

University of Mississippi

eGrove

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

1-1-2021

THE PERCEPTIONS THAT UM FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS HAVE REGARDING THE IMPACT OF CAMPUS ENGAGEMENT ON THEIR SUCCESS AT THE INSTITUTION

Martin B. Fisher
University of Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd>

Recommended Citation

Fisher, Martin B., "THE PERCEPTIONS THAT UM FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS HAVE REGARDING THE IMPACT OF CAMPUS ENGAGEMENT ON THEIR SUCCESS AT THE INSTITUTION" (2021). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 2156.
<https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd/2156>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

THE PERCEPTIONS THAT UM FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS HAVE
REGARDING THE IMPACT OF CAMPUS ENGAGEMENT ON THEIR SUCCESS AT THE
INSTITUTION

Doctor of Education
Department of Higher Education
University of Mississippi

Martin Barrett Fisher

December 2021

Copyright © 2021 by Martin Barrett Fisher

All rights reserved

ABSTRACT

First-generation students are often underprepared for college and have lower persistence rates (Balemian & Feng, 2013), and they face a unique set of challenges in their transition to college that many of their peers do not (Pelco, Bell, & Lockeman, 2014). Consistent with national statistics, data obtained from UM's Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning indicate first-generation students at UM persist and graduate at lower rates than their peers whose parents have a bachelor's degree.

There are many reasons why first-generation students have lower success rates, and, for some students, a lack of engagement is one of them (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Tinto also links student engagement with persistence. "The more students are academically and socially engaged with other people on campus, especially with faculty and student peers, the more likely (other things equal) they will stay and graduate from college" (Tinto, 2012, p. 64).

This qualitative study focused on the perceptions that 19 first-generation students at the University of Mississippi have regarding the impact of campus engagement on their success at the institution. The three-part conceptual framework draws from the work of Banning and Strange's (2001) campus ecology theory, Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship, and Tinto's (1993) academic and social integration theory. Consideration of these theories allowed for a more effective study of student behavior and how those behaviors might impact certain outcomes.

The interviews sought to address the following research question: What are the perceptions of interview participants as it relates to campus engagement's impact on their success? A number of themes were identified: relationships are critical to success; membership in student organizations is a catalyst for success; and cohort-based learning communities provide critical support for student success. Additionally, barriers to campus engagement were found.

Recommendations for practice are provided, centering around enhancements in identification and support of first-generation students during pre-enrollment and throughout their time at the institution. A discussion of further research recommendations and limitations are also included.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank the University of Mississippi and the Office of Admissions. They have provided the opportunity to pursue my Doctor of Education degree while working a job that is fulfilling and matters deeply to me.

I want to thank Dr. George McClellan, my chair, for his constant support, teaching, and encouragement throughout this process. I have become a better scholar and practitioner because of his guidance. I also want to thank the members of my committee – Dr. Phillis George, Dr. Stephen Monroe, and Dr. Patrick Perry – for all that they have done for me.

None of this would have been possible without the steadfast support that I have received from my family, especially my wife, Stephanie. There is no question that this journey has required sacrifice, and I am forever grateful for their understanding and words of encouragement.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE	1
Introduction.....	1
Purposes of Higher Education.....	1
Benefits of Higher Education.....	3
First-Generation Students.....	5
Local Context and Professional Setting.....	7
Rising Costs and Rising Student Debt.....	10
Identification of the Problem of Practice.....	12
Positionality and Assumptions.....	13
CPED Principles.....	15
Conceptual Framework.....	16
Campus Ecology Theory.....	16
Self-Authorship.....	17
Academic and Social Integration.....	19
Literature Review.....	21
Defining First-Generation Students.....	22
Prior to College Enrollment.....	22
Transition to College.....	23
Success Rates.....	25
Experiences and Programming.....	26

Methodology.....	27
Participants and Recruitment.....	28
Interview Procedures.....	28
Analysis of Data.....	29
Research Questions.....	29
Institutional Review Board.....	29
Conclusion.....	30
CHAPTER TWO.....	31
Introduction to Presentation of Data.....	32
Personal Profiles.....	33
Theme One: Relationships are Critical to Success.....	40
Faculty.....	40
Staff.....	46
Peers.....	50
Theme Two: Membership in Student Organizations is a Catalyst for Success.....	52
Sense of Belonging.....	52
Cultural/Multi-Cultural Student Organizations.....	55
Connection to Academic Performance.....	57
Fraternity and Sorority Life.....	58
Theme Three: Cohort-based Learning Communities Provide Critical Support for Student Success.....	60

Barriers to Campus Engagement.....	61
Summary of Manuscript Two.....	62
CHAPTER THREE.....	63
Introduction to Recommendations for Practice.....	65
Identifying First-Generation Students.....	65
Clarify the Institutional Definition of First-Generation.....	66
Expand Definition to Include Transfer and Non-Traditional Students.....	66
Support for First-Generation Students.....	67
Pre-Enrollment.....	67
Currently Enrolled Students.....	74
Introduction to Recommendations for Research.....	76
Subpopulations Among UM First-Generation Students.....	76
Transfer Students.....	77
Non-Traditionally-Aged Students.....	77
Non-Residents.....	77
Covid-19’s Impact on Campus Engagement.....	78
Campus Engagement on UM’s Regional Campuses.....	78
Part-Time Learners.....	78
Limitations.....	79
Conclusion.....	80
REFERENCES.....	81
APPENDIX.....	89

CHAPTER ONE

Higher education has the potential to transform students' lives and impact society in many ways, and a considerable amount of research exists demonstrating the evidence for long-term positive effects of postsecondary education (McMahon, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Renn & Reason, 2013). The benefits that result from attending college and obtaining a degree have been a point of focus for many different populations; who should go to college and why they should attend is likely an endless debate that persists at varying levels among scholars, policymakers, and even the general public. Students and society can benefit from higher education in many different ways, but the costs of pursuing a college degree leave some critics to question higher education's value and the efficiency of its outcomes.

Purposes of Higher Education

When discussing student outcomes of college and the importance of higher education on society, it can be helpful to understand the differing views related to the purpose of education, which is often highly contested and deeply politicized. Labaree's (1997) threefold framework of the purposes of education provides context in this regard when considering the vast research that has been conducted on student outcomes.

The democratic equality approach to education emphasizes education is a public good, meaning society as a whole benefits from the education of the nation's people. This view asserts it is the obligation of institutions to prepare all of its students for

responsible and competent citizenry upon graduation. According to Labaree, “From the democratic equality approach to schooling, one argues that a democratic society cannot persist unless it prepares all of its young with equal care to take on the full responsibilities of citizenship in a competent manner” (1997, p. 42).

Labaree’s second approach to education is social efficiency. Like democratic equality, social efficiency proposes that education is a public good. Labaree suggests the following about the social efficiency approach to education:

our economic well-being depends on our ability to prepare the young to carry out useful economic roles with competence. The idea is that we all benefit from a healthy economy and from the contribution to such an economy made by the productivity of our fellow worker...society as a whole must see to it that we invest educationally in the productivity of the entire workforce. (1997, p. 42).

It is the aim of the social efficiency approach to produce a citizenry that is well educated and more prepared to meaningfully contribute to the workforce.

The third purpose for education that Labaree discusses is social mobility. Unlike the first two, this perspective suggests that education is primarily for personal gain:

The social mobility approach to schooling argues that education is a commodity, the only purpose of which is to provide individual students with a competitive advantage in the struggle for desirable social positions...This, then, is the perspective of the individual educational consumer, from which education is seen as a private good designed to prepare individuals for successful social competition for the more desirable market roles (Labaree, 1997, p. 42)

Given the substantive private and public benefits of partaking in higher education, it should not be surprising that total undergraduate enrollment has increased 28 percent from 2000 to 2016 to 16.9 million students, and it is projected to increase to 17.4 million students by 2027 (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2018). As the number of students enrolled is increasing, so is the racial and socioeconomic diversity (NCES, 2018). College campuses are continually diversifying and this is a trend that is expected to persist (Renn & Reason, 2013). Consequently, higher education has the potential to impact the lives of many different types of people.

Benefits of Higher Education

Some of the benefits of higher education are considered private; in other words, the individual who receives the education is the one who gains the value from it (McMahon, 2009). Cognitive development, intellectual skills, analytical competency, moral development, personal growth and change, and socioeconomic attainment are some of many potential private benefits (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Renn & Reason, 2013).

Career and economic impacts are commonly discussed as a positive outcome of higher education. Engle (2007) posits, “A college education is considered the key to achieving economic success and social mobility in American society” (p. 25). While some of higher education’s critics point to the rising costs when questioning a college degree’s value, data still supports the economic benefits of going to college. Renn and Reason (2013) recognize the private financial benefit in their discussion of student outcomes, asserting there is evidence that college impacts an individual’s lifetime earning potential and what jobs and careers are available to them, even for those who attend and do not graduate.

There is a measured difference in attendance and degree completion, though; Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) call it the *credential effect*. Their research indicates: “a bachelor’s degree (compared with a high school diploma) conferred about a 34 percentile point advantage in occupational status or prestige, a 20 to 40 percent advantage in earnings, and a private rate of return of between 9.3 and 10.9 percent” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 447). Hout and Janus (2011) more recently assert the lifetime earnings of a college graduate increase by 20 percent compared to high school graduates. Further, the earnings of individuals with only a high school diploma have seen no increase over the past thirty years, while the real income of college graduates has increased by more than 50% (McMahon, 2009).

While socioeconomic impacts like job attainment and earning potential are some of the first outcomes to be referenced by individuals outside the walls of academia, the benefits of college are not just market-related, and they are not all private. Quality of life, cognitive development, psychosocial change, changes in attitudes and values, and moral development are some of many outcomes that have been the focus of higher education research. These benefits certainly affect the college graduate themselves, but these benefits also spill over to others and can impact future generations (McMahon, 2009). College graduates are more likely to be involved in and contribute to their communities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Reduced crime, the promotion of democracy, and lower state welfare are just a few of the significant social benefits that can result from more higher education (McMahon, 2009). In contrast to the private benefits, these are typically referenced as *public* benefits.

Economic benefits from higher education are not solely private; they have greater societal impacts, as well. There are direct contributions to the economy such as national income growth (McMahon, 2009). There are spillover or residual effects too; for example, college graduates are

more likely to serve on governmental and civic boards, and they donate more money to non-profit and charitable organizations (McMahon, 2009).

This is far from a comprehensive overview of the benefits of college. Rather, it is acknowledgement of the importance of higher education to the American society and a brief summary of some of the ways research has demonstrated its significance. It is also necessary to recognize that every student is unique and each institutional context is different; therefore, the transformation as a result of higher education can vary across groups (Perna, 2005; Renn & Reason, 2013).

First-generation Students

First-generation students are one of those groups that have much to gain from higher education. Defining first-generation students is not a simple task, though. The definitions within the literature vary, and I have found that the definition even differs among departments on the University of Mississippi campus. One definition says these students' parents have no experience at a 4-year, degree-granting institution (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Another says the parents have no experience at any postsecondary institution (Chen, 2005). For the purposes of this report, the following definition will be used: first-generation students are individuals whose parents did not earn a bachelor's degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2009). This appears to be a commonly used definition in the literature. Further, data in this report that is provided from UM's Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning is premised on this definition.

As evidenced by the multiple definitions of first-generation students, it is difficult to put into this group of students into one category. For example, consider the identities of three first-generation students with whom I have worked. One is an African-American, male,

Mississippian; another is a Caucasian, female, non-resident; and a third is a Hispanic, male, first-generation American. This simple illustration demonstrates the intersectionality that occurs within the group – differences with race, socioeconomic, gender, etc. – which makes first-generation students a complex population to generalize. Acknowledging those complexities is essential, but it is as equally as important to examine the expansive research that has been done on first-generation students and the commonalities that arise. It is necessary to consider the intricacies and potential intersectionality that exists within the group but also the trends and data that exists in the literature.

Many first-generation students come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, thus their experiences within society would likely look very different from someone whose upbringing was in an affluent home (Balemian & Feng, 2013). Many first-generation students are persons of color or belong to another marginalized group (Balemian & Feng, 2013). The realities that marginalized people face in our current divisive society impact their experiences leading up to college, their college search process, their transition to a university community, and their undergraduate tenure. These factors and others can contribute to lower success rates among first-generation students.

Challenges. Researchers suggest the number of college bound first-generation students continues to increase each year, and they are often underprepared for college and have lower persistence rates (Balemian & Feng, 2013). First-generation students face a unique set of challenges in their transition to college that many of their peers do not (Pelco, Bell, & Lockeman, 2014). In many cases these students lack the capital – social, economic, cultural – that comes with being raised in a household with a parent or parents who hold a baccalaureate degree (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). The capital referenced in literature can be based on

hierarchical understandings of society and assume that persons of color lack social and cultural capital of the majority, while in reality they possess a different type of capital that can be known as *community cultural wealth* (Yosso, 2005).

Success rates. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 43% of first-generation students enrolled in postsecondary institutions left college without graduating over an 8-year longitudinal study (Chen, 2005). The national average for retention from first to second year students at 4-year public, traditional institutions is 73.4% (Martin, 2017). Retention and graduation rates are increasingly important to higher education decision-makers, especially for groups like first-generation students, who have lower success rates when compared to their peers.

The lower success rates for first-generation students can be attributed to a number of reasons, and one of them is that they are less likely to engage with campus (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). “Student engagement represents both the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices” (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). Many scholars have linked student engagement with persistence, and one suggests “The more students are academically and socially engaged with other people on campus, especially with faculty and student peers, the more likely (other things equal) they will stay and graduate from college” (Tinto, 2012, p. 64).

Local Context and Professional Setting

Like many other universities throughout the nation, the University of Mississippi (UM) struggles with these issues. According to data retrieved from UM’s Office of Institutional Research Effectiveness and Planning, 1,698 of the 15,125 first-time freshmen who are members

of the 2013-2016 freshman cohorts are first-generation college students. Demographically, these students are 62% female/38% male; 60% MS residents/40% non-residents; 36% minority/64% white. While the differences in average high school GPAs between entering first-generation students and all entering freshmen at UM are not statistically significant, the average ACT of the first-generation students is over one point lower for the first-generation freshmen. Like the national averages, the success rates are lower for first-generation students than their peers at UM. Retention rates are lower: while 93.8 percent of students return after the first semester, only 91.85 percent of first-generation students return; 85.43 percent of students returned for year two, but only 81.02 percent of first-generation students returned (UM IREP). Additionally, of the students who began with the 2013 freshman cohort, 52.301 percent have graduated, while only 40.33 percent of the first-generation students in that cohort have completed their degree.

Mississippi is a rural state that ranks near the bottom in most rankings regarding education or the economy. NCES publishes educational data for state's K-12 education in a National Assessment of Educational Progress report. Mississippi's scores fell below the national average in all 8 categories listed. Business Insider recently ranked states on general economic health using six different labor-market measures; Mississippi ranked 46th (Kiersz, 2018). Total expenditures for K-12 education are roughly one-third of the national average (NCES, 2018).

The University of Mississippi is a medium-sized, public institution that is located in Oxford, MS. UM has an undergraduate enrollment of nearly 20,000 with Mississippi residents making up roughly 60% of the student population. Its admissions policies allow open access to almost any Mississippian who is graduating from an in-state high school. The Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL), which is the Mississippi's governing board for public, 4-year institutions, has set the resident admissions standards to be the same for all eight of Mississippi's

public colleges and universities. Institutions have more autonomy regarding non-resident admissions. While the class ACT average was a 25.2 for entering freshmen in 2017, UM enrolled students with scores ranging from 16-36 (UM IREP). In addition to enrolling first year students, UM enrolls hundreds of transfer students each year from Mississippi's 20 community colleges. This adds to the diversity of the student population and further complicates the institution's efforts to educate students from various levels of college preparedness.

The University of Mississippi is in a unique position as the state's flagship institution to impact the state and the world through the education of first-generation students. Its institutional mission supports these efforts. UM's mission says the university "transforms lives, communities, and the world by providing opportunities for the people of Mississippi and beyond." Access is incredibly important when considering equity, social justice, and ethics in education, but the efforts must not stop there. University administrators want and need their institutions' students to persist and graduate.

Educating first-generation students is a critical part of educating Mississippi. UM faces a vexing set of challenges in that regard. The first is recruiting rural, first-generation Mississippians to attend UM. Nationally, only about half of students enroll in a college or university after high school if they come from a household with parents whose highest level of educational attainment is a high school diploma (Balemian & Feng, 2013). This is compounded in a rural state like Mississippi, as a lower percentage of rural students choose to pursue postsecondary education (Tieken, 2016). Considering more than one third of 5-17 year-olds in the United States are first-generation students, it is imperative that these students are educated and properly supported so that the another generation does not miss the opportunities afforded through higher education (Balemian & Feng, 2013). Every first-generation student that

graduates from college has the ability to impact their home community, directly or indirectly. Young family members (siblings, cousins, etc.) have an example to follow and will hopefully see that pursuing higher education is not only possible, but also beneficial. If these graduates move back to their communities, they will directly impact that local economy, and if they do not, they still impact the economy from a broad perspective.

Rising Costs and Rising Student Debt

Not only does society benefit from the education of first-generation students, but institutions do as well. Universities rely on the income from its students to operate. Tuition, federal aid, state grants, etc. are essential to the operating budgets and vitality of institutions of higher learning, regardless of its status as a private, public, profit, or non-profit. There are dozens of reasons for the continual rising costs of higher education, and critics do not agree on all of them, but one that public universities quickly point to is decreased state funding. This year alone, Mississippi's state government has cut higher education twice. At one time, state institutions such as UM were state-funded or state-supported. Many now are referring to UM and other similar institutions as state-assisted, as state funding levels are now on average between 10 and 15 percent of public university budgets (Webber & Boehmner, 2008).

A strong decrease in state funding, however, is not the only reason for rising costs. Education is a labor-intensive industry and has increased wages to keep pace with the economy and there are costly and unfunded, yet socially beneficial government regulations (Huber, 2014). Further, one of the most tangible reasons for increased costs is increased competition among institutions to provide the best amenities; new residence halls, extravagant workout facilities, state-of-the-art student union buildings, and much more have become an increased priority for

universities as they compete for more students. (Robinson, 2017). For all these reasons and many others, public universities, like UM, rely heavily on the dollars collected through tuition and fees.

The economic impacts of student success have larger implications beyond the individual institutional level. The reputation of the American higher education system and the future of many institutions are at stake. The increases in college costs have left many students and parents to question the worth of college. In fact, costs have been rising at a rate that far outpaces inflation; in the last twenty-five years, tuition and other fees have “climbed more than 440 percent” (Wood, 2011, p. 276). To add to the complexity of the financial crisis, collective student loan debt in the United States has exceeded \$1 trillion (Abel and Deitz, 2014). It increased at an alarming rate of 13.3 percent annually from 2005 to 2013 (Craig & Raisanen, 2014). Some scholars, like Peter Wood, suggest the higher education system might eventually crash like the mortgage business did in 2008. Wood states, “If enough people notice and consequently decide to not spend at comparable levels and to seek lower-priced alternatives the bubble will burst” (2011, p. 264). Institutions need its students to be successful.

Determining the most effective ways to aid its students in this success is one of institutions’ greatest challenges, increasingly so as student populations continue to diversify. In her discussion of first-generation students, one scholar states, “with nearly 70 percent of high school graduates enrolling in some form of higher education (National Center for Education Statistics 2009), the relevant questions are no longer simply whether students go to college, where they go, or whether they graduate. Instead, scholars must focus on stratifying processes that take place on college campuses” (Stuber, 2011, p. 119).

Identification of the Problem of Practice

Given the potential benefits (both private and public) to students from success in higher education, the challenges faced by first-generation students in being successful in higher education, and the role that engagement can play in supporting the success of first-generation students in higher education, this study focuses on the perceptions that UM first-generation college students have regarding the impact of campus engagement on their success at the institution.

Having identified the specific dimension of the problem of practice that is the focus of this study, I will now turn to my positionality relative to that problem. Discussion of the connection between my topic and the principles of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) will follow as will identification and description of the conceptual framework for the study. This paper will also include a review of relevant literature, methodology for the study, and a brief conclusion.

POSITIONALITY AND ASSUMPTIONS

My interest in first-generation students began when I was an admissions counselor for the University of Mississippi. In that role, I travelled to many areas of the country to recruit prospective students on the university's behalf, and one of my assigned territories was a portion of the Mississippi Delta. The Delta is a very rural region of the state that is greatly impacted by poverty. Many of the students who I worked with from the Delta were first-generation students. Many of them were poor and qualified for UM's need-based scholarships. In the public schools, students were almost exclusively students of color. I found the needs of these students and the questions they asked to be different from some of the other populations with whom I interacted (for example: the schools in the Atlanta suburbs). Application fee waivers, FAFSA, and how to

apply to college were common topics in my trips to the public schools of the Delta. Of course, all the students at these schools were not first-generation, but many of them were. It was in these interactions that I became interested in this population of students.

Admissions counselors spend many hours on the road between high schools, leaving lots of time to process experiences. I often found my thoughts focused on how I could impact those students whose parents did not go to college. Their stories stuck with me. I knew they often needed more support than their peers, but I was a young professional and only knew so much about how to help. My job was to recruit them to come to UM, but ultimately, I just wanted them to pursue higher education and know how to navigate that process. I learned a lot in those few years on the road, and some of those initial experiences in my first job in higher education still inform the work that I do today.

Today, I interact with and support first-generation students in many ways. My full-time position affords me many opportunities to serve students. My two primary responsibilities are to direct new student orientation for the university and also to oversee its campus visit programs. In addition, I advise two groups of student leaders – orientation leaders and ambassadors. These two groups are made up of over 100 student leaders from diverse backgrounds. First-generation students are members of both of these groups. I have also taught a first-year experience course for the past four years, and each semester, I have had numerous first-generation students in my section. My passion for supporting first-generation students has grown through the various interactions I have had with students and their families. I work with thousands of students and their families each year, and I feel fortunate that my work allows me to work with students in several phases of development – prospective students, new students, first-semester freshmen, and student leaders.

My belief in higher education as transformational is associated with my own experiences. I have personally benefitted from my college education and experience, and I have also seen its impact on my family as well. I grew up hearing about my parents' college experiences, and even spent a great deal of time on college campuses with them. Beyond my personal and familial experiences with higher education, my professional work has allowed me to witness transformation among hundreds of students with whom I have worked or taught. All of this informs my view of higher education's potential to impact students and society.

All of these interactions that I have mentioned inform my subjectivity and assumptions about first-generation students. My work experience leads me to believe there is a strong correlation between campus engagement and persistence, but I also know that on a campus with 20,000 undergraduate students, my perspective is limited. To that end, I also recognize that my assumptions about the demographics of first-generation students at UM may not always be accurate. Several generations of my family have graduated from college, so I do not have any personal experience as a first-generation student. However, my work experiences have provided many opportunities to interact with students from this population, and most of these students have been students of color and are most often from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Further, many of the first-generation students whom I have met must keep at least a part-time job to afford the costs of college. This often prevents them from engaging with campus as much as some of their peers. I know that my assumptions are influenced by the high schools I recruited during my time as an admissions counselor and by the students I have worked with on campus in my current role. Consequently, I often think of first-generation students at UM as having those characteristics, but the more students I meet, I am increasingly convinced that first-generation students come from many different backgrounds.

Just as I have a story about how I have come to have an interest in first-generation college students, each of these students has their own story. One of the many reasons I enjoy working in higher education is learning students' stories. My style of leadership and mentorship is relational. I seek to understand students' experiences so that I might better serve them. My philosophical approach to qualitative research is the same. The interpretive approach to qualitative research seeks to understand and make sense of the experiences of those individuals they are researching. Students are complex and have lived experiences that inform the way they act and the decisions they make. Listening to their stories and seeking to understand their experiences on campus – what organizations they joined, how many organizations they joined, the leadership roles held, etc. – can impact the persistence of future students. I also believe there are solutions. Programmatic interventions and improvements exist, and this research can inform those solutions.

CPED PRINCIPLES

This paper is written in partial fulfillment of the degree requirements for Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) with an emphasis in Higher Education. UM's School of Education is a member of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED), and accordingly, this dissertation in practice is framed with CPED's principles in mind. More specifically, CPED's first principle suggests addressing questions around equity, ethics, and social justice.

The topic of this paper naturally focuses on these issues. As previously noted, first-generation students are often members of marginalized groups. Many are racial minorities and come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Therefore, by supporting UM's first-generation students, this project is promoting the principles of equity, ethics, and social justice through

higher education. In addition to my topic being tied to these issues, I will be conducting this study in an ethical manner, as noted in detail in the methodology section.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study's conceptual framework utilizes the work of Banning and Strange's (2001) campus ecology theory, Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship, and Tinto's (1993) academic and social integration theory. Considering and drawing from the work of these scholars as a conceptual framework supports a more effective study of student behavior and how those behaviors might impact certain outcomes.

Campus Ecology Theory

Every college campus is different – administration, location, physical spaces, cultures, etc. – which creates unique campus climates. Renn and Patton (2010) defined campus climate as “the overall ethos or atmosphere of a college campus mediated by the extent individuals feel a sense of safety, belonging, engagement within the environment, and value as members of a community” (p. 248). Renn and Reason (2013) assert, “When considering campus environments it is critical to take into account the human-built, organizational, and natural elements that make up the milieu in which student learning and development occur” (p. 83).

One of the ways these elements can be considered together is through the perspective of campus ecology theory. Campus ecology “is the study of the relationship between the student and the campus environment” and as such, it “incorporates the influence of environments on students and students on environments” (Banning, 1978, p.4). Banning's presentation of campus ecology relied on six theoretical foundations –behavior-setting theory (Barker, 1968); subcultures (Walsh, 1978); personality types (Holland, 1966), and interactions (Moos, 1973, 1979; Pervin, 1967, 1968) (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Banning and Strange

(2001) integrated these six approaches and advocated “for campus design that promoted four goals: inclusion, safety, involvement, and community building” (Renn & Reason, 2013, p. 84).

By integrating these approaches Banning and Strange (2001) “attended to the natural and human-built environments of campus geography and architecture, peer and other group interactions, structural aspects of the organization (such as administration, policy, and campus culture), and the ways individuals perceive, or construct, their environments” (Evans, et al., 2010, p. 170-171). Applying a campus ecology perspective to understanding student behavior – whether it is in the classroom, a residence hall, or with a peer group – allows the researcher to consider both the psychosocial and the physical environment and how they might interact (Evans, et al., 2010).

Environments have a way of shaping people and causing them to behave in similar ways (Walsh, 1978). Physical spaces, such as residence halls, or other forms of programming can influence students’ participation in certain subcultures, but students also self-select into various environments based on values or interests. Evans, et al. (2010) suggest students “seek to maintain settings that they favor or find pleasant and try to change (or vacate) settings that they do not enjoy” (p. 168). These environments and students’ interactions within these dynamic systems can certainly impact student behavior (Moos, 1973, 1979). Therefore, the application of campus ecology theory can assist scholars and practitioners in understanding the success of students as they work to create and maintain environments that provide opportunities for learning and developmental outcomes.

Self-Authorship

A second approach to understanding the perceptions of UM’s first-generation students is through the application of Baxter Magolda’s (2001) theory of self-authorship. The term self-

authorship comes from Robert Kegan's theory of self-evolution (Renn & Reason, 2013). According to Baxter Magolda (2008), self-authorship is the "internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations" (p. 269). Through decades of research of college students (and their lives beyond college), Baxter Magolda "found evidence that her participants' epistemological development was intertwined with the development of their sense of self and relationships with others" (Evans, et al., 2010, p. 183).

Self-authorship theory focuses on three major questions: "How do I know? "Who am I?" and "How do I want to construct relationships with others?" (Evans, et al., 2010). Studying individuals' cognitive (intellectual and moral), intrapersonal (social), and interpersonal (psychosocial) dimensions, Baxter Magolda's research has focused on higher education's ability to assist students in moving toward self-authorship (Renn & Reason, 2013). She argues, "Higher education has a responsibility to help young adults make the transition from being shaped by society to shaping society in their role as leaders in society's future" (1999a, p. 630). "Authoring one's life may be an independent development, but it is not necessarily a solitary one. In the college context, students may benefit from support from advisers and mentors as they negotiate new ways of being in relationships" (Renn & Reason, 2013, p. 120). However, college environments do not always create the appropriate opportunities for development of self-authorship (Evans, et al., 2010).

The path to self-authorship, according to Baxter Magolda (2001) has four phases, and the three dimensions are intertwined in each of them. The first – following formulas – suggests "young adults follow the plans laid for them by external authorities...although they frame these formulas to sound as if they are their own ideas" (Evans, et al., 2010, p. 184). Second, the crossroads phase their initial plans might not work and it is time to establish their own plans to fit

their own interests or needs. Phase three is known as becoming the author of one's life; it is here that individuals gain "the ability to choose one's beliefs and stand up for them in the face of conflicting external viewpoints" (Evans, et al., 2010, p. 186). In the last phase of self-authorship, individuals have established a "solidified and comprehensive system of belief" (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 155). "Not every college student will achieve this transition, but for those who do, colleges and universities can offer curricular and cocurricular opportunities to explore and enact internal foundations across academic, professional, and social domains" (Renn & Reason, 2013, p. 121).

Baxter Magolda has followed the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development of young adults since they began college in the 1980s. This decades-long, longitudinal study offers an effective framework for which to understand college student development. Further, it provides an applicable lens through which to study students' perceptions of their own "meaning-making" experiences.

Academic and Social Integration

Tinto's theory of academic and social integration (1993) is a third portion of the framework that can support the effective study of UM's first generation students' success. Tinto has spent decades studying student departure – the reasons why some students persist and others depart from college. As already mentioned, student success can be understood and defined in a myriad of ways; persistence toward graduation is an outcome that is a form of student success. Like many researchers who have studied persistence, Tinto's work assumes that students enter with different aspirations and goals, characteristics, etc. (Renn & Reason, 2013). "Tinto assumed that students' precollege characteristics directly affect their likelihood of persisting, as well as

indirectly through their initial goal and institutional commitments” (Renn & Reason, 2013, 2013, p. 178).

Integration to campus, social isolation, finances, and lack of involvement are just a few of the reasons Tinto lists and discusses as possible factors for individual persistence or departure, but “not all persons are identical, nor are all institutions alike in their structure and student bodies” (1993, p. 82). Tinto’s theory suggests students participate in a continual, interactive engagement with their institutions as they integrate to campus cultures. Further, he asserts students are simultaneously assessing their academic and social achievement as they persist. In a broader sense, Tinto points to intention (goals of individual action) and commitment (motivation, drive, or effort) as the two attributes that are underlying roots for departure (1993, pp. 27-32).

Colleges and universities “are made up of both academic and social systems, each with its own characteristic formal and informal structure and set of student, staff, and faculty communities” (Tinto, 1993, p. 106). The separation and transition from culture to culture is what can ultimately lead some students to persist and others to depart from college. This transition is not just an academic one, though. Tinto believes students are continually assessing both their academic and social integration.

Renn and Reason (2013) explain Tinto’s social integration as “interactions with peers, [students’] sense of fit within the student culture of an institution, and their engagement with formal student organizations” (p. 178). Academic integration then is “marked by feedback from faculty members on academic performance and the students’ comfort when interacting with faculty members about academic issues” (Renn & Reason, 2013, p. 178). Tinto claims, “The more students are academically and socially engaged with other people on campus, especially with faculty and student peers, the more likely (other things equal) they will stay and graduate

from college” (2012, p. 64). Academic and social integration is not just a student issue, though. According to Tinto, institutions play a role in this process as well. He asserts, “An institution’s capacity to retain students is directly related to its ability to reach out and make contact with students and integrate them into the social and intellectual fabric of institutional life” (1993, p. 204).

“Theories provide an important and necessary lens through which...to think about how to interpret individuals, environments, and organizations” (Jones & Abes, 2011, p. 161).

Operationalizing the work of Banning and Strange’s (2001) campus ecology theory, Baxter Magolda’s (2001) theory of self-authorship, and Tinto’s (1993) integration framework is a critical step in this study’s pursuit of understanding first-generation students at UM. Considering the campus ecology, students’ self-authorship, and their academic and social integration provides a well-rounded framework through which to critically ask questions, listen, and formulate appropriate responses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

First-generation students are considered to be a sizable part of the college population (Davis, 2010). Though, without a consistent definition, determining their participation rates has proven to be challenging. Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) indicated 43.4 percent of first-year college students were first-generation students. Choy (2001) used a different calculation that suggested the percentage was even higher. Balemian and Feng’s (2013) proposal that more than one-third of 5-17 year-olds in the United States are first-generation students indicate this student population will continue to be a significant portion of college campuses for years to come.

Defining First-Generation Students

The multiple definitions for first-generation students that exist in the literature have already been discussed in this report. This study relies on the following definition: first-generation students are individuals whose parents did not earn a bachelor's degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The complexity and diversity of this group of students make it a difficult population to generalize. However, much research has been conducted that provides an understanding of commonalities that exist among first-generation students.

Demographically, first-generation students are “disproportionately overrepresented in the most disadvantaged groups relative to participation in higher education” (Engle, 2007, p. 25). They are more likely to come from low-income families (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001; Strand, 2013). Additionally, many first-generation college students are persons of color or belong to another marginalized group (Balemian & Feng, 2013). They are also more likely to be female, older and have dependent children (Engle, 2007). “All of these characteristics are independently associated with lower rates of college attendance and degree attainment, they are all interrelated, and they intersect with first-generation status to limit postsecondary opportunities and outcomes” (Engle, 2007, p. 25).

Prior to College Enrollment

The experiences of first-generation students are often different than their peers whose parents have earned a college degree (Renn and Reason, 2013; Balemian & Feng, 2013). Not having the privilege to gain from their parents' experiences puts these students at a distinct disadvantage (NCES, 2000). These differences begin well before students enroll in college. First-generation students are often less academically prepared (Choy, 2001; Strand, 2013). They are

less likely to take certain “gateway” courses associated with college enrollment (NCES, 2000). Scholars also suggest that first-generation students “report lower educational expectations than their peers as early as 8th grade” (Choy, 2001, p. xxiv). In general, these students often lack the same amount of support as many of their peers (Strand, 2013). For example, the likelihood of first-generation students’ parents will attend information or financial aid sessions or visit college campuses is less as compared to parents who have a college degree (Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007). All students are unique, but research suggests first-generation students are often at a disadvantage because of their parents’ lack of experience or context:

The weight of evidence...indicates, compared to their peers, first-generation college students tend to be at a distinct disadvantage with respect to basic knowledge about postsecondary education, level of family income and support, educational degree expectations and plans, and academic preparation in high school. (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004, p. 250)

Consequently, “only about half (53 percent) of first-generation students expect to earn a bachelor’s degree compared to nearly 90 percent of students whose parents have earned a college degree” (Engle, 2007, p. 29).

Transition to College

In his evaluation of initiatives and support programs designed specifically for first-generation students at 50 colleges and universities, Strand (2013) found that connection, preparation, and money summarize many of the distinctive challenges faced by these students. Much of this is impacted by the transition to college, which is a process that can be challenging for many students. Without parents who understand the complexities or resources required to

successfully navigate a college campus, first-generation students can lack the preparation for the actions or habits that are important for early success. Therefore, this transitional process is especially challenging for first-generation students (Engle, 2007; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Martin, 2017; Pacarella, et al., 2004). “Not only do first-generation students confront all the anxieties, dislocations, and difficulties of any college student, their experiences often involve substantial cultural as well as social and academic transitions” (Pascarella, et al., 2004).

The lack of academic preparation leaves first-generation students to be more likely to need remedial coursework, which also adds to the uniqueness of their early college experiences (Engle, 2007). They are also “less likely to take college courses in academic areas such as mathematics, science, and computer science and more likely to focus on vocational/technical fields” (NCES, 2005, p. v-vi). The initial college experiences are very important to students’ persistence; Active help seeking, managing free time, underestimating academic rigor, and early diligence are critical to students’ success (Morales, 2011). “While students whose parents have a college education tend to experience ‘college as a continuation’ of their academic and social experiences in high school, going to college often constitutes a ‘disjunction’ in the lives of first-generation students and their families” (Engle, 2007, p. 33). Defrietas and Rinn (2013) suggest “it is necessary to begin intervention as soon as [first-generation students] begin college” (p. 63).

Students face many transitional challenges, and there are few more pressing than finances. According to Engle & Tinto (2008), 24 percent of college students are both low-income and first-generation. Educational and personal living expenses can be problematic for many students, and these issues can be especially troublesome for first-generation students. They know less about the price of college than their peers and are less likely to find and use financial

information and resources (Choy, 2001; Strand, 2013). Financial hardship can cause first-generation students to work many more hours than their peers while enrolled in college (Pascarella, et al., 2004). Consequently, they also attend college part-time at a higher rate than other students (Strand, 2013). These factors, along with others, contribute to less engagement with campus in terms of extracurricular activities, volunteer work, and non-academic interactions with their peers, which are activities that often support academic success. (Strand, 2013; Pascarella, et al., 2004; Engle, 2007).

Success Rates

Research indicates first-generation students have a more difficult time completing college, persisting and graduating at lower rates than their peers (DeFreitas & Rinn, 2013; Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009). They receive lower grades than their peers on average (Chen, 2005). They are “far more likely to drop out after the first year. Even those who persist into their second and third years are likely to complete fewer credit hours, have lower GPAs, and continue to live and to work, many of them full-time, off campus” (Strand, 2013, p. i). “As reported in Chen’s (2005) recent research using data from NELS Postsecondary Education Transcript Study, first-generation students...were twice as likely to leave without earning a degree compared to students whose parents had college degrees, 43 to 20 percent respectively” (Engle, 2007, p. 26-27).

Pascarella, et al. (2004) reviewed much of the first-generation student literature available and summarized the following regarding their success rates:

These investigations consistently indicate that, compared to students whose parents are college graduates, first-generation students are more likely to leave a four-year institution at the end of the first year, less likely

to remain enrolled in a four-year institution or be on a persistence track to a bachelor's degree after three years, and are less likely to stay enrolled or attain a bachelor's degree after five years. (Pascarella, et al., 2004, p. 250)

Experiences and Programming

The landscape of higher education has changed significantly over time, as it relates to demographics. “Despite considerable gains in postsecondary access and participation among underrepresented populations, first-generation college students remain at a distinct advantage” (Engle, 2007, p. 38). Much research has been conducted on particular groups of first-generation students at individual colleges and universities or has focused on smaller subsets of first-generation students based on some identifying demographic such as race and ethnicity or income level. Often, these studies have aimed to understand student experiences, interventions, or programming and how it relates to success among first-generation populations.

Azmitia, Sumabat-Estrada, Cheong, and Covarrubias (2018) studied the challenges and persistence of a group of first-generation students and found those “who surmounted challenges and persisted toward graduation had emotional support from family and friends from home; developed supportive relationships with university peers, staff, and faculty; and believed that college would allow them to attain their future life and career goals” (p. 89). Forbus, Newbold, and Mehta (2011) studied first-generation students' satisfaction and found a correlation with academic performance and satisfaction with one's institution and also noted students' desire to graduate as quickly as possible. The desire to graduate quickly makes sense when considering Thering's (2011) findings that the achievement of social mobility was a primary motivation for persistence among the first-generation students in their study.

Engle (2007) suggests, “First-generation college students not only face barriers to their academic and social integration on campus, they also confront obstacles with respect to cultural adaptation” (p. 35). There are many layers to cultural adaptation, and one could be relationships with faculty. Longwell-Grice (2008) studied relationships between first-generation students and faculty; their findings suggested participants held the opinion that faculty did not care for them.

Pascarella, et al. (2004) sought to fill a gap in the literature as it relates to college experiences and cognitive growth of first-generation students. Their findings identified differences in academic and non-academic experiences that influenced the outcomes of colleges:

Despite the fact that they were somewhat less likely to be involved in extracurricular activities and noncourse-related interactions with peers, first-generation students tended to derive significantly stronger positive benefits from these involvements than did other students. For example, extracurricular involvement had significant positive effects on critical thinking, degree plans, internal locus of attribution for academic success, and preference for higher-order cognitive tasks for first-generation students (Pascarella, et al., 2004, p. 270-273).

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of UM’s first-generation students related to campus engagement’s impact on their success. A qualitative methodological approach was used, which allowed the words and views of participants to be the primary source of data (Creswell, 2008). A semi-structured interview style was utilized, which allowed for follow up or subquestions known as probing (Creswell, 2008). This was an ideal fit for the diversity of this student population. Initial interview questions are listed in Appendix A.

Participants and Recruitment

The success of a college student could be understood in many ways, but for this report, success will be operationalized as degree attainment. Therefore, the students studied for this report had persisted within one year of graduation. Specifically, data was collected through interviews of UM's first-generation students who were within one year of degree completion. Students fitting this criterion were identified with the assistance of the Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning. Once a list of students was identified, an interview request was sent via UM email. An incentive of \$5 Starbucks gift cards was offered for participation in an interview. Interviews were conducted with a diverse group of students until saturation was achieved, as to avoid missing any major themes or new information (Creswell, 2008).

Interview Procedures

Interviews were conducted in a neutral space on the UM campus. They were 30-45 minutes in length, recorded and transcribed. Prior to the interview, students were provided a consent form. Students were asked basic demographic information – gender, hometown, age, major, etc. – during their participation in this research project, but confidentiality was a priority. Pseudonyms were utilized so that others will not be able to identify students by names or other identifying information. A list of the initial interview questions is included in Appendix A. Follow up questions naturally arose as conversation allowed, and the student had the opportunity to interject and ask questions as needed. A brief debrief discussion took place following the interview and was not recorded.

Analysis of Data

Interviews were transcribed, reviewed, analyzed, and coded. Data was then organized into themes. Once coding was completed and themes were identified, the data was validated by member checking, which allows one or more participant to review the themes and check for accuracy (Creswell, 2008).

Research Questions

Making use of the qualitative methodology described, this study addressed the following research questions:

What are the perceptions of UM's first-generation students as it relates to campus engagement's impact on their success?

The research question aimed to understand student behavior while exploring the stories of individual students and sought to identify shared themes. This better understanding ultimately provided guidance on how to improve the success rates of UM's first-generation students.

Institutional Review Board

As this research involved human subjects, it was ethically responsible to submit to the Institutional Review Board for approval. In addition, the involvement of IRB provided peer review that is critical to thorough research.

CONCLUSION

This is the first manuscript of a three manuscript dissertation-in-practice. In this manuscript, I offered an introduction to the problem of practice, conceptual framework, literature review, and the proposed methodology for the study. The second manuscript will be a

presentation of the data received through interviews. The third and final manuscript will present the meaning of the data and recommendations for professional practice and further study.

CHAPTER TWO

Considering the challenges faced by first-generation students in being successful in higher education and the role that engagement can play in supporting success, this study focuses on the perceptions that first-generation college students have regarding the impact of campus engagement on their success at the University of Mississippi. Data was collected through interviews of 19 students who had each accumulated enough academic credit to earn a junior or senior classification. The students interviewed represent a wide variety of backgrounds and differences. A summarized breakdown of the interviewees is provided below; this is far from an exhaustive list of personal identifiers, but does provide a brief visual summary of participants, which demonstrates the diversity of perspectives represented in this study.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Male	5
Female	14
Black or African American	4
White	14
Multiple	1
Mississippi Resident	11
Non-Resident	8
Transfer	7
Non-Traditional	2
Academic Discipline(s)	Art
	Biochemistry
	Biology
	Business Marketing
	Chemistry
	Communication Sciences & Disorders (2)
	Criminal Justice
	Exercise Science (2)
	History
	Integrated Marketing Communications
	Journalism
	Law Studies
	Mechanical Engineering
	Pharmaceutical Sciences
	Political Science
Psychology	

As outlined in manuscript one, the conceptual framework utilized for this study draws from the work of Banning and Strange’s (2001) campus ecology theory, Baxter Magolda’s (2001) theory of self-authorship, and Tinto’s (1993) academic and social integration theory. Consideration of these theories as a conceptual framework supports a more effective study of student behavior and how those behaviors might impact certain outcomes. The second manuscript will be a presentation of data received. Making use of a qualitative methodology, this study addresses the following research question:

What are the perceptions of interview participants as it relates to campus engagement's impact on their success?

Presentation of Data

Upon completion of the qualitative data collection, the interviews were transcribed, coded by hand, and then coded a second time digitally. Themes and sub-themes became evident through this process. The direct quotes and paraphrased findings come from the 19 students interviewed. The following is a presentation of those results.

Personal Profiles

This section contains a brief profile of each of the 19 students interviewed. To ensure their anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned, and unique details that could identify the student (e.g. a student leadership position) were omitted.

Adrienne

Adrienne is an Integrated Marketing Communications major who grew up in Alabama. She considered the academic transition to UM to be fairly easy and did not perceive her overall transition to college as any different from her peers whose parents have a college degree. Adrienne participated in Panhellenic recruitment and became an active member in her sorority. In addition to sorority life, she is a member of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College, several leadership organizations, and a faith community.

Alexis

Alexis grew up in a small town in Alabama. She described her transition to college as really scary, but quickly established critical relationships through the FASTrack program, a first-year learning community. She changed her major several times along the way, but is now confidently pursuing a degree in Communication Sciences and Disorders. Alexis has spent much

time invested in the FASTrack program, as both a first-year student and peer mentor. She is also active in various service/leadership organizations.

Andy

Andy's path to a college degree has been different from many of his peers. He remembers being discouraged from going to college by his parents and high school counselor, told that he would not make it and that he should think about a vocational career. Determined to achieve his goal of graduating from the University of Mississippi, he left a successful career to go back to school full-time, first at a Mississippi community college and now at UM, where he is pursuing a degree in Integrated Marketing Communications.

Anthony

Anthony grew up in a small town in rural Mississippi. He was used to making good grades in high school, but was quickly overwhelmed when he started getting assignments back his first semester at UM. The lack of understanding from his family has been difficult at times, but he knows that he wants a different life than that of many of the people in his home community. Anthony fully invested in all the UM community had to offer him – relationships with faculty, leadership positions, membership in a NPHC fraternity, multiple study abroad opportunities, etc. He even started his own student organization. Anthony is now pursuing a PhD in Pharmaceutical Sciences.

Ashley

Ashley is from small town Mississippi and was raised in a lower-middle-class family. The Luckday Program provided scholarships that made attending UM an option that would not have been available otherwise. Ashley eventually became a peer leader for the Luckday Program and the vice president of an academic honor society. She has worked throughout college, up to

three jobs at one time. Ashley is an Exercise Science major with the ultimate goal of becoming a physical therapist.

Austin

Austin grew up outside of Atlanta, GA and attended a large public high school, graduating with 700 classmates. She is a Journalism major and has also added multiple minors to her degree plan along the way. The transition to college academically was not very difficult for Austin, but she worried that UM might not be the right social fit because of its big SEC football and Greek life persona. The scholarship money and friendly people ultimately made her choose UM over a small private school. She feels supported by her parents, even though they do not have college degrees, and wonders if some of her classmates take for granted the financial resources provided by their parents.

Briana

Briana is a Criminal Justice major who grew up in the Midwest. In addition to her major, she is a part of the Center for Intelligence and Security Studies, one of UM's special programs that is a selective minor aimed at training future intelligence officers. Both of her parents dropped out of college before completing their degrees. Other family members, like her aunt and uncle, who both work in academia, and her grandparents, who are helping pay for her college education, have been critical influences toward Briana's navigation of the college experience and have informed some of the decisions she has made. While her initial transition to college was not overly difficult, she definitely feels her experience as a first-generation student has been different than that of her peers.

Brittain

Brittain's K-12 education was a combination of public, private, and homeschooling education. She graduated from a small private Christian school in Mississippi that she described as "pretty much homeschooling," but moved around quite a bit as a member of a military family. Brittain attended two community colleges prior to enrolling in UM's Communication Sciences and Disorders program. She feels her transition to college and overall experience has not been any different because she is a first-generation student, but she is also a parent, which does impact the way she is able to engage in the college experience. Her family has been supportive of her educational pursuits and have also played an important role in shaping her career goal of working in special education.

Charlie

Charlie is a Biology student who plans to attend Optometry school after graduation. She is an out-of-state student from the Midwest and knew no one when she first arrived on campus. While she feels students with "Ole Miss parents" might have an upper hand at first, something that numerous students mentioned in their interviews, her first-generation status has not made her transition or experience any different than that of most of her peers. In part, she credits this with the reality that she comes from a middle-income family, and they have never had to struggle financially. Charlie has invested in many aspects of student life and has served in multiple high-profile leadership positions.

Crystal

Crystal is an Art major from small town Mississippi. She graduated from high school in a class of less than 60 students and was the only one from her class to attend UM. She is a member

of the Baptist Student Union and the International Student Organization. Crystal also works five days a week to pay her rent.

Danica

Danica attended community college prior to enrolling at UM. The adjustment from high school to community college was pretty easy, but she felt the jump from community college to UM was significant. To Danica, it feels like everyone at UM is smart, and that the university just expects you to figure it out. Danica originally planned to attend law school, but a challenging genetics course made her question that path. She is now pursuing a degree in Law Studies to become a paralegal.

James

James is a Business Marketing major from California. The cultural transition to Mississippi was pretty difficult at first. James initially joined an IFC fraternity but ultimately became inactive later in college. Entering without knowing anyone at UM and not having parents who attended college left some gaps in understanding of how to navigate certain processes. His health nearly caused him to withdraw and return home, but he has persisted and is nearing degree completion.

Johnathan

Johnathan is a transfer student from rural Mississippi. His ultimate goal is to pursue a PhD in neuroscience, a field he did not know existed prior to attending UM. The transition from high school to community college was similar to the transition from community college to UM in his mind. Success has been all about building connections at each new place. Developing a circle of advisors and mentors has been key because he knew that he could not use his family as a resource in that way.

Lauren

Lauren is the child of immigrants and came to UM from California. Her older sisters attended college too, but both stayed near their home, each sibling's experience building on the next. Going to college out of state has been very important for Lauren, allowing her to get what she sees as the full college experience. She is a member of a Panhellenic sorority and a number of other campus organizations. She plans to pursue a career in Higher Education.

Megan

Megan is a history major. She has started and stopped her education multiple times, pursuing fields like nursing and pathology along the way. She now hopes to become a professor in the future. Megan has lived in various communities around Mississippi, but considers Oxford to be a big town, as every other place she has lived previously was "in the middle of nowhere." Her experience as a first-generation student has not been that different than her peers in her mind, but her age has played more of a significant role in her experience. Megan is older than most of her classmates and is married.

Rachel

Rachel is from Jackson, MS. Initially, she enrolled with some negative views of UM because of what people in her home community said about the institution and its people. Rachel joined E.S.T.E.E.M. (Educated, Successful, Talented, Evolving, Empowered, and Motivated), a student organization focused on the empowerment of minority women. She has also worked throughout college, sometimes more than one job at the same time. Rachel is an Exercise Science major. She hopes to attend Physical Therapy school one day.

Susan

Susan is now a Mississippian, but she considers Chicago home. She did not complete high school because of an unstable upbringing, but at age 26, with a child and husband, she decided to go back to school and began her pursuit of a college degree at a Mississippi community college. After earning her associate's degree, Susan went back to work for five years before enrolling in the Chemistry program at UM.

Thomas

Thomas is a Mechanical Engineering major from California. He grew up in the foster care system and remembers at young age being very far behind academically. Neither of his foster parents, who he now calls his parents, have college degrees, but pushed him and his siblings academically so that they could be successful. Thomas graduated from high school and began community college, but dropped out to join the Marines. He then went back to finish his associate's degree prior to enrolling at UM in order to complete his college education. Choosing to move Mississippi to attend college, he believes, is one of the best decisions he has ever made.

Whitney

Whitney is a Biochemistry major from Mississippi. She dreamed of attending Howard University, and was admitted, but, at the last minute, her family would not let her attend. Prior to enrolling at UM, Whitney attended two other institutions in MS – a four-year private institution and a community college. Student life was a significant part of her time at her first institution, but she now commutes, works full-time, and is married, so her priorities are focused on going to class and getting the work completed, rather than engaging with peers and faculty like she did at her previous institution. Whitney has very high expectations for herself, and mindset is very important to her process in achieving success in her life.

Research Question: Perceptions of Engagement’s Impact on Success

One reason first-generation students are often associated with discussions of lower success rates in college is that they are less likely to engage with campus (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Student engagement has been linked with persistence, and one scholar suggests “The more students are academically and socially engaged with other people on campus, especially with faculty and student peers, the more likely (other things equal) they will stay and graduate from college” (Tinto, 2012, p. 64). The perceptions of the students interviewed for this study are consistent with Tinto’s assertion.

Relationships are Critical to Success

Throughout many hours of interviews, the topic that persistently surfaced in nearly every conversation was the impact of relationships on students’ experiences – and ultimate success – at UM. Whether in transition to the UM community or in the midst of a challenging course, or personal tragedy, the relationships fostered with faculty, staff, and peers were undoubtedly perceived as meaningful in helping students persist. While the types of relationships and the means by which these connections or relationships were developed varied student-to-student, every individual interviewed acknowledged the impact others – in addition to or in place of their families – had on their success at UM.

Faculty. The impact of faculty was the most prominent sub-theme that arose. For some it was the key to making it through a difficult course or semester, and for others, such mentorship relationships changed the trajectory of their future career or motivated them to persist in the midst of challenges.

One such student was Johnathan. The most important relationship he has built during his time at UM is with his psychology professor. When asked which faculty or staff members, if

any, had a positive impact on his college success, he passionately discussed the relationship he had built with this particular member of the university's faculty. They connected over the commonality of both being first-generation college students, and as a result of this mentorship, Johnathan now plans to pursue a PhD in neuroscience. The relationship they fostered outside of class, and the connection they made around both being first-generation college students, led Johnathan to pursue a future in a field he did not even know existed prior. When speaking about this particular faculty member, Johnathan said:

[H]e has been really important to my decision to go to a PhD program in neuroscience. I was in his class when I first got here and spent hours in his office hours just sitting there talking to him about everything. It doesn't even have to be neuroscience. Just having that as a connection, he sits down and tells me real stuff about what a PhD program is going to be like. He asks me questions like this. What it was like to move here. I think just having that has been really positive...I didn't even know what neuroscience was before I met him. Just taking his class, he was so excited about the subject, and it made me a little bit excited and I thought it was interesting. So talking to him, he just pushed me in that direction. (Johnathan, Interview #2, 10 March 2019)

Johnathan, a Mississippi community college transfer student, recognized the importance of making "connections" and introducing himself to lots of people, something he mentioned several times throughout the interview. It was not that his family did not care, but they did not know how to help him, so he had to find others to answer all of his questions. Making these connections is why Johnathan feels his transitions to community college and then to UM were not that different, but he acknowledged that building meaningful relationships was not always easy. He said that although the university offers programs for first-generation students, finding a mentor felt "like an egg hunt" and he perceived a lot of professors as not understanding of his experiences.

Later in our conversation, we were discussing defining moments of his college career, and Johnathan said of his neuroscience class and professor, "One [moment] would be just taking

his class and being introduced to neuroscience as a subject. I think that solidified my career trajectory...It made me think this is something I got to do the rest of my life.” They also bonded over more than just neuroscience because of common life experiences. Johnathan would like to see the university introduce first-generation students to a panel of professors who also identify in the same way because “they know what it’s like.” Eventually, he and his neuroscience professor discovered they were both first-generation college students: “I told him I was a first-generation student, and he took me under his wing, and told me real stuff, not just outlining this and that. He really talks to me about real stuff that I am wanting to ask. I can talk about things that I wouldn’t be able to talk to anyone else about.”

Anthony, like Johnathan, is from Mississippi. However, Anthony began his college career at UM as a freshman rather than a community college. Anthony felt that his high school education did not prepare him for UM. He referred to his transition from high school as “pretty bad,” but rather than give up, he spent hours in his professors’ offices and took advantage of student services like the Writing Center.

Throughout our conversation, Anthony recognized the importance of the investment of others in his life. Early in our interview, I asked him about his transition from high school to college:

It was pretty bad. I would say I was not ready at all, like completely not ready. I took my first L, was a personal reflection from convocation for EDHE, and my professor gave me a C minus. She said, "Immediately go to the writing center." My first college paper, all throughout high school, literally 99s, 100s on all papers, everything. Then I get to college and it's just like, well, that's my life gone down the drain. First psychology test, it's actually the highest grade I made on a psychology test was a 66. I was not ready at all. My high school did not prepare me. I had to find ways to basically level the playing field between me and everybody else. From then on, I spent every week in all my professors’ offices and the writing center. My first semester was basically me catching up to everybody else and just trying to make it and basically staying in school and not lose my scholarship or get on probation. (Anthony, Interview #17, 10 April 2019)

From his start as an underprepared college student to his life now, as a college graduate and PhD student, building relationships with faculty provided many life-altering experiences for Anthony. He participated in unique engagement experiences, ranging from multiple study abroad trips to the opportunity of assisting a new faculty member with the building of a research lab from the ground up. In our discussion of the impact of faculty and staff on his success, Anthony said:

When I have a problem or when I need help, I send them an email or I text all of them at once and it's just like boom...they all tell me something different. I just combine all of their viewpoints and that's literally what's allowed me to be able to graduate in May. I would not have been able to do that just relying on me and my family. I definitely need the faculty. (Anthony, Interview #17, 10 April 2019)

Without the relationships he built with numerous faculty and staff in addition to the mentorship provided to him, Anthony feels he would not be where he is today or have had many of the opportunities that have helped shaped his college experience. Anthony credits relationships with much of his success. Success in Anthony's case has been realized by graduating from UM with his bachelor's degree and is now pursuing a PhD.

Similarly, to Anthony, Briana has built relationships with several faculty who have provided unique opportunities to her. She has been connected through UM faculty to a prison research study in Marshall County, MS, and as a member of the Center for Intelligence and Security Studies, she has also had a unique internship experience. These experiences have been defining moments of her time in college and have helped provide context to potential future career options.

Austin is a Journalism major, but also added Psychology and English minors. Her passion lies in writing, and through the nudging of one of her English instructors, Austin decided to participate in a writing competition, where she ultimately placed regionally and was presented the opportunity of speaking at a conference. Through her engagement with faculty and

organizational activities Austin has further developed some of her passions and created important relationships and opportunities that she considers defining moments of her college experience.

For some first-generation students, faculty relationships transformed their passions and re-enforced their academic focus, but for others, the impact might not have been as pronounced, but important, nonetheless. Sometimes, it was simply a contribution to their sense of belonging, making them feel like a person and not a number, knowing that people cared about their success. When emphasizing the impact of faculty, Leah, a female student originally from the Midwest, recalled:

I didn't think my physics teacher would know my name in the class of 150 students, but I see her out in public and it's someone I feel like I can go to if I need to talk to someone. Building those connections and being able to walk on campus and know there's a higher mentor or someone I respect really makes a difference of feeling again that home-sense. (Leah, Interview #16, 3 April 2019)

The transition to college – academically and otherwise – is difficult for many college students and was a topic discussed in many of the interviews. Relationships can be critical during that adjustment period. This sentiment was affirmed over and over in the interviews conducted for this study. For Whitney – a student who attended two other institutions prior to enrolling at UM – the most important decision she made during the transition was going to see her professors:

[O]nce I actually went to my professors and saw what it was that they were wanting out of me, what they were expecting out of me, then from that point, I was ready. I was good for the rest of that time. I think it just took having to adjust to what you're used to from something that's new, being open to new experiences, being open to just new concepts. After that, I was just fine. (Whitney, Interview #14, 29 March 2019)

Later in the interview, her professors' impact on her success came up again, and similar to Johnathan, she noted her perception that building a network is important. Whitney said:

There's been a lot of people that have impacted me over my educational career and I still keep in touch with them. If I ever need anything or just have a question or whatever, then

I know I can always go to them. Even though I'm not a student of theirs anymore, I can always go back to them. That feels good to know that I'm actually valued and that I wasn't just the kid that, "Oh, okay. You took my course. I'm done with you. Okay, bye." That makes a difference to keep those relationships because you never know who you might need. Networking is important. Sometimes it's not about what you know but it's about who you know. That's for sure. (Whitney, Interview #14, 29 March 2019)

For Susan, a non-traditional, transfer student, the most significant experiences at UM, by far, have been the time spent and relationships built with a network of faculty. Without their support and encouragement from peers and her husband, she said it is likely she would have quit.

The faculty within the Chemistry department helped Susan with her transition back to school, provided her a job as a TA, and have even motivated her to consider teaching one day in the future. On the impact of faculty during her transition, Susan said:

First semester was crazy. I hadn't sat in a classroom in five years. The material was harder obviously because I came in as forensic chemistry. I had to choose the hardest thing I could find, of course. I don't know. I think if I hadn't have gotten up with Dr. A and started TA-ing, I may not have survived those first couple semesters. The first semester was extremely hard. I was trying to figure out my way as a TA. I was trying to maintain the full course load. That semester I took organic and physics and calculus. (Susan, Interview #6, 12 March 2019)

A number of faculty members came up in my discussion with Susan. From her faculty advisor to her instructors, she felt challenged and supported. When asked which, if any, had a positive impact on her college success, Susan responded:

Dr. B. She's a machine. She will push you, but she means well. She's really out to push you to be the best that you can be. Having to face her at the end of every semester, that's a pretty good motivator to make sure you're on point. Dr. A, he's an instructor and director of the laboratories over there. Worked underneath him since the semester I got here, and not only has he been an amazing supervisor and boss, but he's our sounding board. He's unofficial advisor. It doesn't matter what the [sic] like private life or student stuff or you just really want to throttle one of your instructors. He's the man to go sit and talk to, and he puts things into perspective for you. He has been a driving force. (Susan, Interview #6, 12 March 2019)

When personal tragedy hit and she thought about quitting, the same professor was there to support her: “[He] was a huge support. He kept checking in with me and be like, ‘Are you still doing okay? Are you still working through it?’”

While many of the students shared positive experiences with building relationships with faculty, not every student had all positive things to share. Megan, a non-traditional student like Susan, has had mixed experiences with UM’s faculty. She recounted one circumstance that has stuck with her. She remembers one instructor who told the entire class that no one in the class could earn an A on one of her papers and that they were all bad writers, no matter how good they thought they might be. Megan was disheartened from the start because writing is one of her perceived strengths. Not all of her experiences have been negative, though. Other instructors, she noted, have been more understanding and supportive.

Staff. In addition to relationships built with faculty, students interviewed for this study also emphasized the impact of other university staff members on their success. There were a number of instances in our discussions that students emphasized the impact of university staff – individuals whose primary responsibilities do not include classroom teaching – on their success. These relationships were often formed through student services, like academic advising or admissions, or as a result of participation in programs like FASTrack or Luckyday, which will be detailed further as individual themes. Other meaningful staff-student relationships were developed through co-curricular experiences like ROTC, transfer leadership programming, and membership in Panhellenic sororities.

For some students interviewed, attending college was never a question; it was understood. For others, the process leading up to attending the University of Mississippi was more of a challenge, and without engaging with campus and its resources prior to enrollment,

attending college might not have ever become a reality. Anthony, a student already discussed, is one such student. With tears in his eyes, Anthony recounted the impact the staff in the Office of Admissions had on him reaching where he is today:

I did not plan on studying abroad. I did not plan on going to graduate school. Everything about me, I did not plan on doing. I did not plan on coming to college and then I ended up here. That's simply because I got invited to APEX...Then our recruiter at the time, which was Beth. Jane gave me Beth's email and then I found out she was a recruiter. She had come to some college fair day, and I got her card. Basically because of Beth, I was able to get through the scholarship application. I was able to get through those months leading up until going to college, going off. She helped me get through the scholarship application. She notified me that I had got some scholarship so that I would be able to go to college even though she didn't tell me which ones. She was like, "You did excellent for your scholarship application. You're going to be happy when they send it out." Then she helped me with housing. She helped me with orientation. I would say because of Jane and...75% because of Beth I'm here. (Anthony, Interview #17, 10 April 2019)

Thomas, a student who attended community college in California and served in the Marines prior to moving to Mississippi to continue his education, is another student who emphasized the importance of his relationship with an Admissions staff member. Thomas did not grow up hearing about college and knew very little about the process, so he has relied heavily on the advice and support of UM staff. The transition to UM, and the challenges he has faced academically and otherwise, have not always been easy to overcome. However, the combination of hard work, perspective from life experiences, and support from UM faculty and staff has helped Thomas be successful at UM. Thomas and I talked for nearly two hours during his interview, and he was clearly thankful for the assistance he received prior to his enrollment, acknowledging that had it not been for those relationships, he would never have ended up at UM. When discussing those relationships, Thomas recalled:

I called and I said, "Dude, I have no idea what I'm doing." I came in with the perspective of, "I know nothing, you know everything. Whatever you tell me to do I will do." John very much later on told me, "I appreciated that. Because you weren't like, 'My parents said this and my mom said this.'" Maybe it was good, maybe it wasn't good. It was funny, because we visited Ole Miss and I will never forget when I'd gotten in contact

with John...At one point we had been going back and forth with a few different things. Anything I needed, I could just shoot him a text or give him a call or even send him an email and the dude would get back to me [snaps] quick. It would be a Saturday night, Sunday night, he would still get back. I'm like, "Dude you're not even in the office. Stay home." Eventually after that we became good friends. We'll hang out and stuff now, but he really went above and beyond. (Thomas, Interview #13, 22 March 2019)

Admissions was not the only department who had staff go "above and beyond" from Thomas's perspective. He later joked that he learned a lot about "Southern Hospitality" throughout the process. We talked extensively about the decisions and deliberate actions he took leading up to him ultimately choosing UM. In that discussion, he had much to say about the way various staff treated him:

Everyone was just so nice and so courteous like, "Yes, don't worry about it. I'll transfer you right now." At one point, I called housing and they were trying to transfer me and they hadn't transferred me. They called me back to tell me they hadn't transferred me and then to transfer me. I was like, "Wow." If a university has workers like that, that are willing to go out of their way to make sure you find what you need and get what you need, that's somewhere I want to be... Yes, that's why I chose - Ole Miss was like - it was the place I could see myself at and see myself being actually genuinely happy and connected and everything like that. It turned out to be true. I'm definitely, definitely, definitely glad I made the decision. I think it's probably one of the best decisions I've ever made. (Thomas, Interview #13, 22 March 2019)

Now that he is enrolled, Thomas continues to rely on relationships with various staff members. He was given the opportunity to enroll in the transfer section of the Chancellor's Leadership Class and participates in ROTC. Both of these communities have given him access to professionals who, together, know the answers to anything university-related, which has been very helpful to his experience.

For Alexis, a female, non-resident, building relationships with staff members has been a major part of her success in college. She observed her transition as different from many of her peers, in part because she is a first-generation student, but more so because she did not know

anyone at UM. She felt many students enroll at UM already knowing lots of people, and building relationships and finding guidance took some time for her.

One staff member, Alexis's freshman year academic advisor, made a tremendous impact and continues to even though they are no longer assigned to one another. She credits her advisor with helping her during difficult times, putting her in her place when she needed it, and ultimately hiring her as a student employee. When recounting some of her most challenging moments in college, Alexis had this to say about her advisor:

My first college class was at 8 AM, Monday morning, Chemistry 105. I thought I loved chemistry because I was really good at it in high school and I took my first test that was the first test I ever took in college. I got a C on it and coming from [high school] where I was like top of my class, I got shell shocked. I was taken aback and that's one of those moments I went to Ms. Sue, but I thought I was good in chemistry and now I was like, No, I'm not and I need to find a new major. Probably one of the most difficult things is where do I belong? What do I do? I don't know what I want to do. (Alexis, Interview #11, 22 March 2019)

Alexis's advisor helped quell her fears and provided a listening ear when she needed someone to help her navigate important milestones and decisions. At another portion of the interview, Alexis was discussing her transition and the difficulties that came during that time. Again, her advisor's counsel was noted as critical:

Having her on my freshman year when I was going through a really rough time and I didn't know what I wanted to do. It was really scary, but I went in there and cried like probably 10 times at least, and she just literally helped me every time. I work for her now so I even got a job. I get to see other students like if they're having a crisis...getting help too. (Alexis, Interview #11, 22 March 2019)

The willingness to listen and provide advice kept some students from giving up. That has been the case for Rachel. Her transition to UM was challenging. She admits entering college with a wall up because she had preconceived thoughts about the university from family and friends. Her family pressured her to attend an HBCU, so she was questioning whether she belonged at UM. A combination of making friends, joining student organizations, and

developing relationships with university staff helped Rachel develop a sense of belonging. When reflecting on the impact of university staff on her success, she said: “All of them made a huge impact on me being here because there was times that I really wanted to give up...I get emotional talking about them” (Rachel, Interview #19, 24 April 2019).

Peers. University personnel were undoubtedly impactful for the majority of students interviewed, but for many, the relationships interviewees developed with other peers were just as critical to their success – academically, socially, and culturally. Friendships and networking among peers were mentioned in almost every interview, though in different contexts. For some, their peers gave them the encouragement to keep pushing toward degree completion when it did not seem worth it. For others, friendships made living far from home feel like a second home, keeping them from wanting to drop out and transfer closer to family.

For Andy, life as a non-traditionally-aged college student has brought a unique set of challenges. The pride and competition of being the first in his family to graduate from college has been a big motivator for him, but it has not been an easy journey. Andy left a successful career to fulfill a lifelong dream of graduating from UM. He is driven academically, but that does not mean he has not experienced doubt. Socially and culturally, his experience, at times, has been isolating. He has felt excluded from student organizations and knows classmates talk about his age, but he also has been encouraged by peers who have stood up for him or shared that they have been encouraged by his example and personal story.

When discussing defining moments of his college career, he recounted this experience in class:

I took a class in summer intersession and there was a couple of things said about the old dude in class. I didn't hear them. There are some people that had said behind me or whatever, it got back to me. I had made a comment about it. One of the guys...He pulled me aside. He's like, "Man, this is your university too. It's just as much yours as anybody

else. You paid tuition. If you ever have any problems, you let me know. Me and my frat brothers, we'll take care of that." That's cool. You have somebody like that that's standing up for you and believes you have just as much right to be here, too. Having moments like that...Man, that keeps you going. (Andy, Interview #4, 11 March 2019)

This was just one of several stories that Andy recounted about his classmates encouraging him.

There have been many times younger students have asked him for life or career advice. Those types of moments are what Andy says keep him going when he is questioning why he is back in school at 50 years old.

Like Andy, James had doubts about remaining enrolled at UM. He had some serious health issues, spending four days in the local hospital. His health concerns almost caused him to go home and not come back, but he is very glad that he did. James credits a lot to his strong base of friends:

[I]t would be really hard to not have a really strong base of friends here. Because if I didn't have my strong base of friends here, I would probably not be at this school anymore. I'd probably go back home, and try and transfer into a different school because we all get homesick. Everyone does. Some of my friends who live within driving distance are like, they get homesick, they can drive home or whatever. For me, that's a flight. That's a three-day trip. I can't just go home when I want to...but having my friends here, it's really kept me grounded here. (James, Interview #3, 11 March 2019)

James is from California, so the distance from home has presented challenges, especially when he was ill, but he feels leaving California and choosing to attend college so far from home has allowed him to change his mindset and grow as a person. He has learned not to have to rely on his parents to take care of him. Friends have been a part of that experiential growth.

The social and cultural transition can be more challenging to navigate than the academic transition for some students. That seemed to be closely woven into the perception of achieving success in college for the students interviewed. When reflecting on her first year of college, Austin remembered understanding the campus culture and finding friends as the toughest part, not her classes. She reflected on that time: "When I first came here, I was like, 'Oh, I'm coming

to a really big Greek school, a school that's really into football.' I came here mostly because they gave me the most scholarships. I liked the campus, everyone was friendly and I felt like everyone was very amicable, but I didn't really find any close friends for the first few weeks" (Austin, Interview #8, 19 March 2019). Austin recalled thinking she might have made the wrong decision choosing UM over a smaller college focused on English or writing when she did not initially make friends, but said she forced herself to get out of her room to attend university-sponsored meet and greets and ultimately joined some clubs and organizations. As a result, she has been able to develop meaningful relationships.

Membership in Student Organizations is a Catalyst for Success

Relationships – as covered in the last theme – are certainly impactful on students' experiences. It was discussed over and over again. For some, student organizations were the catalyst to the development of those meaningful relationships.

For others, student organizations helped develop transferrable skills or simply helped students find their place within the campus culture. Most of the students interviewed were members of at least one or two student organizations, while others were involved in many. Participation in student organizations varied in number and type among the group.

During the interviews, it seemed that some of the students were thoughtfully reflecting on the meaning of their involvement in student organizations for the first time. It was evident that students were making connections between their experiences as we were engaged in conversation. Ultimately, most of them acknowledged the positive impact it had on their college experience and success.

Sense of Belonging. As mentioned above, Austin initially questioned whether she would ever fit at UM because she had no interest in sorority life or football. She eventually added an

English minor, which connected her to a student organization called Rebel Writers. The engagement with organizational activities helped develop some of Austin's passions and created important relationships and opportunities that she considers defining moments of her college experience. When describing the impact of membership in that student organization, she said it: "really helped me find people who I think have just similar interests...I would say that just helps us feel, the school feel smaller. It's not a massive school, but it helps personally I guess" (Austin, Interview #8, 19, March 2019). The intersection of her English minor and participation in Rebel Writers has provided a way for Austin to build relationships and grow her skills at the same time, and it has helped her feel as though she belongs at UM.

Like Austin, Charlie came to UM from out-of-state. There was a bit of culture shock coming to Mississippi, but the diversity of the student body – something she did not experience going to high school in the Midwest – and the relationships she has made from campus involvement has helped her mature and shaped some of her views on important social issues. She remembers feeling like an outsider at first because it felt like everyone already knew each other. Charlie eventually became a member of several highly selective student organizations on campus and even won a campus-wide election.

Briana, like Charlie, came to UM from the Midwest. She had a great first semester, but ended up dealing with some relationship issues that made the rest of freshman year very difficult. There have been many moments she questioned whether to stay at UM or to even finish her degree. When talking about her experiences with student organizations, she referenced one in particular. At the time of the interview, she was serving as the president of this organization. She remarked, "That club is the reason I'm still here. The president who was the president this year was my best friend...She was like, 'There's a light at the end of the tunnel. Don't transfer

schools.’ That changed my entire course of college. I’m here because of them” (Briana, Interview #10, 20 March 2019).

For students like Brittain and Megan, their student involvement looks very different than some of campus’s most visible leaders like Charlie and Briana, but nonetheless, that type of campus engagement has been impactful on their experiences. Megan is older than most of her classmates, and is married, so student organizations have helped her meet friends. Brittain has a young child at home, so her time on campus can be limited. With the support of her parents, she has been able to participate in some parts of campus life. When discussing the impact of student organizations, Brittain made an interesting connection to her success. She believed student organizations played an important role in helping her make friends and connections, but they also helped keep her focused academically. It served as a form of motivation, because if she let her grades decline, she felt she would not be able to spend her limited time participating in organizational activities: “It helps make friends when you’re in a school this large. For me, who like I said, I went from homeschooling, so I didn’t have many friends. It’s different. It helps...It keeps me focused, because I know that I can’t do those if I don’t do good” (Brittain, Interview #7, 19 March 2019).

Like Brittain and Megan, Susan’s experience has been different than some of her peers because she is older than many of them and is married with a child at home. Having been in the workforce and out of school for so long, it was difficult to relate to classmates, but life experience provided a perspective and context to the material she was studying that she did not have previously. After earning her associate’s degree, Susan went back to work for five years. The transition to UM presented a number of challenges. Her new academic discipline, forensic chemistry, required difficult courses and often large class sizes. At community college,

membership in Phi Theta Kappa honors society was impactful, but at UM, her age and priorities as a parent have kept her from engaging in student life outside of academic-specific activities such as becoming a teaching assistant.

For better or worse, many students perceive membership in student organizations as a means of belonging. For Andy, who was discussed in the section about the importance of relationships with peers, it is not about lack of time or desire, but rather, he feels his non-traditional age prevents him from being welcomed to join student organizations:

I felt really awkward about joining...because you kind of feel like that older student kind of gets cast aside and looked down upon...It's just weird, and it's not just me. Hey, first I thought I'm just paranoid. But I've talked to a couple other people, too, and if you're not that freshman, sophomore, junior, typical age it's kind of like, "What are you doing here?" kind of thing. It's not very welcoming to a lot of the organizations, which kind of sucks. (Andy, Interview #4, 11 March 2019)

The concern of making friends is a reality for most students. Crystal came to UM from a small town and knew no one when she initially enrolled, so making friends was one of her main concerns. Crystal works five days a week to pay her bills, so she does not have a lot of free time. However, she knew that getting involved in student life would be important, and she considers her decision to participate in the Baptist Student Union and International Student Organization defining moments of her college experience. Other than one of her friends whose parents attended UM, she did not perceive her transition to college or overall experience as any different than that of her peers, but acknowledged the impact that student organizations had in providing friendships and a physical space to study – factors that have been important to her success at UM.

Cultural/Multi-Cultural Student Organizations. Navigating campus culture and sub-cultures is a reality for every student that enters college. It can be more complicated or intimidating for certain groups of people. For some students, they enroll at UM knowing no one,

and they perceive that everyone already knows each other and that all of their parents are alumni. For some non-resident students, it is adapting to the culture of the South and how that differs from their home state. For students that are racial minorities, UM's storied history of race issues impacts the perceptions that some students have when they enter college. This history coupled with the current realities of inequality that the university continues to wrestles with, can make it especially challenging for some students.

Rachel grew up in Mississippi, and she felt a lot of pressure from her family to attend a historically black college or university (HBCU). Ultimately, she chose to attend UM, and she felt like she began her college experience with a wall up because of how her family members felt about UM. She remembered being very homesick at first because she kept to herself and missed her family, but she became close friends with other women who lived in her residence hall and eventually joined E.S.T.E.E.M. (Educated, Successful, Talented, Evolving, Empowered, and Motivated), a student organization focused on the empowerment of minority women. Membership in that organization has been a significant part of Rachel's college experience. It has made her want to strive for excellence in her academic work, helped her develop relationships, and has provided the opportunity to learn from guest speakers outside the traditional classroom setting.

Like Rachel, Anthony and Johnathan found meaningful relationships with peers through membership and leadership in organizations with a focus on minority populations. Men of Excellence, a student organization aimed at empowering African-American men is one that both of them used as an example. For Anthony, his experiences with Men of Excellence and other organizations, motivated him to create a new student organization aimed at supporting underrepresented students in specific academic disciplines. He also joined a National Pan-

Hellenic Council (NPHC) fraternity very early in his college career. He highly values the support he received from his fraternity brothers and fraternity advisor.

Finding the balance of campus engagement can be a challenge, and it varies student-to-student. Johnathan, whose transformational relationship with his neuroscience professor impacted so much of his experience, spoke of that during his interview. Student organizations, like Men of Excellence, helped him meet friends and made him feel like he was a part of something. However, he joined too many organizations too quickly, and over engagement outside of class made his grades drop a little, so he withdrew from most of his organization memberships.

Connection to Academic Performance. When asked if any clubs or organizations have impacted their academic performance, students interpreted and answered the question in varying ways. Some saw participation in student organizations as a direct impact on their GPA, but not every student perceived a positive correlation between membership in organizations and academic success. Additionally, some saw student organizations activities as a distraction, while others drew connections between participation in co-curricular experiences and the development of transferrable skills that benefited them academically. The most common connection interviewees made between membership in student organizations and impact on academic performance was the development of time management skills. Charlie described it in this way:

When I have something that's set in starting like an organization meeting and the class and the class due dates, I find as if those organizations make me aware of how much time I have. Because of that, they do affect the way that my class works. If I know I only have an hour to study for my lab exam because I have this meeting, I'm going to do that. Whereas if I had no meeting and had two hours to study for it, I might text my friends and then maybe study (Charlie, Interview #16, 3 April, 2019).

Johnathan felt the strain on time felt could ultimately impact him negatively, so he dropped many of his memberships, but, in reflecting, he noted that student organization

membership provided opportunities for him to develop his public speaking skills, which made him more comfortable speaking in front of groups in class.

For Adrienne, membership in student organizations had many positive benefits, but when asked about the connection to academic performance, she primarily felt student involvement positively impacted her drive to succeed. She felt that surrounding herself with other driven and successful people provided a motivation to want to pursue similar success.

Fraternity and Sorority Life. 41% of UM's undergraduate population is active in a fraternity or sorority, so the trend of membership and participation in fraternity and sorority life as a consistent sub-theme that arose throughout interviews is not surprising. Charlie, whose student involvement was discussed above, felt that participation in sorority life played a large role in her feeling connected at UM. Panhellenic recruitment a month into her first semester of college helped speed up the process of building community and finding her niche on campus. Joining a sorority was a type of catalyst to other involvement and relationship building opportunities on campus.

For Lauren, she felt membership in a Panhellenic sorority was the facilitator for developing a support system and alleviating the feeling of being an outsider at UM. The intersection of being a first-generation college student and a child of immigrants has made her academic journey different than many of her peers. Her sorority sisters and advisor propelled her to other involvement opportunities, like student government. Without these relationships, she believes she would not have had an internship which has proven very beneficial, and also in helping her discover a passion for what she believes is her future career path. Lauren plans to pursue a master's degree in Higher Education and hopes to work in Student Affairs one day. She admitted the pressure to pursue a career in the STEM field has not been easy to overcome or

explain to her parents. Relationships with student organization advisors and other university staff have been significant in shaping her time at UM and in understanding her future career path, and she feels those relationships are a result of membership in her sorority.

Similarly, to Charlie and Lauren, Adrienne described the relationships with her sorority sisters and advisors as a springboard for success. Many of her high school classmates attended the University of Alabama and Auburn University. While her overall transition was not difficult, she did struggle with homesickness at times. Upon reflection, she now sees the value in leaving Alabama and growing as an individual and believes membership in a sorority played an important role in that growth.

As discussed previously, James credits friendships as a major factor in his remaining at UM and his success at the institution. He described his transition to college as hard, mainly because of the difference in cultures coming from California to Mississippi: “It’s a different culture and everything which I love now, but back then, it was really hard for me to adjust to, and meet people who are like me, so it took some time” (James, Interview #3, 11 March 2019). When discussing defining moments of his college experience, he noted becoming a member of a fraternity as a moment that stands out. However, James’s relationship with fraternity life differed from the other interviewees whose experience has been impacted by membership in a Greek letter organization. While joining was a defining moment which helped him to develop friendships, he eventually decided fraternity life was not what he wanted anymore and is no longer active. He seemed to connect leaving his fraternity with his personal development and growth. James credits fraternity life with helping build friendships, which was very important to him, but remaining a member was not consistent with who he felt he had become as a person:

“That helped me with social life a lot. It did, but I grew up more. It’s just my outlook on things, it’s not where I wanted to be anymore, so I ended up dropping that.”

Cohort-based Learning Communities Provide Critical Support for Student Success

Two learning communities – FASTrack (Foundations of Academic Success Track) and Luckyday – that were discussed during the interviews had an undeniable impact on the success of the students who participated in them. Though FASTrack and Luckyday differ in some ways, they both provide opportunities for relationship development, mentorship, and academic support.

For Alexis, her involvement in FASTrack has been critical. FASTrack is a learning community that supports first-year students’ transitions to college through linked classes, academic mentoring, and other intentional programming. The support Alexis found in FASTrack was impactful in many ways – academically, socially, and culturally. There were connections drawn to the program in nearly every part of the discussions had in her interview. She grew up in a small town in Alabama and described her transition to college as really scary, but FASTrack’s focus on the first-year of college gave Alexis an opportunity to quickly build relationships with peers and faculty/staff.

The mentorship and relationships developed early in her time at UM helped her navigate the trials of college, like changing her career path multiple times. She has also felt supported on her path to achieving membership and leadership roles in multiple student organizations, something that has been very important to her. Alexis is now confidently established on a path toward a degree in Communication Sciences and Disorders and serves as a peer leader and student employee for the FASTrack program. Without the mentorship and academic advising Alexis received through FASTrack, she is unsure if she would have been successful at UM.

Similar to Alexis's experience with FASTrack, Ashley could not talk about success at UM without mentioning Luckday. Luckyday is a scholarship program, and while it extends beyond the first year and has a financial component that FASTrack does not, there are similarities in what is provided to Luckyday scholars and FASTrack students from a support standpoint. In addition to the financial resources that come from being a Luckyday scholar, Ashley recognized the other important support the program provided her – connection to people. Whether it be relationships with peers or the very supportive staff, Luckyday played a significant role in helping her find a new home away from home at UM. Ashley became a peer leader for the Luckday Program later in college and has managed to serve in other student organization leadership roles while also working multiple jobs. The Luckyday Program helped make it financially viable for her to attend UM, and the support provided throughout college helped Ashley achieve her goal of being admitted to Physical Therapy school.

Barriers to Campus Engagement

While Luckyday provided the financial resources that made attending UM a viable option for Ashley, working part-time jobs has still been a necessity to help support herself financially. Through the support of Luckday, and with much sacrifice, Ashley found the time to engage in on-campus leadership opportunities and excelled academically, reaching her goal of admission to graduate school, all while working multiple jobs – up to three at one time.

The reality for a number of the students interviewed was that working was essential. Ashley's experiences are evidence that it is possible for some students to balance often competing priorities and opportunities, but this does not come without its challenges. Rachel noted during her interview that she has worked throughout college, sometimes more than one job

at once. She admitted, the drive to make money has been a distraction from her academic work at times.

Danica works 30 hours per week in addition to her academic commitments. When asked about student clubs or organizations, she replied: “I haven’t joined any because I work. I don’t really have time to do all that” (Danica, Interview #1, 10 March 2019). Danica does not feel that her experience has been any different as a first-generation student, but did acknowledge that students who do not have to work or worry about money have more time to enjoy with friends and other aspects of college life. She does not feel that she has that luxury.

Summary of Manuscript 2

This manuscript organizes the data received through the interviews of 19 of UM’s first-generation students, who all persisted to at least junior or senior classification. The positive impact students put on developing relationships was evident throughout the interviews. Students perceived relationships with faculty, staff, and peers as key contributors to their success at UM. Many students also perceived membership in student organizations as a catalyst for success, though the type and level of involvement differed among students interviewed. Students who were members of cohort-based groups, such as FASTrack and Luckyday, perceived strong connections between participation in these programs and their success at UM. Overwhelmingly, students viewed campus engagement as beneficial to their experiences at UM, but many expressed obstacles to their ability to participate as much as they desired, such as needing to work to support themselves financially, caring for children or other family obligations. A third and final manuscript three will provide recommendations for future research and practice related to campus engagement and first-generation students at UM.

CHAPTER THREE

This study focused on the perceptions that first-generation college students have regarding the impact of campus engagement on their success at the University of Mississippi. Manuscripts one and two documented that first-generation students are often underprepared for college and have lower persistence rates (Balemian & Feng, 2013), and they face a unique set of challenges in their transition to college that many of their peers do not (Pelco, Bell, & Lockeman, 2014). Data obtained from UM's Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning indicate first-generation students at UM persist and graduate at lower rates than their peers whose parents have a bachelor's degree.

There are many reasons why first-generation students have lower success rates, and for some students, a lack of engagement is one of them (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Tinto (2012) also links student engagement with persistence: "The more students are academically and socially engaged with other people on campus, especially with faculty and student peers, the more likely (other things equal) they will stay and graduate from college" (p. 64).

As a new professional, I became very interested in first-generation college students during my time as an admissions counselor, travelling around the country engaging with prospective students and their families on behalf of the university. Now, as part of my job, I provide oversight for new student and family orientation programs, instruct a first-year course, and serve as a faculty/staff advisor for 6 registered student organizations, so I have become increasingly interested in the relationship between campus engagement and success. As

discussed in more detail in manuscript one, educating and supporting the success of first-generation students is consistent with the university's mission and practically supports equity and social justice. The University of Mississippi is in a unique position to impact the state and the world through this endeavor.

As a lens for this qualitative research, I used a three-part conceptual framework. As outlined in manuscript one, the conceptual framework draws from the work of Banning and Strange's (2001) campus ecology theory, Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship, and Tinto's (1993) academic and social integration theory. Consideration of these theories allowed for a more effective study of student behavior and how those behaviors might impact certain outcomes. Through the interviews of 19 undergraduate first-generation students, I sought to address the following research question: What are the perceptions of interview participants as it relates to campus engagement's impact on their success?

You will recall from manuscript two, I identified a number of themes: The first theme was relationships are critical to success with subthemes of relationships with three groups – faculty, staff, and peers. The second theme was membership in student organizations is a catalyst for success with a number of subthemes. Student organizations were perceived to support a sense of belonging. Cultural/multi-cultural student organizations were impactful; meaningful relationships with peers were fostered through membership and leadership in organizations with a focus on minority populations. Some students saw a connection between membership in student organizations and academic performance. Joining a Greek letter organization (fraternity or sorority) was also perceived as impactful, most notably as a catalyst to other involvement and relationship building opportunities on campus. The third theme was cohort-based learning communities (specifically FASTrack and Luckyday) provide critical support for student success.

Additionally, I found barriers to campus engagement. Though it was not directly related to the research question, I also found that many interviewees perceived peers with family members who are UM graduates to have an advantage at success at the institution. Many of the students were also very candid about their relationships with their own families and how that impacts the various ways they have navigated the college experience.

Manuscript three will be a discussion of what should transpire based on what was discovered through this research. This will be organized in two sections – one will discuss recommendations for analysis and practice and one will discuss analysis and further research. I will then conclude with limitations and a brief summary.

Recommendations for Practice

Institutions play a role in integrating their students into the fabric of the campus. The following are recommended practices that will actively connect students and help integrate them socially, academically, and culturally. This recommendations for practice are organized in two sections – identification and support.

Identifying First-Generation Students

UM has the ability to improve support of students by improving the methods by which they are identified. The institution has traditionally relied on admission application data to determine who is a first-generation student. The application does not specifically ask students to self-identify whether they will be a first-generation student. Rather, there is a section that collects information about parent education. Relying primarily on this source for identification limits UM's ability to strategically reach first-generation students earlier in the enrollment cycle, prior to their submission of an application. It also can lead to incorrectly identifying some students as first-generation when they simply left the parent education section blank during the admissions

application process. Adding a question or series of criteria questions on the admission application and other forms that collect prospective student data prior to applying would allow for more strategic identification and support efforts. Rather than simply asking, “Are you a first-generation student?”, a description of first-generation college students can be included and respondents could self-identify when asked “does this description fit you?”.

Clarify the Institutional Definition of First-Generation

An important step in identifying and supporting first-generation students is clarifying who the institution includes in this subset of students. Part of that process is acknowledging that various external stakeholders and constituents to the institution might have their own definition of first-generation students. A number of definitions can be used to understand who first-generation students are – first in their immediate family to attend any higher education, first in their family to earn a bachelor’s degree, etc. The various definitions were thoroughly discussed in manuscript one. It became evident, throughout discussions with professionals across campus that the definition of first-generation students differed from office-to-office.

Expand Definition to Include Transfer and Non-Traditional Students

More than one third of students interviewed for this study transferred to UM. Two were non-traditional, meaning they are not 18-22 years of age, and multiple students either have children, are married, or have some form of obligation that requires they support someone other than themselves. Many first-year initiatives at UM are aimed at supporting new freshmen, who are entering the university straight from high school and are most often 18 or 19 years old. Mississippi has a robust community college system, and hundreds of students transfer to UM from those institutions each year. Though they have some college experience, there are still

many social and academic integration challenges that are faced when transitioning to a different context.

Andy, a non-traditionally-aged transfer student discussed that his time at UM has been socially and culturally isolating at times. He has felt excluded from student organizations and knows classmates talk about his age. Susan and Megan also expressed various challenges with their transfer experiences and noted differences in experiences because of their ages.

Systems from campus to campus are not always alike. Courses can often be more rigorous and time-consuming. Shifts in campus cultures can be starkly different and often isolating. Each of these were mentioned throughout the interviews by various transfer or non-traditional students. The definition of first-generation students should be expanded to be inclusive of transfer and non-traditional students so that these students can be identified early and included in the institutions first-generation support efforts.

Support for First-Generation Students

Once UM improves identification of first-generation students through data collection updates and clarification of definitions, the institution will be better prepared to support students. This support can be during pre-enrollment and during their time at the institution and should be a coordinated approach across campus. Support can be individualized or systematically strategic, and should be mindful to avoid unnecessary or harmful “labeling” of students.

Pre-Enrollment

While the university offers robust support to prospective students and their families through the Office of Admissions and the Office of Financial Aid, at the time of this study, there are no formalized institutional efforts to specifically target prospective first-generation students during the pre-enrollment or college search process. Pre-enrollment support from the Office of

Admissions was examined in manuscript two's presentation of data, as it was a topic discussed by interviewees; however, that support took place informally, seemingly by happenstance.

Anthony, a student from rural Mississippi, discussed this type of support in his interview, even suggesting he likely would not have been in college had it not been for admissions personnel. He was visibly emotional when talking about their support:

I did not plan on coming to college and then I ended up here. That's simply because I got invited to APEX... Then our recruiter at the time, which was Beth. Jane gave me Beth's email and then I found out she was a recruiter. She had come to some college fair day, and I got her card. Basically because of Beth, I was able to get through the scholarship application. I was able to get through those months leading up until going to college, going off. She helped me get through the scholarship application. She notified me that I had got some scholarship so that I would be able to go to college even though she didn't tell me which ones. She was like, "You did excellent for your scholarship application. You're going to be happy when they send it out." Then she helped me with housing. She helped me with orientation. I would say because of Jane and... 75% because of Beth I'm here. (Anthony, Interview #17, 10 April 2019)

Thomas was another interviewee who had much to say about the support he received pre-enrollment. Thomas attended community college in California and served in the Marines prior to moving to Mississippi to continue his education. Thomas did not grow up hearing about college and knew very little about the process, so he has relied heavily on the advice and support of UM staff. One staff member from Admissions was noted as extremely impactful. This person gave him a tour of campus and regularly communicated with Thomas to answer any question he and his family did not know how to answer about applications, scholarships, cost, etc:

I called and I said, "Dude, I have no idea what I'm doing." I came in with the perspective of, "I know nothing, you know everything. Whatever you tell me to do I will do." John very much later on told me, "I appreciated that. Because you weren't like, 'My parents said this and my mom said this.'" Maybe it was good, maybe it wasn't good. It was funny, because we visited Ole Miss and I will never forget when I'd gotten in contact with John... At one point we had been going back and forth with a few different things. Anything I needed, I could just shoot him a text or give him a call or even send him an email and the dude would get back to me [snaps] quick. It would be a Saturday night, Sunday night, he would still get back. I'm like, "Dude you're not even in the office. Stay

home.” Eventually after that we became good friends. We'll hang out and stuff now, but he really went above and beyond. (Thomas, Interview #13, 22 March 2019)

The college application process coupled with the complexities of federal and state financial aid applications leave many students and families intimidated or left with questions. Some students and their family members do not even know what questions to ask or are not aware of what resources might be available to them, so identifying first-generation students and actively and strategically offering assistance to them supports institutional goals in a myriad of ways. First, it increases the likelihood that the student chooses UM for their college education, and if effective services are implemented, it increases the likelihood that students will be better equipped for success during their time at the institution. Also, an increase in identification during pre-enrollment will support future institutional efforts to retain enrolled first-generation students.

Students who are supported through the application and college search process are more likely to understand the campus culture and be better equipped to successfully navigate its systems. For example, as noted in the literature review and in the presentation of this study's data, many first-generation students come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and face financial obstacles. A student who fully understands financial aid opportunities ahead of deadlines and is able to take full advantage of financial support services is less likely to face some of the barriers to campus engagement that they may have faced otherwise. Additionally, this identification and support can mitigate some of the perceived advantages that UM alumni children have, as they often have a head start on understanding campus culture, processes, and services.

Individual Support. UM has taken steps to be more strategic in its enrollment practices and systems by creating a Division of Enrollment Management in March 2021, which has initially included the Offices of Admissions and Financial Aid. UM continues to increase pre-

enrollment support through the hiring of additional Admissions Counselors, Financial Aid advisors, and other services, and it has also created a Coordinator of Diversity Recruitment position, which in partnership with the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement, is dedicated to recruiting and supporting underrepresented populations during the college search process, a recognition of the reality that certain populations face barriers to accessing higher education. Formalizing a process to identify prospective first-generation students, like Anthony and Thomas, and then establishing individualized outreach and support efforts for prospective first-generation students and their families are logical next steps.

Foster Integration During Orientation. The stated mission of UM's new student and family orientation programs is to assist new students (freshmen and transfers) and their families by supporting their educational and personal development as they transition to life as a part of the UM community – academically, socially, and culturally. The goals of UM's orientation programs are consistent with Tinto's writings on social and academic integration and have connections with various approaches to campus ecology theory application. However, there have never been any specific efforts to provide additional transition support to first-generation students and their families. These students are supported by many of the offices and services provided through the transition processes, but the orientation programs have lacked a strategic and unified approach. This improvement in practice is consistent with the findings of this study in that many of the students interviewed discussed challenges related to the transition to college. The first step in providing additional integration support is to offer a networking session for new first-generation students and their families at each orientation session, so that the relationship-building process can be sped up for first-generation students.

This additional integration support will also increase awareness of StudentsFIRST, an initiative, from the Center for Student Success and First Year Experience, aimed at supporting first-generation students during their first year at UM. Rachel – a student interviewed for this study – is one who could have benefitted from this type of support. She acknowledged entering UM with a wall up and had negative preconceived ideas about the university. After a challenging transition, it was relationships with staff that ultimately helped her develop a sense of belonging.

The desire to connect with faculty and staff, who were also first-generation college students, was an expressed interest discussed in numerous interviews. This introductory meeting with StudentsFIRST can provide a means to formalize and increase the likelihood that these types of relationships are able to develop. The impact that relationships had on the success of students interviewed could not be overstated. Some of the perceived campus engagement behaviors that students discussed in interviews took place informally or absent a strategic institutional effort. However, they could be supported through future strategic efforts. This should begin through the transition process at orientation.

Sustain Integration Through Pre-Enrollment Programs. UM's new student orientation programs traditionally begin in mid-May for first-year students. Therefore, a student could attend an orientation program and participate in the academic advising and course registration process up to three months prior to the first day of the fall semester. A number of programs occur in this gap of time, and participation in these programs have documented benefits.

Alexis – another student interviewed for this study – perceived her transition to be different from many of her peers, in part because she is a first-generation student, but more so because she did not know anyone at UM. She felt many students enroll at UM already knowing

lots of people, and building relationships and finding guidance took some time for her. A next step in the formalization of pre-enrollment and transition support would be to increase participation of first-generation students in programs that currently exist. Students who participate in these programs would have the opportunity to build relationships with faculty, staff, and peers in smaller, more intentional settings before 15,000+ more students return to campus. These relationships could reasonably increase students' chances of engaging in other meaningful ways too, like pursuing membership in student organizations. A few examples of existing summer programs are as follows:

The Mississippi Bridge STEM program, funded by the Hearin Foundation under the Louis Stokes Mississippi Alliance for Minority Participation (LSAMP), traditionally occurs during the second half of summer. According to the program's co-principal investigator, student participants "attend various seminars, including health promotion, career center, financial aid, counseling center, student organizations and so forth" (UM Website). This is part of UM's Increasing Minority Access to Graduate Education (IMAGE) efforts.

JumpStart, one of UM's Pre-College Programs through the Division of Outreach and Continuing Education, is another example of a summer program that supports incoming first-year students. In this case, it is not aimed at certain populations or academic disciplines. JumpStart's program description explains, "The purpose of the program is to help students with their transition from high school to college life by immersing them in course rigor similar to what they will experience in their first Fall semester, supplemented with in-program activities that build academic skills and connect students to other programs and resources on the Ole Miss campus" (UM Website).

Another pre-enrollment program, open to all students, is the MPower extended orientation leadership experience. MPower takes place the week prior to the fall semester and “prepares incoming first year students to understand the history of the University of Mississippi and to be responsible members of our community. Participants will be placed in small groups led by a peer mentor, who will guide them through a series of activities and conversations geared toward college success” (UM Website).

This is far from an exhaustive list of summer or pre-enrollment programs. In fact, many programs like the Luckyday Scholars Program, Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College, and others have retreats or introductory activities the week before the fall semester begins that are exclusive to their students. Some first-generation students will organically participate in selective forms of pre-enrollment or transition activities by requirement of a scholarship or some other identifying factor. However, many will not, so an increase in strategic identification and targeted recruitment efforts of first-generation students could prove beneficial for the programs and students. Appropriate financial support must also be a consideration for programs that have associated fees. Many interviewees did not perceive their first-generation status as having a major impact on their transition relative to their peers whose parents have college degrees; however, many of them commented the perceived advantage students with “Ole Miss family” have over them. Participation in a pre-enrollment program could improve students’ social and academic integration, promote relationship building and networking with peers, and offer opportunities to learn more about campus, its systems and cultures.

Recruit for Learning Communities. Learning communities, like the Luckyday Scholars Program and FASTrack (Foundations for Academic Success Track) support students in a myriad of ways. These programs, though different, have similarities in that they provide mentoring,

academic support, an emphasis on relationship-building and more. Not every student will be able to participate in a pre-enrollment program that effectively speeds up their transition to college. Others will not have the same time or energy to engage in student organizations, like their peers, because they have to work to pay bills and support themselves through school. Both of these programs had notable impacts on students interviewed for this study. Targeting and recruiting first-generation students for programs like these will add structure to the first-year and increase the likelihood of meaningful engagement behaviors and activities.

Currently Enrolled Students

UM has the opportunity to expand its support of currently enrolled first-generation students beyond their initial transition and first year.

Expand the Student*FIRST* Initiative. Students*FIRST* is an initiative out of UM's Center for Student Success and First-Year Experience that seeks to “[foster] an effective transition to the University by providing targeted services and resources that promote a holistic experience to support students through their journey to become the first in their family to earn a college degree” (UM Website). The initiative aims to support first-generation college students during their first year at UM through providing resources that focus on establishing friendships, becoming financially responsible, developing study skills, and much more. Currently, this initiative is coordinated by one individual, and their full-time role is academic advising, not managing Students*FIRST*. Students' needs and their perceived value of certain engagement opportunities are often dictated by their lived experiences, so resources and programs are not always one-size-fits-all.

By investing more resources in this initiative, Students*FIRST* will have increased opportunities to proactively and individually connect new first-year, first-generation students

with appropriate resources and help promote academic and social engagement. This also allows for more support for students who enter the institution at a less traditional time while most of the support is aimed at first-time, first-year students beginning in the fall semester. Additionally, providing additional resources to expand this initiative beyond its current capacity of information sharing is a step toward centralizing the support of UM's first-generation student success, rather than relying primarily on committees and task forces to carry out these efforts.

These types of efforts would provide a systematic approach to supporting the types of engagement that interviewees discussed throughout the study – relationship-building/networking, membership in various student organizations, and potentially receive similar support that Luckyday and FASTrack students benefit from. Further, these efforts would allow the institution to expand programming and strategic support beyond first year retention efforts and into students' junior and senior years with graduation as the goal.

Develop Network of Mentors. By centralizing first-generation student identification and support, formal mentorship relationships can more easily be developed. Some students intuitively perceive value in seeking mentorship relationships, like Johnathan, a transfer student from rural Mississippi. Whether it was in the transition from high school to community college or community college to UM, success was all about building connections and developing a circle of advisors and mentors.

Other students, though, fall into such relationships through a student organization, a challenging course that necessitates asking for help, or some other form of campus engagement. Those were the relationships spoken about throughout most of the interviews, and they were undoubtedly perceived as valuable. However, not all students have the confidence to seek such

relationships or are fortunate enough to find one naturally. One of the students interviewed even jokingly likened finding a mentor to a difficult egg hunt.

A number of barriers can prevent first-generation students from engaging in activities that could lead toward the development of a mentorship relationship in an organic way. Having a network of willing faculty and staff from which to draw would allow for more proactive support, and these relationships, as thoroughly evidenced in Manuscript Two, can contribute to self-authorship, a sense of belonging, career exploration, development of self-efficacy, academic integration, transition support, research opportunities, internships, and more.

Recommendations for Research

There are a number of topics that merit further research, as either a result of this study's findings or due to a lack of data. The following is a discussion of further research opportunities.

Subpopulations Among UM First-Generation Students

Throughout interviews, there appeared to be subthemes that were developing among subpopulations. Though this study's data did not provide enough information to assert findings based on variance in subpopulation trends, it is worth noting that there were perceived differences among groups of students. For example, there were noticeable differences in the way that the non-traditional students answered questions versus the traditionally-aged students.

There is immense intersectionality among first-generation students, which makes it very difficult to generalize findings. Further research of subpopulations would allow the institution to better serve each student and provide services that support their success. Studying subpopulations based on race and ethnicity should be a consideration for future research. Additionally, the findings of this study suggest that these subpopulations among UM's first-generation students would benefit from further exploration:

Transfer Students

Students who transfer from a community college or other four-year institution have lived experiences that are different from students who enter as a first-year student. Many of the transition or first-year programs and services are primarily aimed at freshmen, which makes learning campus culture more complicated for transfer students. In addition, some physical spaces, like residence halls, are more likely to shape campus engagement opportunities for freshmen than they are transfers.

Non-Traditionally-Aged Students

Similarly, to transfer students, first-generation students who are not traditionally-aged (18-22) enter the institution with a different mindset and with life experience that shapes how they navigate the college environment. Campus engagement can look different for these students. Living on campus is extremely unlikely. Joining a fraternity or sorority, or any student organizations for that matter, is less likely for students who are not entering college in the 18-22 age range.

Non-Residents

The study participants who grew up and attended high school outside of MS seemed to answer questions differently from their peers who are Mississippians. The perceived difference in academic rigor and transition from high school to college was less severe for most of the non-residents who were interviewed. Also, several students noted that, though they are first-generation college students, they grew up in homes that were either affluent or that they had family members who were successful in their chosen field of work.

Covid-19's Impact on Campus Engagement

Campus ecology theory's lens helps us evaluate the relationship between the student and campus environment. Covid-19's impact on the campus environment has been immense. Simply put, many of the campus engagement behaviors discussed at the time interviews were conducted would not have been possible during the pandemic. Shutdowns, remote learning, mask mandates, and ever-changing safety parameters and protocols have disrupted norms and created new ones. Lack of social integration, for example, could lead to isolation from campus and contribute to decreased engagement. Further research could be done to determine Covid-19's perceived impact on campus engagement opportunities and trends, and in due time, research should be conducted to determine the pandemic's lasting effects on the campus environment.

Campus Engagement on UM's Regional Campuses

UM has a series of regional campuses throughout the state, whose size and enrollment are more similar to a local community college than the main campus in Oxford. In fact, there are regional campuses that share space with community colleges. While the main campus has hundreds of registered student organizations, fraternity and sorority life, on-campus living opportunities, and significant systemic support for its students, the regional campuses are more limited in their offerings and opportunities. All of the students interviewed for this study are full-time, degree-seeking students who attend classes on UM's main campus. Further research should be conducted on the campus engagement opportunities among students who are enrolled at regional campuses.

Part-Time Learners

Similarly, to students who are enrolled at UM's regional campuses, part-time learners might have a different experience navigating opportunities to engage with campus outside of the

classroom than the students interviewed for this study. Significant obligations outside of course work – like supporting a family or working full-time – can alter one’s path toward a college degree. While the pursuit of degree completion might be the same end goal, a student who enters college in a traditional sense and lives on campus will likely engage with campus and its people in ways that a part-time learner does not have the time to do. Studying part-time learner’s campus engagement norms and their perceived benefits would help the institution support their success.

Limitations

Every study has its limitations. The first that should be acknowledged for this dissertation in practice is that its qualitative methodology makes its findings less generalizable beyond the University of Mississippi. Campuses have their own academic and social systems, and while there are some conclusions that can be applied in similar contexts, the campus culture, programs, and services – all key factors to campus engagement – can be unique to the institution.

A second limitation to this study is its lack of demographic diversity. Of the students who volunteered to be interviewed, 14 of the 19 participants are White, and 14 of the 19 participants are women. An initial goal of this research was to identify themes among subgroups of students, but without enough diversity in student participation, this could not be accomplished, leaving room for future research of UM’s first-generation students.

The timing of this study in relation to Covid-19’s continued impact on the world is also a limitation. Will college campuses, like UM, go back to how they were pre-pandemic or has the student experience changed in ways not yet fully understood? The data collected for this study occurred prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 and the subsequent shutdown of UM and other campuses across the world. The presentation of findings is occurring while the world is still

grappling with when and how to return to pre-pandemic norms and how to proceed with new norms. As noted above, there are many possibilities for future research as a result of this global pandemic.

Conclusion

I have shared the data I found and the meaning it can have for the University of Mississippi and other campuses like it for future practice and research. The students' stories were powerful, and their willingness to share their experiences and perceptions will have the ability to impact current and future UM students. This process – from dissecting existing literature, pondering theory, and interviewing 19 first-generation students – has made me a better professional. I am more aware of the needs of UM's students, and it has undoubtedly impacted my work in a positive way.

LIST OF REFERENCES

REFERENCES

- Abel, J. R., & Deitz, R. (2014). Do the benefits of college still outweigh the costs?. *Current Issues in Economics & Finance*, 20(3), 1-12.
- Azmitia, M., Sumabat-Estrada, G., Cheong, Y., & Covarrubias, R. (2018). “Dropping out is not an option”: How educationally resilient first-generation students see the future. In C. R. Cooper & R. Seginer (Eds.), *Navigating Pathways in Multicultural Nations: Identities, Future Orientation, Schooling, and Careers. New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 160, 89-100.
- Balemian, K., Feng, J., & College, B. (2013). First generation students: College aspirations, preparedness and challenges. *College Board*.
- Banning, J. H. (Ed.). (1978). *Campus ecology: A perspective for student affairs*. In Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Baxter Magolda, M.B., & King, P.M. (2008). Toward reflective conversations: An advising approach that promotes self-authorship. In Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Brown, G., Hurst, B., & Hail, C. (2016). Early reading experiences: An artifact of cultural capital. *Critical Questions In Education*, 7(2), 116-129.

- Chen, X. (2005). *First generation students in postsecondary education: A look at their college transcripts* (NCES 2005-17). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Choy, S. P. (2001). *Students whose parents did not go to college: Postsecondary access, persistence, and attainment* (NCES 2001-126). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Craig, J. D., & Raisanen, S. R. (2014). Institutional determinants of American undergraduate student debt. *Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management*, 36(6), 661-673.
- Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. (3rd ed.). Pearson Education.
- Davis, J. (2010). *The first-generation student experience: Implications for campus practice, and strategies for improving persistence and success*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- DeFreitas, S. C., & Rinn, A. (2013). Academic achievement in first generation college students: The role of academic self-concept. *Journal Of The Scholarship Of Teaching And Learning*, 13(1), 57-67.
- Engle, J. (2007). Postsecondary access and success for first generation college students. *American Academic*, 3(1), 25-48.
- Engle, J., Tinto, V., & Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education (2008). *Moving beyond access: College success for low-income, first-generation students*.
- Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Forbus, P.R., Newbold, J.J., & Mehta, S.S. (2011). First-generation university students: Motivation, academic success, and satisfaction with the university experience. *International Journal of Education Research*, 6(2), 34-55.
- Jones, S.R. & Abes, E.S. (2011). The nature and uses of theory. In Renn, K. A., & Reason, R. D. (Eds). *College students in the United States: Characteristics, experiences, and outcomes*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Harackiewicz, J. M., Canning, E. A., Tibbetts, Y., Giffen, C. J., Blair, S. S., Rouse, D. I., & Hyde, J. S. (2014). Closing the social achievement gap for first-generation students in undergraduate biology. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 106(2), 375-389.
- Hout, M., & Janus, A. (2011). Educational mobility in the United States since the 1930s. In Renn, K. A., & Reason, R. D. (Eds). *College students in the United States: Characteristics, experiences, and outcomes*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Huber, M. T. (2014). Perspectives on the college cost crisis. *Change*, 46(3), 18-23.
- Inkelas, K. K., Daver, Z. E., Vogt, K. E., & Leonard, J. B. (2007). Living-learning programs and first-generation college students' academic and social transition to college. *Research in Higher Education*, 48, 403-434.
- Kiersz, A. (2018). *The economy of every state, ranked from worst to best*. Business Insider. Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.in/the-economy-of-every-state-ranked-from-worst-to-best/articleshow/66056421.cms>.
- Kuh, G.D., Cruce, T.M., Shoup, R., Kinzie, J., & Gonyea, R.M. (2008). Unmasking the effects of student engagement on first-year college grades and persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education* 79(5), 540-563.

- Labaree, D. F. (1997). Public goods, private goods: The American struggle over educational goals. *American Educational Research Journal*, 34(1), 39-81.
- Land, C.W., & Ziomek-Daigle, J. (2013). College 411: Get the scoop. a small group plan to promote college success for first-generation college students. *Georgia School Counselors Association Journal*, 20(1)
- Lightweis, S. (2014). The challenges, persistence, and success of white, working-class, first-generation college students. *College Student Journal*, 48(3), 461.
- Longwell-Grice, R., & Longwell-Grice, H. (2008). Testing Tinto: How do retention theories work for first-generation, working-class students? *Journal of College Student Retention*, 9(4), 407-420.
- Martin, J.M. (2017). It just didn't work out: Examining Nonreturning students' stories about their freshman experience. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 19(2), 176-198.
- Martinez, J.A., Sher, J.J., Krull, J.L., & Wood, P.K. (2009). Blue-collar scholars? Mediators and moderators of university attrition in first-generation college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 50, 87-103.
- McMahon, W. W. (2009). *Higher learning, greater good: The private and social benefits of higher education*. John Hopkins University Press.
- Morales, E.E. & Trotman, F.K. (2011). *A focus on hope: 50 resilient students speak*. Rowman Littlefield/University Press of America Press. Lanham, MD.
- Morales, E.E. (2012). Navigating new worlds: A real-time look at how successful and non-successful first-generation college students negotiate their first semesters. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 1(1), 90-101.

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2018). *Digest of education statistics*, 2017.

Retrieved from

https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/Indicator_CHA/coe_cha_2018_05.pdf.

Ndiaye, M., & Wolfe, R.E. (2016). Early college can boost college success rates for low-income, first-generation students. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 97(5), 32-37.

Nunez, A., & Cuccaro-Alamin, S. (1998). *First-generation students: Undergraduates whose parents never enrolled in postsecondary education* (NCES 98-082). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Oldfield, K. (2012). Still humble and hopeful: Two more recommendations on welcoming first-generation poor and working-class students to college. *About Campus*, 17(5-), 2-13.

Pascarella, E. T., Pierson, C. T., Wolniak, G. C., & Terenzini, P. T. (2004). First-generation college students: Additional evidence on college experiences and outcomes. *Journal of Higher Education*, 75, 249-284.

Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Peck, A. (2011). Peer involvement advisors improve first-year student engagement and retention. *About Campus*, 16(3), 22.

Pelco, L. E., Ball, C. T., & Lockeman, K. S. (2014). Student growth from service-learning: A comparison of first-generation and non-first-generation college students. *Journal Of Higher Education Outreach And Engagement*, 18(2), 49-66.

Perna, L. W. (2005). The benefits of higher education: Sex, Racial/Ethnic, and socioeconomic group differences. *Review of Higher Education*, 29(1), 23-52.

- Petty, T. (2014). Motivating first-generation students to academic success and college completion. *College Student Journal, 48*(2), 257.
- Renn, K. A., & Reason, R. D. (2013). *College students in the United States: Characteristics, experiences, and outcomes*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Renn, K. A. & Patton, L. (2010). Campus ecology and environments. In Renn, K. A., & Reason, R. D. (Eds). *College students in the United States: Characteristics, experiences, and outcomes*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Robinson, J. A. (2017). Bigger's better? In higher ed's amenities arms race, bigger's just bigger! James G. Marin Center for Academic Renewal. Retrieved from <https://www.jamesgmartin.center/2017/01/biggers-better-higher-eds-amenities-arms-race-biggersjust-bigger/>.
- Soria, K. M., & Stebleton, M. J. (2012). First-generation students' academic engagement and retention. *Teaching In Higher Education, 17*(6), 673-685.
- Strand, K. J., & Council of Independent, C. (2013). Making sure they make it! Best practices for ensuring the academic success of first-generation college students. CIC/Walmart College Success Awards Report. *Council Of Independent Colleges*.
- Stuber, J. M. (2011). Integrated, marginal, and resilient: Race, class, and the diverse experiences of white first-generation college students. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 24*(1), 117-136.
- Thering, A. (2011). White, working class, first generation college student narrations of the “value” of a college education. *International Journal of Learning, 2011*(127), 1-4.
- Tieken, M. C. (2016). College talk and the rural economy: Shaping the educational aspirations of rural, first-generation students. *Peabody Journal Of Education, 91*(2), 203-223.

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tinto, V. (2012). *Complementing college: Rethinking institutional action*. Chicago, OL: The University of Chicago Press.

U.S. Department of Education. (2009). Institute of education sciences. Available:
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d09/tables/dt09_331.asp

University of Mississippi Office of Institutional Research Effectiveness and Planning

Warburton, E. C., Bugarin, R., & Nunez, A. M. (2001). *Bridging the gap: Academic preparation and postsecondary success of first-generation students*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Webber, K. L., & Boehmer, R. G. (2008). The balancing act: Accountability, affordability, and access in American higher education. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 79-91.

Wood, P. (2011). Higher education's precarious hold on consumer confidence. *Academic Questions*, 24(3), 262-281.

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions:

1. Think back on your first year of college. What was your transition like from high school to college?
2. Do you believe your transition to college was any different than your peers' whose parents earned a college degree? Why or why not?
3. If you have joined any clubs or organizations, what impact have those had on your college experience?
4. If you have held any leadership positions in student clubs or organizations, what impact have they had on your college experience?
5. How do you feel your involvement in student organizations or leadership positions has had an impact on your academic performance?
6. Which faculty or staff members, if any, have had a positive impact on your college success?
7. What is your primary motivation for completing your degree?
8. Would you mind talking about moments that stand out as the most challenging during your time as an undergraduate student?
9. Which moments, if any, have you felt like quitting? What has motivated you to keep going?
10. What experiences, if any, stand out in your mind as defining moments of your college career?
11. In what ways, if any, has your experience differed as a first-generation college student from students whose parents have earned a degree?

VITA

MARTIN B. FISHER

EDUCATION

Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) with an emphasis in Higher Education

The University of Mississippi, December 2021 (anticipated)

Dissertation in Practice: *The Perceptions that UM First-Generation College Students Have Regarding the Impact of Campus Engagement on Their Success at the Institution*

Master of Arts in Higher Education/Student Personnel

The University of Mississippi, May 2014

Phi Kappa Phi

Bachelor of Arts in Public Policy Leadership with a minor in Business Administration

The University of Mississippi, May 2011

Democratic Governance/Civic Engagement International Exchange

Osnabruck University (Germany), Summer July 2010

WORK EXPERIENCE

Associate Director of Admissions for Orientation and Campus Visits

Jan.

2017-present

The University of Mississippi

- Provides leadership, direction, and administration for new student orientation programs, campus visits, and on-campus recruitment events
- Supervises six professional staff (assistant director for communications, two program coordinators, three receptionists/support staff) and multiple graduate assistants and practicum students
- Oversees the recruitment, selection, training and participation of students involved in Ole Miss Orientation Leaders (40-45 undergraduate students)
- Oversees the recruitment, selection, training and participation of students involved in Ole Miss Ambassadors (70-80 undergraduate students)
- Counsels prospective students and family members regarding admissions processes and other university-related information
- Serves as a liaison to Ole Miss Athletics
- Designs print, web and social media materials for orientation and maintains orientation aspects of the website
- Prepares reports and analyzes the data related to orientation, campus visit programs and on-campus recruitment events

Assistant Director of Admissions for Orientation and Campus Visit Programs

Mar

2015-Jan. 2017

The University of Mississippi

- Provided leadership, direction, and administration for new student orientation programs, campus visits, and on-campus recruitment events

- Supervised senior admissions receptionist, two program coordinators, two graduate assistants, and a practicum student
- Oversaw the recruitment, selection, training and participation of students involved in Ole Miss Orientation Leaders (40-45 undergraduate students)
- Oversaw the recruitment, selection, training and participation of students involved in Ole Miss Ambassadors (70-80 undergraduate students)
- Counseled prospective students and family members regarding admissions processes and other university-related information
- Designed print, web and social media materials for orientation and maintains orientation aspects of the website
- Prepared reports and analyzes the data related to orientation, campus visit programs and on-campus recruitment events

Regional Admissions Counselor for Internal Operations

Apr.

2014-Mar. 2015

The University of Mississippi

- Served as a liaison between the University and prospective students and their families
- Represented the University and Office of Admissions at various functions
- Gave presentations to visiting prospective students and their families as they tour the University
- Marketed the University via various social media platforms
- Oversaw the Telecounseling program to contact prospective students via targeted calling campaigns; supervise a Graduate Assistant
- Operated the campus recruiting management (CRM) system; prepare reports and/or analyze data to coordinate communication and marketing efforts
- Supported the Assistant Director of Admissions for Orientation with the preparation of the orientation
- Assisted with orientation sessions for freshmen and transfer students; create orientation attendance report

Regional Admissions Counselor

Jul.

2012-Apr. 2014

The University of Mississippi

- Served as a liaison between the University and prospective students and their families
- Actively recruited high school students from Georgia and nine counties in the Mississippi Delta
- Travelled to high schools for private visits and college fairs as a University representative around the Southeast
- Gave presentations to visiting prospective students and their families as they toured the University.
- Planned and organized special events in target areas to cultivate relationships with groups such as, but not limited to, high school counselors, prospective students, parents, and alumni

Full-Time Intern

Cru

Jun. 2011-Jun. 2012

- Developed mentorship relationships with male college students
- Led Bible studies in multiple fraternity houses on The University of Mississippi campus
- Travelled abroad on a mission trip as a group leader
- Identified individuals as potential ministry-partners and solicited donations from them to fund yearly salary and miscellaneous ministry expenses; Successfully collected yearly salary and expenses in less than 2 months
- Maintained and fostered relationships with all donors through newsletters, speaking engagements, and handwritten letters

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Instructor, *The Freshman Year Experience* (EDHE 105), FASTrack section* Fall
2014 – Present

The University of Mississippi, University, MS

Center for Student Success and First-Year Experience

*FASTrack is a first-year learning community with linked classes and one-on-one mentoring.

AWARDS/HONORS

- Faculty/Staff Live the Creed Award (2019-2020)
- 1848 Pin Recipient from the UM Division of Student Affairs (2016)
- Daniel W. Jones, M.D. Outstanding Team Service Award (2015)

PRESENTATIONS

- *Guest Speaker*, Interfraternity Council (IFC) Rho Alpha Training (2016)
- *Featured Speaker*, Ole Miss Women's Council Red Plate Supper (2017)
- *Featured Speaker*, Rotary Club of Oxford (2017)
- *Guest Speaker*, Attitude of Gratitude Event with the Department of Student Housing (2017)
- *Putting the L.E.A.D. in Leadership*
 - 2019 NODA Region VI Conference, Coastal Carolina University
- *Putting the L.E.A.D. in Leadership*
- 2020 PULSE Leadership Conference, the University of Mississippi

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

- *Member and Volunteer*, Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention (NODA) (2015-present)
 - State Coordinator for Mississippi (2019)
- *Member*, Association of Higher Education Parent/Family Program Professionals (2015-present)
- *Member*, Mississippi Association for Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (2012-present)

SERVICE

Member, Panhellenic Recruitment Working Group (2020)

Chair, Admitted Student Days Working Group (2020)

Member, Demonstration and Assembly Response Team, University of Mississippi (2016-present)

Mentor, Ole Miss Women's Council (2016-present)

Co-Chair/Committee Member, MPower Program, University of Mississippi (2015-2018)

Member, Texas Regional Manager Search Committee, UM Office of Admissions (2017)

Member, Florida Regional Admissions Counselor Search Committee, UM Office of Admissions (2017)

Panelist, Student Affairs Professional Development: Job Search Panel (2016)

Guest Speaker, Interfraternity Council (IFC) Rho Alpha Training (2016)

Member, Georgia Regional Admissions Counselor Search Committee, UM Office of Admissions (2016)

Chair, Program Coordinator Search Committee, UM Office of Admissions (2016)

Mentor, Student Affairs Leaders of Tomorrow (SALT) (2016)

Chair, Senior Receptionist Search Committee, UM Office of Admissions (2016)

Member, Student Organization Advisory Committee, University of Mississippi (2015-2016)

Member, Leadership Advisory Council, University of Mississippi (2015-2016)

Volunteer, Southeast Regional Orientation Workshop, NODA (2016)

Member, Transfer Task Force, University of Mississippi (2015)

Member, Financial Literacy Task Force, University of Mississippi (2015)

Graduate, Orientation Professionals Institute, Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention (2015)

Facilitator, APEX Leadership Summit (2014)

Facilitator, PULSE Leadership Workshop (2014)

Advisor, Greek Legacy Ministry (2013-2014)

Member, Senior Receptionist Search Committee, UM Office of Admissions (2013)

Affiliate, CRU (formerly known as Campus Crusade for Christ) (2012-2013)

Facilitator, APEX Leadership Summit, University of Mississippi (2013)

Member, Grace Bible Church Long-Range Planning Committee (2013)

Mentor and Speaker, Greek Summit Leadership Conference (2012)