elaborate on your experiences as a participant in the McNair program. McNair students often enjoy reflecting on these experiences because it allows them the opportunity to reflect on past experiences and perceptions.

Cost and Payments

There is no cost for helping us with this study.

Confidentiality

We will not put your name on any of the recordings of the interviews. The only information that will be on the recording of the interview is the gender, ethnicity, and age of the participants. We do not believe that you can be identified from the interviews by anyone other than the principal researcher.

Right to Withdraw

You do not have to volunteer to participate in this study. If you start the study and you decide not to finish, simply tell Zaducka T. C. Thomas or Dr. David Spruill by email, by letter, or by telephone at the Department of Leadership and Counselor Education, 120 Guyton Hall, The University of Mississippi, University MS 38677, or 662-915-7069**.** Whether or not you choose to participate or to withdraw will not affect your standing with your McNair program, your school, or with the University.

IRB Approval

This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study fulfills the human research subject protections obligations required by state and federal law and University policies. If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a participant of research, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482.

If you have any questions, please contact Zaducka T. C. Thomas at the number listed above.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information and have been given a copy of this form. I have had an opportunity to ask questions, and I have received answers. As a result, I consent to participate in this study.

_____   _____

Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____

Signature of Investigator   Date

<div align="center">

VITA

ZADUCKA T. C. THOMAS

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University Counseling Center
The University of Mississippi
University, MS 38677
(662) 915-3874

EDUCATION
Master of Education, Leadership and Counselor Education, University of Mississippi**,**
May 2008.

Bachelor of Arts, Psychology, Delta State University, May 2004.

COUNSELING EXPERIENCE
Graduate Student Counselor, University Counseling Center, August 2008-Present.
Duties include providing university students, faculty, and staff with counseling services.
Duties also include conducting group therapy. These groups are the Early Intervention
Group, the Turning Point Group, and the Oasis Group, which are all substance abuse-
related groups. Duties also include assessing and providing counseling to clients that
have issues related to alcohol and drug abuse. Duties also include providing community
development programs, serving as a Triage counselor, and providing supervision to
Masters-level counseling students.

Graduate Student Counselor, Adolescent Offender Program, February 2009. Duties
include counseling adolescent individuals that had been sent to program by the court
system. These individuals would be placed in either a group or an individual counseling
session.

Crisis Team Member, University Counseling Center, August 2008- May 2012. Duties
include being assigned the Crisis Team Emergency Phone outside of the normal hours of
operation of the Counseling Center. Duties also include responding to any emergencies,
documenting calls, and providing the caller/ client with referrals to the Counseling Center
for further assistance.

Graduate Student Group Co-Leader, Counseling Education and Supervision Doctoral
Program, September 2008- November 2008. The group was led for 11 weeks and the
purpose of the group was to enhance and promote interpersonal learning among group
members. The purpose of the group was to also develop group counseling skills as a
group leader. The group consisted of first year Masters-level Counseling students.

Counseling Intern, Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, January 2008- May 2008. Duties included individual and group counseling for undergraduate students at the University of Mississippi. Duties also include providing and conducting weekly workshops to help students develop helpful study habits during their education.

Counseling Practicum Student, Academic Support Center, August 2007- December 2007. Duties included individual and group counseling for undergraduate students.

TEACHING AND SUPERVISION EXPERIENCE
Co-Teacher of Masters Level Courses: Multicultural Counseling (COUN 570), Issues and Ethics in Counseling (COUN 672), Organization, Administration, and Consultation in Community Counseling (COUN 685), Lifespan Development (COUN 601), Family Counseling (COUN 682), and Diagnostic Systems in Counseling (COUN 674).

Graduate Master's Student Supervisor, Leadership and Counselor Education, January 2009- May 2012. Duties include supervising Master's program students in practicum and internship. Duties also include watching sessions on tape and providing evaluation and feedback to the students. Evaluation and feedback was provided at the mid-term point of the semester and at the end of the semester.

Academic Support Training Workshop Leader, Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, January 2008- Present. Duties include conducting bi-weekly training workshops to teach undergraduate students effective study skills. Duties also include planning and preparing educational material that will be covered during the training workshops.

WORK EXPERIENCE
Graduate Student Counselor, University Counseling Center, August 2008-Present. Duties include providing university students, faculty, and staff with counseling services. Duties also include conducting group therapy. These groups are Harm Reduction Group and Turning Point Group. Duties also include assessing and providing counseling to clients that have issues related to alcohol and drug abuse. Duties also include providing community development programs, performing front desk duties as needed, participating in professional development in-services geared towards educating counselors about different aspects of mental health, and participating in the hiring and interview process for potentially incoming counselors.

Summer Director of Camp Rising Stars, Water Valley, MS, May 2009-August 2009, Duties included performing as director of the summer camp program, providing daily activities for the youth participating in the summer program, organizing the weekly theme for all activities, contacting speakers for the weekly youth seminars, supervising 8 youth counselors that worked in the program, supervising the youth that traveled to different trips and locations on a weekly basis, and performing administrative duties such as preparing timesheets, sign-in sheets, and weekly meetings among the youth counselors.

Science Library Assistant, Thad Cochran Research Center, October 2006- August 2008. Duties include assisting users with library research and finding materials. Duties also include checking in/out materials to patrons, organizing and maintaining journals, books, and online subscriptions, and providing reference, circulation, reserve, photocopy, and bibliographic instruction and assistance.

Resident Hall Director, Department of Residence Life, University of Southern Mississippi, July 2005- May 2006. Duties included coordinating administrative procedures within the dormitory. Duties also included developing hall community programs conducive to learning, providing counseling to students in cases of emergencies, and supervising the resident assistants and desk assistants on staff.

Activity Assistant, Oasis Health and Rehabilitation Center, (Formerly the Yazoo City Health and Rehabilitation Center), December 2004- August 2005. Duties included assisting residents to and from activities, providing mental, physical, and social activities for the residents of the facility, providing and maintaining documentation of all residents' behaviors at the facility, and providing one on one interaction with residents that were not capable of attending activities.

Desk Assistant, Department of Residence Life, Delta State University, August 2001- May 2004. Duties included greeting visitors, checking in guests during visitation hours, making announcements, answering the telephone, and performing general desk duties.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE
Dissertation Research, University of Mississippi, In Progress. An Exploratory Study of the Experiences of Recent Graduates Whom Participated in the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program. Dr. David Spruill.

Graduate Research, University of Mississippi, In Progress. Influences of Parental Patterns of Relating, History of Child Abuse, and Dissociative Experiences in a Prison Population: Implications for Rehabilitation and Recidivism. Dr. Marilyn Snow.

Special Research Interest Group (SRIG), University of Mississippi, January 2009- August 2010. SRIG was comprised of a group of Masters-level and Doctoral-level students, along with a faculty member, that met weekly to discuss future research interests, progress, and presentations. The SRIG group collectively presented at the International Interdisciplinary Conference on Clinical Supervision (IICCS) in June 2009 and the Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (SACES) conference in October 2010.

Undergraduate Research, Delta State University, February 2004. The Effects of Race and Dress on Altruistic Behavior in a University Population. Dr. Scott Hutchens.

Undergraduate Research, Delta State University, March 2004. Obesity and Predicting Factors on a College Campus Utilizing a Lifestyle Survey Approach. Dr. James Reid.

PUBLICATIONS
Sommer, C. A., Kholomeydik, N., Meacham, P., Thomas, Z. T., Bryant, M., & Derrick, E. C. (in press). The Supervisee with a Thousand Faces: Using Stories to Enhance Supervision. *Journal of Poetry Therapy, 25* (3).

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS
October 2010. First Presenter, "Films in Supervision: A Creative Process for Supervisee Reflection". Presentation made at the Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision conference, University of Mississippi.

November 2009. "Narrative Approaches to Counseling and Supervision". Presentation made at the Mississippi Counseling Association conference, University of Mississippi.

June 2009. First Presenter, "The Supervisee with a Thousand Faces: Using Stories to Enhance Supervision". Presentation made at the International Interdisciplinary Clinical Supervision Conference, University of Mississippi.

March 2004. First Presenter, "The Effects of Race and Dress on Altruistic Behavior in a University Population". Presentation made at the Mid-South Psychology Conference, Delta State University.

WORKSHOPS/ CERTIFICATIONS/ PRESENTATIONS
March 2012. Eating Disorder Treatment Conference. The purpose of this conference was to learn more about eating disorder behaviors and treatment techniques.

September 2010. Substance Abuse: Education and Treatment Conference. The purpose of this conference was to learn more about the assessment and treatment of substance abuse issues.

November 2008. Substance Abuse Subtle Screening Inventory. The purpose of this workshop was to educate the attendees about administration, scoring, and clinical interpretation of the SASSI.

November 2008. Seminar on Motivational Interviewing: Overcoming Client Resistance to Change. The purpose of this workshop was to educate attendees about motivational interviewing in the clinical setting.

September 2008. Presented substance abuse information and facts to residents' dorm. This presentation also included providing the residents of the dorm with substance abuse services available at the University Counseling Center.

ACADEMIC AND COMMUNITY SERVICE
Department of Leadership and Counselor Education, Doctoral Student Interviewer of potential doctoral students, January 2009- May 2012. Duties included participating in the interview process of potential doctoral students by being present during the interviews,

asking each applicant a set list of questions, and helping to rate each applicant for potential success in the doctoral program.

Department of Leadership and Counselor Education, Doctoral Student Interviewer of potential masters students, March 2009- May 2012.   Duties included participating in the interview process of potential masters students by being present during the interviews, asking each applicant a set list of questions, and helping to rate each applicant for potential success in the masters program.

Family Crisis Services, Administrative/ Clerical Volunteer, June 2008. Duties included cleaning and stocking the office, stuffing envelopes that were mailed to community residents, and answering phones and taking messages when needed.

Oasis Health and Rehabilitation Center of Yazoo, (Formerly the Yazoo City Health and Rehabilitation Center), Activities Volunteer, 2006-2008. Duties included volunteering during weekends or special holidays to pass out treats and holiday cards to each resident as well as spending time with residents.

Region-8 Mental Health Services, Children's Day Treatment volunteer, May 2004- August 2004. Duties included shadowing the Behavior Specialist on staff during classroom activities, helping to prepare the Children's Day Room before and after class, and developing and participating in classroom activities with the youth in the class.

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS
American Mental Health Counselors Association 2008- Present
American Counseling Association 2007- Present
Mississippi Counseling Association 2007-Present
Mid-Mississippi Counseling Association 2007-Present

RESEARCH INTERESTS
Student retention and degree completion among college students
Academic experiences of first-generation, low-income, minority students
Substance and Drug Abuse among the university populations
Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder and its effects on the lives of late adolescents
Issues among the aging population

HONORS AND HONORARY SOCIETIES
Omicron Delta Kappa- University of Mississippi Chapter, 2008
Gamma Beta Phi- University of Mississippi Chapter, 2008
Chi Sigma Iota- University of Mississippi Chapter, 2007
Phi Kappa Phi- University of Mississippi Chapter, 2007
Psi Chi, Delta State University, 2001